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**Submission to the**  
**National Children's Commission**  
**Intentional self-harm and suicidal behavior in children**

from

Peer Support Australia

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Peer Support Foundation Limited trading as Peer Support Australia ABN: 40 002 634 853





*“The results suggest the Peer Support Program promotes mental wellbeing, resilience and social connectedness. These are key protective factors for young people.”*

Paul Bullen, Researcher, 2009

## Issue

The National Children’s Commissioner is examining how children and young people under 18 years can be better protected from intentional self-harm and suicidal behaviour. Submissions are being sought regarding programs and practices that effectively target and support children and young people who are engaging in a range of intentional self-harm and suicidal behaviours.

## Self harm and Suicide Prevention– Protective factors

The reasons why people self-harm or take their own life are complex and Peer Support Australia does not claim clinical expertise in these areas. Research shows that for many young people self-harm is a coping mechanism and that people who self-harm are also more likely than the general population to feel suicidal and to attempt suicide. (Youth Beyond Blue)

Protective factors are recognized as reducing the likelihood of suicidal behavior and improving a person’s ability to cope with difficult circumstances.

At an individual level protective factors include mental and physical health, self-esteem, the ability to deal with difficult circumstances, manage emotions or cope with stress.

At a social level protective factors include relationships and involvement with others, and a person’s sense of belonging.

Peer Support Australia provides schools with a program to support the development of these protective factors as a preventative mental health initiative.

## Introduction to Peer Support Australia

Peer Support Australia is a not for profit, non government organisation. The mission of Peer Support Australia is to provide school communities with an evidence based, peer led approach to enhance the mental, social and physical wellbeing of young people.

The Peer Support Program develops leaders, connections and skills. It is a peer led, universal, preventative mental health program that has been operating in both primary and secondary schools in Australia for almost 40 years. The Peer Support Program supports young people to develop their capacity to support themselves and each other, to develop positive relationships and to develop the skills contributing to their resilience.

The Peer Support Program is a valuable learning experience for students and in conjunction with other strategies provides a powerful tool for bringing about positive cultural change in school communities. It currently operates in over **1,000** schools across Australia. Over **500,000** students participate annually.

The Peer Support Program aligns to Government initiatives such as the National Suicide Prevention Program and the National Safe Schools Framework. It is linked to Student Welfare/Pastoral Care programs and addresses the development of the General Capabilities within the Australian Curriculum.

Peer Support Australia is supported by NSW Health, Mental Health, Drug and Alcohol Office, and as part of the National Suicide Prevention Strategy (NSPS) with funding from the Australian Government Department of Health. This recognises the Peer Support Program's positive impact on the mental health, resilience and connectedness of young people.

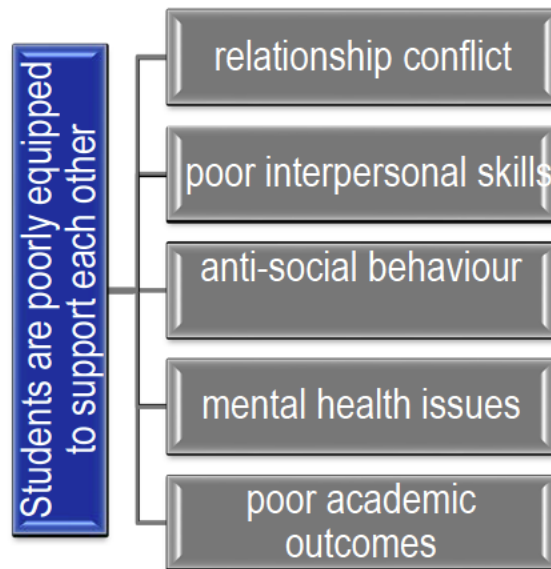
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The Peer Support Program began as a drug prevention program when a student died as the result of a drug overdose. It was discovered that his peers were aware of his problems, but did not have the skills to be able to help him. The Program has evolved and now provides a wider model of preventive intervention focusing on aspects of social organisation that affect the development of children and their mental, social and emotional wellbeing. The Peer Support Program assists in enhancing wellbeing, optimism, connectedness, resilience and a sense of possibility (or hopefulness) for the future.

## The core problem

The key issue that the Peer Support Australia (PSA) program addresses is that **school students are ill-equipped to support each other**. This can have many negative societal effects. The program is directed to all school aged children (aged 5 -17) across Australia.

