

Reach, Research & Reflect:

An evaluation of the Cityscape* Program

"It showed us for a week what the role of a facilitator looks like ... our first real experience of unaccompanied excursions A whole week of it. For new teachers coming out [it presents] a different scenario of interacting ... a really valuable experience in a bigger big-picture program." [Teacher]

This report summarises the findings of research conducted by Helen Stokes and Malcolm Turnbull at the Australian Youth Research Centre.

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*[former City Centre program]

Context

Cityscape is an initiative of Education Foundation and a response to extensive research into the problem of disengagement in the middle years of schooling. Piloted in 2003, and operating out of EF's City Learning Centre premises in the Melbourne Central complex, the program makes active use of proximity to the CBD. It actively embraces and promotes the concepts of "classroom without walls" and "the city as classroom/ learning resource".

The "classroom without walls" model actively acknowledges that traditional school buildings can operate as a hidden curriculum, transmitting out of date messages about how and for whom learning takes place. In seeking to send a different message, the City Centre aims also to "break down physical and conceptual boundaries separating schools and the surrounding world". Its flagship program, titled simply 'Cityscape', rebranded from City Centre in 2008 puts into direct action everything that research shows is needed to achieve success in educating adolescents.

Cityscape provides and facilitates access to meaningfully interactive, 'real world' learning experiences that: (a) make appropriate and innovative use of community resources, and (b) offer students opportunities to explore their own needs and interests beyond the classroom. Financed annually through EF's partnerships with a range of corporate and philanthropic organisations, the program unlocks the learning potential of the central business district and introduces young people to new worlds beyond the classroom during a week of independent learning.

As the centrepiece of an educational experience that encompasses a series of school-based preparatory sessions and post-Cityscape reflection, analysis and presentation components, Cityscape articulates and subscribes to the educational principles underlying VELS (Victorian Essential Learning Standards), i.e. Learning for all, pursuit

of excellence, engagement and effort, respect for evidence and openness of mind. Cityscape offers participating students a rigorous five-day sequence of (a) educational and motivational workshops that seek to develop their interpersonal and team working skills; and (b) action research activities aimed at enhancing their connections to learning and learning possibilities. The skills and outreach of Reach, Fitness First, SYN, Urban Seed Big Issue and the Lexus Centre are drawn on for specific activities.

The program caters annually for more than 3500 young people, most of them in Year 9, from more than 50 Victorian State secondary schools. 70% of participating schools are classified as 'Disadvantaged' to 'Highly Disadvantaged' according to the Department of Education & Training's LSG (Like School Group) classifications. In addition to its outreach to young people in the middle years of schooling, the program aims to serve as an active and inclusive model for teachers of inquiry-based, student-centred learning. Accordingly, an important secondary purpose of the week is professional development for participating teachers. This report evaluates the impact and delivery of Cityscape during 2008.

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Findings

Survey findings and feedback from EF staff, teachers, students and school leaders confirm the continuing success of the Cityscape program in meeting three core objectives.

Objective 1.

To provide young people with opportunities for engaging, independent, student-centred learning.

Feedback from students, teachers and Cityscape staff indicated that the variety of activities offered by the Cityscape experience engaged, challenged and motivated the participants. “It delivered on many levels”, “very experiential ... put landmarks in place”, and “all [students] rated the Cityscape experience highly” were among teacher comments. Student interviewees highlighted the value of “opportunities for individual learning, responsibility and freedom” and the program’s difference from school.

91% of students agreed that the Program had added value to their education while 87% credited Cityscape with helping them “learn to think with an open mind, accept peoples’ differences and be open in new and unusual situations”. While assessments of the enjoyability or learning value of component activities varied (some students were engaged by self-awareness activities such as Reach and Reflect & Recharge, while others related more to Fitness First, Scavenger Hunt or the Research process), there were indications that all interviewees had been strongly engaged and motivated by at least one or more aspects of the week. As one school leader observed: “Cityscape offers a good spread of things ... It picks up a range of kids ... We’ve never yet had a kid who didn’t like at least one activity or workshop”. 67% of participants now felt “more interested and motivated about learning”.

By extension, a valuable and frequent spin-off of the week has been improved and more productive relationships with teachers. 79% of students now understood how teachers could assist their learning as mentors while 83% were now “more likely to work in a positive way with teachers at school”.

Objective 2.

To model engaging, independent, student-centred learning for teachers in Victorian government schools

Teachers are able to utilise the Cityscape Program as a formal professional development experience. Also following an action research model, they focus on undertaking and evaluating three forms of research over the five days. These are:

- Observation and journaling their students’ responses to the timetabled activities;
- Facilitation (through meetings with the students during the Reflect & Recharge, Creative Conversations and Pit Stop activities);
- An interview with a selected student (on Day 4 of the program).

Participating teachers are briefed separately during the Monday morning introductory session and informally on successive mornings. Cityscape staff also provide materials and mentor teachers on how to conduct the facilitation process. A formal reflection session is held on Friday enabling teachers to discuss their findings and take time to think creatively and holistically about ‘where to from here?’

There was some feeling that the professional development component of Cityscape has enjoyed more limited success because of a range of variables including: lack of time, unyielding school structures, ‘disengagement’ from the process or intimidation by the Cityscape approach. EF staff reported a “a degree of suspicion” as common amongst new teacher attendees, noting that experience of the process often changes their attitudes.

Interviews with teachers, school leaders and EF staff indicated that Cityscape has had more qualified success in realising the aim of redirecting and re-orienting teacher practice in government schools. The Cityscape Director felt, for instance, that the professional development component of the week enjoyed only limited success because:

- Teachers are often unable to spend the whole week at the Cityscape. Even when they can, they often have insufficient time to immerse themselves in the professional development.
- In some cases, teachers may embrace the Cityscape model over the week only to be discouraged by an unchanged structure on return to school (“They’ve shifted here but the question is ‘Have they the energy back at school?’”)
- Some teachers are “disengaged” from the process, finding it difficult to “self-reflect ... All they can talk about is the students”.

