

Intergenerational Volunteering Case Study* Bundaberg South State School and Rotary Readers

The Rotary Readers program in Bundaberg South State School began as an initiative of the Bundaberg East Rotary Club, as part of their response to the Rotarian belief and International Goal of 'Universal Literacy For All'. The Bundaberg East Rotary Club organised and advertised a local meeting. A couple of principals were invited but only one attended (principal of Bundaberg South State School). From this meeting a healthy partnership was formed and the Rotary Readers program began under the guidance and management of the schools learning support teacher.

There are a range of programs in the community that offer opportunities for different generations of individuals to interact. Many organisations facilitate specific intergenerational volunteering programs which can be through one of 3 approaches.

1. Seniors and youth volunteering together
2. Senior volunteer working with youth recipient
3. Youth volunteer working with senior recipient

This case study represents an example of older volunteers working with younger recipients of primary school age.



grandparents in their support of children's literacy.

As an inner city school, Bundaberg South State School has many students who face challenges associated with proficiency in literacy, perhaps due to a number of factors including the socio economic profile of the area and high student turnover. The Rotary Readers program taps into the pool of community volunteers, who work in conjunction with the school to deliver Education Queensland's Support-A-Reader program. This program 'broadens reading support resources traditionally available to a school' (Warburton, 2008: 4), by complementing the work of teacher aides, parents and even

The Partnership

Much of the success of the Rotary Readers program in Bundaberg South State School is due to the collaborative partnership between the school and the Bundaberg East Rotary Club. Each party has a vested interest in ensuring the success of the program in achieving enhanced literacy for the children of the area. The Rotary Club is responsible for the promotion, advertisement and recruitment of volunteer tutors for the program, drawing on its base of Rotarians, their partners, and utilising their media contacts in the community. The Club also organises the essential Blue Cards for working with children, for the volunteer tutors, as well as supplying t-shirts for the tutors.

The learning support teacher at the school organises the program at the school level, taking on the role of training and supporting the volunteer tutors as well as liaising with the school community. The training provided for the volunteer tutors, focuses on techniques that allow the tutor to guide children in their attempts to adopt particular reading strategies. The learning support teacher also facilitates regular morning teas in which tutors can exchange experiences, interact with teachers and be part of a coherent school community.



The Program

The volunteer tutors visit the school on a regular basis, providing support to children through one on one reading in the school setting. Many of the volunteers in the program are in the retirement phase of life, and although the program has utilised younger volunteers in the past, many of these have left to go onto paid employment. The appeal of the program to older persons is perhaps due to the constraints of having to deliver the program during school hours, on a reasonably regular basis.

The success of the program, in terms of enhanced literacy for children is dependant upon the volunteer tutors being able to provide a certain level of commitment in order to develop rapport, and a productive, respectful relationship with the children requiring additional reading support. The teachers and the principal recognise that the one-on-one relationship is a key to helping some children learn to read, and schools just don't have the capacity to provide this. Through the Rotary Readers program, children are able to benefit and grow from this one on one support provided by the volunteer tutors. In addition, many of the children are from disadvantaged backgrounds or single parent families, and benefit immensely from having an older, stabiling influence in their lives. These benefits for the children include enhanced self esteem, and less behaviour problems, as well as the improved reading ability.

Intergenerational Relationships

One of the critical elements to the success of the program is the fact that many of the tutors are older and are often seen as grandparent figures. The age difference is critical, as the older tutors are not perceived as parents or teachers and are able to develop a specific one on one relationship with the children in the program. The importance of the intergenerational nature of the relationship is acknowledged by all participants in the program, particularly as older persons appear to have 'all the time in the world' (Warburton, 2008: 21), with the children being relaxed and at ease with the older volunteers. Teachers also report that many of the children come from strained backgrounds, so the consistency of the Rotary Readers each Monday, Wednesday and Friday became like a lifeline to these children. The bond that children built with their Rotary Reader often went beyond actual reading, to talking about various issues and listening. Through the flexibility of the Support-A-Reader program, and the intense training which included recognising 'teachable moments', the children were able to develop lovely relationships with their Rotary Reader.



The nature of the intergenerational relationships within the program is based on friendship and care, rather than authority. Many of the children don't actually have grandparents or may not have regular contact with their grandparents, so benefit greatly from developing a relationship with an older person. Although many of the volunteer tutors are female, it's worth noting that having the male tutors and role models in the program were particularly beneficial to older boys from the school.

Many of the volunteer tutors acknowledge the building of a rapport, feeling special and developing a bond with the child in the program. The reciprocal nature of the relationship is an essential element of the program, with tutors expressing how much they enjoyed this relationship, particularly if they happened to run into the child outside the school setting.

Indeed, all participants in the program acknowledge the importance of the one on one intergenerational nature of the relationship.

Benefits and Challenges

The Rotary Readers program offers multiple benefits to the children, the tutors and the school. Besides the benefits arising from the intergenerational relationships, and the improved literacy, the children also develop greater self esteem and confidence as a result of the regular contact with their Rotary Reader. In addition, Bundaberg South State School has benefited from a raised profile in the community and enhanced reputation.