## Effects of the core problem



## Objectives of the Peer Support Program

Through professional development and training delivered by Peer Support Australia, teachers are skilled and empowered to coordinate all aspects of implementation of the Peer Support Program and to support Peer Leaders and students involved in the sessions. Using an integrated package of student leadership training and peer led resources, students learn how to support each other, maintain positive relationships and develop a range of protective skills.

### **Relationship building**

Positive relationships are a significant contributor to positive mental health and provide a degree of protection in difficult circumstances. Through the Program students are provided with the opportunity to explore relationships and develop social skills in a safe and supportive environment.

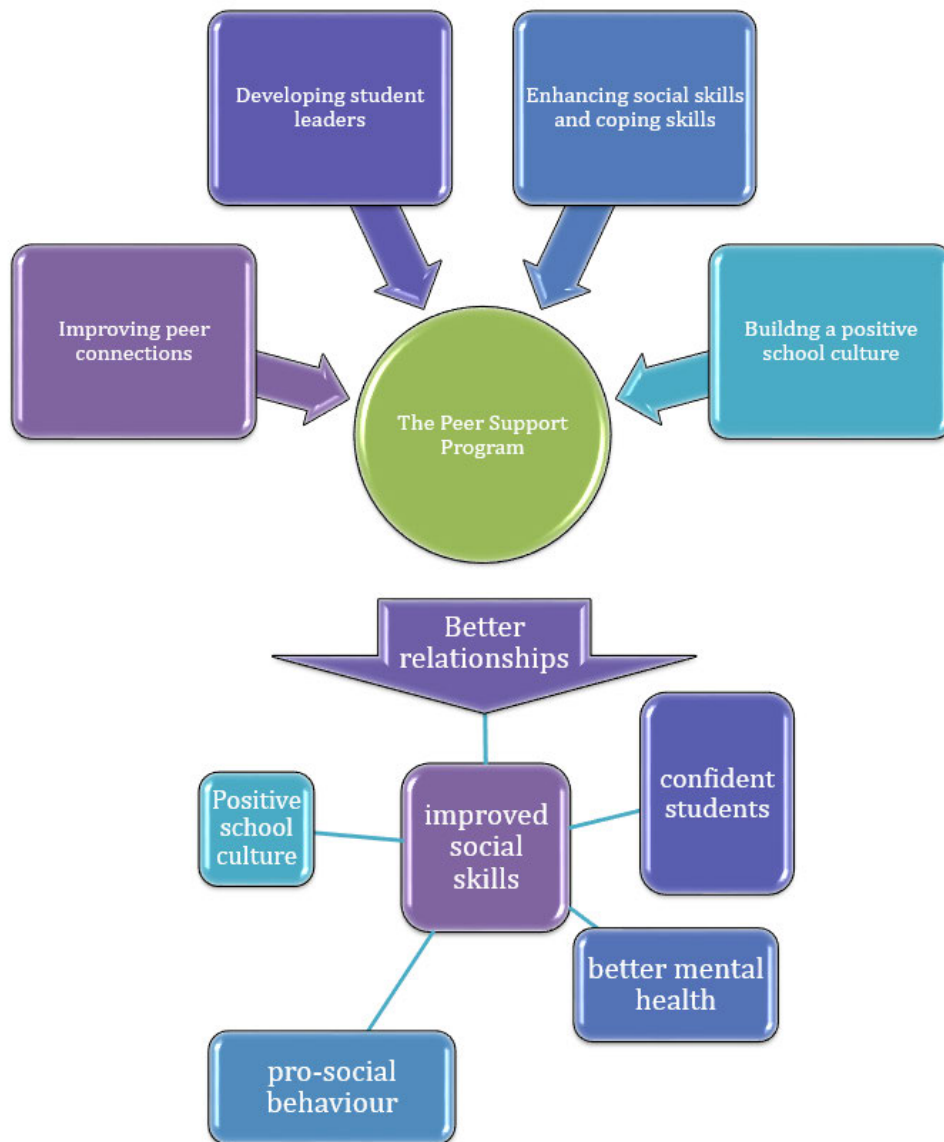
### **Resilience**

Assisting students to develop a range of coping strategies enables them to become more autonomous and independent as they navigate their way through life. This can be a powerful protective factor in mental health.

