

Real Engagement with Real Issues: An Evaluation of the ruMAD? Program

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[Teacher, Loganlea State High School].*

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

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Context

The ruMAD? (Are You Making a Difference) Program is a pedagogical framework or model that aims to encourage, educate and empower young people to make a difference and facilitate social change within their schools and local communities. Predicated on the belief that everyone is able to improve and help change the communities in which they live, the program provides participants with opportunities for experiential civic engagement.

Over 1000 Australian schools have participated in ruMAD? since its inception in 2001, either through organising MAD Day, by initiating an ruMAD? (Social change) project, by supporting an ruMAD? Student Foundation, or by becoming an ruMAD? student ambassador. Diverse themes and issues addressed or pursued to date have included Homelessness, Depression, Poverty, Climate Change, Violence and Landmines. While the framework allows for flexibility in implementing specific projects, an ruMAD? experience typically consists of three sequential phases (Understanding, Action and Celebration) and is generally facilitated/delivered over two terms.

237 schools in five Australian states took part in ruMAD? activities in 2008. This report examines the impact and delivery of the program during this period.

Why Schools select ruMAD?

In preparing the current report, the authors conducted interviews with teacher and student representatives of three settings, a Primary school in Tasmania and Secondary schools in Queensland and Western Australia. Two of the settings have been ranked 7 or higher on LSG.

Gagebrook Primary School - Tasmania

Gagebrook Primary School saw ruMAD? as a possible means of heightening connections between school and community. The school serves 220 students in "... the lowest socio-economic district in Tasmania according to ABS figures ... We have the highest rate of everything except employment ... This is a community that is generally 'disengaged' from school. Through ruMAD? it was evident we might be able to build positive bridges". Individual classes at Gagebrook have participated in ruMAD? for three years; 2008 has seen whole school involvement in the program under leadership of a designated ruMAD? co-ordinator (i.e. a teacher released from other duties, one day a week, to oversee and implement ruMAD? activities at the school)
[Teacher, Gagebrook PS].

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Loganlea State High School - Queensland

Loganlea State High School seeks to meet the educational needs of 780 young people in southern Queensland, it is located in “an impoverished area with lots of violence and an over-riding sense of powerlessness ... We spend a lot of energy trying to establish recognition of the links between Education and Power”. Currently in its first year with the program, Loganlea opted to participate following an approach by Education Foundation (“They knew that the school was susceptible and would jump at the opportunity”) and has embraced the program as “a legitimate framework for use ... a vehicle for what the school’s already doing with the kids ... ruMAD? fits in well with our way of thinking [School Leader, Loganlea SHS].

South Fremantle Senior High School – Western Australia

South Fremantle Senior HS has also participated in the ruMAD? program for the first time in 2008. The school serves a population of 630 Year 8-12 students, described as “a real mixture ... Lots of migrants of European heritage ... [some] very alternative families, very arty, left-wing, a few Indigenous kids ... very multi-cultural”. The inaugural project has been initiated by a teacher who responded positively to an ruMAD? a workshop run in Perth by program’s national Director, and “liked it because it’s about really meaningful connection between curriculum and community service”.

[Teacher, South Fremantle SHS]

Findings

Feedback from ruMAD?’s Manager, survey responses and interviews with teachers, students and leadership at participating schools, confirm the success of the program in meeting three primary objectives:

Objective 1.

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

Interviewees cited the empowering nature of the program, expressing surprise at unforeseen changes in behaviour and instances of re-engagement with learning demonstrated over the course of the ruMAD? Process. Specific activities were cited as extremely successful at exciting and maintaining student interest. Survey data highlighted increased confidence, improved team skills, the enjoyment of “doing different stuff” [Student], and co-operation in working towards common goals, as highly desirable outcomes of the program.

They were amazed ... found they could take their ideas to Admin and be seen [by the Principal] as a person not just a student. It has provided a chance for adolescents to talk with peers rather than as children to adults. [Teacher]

This was confirmed by other teachers at the school who expressed pleasure at “significant changes in behaviour ... the students who are [usually] most challenging are sitting in the front row”. As a down-to-earth example of re-engagement, one teacher (who has delivered ruMAD? through SOSE) recorded: “I have the same kids for English and SOSE ... the kids much prefer SOSE ... The program gives kids motivation”. [Teacher, Loganles State High School]

[It’s] because they chose the activities.... The kids are invited to share their passions and interests.... Narrow them down to one common passion they can share in, and then match that passion with local issues ... Teachers can influence, coerce, but at the end of the day their choice is from their passion. [Teacher, Gagebrook Primary School]

Objective 2.

To model engaging, student-centred learning for teachers

Survey respondents reported that their ruMAD? projects had enjoyed either “some success” or “lots of success” as prototypes of independent student-centred learning. Interviewees confirmed the value of ruMAD? involvement in providing first-hand experiences of flexible and practical pedagogy, enabling teachers “to learn, along with the students, about the strengths kids have”.

The ruMAD? framework allows teachers to learn, along with the students, about the strengths kids have ... We forget teaching is not just about the curriculum, [that] we’re teaching the WHOLE child. Teachers think [disruptive] behaviours [occur because] kids are bad when really it’s just that they haven’t learned to love learning. ... We have so many great kids – honest, gutsy ... and ruMAD? gives them opportunities ... [They’re] foregrounding their strengths rather than their weaknesses . [Teacher, Loganles State High School]

Objective 3.