Benefits include:

Children

- Improved literacy
- Enhanced self esteem
- Building confidence
- Having good behaviour models
- Increased communication skills

Volunteer Tutors

- Developed rapport & relationship with child
- Feeling special
- Developed unique bond
- Keeping busy in retirement & giving time

School

- Improved literacy results
- Less behaviour problems
- Enhanced school reputation

Although the program has been beneficial in multiple areas, it is not without its challenges. Some of the challenges include the problems of having older persons in a physical environment that is ideally suited to children. Secondly, there is the issue of timetabling and finding a time for the Rotary Readers which is compatible with school timetables. BSSS has overcome many of these challenges by maintaining a flexible approach and working with their volunteers in a collaborative manner. The tutors at BSSS indicate to the school the times that they are available and then the school matches them to a student. Although at times it may be 'inconvenient' to take a child out of the classroom for the Support-A-Reader program, the school acknowledges that the benefits far outweigh the challenges. Additional challenges include the lack of time for tutors to talk directly with the teachers or challenges tutors face in drawing barriers when developing relationships and friendships with very needy children.



Expansion of the program

The BSSS & Rotary Readers program stakeholders have been instrumental in developing a Model of Operation. This Operation Model outlines the roles and responsibilities for all involved during the establishment phase and the maintenance of the program over an extended period, which will be crucial in ensuring longevity and expansion of the program.

During 2008, the Rotary Readers program has been proactive in expanding into other schools throughout the Bundaberg district, and is currently active (November, 2008) in nine primary schools throughout the region. This has meant that volunteer tutors are able to provide valuable assistance to children in primary schools located geographically closer to their homes, whereas previously, some tutors had travelled in excess of 30km round trip to support the Rotary Readers program. This expansion has also enabled more community volunteers to become involved in the program due to locality choices.

The role of the Coordinator in this expansion has been managing the matching of the tutors to the schools, preparing the school staff for the inclusion of older volunteers in their school community and communicating with Rotary Club in terms of program development. The coordinator essentially assists the school in managing this rich community resource, and also ensures high levels of project satisfaction and outcomes for all stakeholders.

One of the main challenges for the coordinator is maintaining stable tutor attendance in order to maximise the benefits for the schools involved. As with any successful volunteer program, associated costs include the time taken to recruit, screen and initially train volunteers, as well as ongoing training and support for the tutors and the matching of resources.

The nine school locations (and growing) have required the provision of one day a week to meet these needs. This crucial support, provided through the coordinator has enabled schools to multiply the effectiveness of learning support provision in schools. When schools better understand and cater for the needs of these older adult volunteers they are rewarded with quality contact and stable attendance, and ultimately an effective, rich intergenerational volunteering program.



In addition to the support provided by the coordinator, the Rotary Readers program and expansion has been well supported by the Rotary Club, through the production and publication of glossy brochures outlining the program and contact information; and the new Regional Library through a permanent display of the program, tutor testimonials and additional contact information. The Rotary Readers program had also featured in a local publication Bundaberg Regional Council Arts Bundaberg Vol 5 Aug –Nov 2008 which is available at all Council venues.

The Rotary Club plans to convene the 'Welcome Back' function to start Rotary Readers 2009 and have invited all tutors to bring an interested friend. The club acknowledges that Dr Warburton's research is instrumental as a powerful recruiting approach with volunteer groups.

Summary

The success of the Bundaberg Rotary Reader's Program can be attributed to many factors including the unique partnerships between the Rotary Club and the schools involved. The commitment demonstrated across all groups involved in the program, particularly the principal, teachers and Rotary club has been a key element to the success of the program. 'Rotary's involvement adds legitimacy and credibility to the program; and the principal and teachers' support is essential to facilitating the program within the school' (Warburton, 2008: 39). In addition, the coordinators dual role in managing the relationship between Rotary and the school; combined with managing the program on the ground has enabled this program to flourish. The commitment from stakeholders to the success of the program has meant that challenges, risk and difficulties associated with managing a school based program were overcome through flexible approaches resulting in successful outcomes.



As this case study has highlighted, there are far broader outcomes that just improved literacy for the children. Through the giving of individual, quality time, tutors are able to develop relationships with the children. The outcomes of these intergenerational relationships for the children include more confidence, increased self esteem and positive behaviours in the school setting. As the volunteer tutors are older people, the significance of the intergenerational nature of the relationship means that these relationships are based on respect rather than authority, with the tutors having significant reciprocal benefits from their involvement with the children.

The Bundaberg Rotary Reader's Program is a fine example how individuals working together are meeting the challenges in their community through innovative intergenerational approaches. Ultimately, it is through these meaningful, reciprocal intergenerational relationships that communities are able to address issues, meet needs and create a cohesive, less fragmented society.

For further information on the Bundaberg Rotary Reader's Program please contact:

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*This case study was developed from an evaluation report conducted by Dr Jeni Warburton from The University of Queensland for Rotary and Bundaberg South State School. (April, 2008). Additional information provided by Sherilyn Strube- Rotary Readers Coordinator.

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