### **Optimism**

Thinking patterns become habitual early in a child's development. Altering a habit of thinking becomes more difficult the longer it has been established. Through the Program students are encouraged to persevere, maintain positive thinking and set realistic goals. Thinking optimistically is a key protective factor which enhances student resilience and provides a buffer against challenging situations.

The development of these protective skills in young people is important for the prevention of mental health issues. The Peer Support Program provides schools with opportunities to address preventative mental health using a positive, peer led strategy.



## How it works

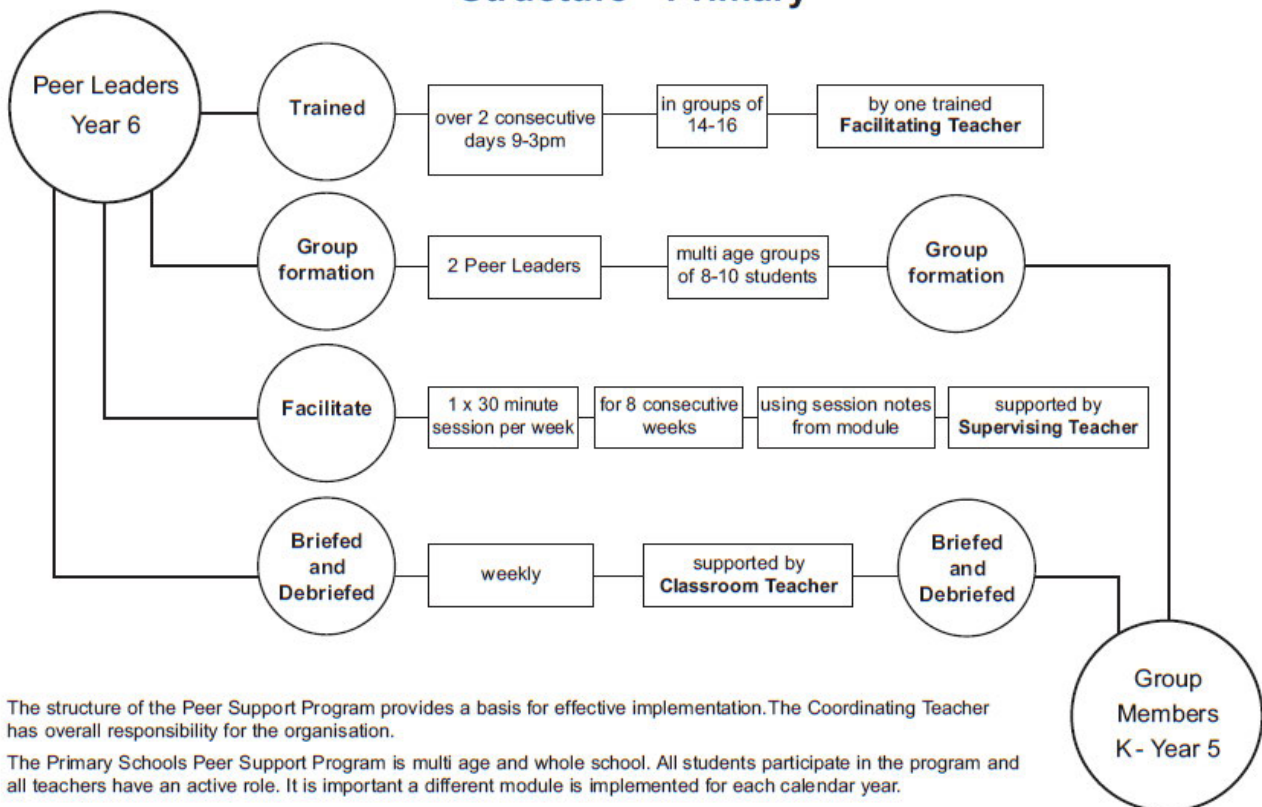
Senior students in primary and secondary schools are trained as Peer Leaders through a 2 day leadership training program developed by Peer Support Australia.

In primary schools, Year 6 Peer Leaders work with multi age groups of 8-10 younger students  
 In secondary schools, Year 10 Peer Leaders works with groups of 8-10 students from the entry year group.

In the Peer Support sessions students explore and begin to develop a range of skills focusing on the development of relationships, optimism, resilience, values and anti-bullying. Over the course of the Peer Support Program, Peer Leaders practise and improve their leadership and organisational skills, while group members develop strong peer connections and life skills.

The program structure for the Primary and Secondary School Program is represented diagrammatically below.