- Some teachers “just don’t get it”.
- Others are sceptical or threatened by the Cityscape approach. It was noted that “a degree of fear and suspicion” is common among new teacher participants at the start of the program. “We generally see that turned around by Thursday or Friday. They visibly relax. Their interactions with students [become] more genuine, honest and open ... This is a fairly standard process ... convincing them we’ve been doing this for a while. By the end of the week they [usually] let go and trust us for a bit”.

By contrast, teachers of two or three years acquaintance are generally “on board”, recognising how Cityscape can fit into school programs and connect to VELS requirements. However, feedback from the schools sampled for this report indicated that continued exposure to Cityscape philosophy and practice is impacting on teacher practice at schools, increasingly anticipating or complementing individual schools’ re-invention of themselves along student-centred, inquiry-based lines.

Teacher assessments of the impact of the professional development component of Cityscape varied. While one interviewee felt bluntly that “the PD [itself] doesn’t work for teachers”, he cited the inherent value of simply attending the program.

Objective 3.

To use the Melbourne CBD as a learning resource for young people

Interviewees stressed the importance of Cityscape in “taking students out of their comfort zone” and exposing them to an inner-urban experience. Student respondents uniformly cited increased familiarity with the CBD as an important feature of the program with exposure to public transport, using train or tram timetables and maps, and improved road safety skills, cited as positive learning outcomes. Access to the CBD was also cited as a major contributor to the enjoyability of the program. Most student respondents agreed that they felt “more connected to Melbourne”, “a bit more independent”, “more used to public transport” and more aware of new cultures as a result of interviews, Scavenger Hunt, and visits to the Lexus Centre, Fitness First, Federation Square and Queen Vic Market. This feedback confirmed survey findings that 91 % of students felt more confident navigating the streets of Melbourne and that 88% had “learned more about the worlds of the city, its people, places, activities and culture” as a result of the Cityscape program.

In addition to its success in providing young people with a range of engaging learning experiences, survey data and feedback from teachers and students highlighted the value of the Cityscape program in developing social and interpersonal skills, heightening self-awareness and fostering teamwork. “Walking around the city, making appointments, interviewing ... all facilitates independence ... The large majority of the kids were ‘right on to it’. Some exceeded our expectations”, observed one teacher. Survey results indicate that, as a result of Cityscape:

- 86% of students believed they had learned to work successfully in a group, sharing roles and responsibilities
- 78% now understood the value of reflecting on their own work
- 81% had been able to communicate confidently with people they had not met before
- 91% felt they had taken responsibility for their behaviour and actions during the week
- 84% had discovered skills and talents needed to be successful

One student “loved the group element ... hanging around with friends, making friends with people from other schools ... we still keep in touch. We were always together, always working in a group. Co-operating was the best part ... Now I have 100% more understanding of working in a team”. “The kids loved the space and the [Cityscape] staff”, was one teacher assessment.

Teachers also applauded the capacity of the program to facilitate re-connections with learning and improved teacher-student relationships. Elsewhere, teacher feedback underlined the importance of integrating the Cityscape experience into school and curriculum structures as a means of maximising its impact and long-term effectiveness.

Teachers stressed the importance of (a) adequate preparation for Cityscape; and (b) the program’s incorporation into the schools’ overall learning structures. “If it’s seen as an add-on, it won’t last ... if it’s integrated into the curriculum it will”, was one observation. “It’s much easier to integrate Cityscape than [to offer it as] an elective in the traditional curriculum. There it’s just a week in the city”, was another.

Conclusion

Teacher respondents at the three selected schools and at other settings surveyed during the authors' evaluation of EF's outreach uniformly acknowledged that the Cityscape program has fulfilled expectations, and indicated strong willingness to participate on an ongoing basis.

Interview data confirmed the success of Cityscape in meeting the key objectives of (a) providing participants with opportunities for engaging, student-centred learning, and (b) with using the CBD as a learning resource. Student assessments ranged from "good – but could have been better" through "fantastic" to "by far the best week of school".

With regard to objective 2 (modelling independent learning for teachers), although there were some reservations about the value of the experience in terms of professional development for teachers, there were strong indications that continued exposure to Cityscape philosophy and practice is impacting on teacher practice at schools. It is noted that two of the three schools surveyed for the report have successfully woven Cityscape into their Year 9 or 10 inquiry-based curricula over several years, and that the third school is currently doing so. Comments from the three settings included: "Cityscape is the part of Year 9 that generally works best" [Teacher]; "Cityscape is part of our wider program for change ... Hence staff are committed" [Northcote High School]; and "Teachers have brought back structures ... the Inquiry-based stuff [is] used by lots of teachers already ... our English teachers go as first priority ... they're already in tune with the experience" [Teacher].

Recommendations

Based on positive survey results and student, teacher and school leadership responses to the Cityscape Program it is recommended:

- That Cityscape continues to be offered by EF and that schools continue to access the program as a matter of course
 - That funding be made available to facilitate continued access to and delivery of the program and other EF initiatives
 - That the program's outreach be extended.
 - That (where possible) rural and metropolitan groups be timetabled simultaneously and (again where feasible/workable) that interaction between the schools be facilitated
 - That, where possible, schools work to ensure consistency of staff support, i.e. sending teachers who know the students for the full week
 - That schools seek to offer Cityscape as an integrated element in the curriculum rather than as a 'one-off' elective
 - That schools seek to ensure students have undertaken adequate preparation for the week.
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