To enable young people to make a difference in their school or community

Teacher and student interviewees highlighted the value of ruMAD? in (a) promoting awareness of issues in the community, (b) promoting awareness of how individuals and groups can effect change, and (c) providing opportunities for students to take ownership of initiatives. Students testified to changed perceptions of others (and to having “learned that you can really make a difference if you want to”) while teachers cited examples of strengthened school-family-community connections resulting from the program. A Tasmanian school, defined as facing severe disadvantage, cited significantly improved perceptions of both school and local community (including positive media attention) as a result of ruMAD? projects. According to (limited) survey data, 73% of a sample of students felt that their ruMAD? experience had heightened their awareness of the world around them; 80% cited varying degrees of increased self-awareness due to the program; 59% felt they had made some, quite a bit or lots of difference to the community.

In the opinion of the program’s Manager, enabling young people to make a difference is the “absolutely the biggest ‘plus’” of ruMAD? This view was shared by both teacher and student interviewees who highlighted the value of ruMAD? in:

- Promoting “students’ awareness not only of the community but of issues in the community”;
- Promoting awareness “of how individuals and small groups can effect change [and] ... have a positive influence”; and
- Providing opportunities for students to “produce”, “watch things grow” and “take ownership” of specific initiatives

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Asked to identify the “best aspects” of being involved in ruMAD?, a Gagebrook Primary School student who had previously taken part in the school’s 2007 Cambodian project (and was currently focused on preserving the Eastern Barred Bandicoot) reported that she:

- Had “mainly enjoyed the fact of me helping the world in some way”
- Had “learned that you can really make a difference if you want to”
- Felt “more helpful to the world now I’ve helped someone in the world”
- Felt she was “making a difference in myself and the people we help”, and
- Liked “coming to school more.. It really has changed the way I think about people I don’t know”.

At a broader level, Gagebrook’s involvements with ruMAD? have nurtured improved public perceptions of the school and local community. Where media mention of the Gagebrook-Brighton district has traditionally been negative (including reports of bus services being suspended because of rock-throwing or threats by Emergency Services not to attend because of violent incidents), “You wouldn’t believe how much positive press we’ve had ... fantastic TV and radio coverage ... the Sunrise Program ... Really great stuff!”. [Teacher]

Interviewees highlighted the importance of EF staff support, advice and in-service in nurturing the success of any ruMAD? involvement. They identified time constraints and insufficient peer support as primary barriers to successful delivery. Conversely, it was recognised that integration of ruMAD? projects into key subject areas within curricula, and active support from school leadership and colleagues were significant determinants of program success.

A number of elements of the ruMAD? program and philosophy were identified as holding particular attraction and relevance for schools, i.e. for providing students and teachers with:

- Opportunities for real community engagement (both within and beyond school grounds)
- Opportunities for engagement with real issues
- Opportunities for Active citizenship (including “something new ... somebody new in the school”)
- Opportunities for effecting and sustaining change (“so that the change perpetuates”)
- Opportunities for Independent Learning
- Opportunities for changed teacher practice (“It works beautifully in regards to modelling for teachers ... [It’s] being touted as a Best Practice model ... ruMAD? provides schools with a great opportunity ... it always comes back to the capacity of the teacher Some teachers [embrace it], some pull back ... We support as best we can”).

The Principal of Gagebrook Primary School noted, for example, that : “the staff are all on board ... no negativity about it. They’ve taken ownership of it too ... requesting planning time. If you’re going to do it, do it properly”. “We’re lucky”, confirmed the school’s ruMAD? co-ordinator. “We’ve got a very united staff. Everyone’s on board ... This is the first year it’s being done by the whole school. I haven’t yet asked for feedback but I assume if they weren’t happy I would have known about it”. The teacher in question has been nominated by his peers for an Excellence in Teaching Award.

“It is a methodology that our teachers MUST adopt not only because it empowers students to become active generators of their own learning, but it increases their capacity to positively affect their own world – incredibly important for children from impoverished communities. It generates within them a can do attitude that enables them to envision a better world for themselves and gives them the courage and skills to actively seek it. Well done, I say”

[School Leader, Loganlea State High School].

Recommendations

The success of the ruMAD? Program in 2008 was confirmed by strong recommendations from teacher and student survey respondents and interviewees:

- That EF continue to facilitate its delivery within participating schools
- That EF continue to provide workshop, Professional Development and support services to assist teachers with implementation of projects and activities
- That EF seek to expand the number of school registrations throughout the country

In the interests of maximising program impact and success at the classroom level, it was recommended that:

- Schools endeavour to provide a consistent contact person having specific responsibility for implementing ruMAD? on campus
- That schools endeavour actively to integrate ruMAD? activities and projects into key subject areas within curricula
- That schools be encouraged to formalise evaluation and 'reporting back' procedures

With specific focus on (a) streamlining registration, evaluation and reporting processes, and (b) ongoing expansion of program delivery, ruMAD?'s Manager recommended:

- That EF seek to maximise the potential of the ruMAD? website as an online interactive tool, showcase for current and past projects, and means of reaching a wider target audience. ("Young people are very 'savvy' about Internet technology ... We can use their skills in the Program")
 - That attention be paid to modifying, re-developing and re-vamping aspects of the ruMAD? framework and literature (in the interests of increased user accessibility)
 - That EF continue to seek Government funding and endorsement of the program, in the interests of sustainability. ("Departmental endorsement means dollars ... currently [the Departments of Education] are only 'supporting' the program)
 - That EF seek, in the interests of extended school-community partnerships, to increase involvement in projects of non-school participants
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