### Structure - Primary

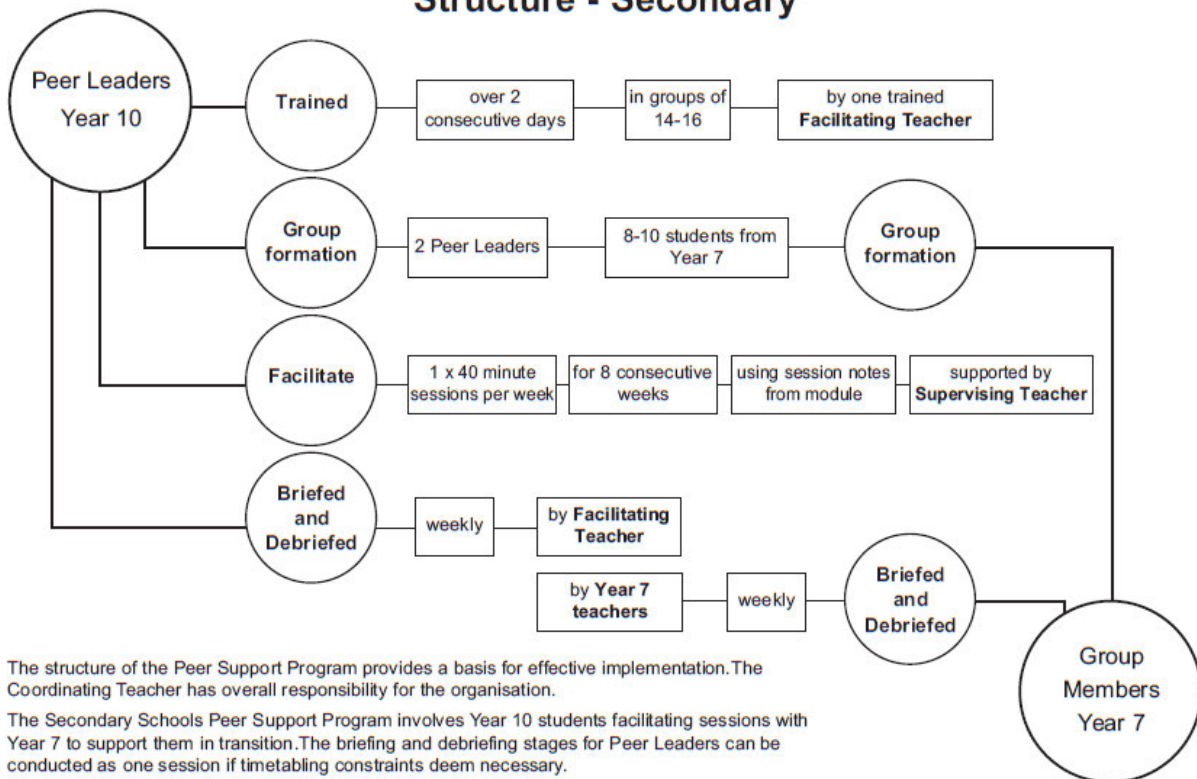


The structure of the Peer Support Program provides a basis for effective implementation. The Coordinating Teacher has overall responsibility for the organisation.

The Primary Schools Peer Support Program is multi age and whole school. All students participate in the program and all teachers have an active role. It is important a different module is implemented for each calendar year.



## Structure - Secondary



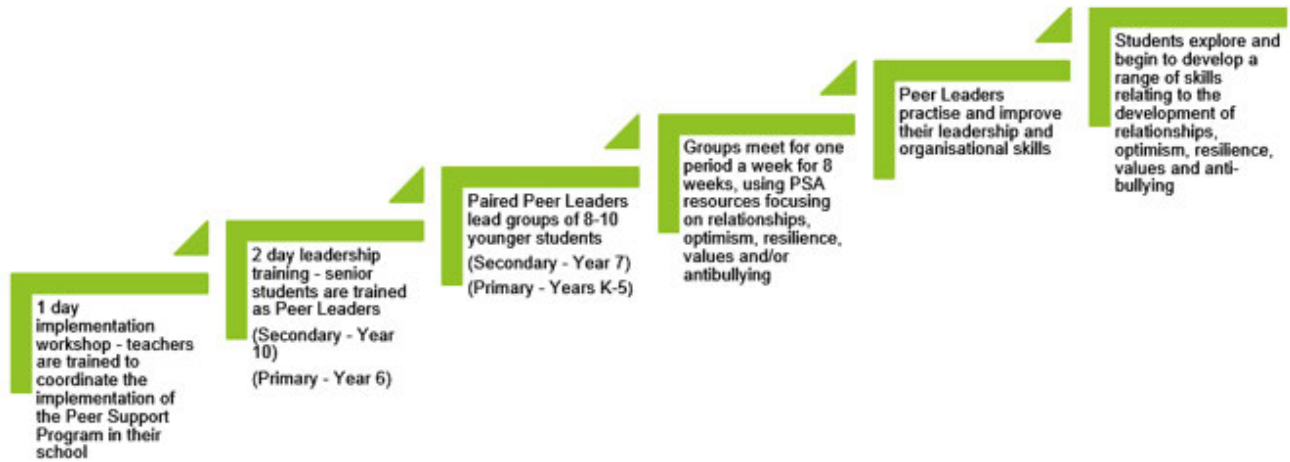
## Evidence

A longitudinal study into the Peer Support Program by the University of Western Sydney was published in 2003. The research was conducted to determine the efficacy of Peer Support Australia's secondary school Peer Support Program and showed positive long term benefits for students and school communities. Funded by the Australian Research Council and involving 2,300 secondary students across New South Wales, some of the findings demonstrated the Peer Support Program:

- improves self-concept
- assists students to successfully negotiate transition from primary to secondary school
- improves relationships with others - peers and teachers
- successfully changes attitudes toward bullying behaviours
- has a delayed positive effect on a number of other desirable outcomes including emotional stability, active involvement and enjoyment of school
- can be a potentially powerful strategy in managing bullying behaviours in schools
- makes a significant contribution to a school's endeavours to provide positive outcomes for students
- creates a secure and caring ethos within the school environment
- has the potential to generate an ongoing cycle of personal growth in students over time.

## Theory of change

### Short-term (up to 8 weeks)

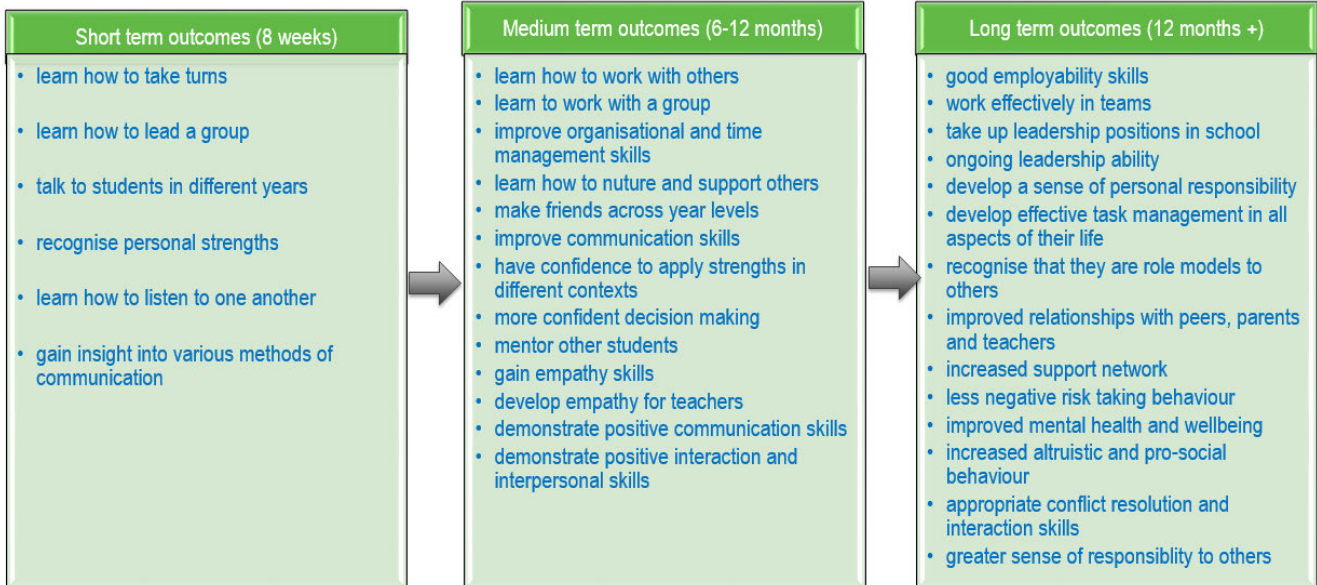


### Medium to long-term (over 8 weeks)

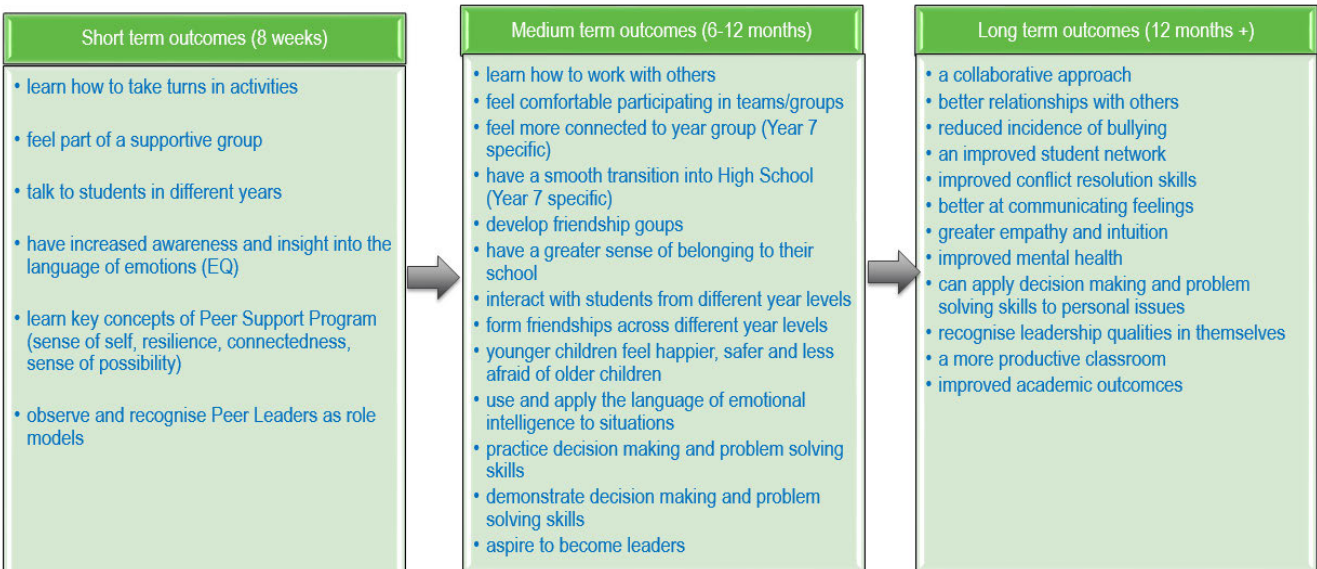


# Outcomes

## Peer Leaders



## Group members



In 2005, James Cook University conducted case studies as part of the Values Education Good Practice in Schools (VEGPS) Project, Stage 1 to determine the efficacy of the Peer Support Program in primary schools. These studies involved seven schools in Townsville, Queensland and the findings were published in *The Double Helix of Values Education and Quality Teaching*, (Lovat and Toomey, 2007).

The results highlighted significant benefits schools may achieve by implementing an effective Peer Support Program. The Peer Support Program can also be specifically used to help strengthen student connectedness. There is evidence to suggest the Peer Support Program is effective in increasing communications and social skills and enhancing optimistic thinking and resilience (Ellis, 2003). The research also demonstrated students developed a sense of their own worth and dignity and learned to value themselves for who they are. As the Peer Support Program is a universal intervention program, early intervention is paramount.

## Published articles

- Ellis, L., Marsh, H. and Craven, R. (2005), 'Navigating the Transition to Adolescence and Secondary School: A Critical Evaluation of the Impact of Peer Support', *International Advances in SELF Research: New Frontiers for SELF Research Vol. 2.*, Information Age Publishing Inc. 1593111568.
- Ellis, L., Marsh, H. and Craven, R. (2009), 'Addressing the challenges faced by early adolescents: A mixed-method evaluation of the benefits of peer support', *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 22.
- Chapter 5 Values Education and Quality Teaching, *The Double Helix Effect* (Edited by Terry Lovat and Ron Toomey – *Moving Values beyond the Half Hour: Peer Leadership and School Vision – A Case Study of the Townsville Cluster, Queensland*, Angela Hill and Malcolm Vick
- They can't hurt me – A peer led approach to bullying – Sharlene Chadwick