

## PROGRAM EVALUATION

### *Big Questions* philosophy mentoring pilot program (2013)

#### FOREWORD

As a professional philosopher, I direct **The Philosophy Club**, a small social enterprise dedicated to the practice of collaborative philosophical enquiry with children in Melbourne and Sydney. The Philosophy Club has a website/blog <<http://www.ThePhilosophyClub.wordpress.com>> and a facebook page <<http://www.facebook.com/ThePhilosophyClubAustralia>>

My Melbourne-based initiative, the ***Big Questions* philosophy mentoring program** (“*Big Questions*”) is the only community-based learning program in Australia that is (a) designed to widen participation in philosophy by primary school students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds; and (b) designed specifically for senior undergraduate Philosophy students, who have traditionally had little or no opportunity to undertake community-based learning as a complement to their formal studies. The *Big Questions* program has a dedicated website: <<http://www.BigQuestionsProgram.wordpress.com>>.

Please contact me if you have any questions about this evaluation, which I conducted following the implementation of the *Big Questions* pilot program in 2013.



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## PROGRAM AIMS

The *Big Questions* pilot program had two sets of aims, reflecting its two cohorts of participants: students from Mahogany Rise Primary School (“students”); and senior undergraduate Philosophy students (“mentors”).

**To benefit students, *Big Questions* aimed:**

- (1) to develop students' capacity for critical and creative thinking;
- (2) to improve students' oral literacy;
- (3) to build students' collaborative skills; and
- (4) to ignite students' curiosity.

**To benefit mentors, *Big Questions* aimed:**

- (5) to engage mentors in meaningful experiential learning;
- (6) to improve mentors' communication and facilitation skills;
- (7) to build mentors' confidence; and
- (8) to broaden mentors' philosophical practice.

## PROGRAM PARTNERS AND LEADERSHIP TEAM

Two organisations partnered to deliver the *Big Questions* program:

**The Philosophy Club** is a social enterprise that facilitates collaborative philosophical enquiry among children in Australia. It offers small-group workshops to help children investigate life's big questions and explore a world of ideas, with the aid of intriguing stories, pictures, games and crafts that spark philosophical wonder and dialogue.

<http://www.ThePhilosophyClub.wordpress.com>

**Mahogany Rise Primary School** is a low socio-economic status urban primary school that is very disadvantaged relative to schools across the state. The school is committed to high quality learning and has implemented a range of strategies to support children facing social, emotional and behavioural challenges; to broaden learning opportunities for students; and to support oral language development.

<http://www.mahoganyrise.vic.edu.au>

The program's leadership team comprised:

- Michelle Sowe, *Big Questions* Program Director and director of The Philosophy Club
- David Urbinder, *Big Questions* Creative Director
- John Culley, Principal at Mahogany Rise Primary School
- Daniel Riley, Assistant Principal at Mahogany Rise Primary School.

## **FUNDING**

The *Big Questions* program received seed funding for 2013, awarded under the ‘Schools First’ school-community partnership scheme provided by the National Australia Bank, the Foundation for Young Australians and the Australian Council for Educational Research.

Additional support was provided by Alana Kennedy, Partnership Manager at NAB.

## **PRO BONO ASSISTANCE AND VOLUNTEERS**

Twelve volunteer mentors played a crucial role in the program, sharing their professionalism, enthusiasm and high-level skills. Many thanks to all the dedicated mentors: Emma Atherton, Shannon Brick, Martin Clark, Hannah Dallas, Brigid Evans, Christina Majoinen, Alex Mealey, Jan Mihal, Tanita Northcott, Caterina Pacitti, Kai Tanter, and Bernard Wojcik.

Four actors generously volunteered their time, expertise and talent for the production of the *Big Questions* philosophical short films. The performances of Jack Walsh, Alice Cavanagh, Kara Lee and David Urbinder greatly enriched these films.

Staff at The King David School graciously invited the mentors-in-training to observe Philosophy classes. Special thanks to Anita Bass for making the mentors welcome in her Philosophy classroom.

Support and occasional *pro bono* consultancy services were kindly provided by Tristan St Clare, Professor Phil Cam, and Dr Sue Knight, experts in philosophy for children.

Sincere thanks to Professors Greg Restall, Howard Sankey, Laura Schroeter, Parshia Lee-Stecum and colleagues at the University of Melbourne for their staunch support in the early stages of the *Big Questions* program development. Rochelle Sullivan at the University’s School of Historical and Philosophical Studies also assisted by providing venues for mentor training workshops.

Special thanks to the Urbinder and Sowe families, both for their ongoing encouragement and advice, and for their generous practical support including the provision of studio space for film recording.

## **RATIONALE FOR THE DESIGN OF THE PROGRAM**

This section highlights three aspects of the design of the *Big Questions* pilot program: (1) the focus on introducing philosophy to children; (2) the decision to partner with a disadvantaged school; and (3) the involvement of university students as mentors in the program.

## **(1) Introducing philosophy to children**

It has been convincingly argued<sup>1</sup> – and borne out by decades of anecdotal evidence<sup>2</sup> – that children have the capacity to think philosophically. Furthermore, empirical studies<sup>3</sup> conducted internationally show that the practice of collaborative philosophical enquiry in schools has marked cognitive and social benefits for students, as described below.

### **Cognitive benefits of philosophical enquiry**

Philosophical enquiry cultivates rigorous intellectual habits which improve students' skills in reasoned argument and higher-order thinking. These habits include insightful questioning, creative thinking, critical reflection, active open-mindedness, sound judgement, self-correction, articulate self-expression and respectful dialogue.<sup>4</sup>

Philosophical enquiry cultivates deep and deliberative thinking – often neglected in traditional schooling, which tends to focus more on getting 'the quick right answer' – and thus enables students to investigate the nuances of complex ideas. Practising philosophy improves students' ability to construct cogent arguments, to rationally defend their views, to evaluate their own and others' arguments, to question assumptions and to analyse the implications of beliefs. Students are expected to give examples and counterexamples, recognise mistakes in reasoning, make distinctions and draw analogies.<sup>5</sup>

Where Philosophy has been systematically incorporated into school curricula, students' performance has measurably improved in verbal, non-verbal and quantitative reasoning.<sup>6</sup>

*Big Questions* helps students to develop a broad range of interdisciplinary thinking capacities and communication skills specified by the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority.<sup>7</sup>

### **Personal and social benefits of philosophical enquiry**

By engaging in constructive dialogue with a community of co-enquirers, students learn how to examine their own beliefs and how to express them clearly to others. They develop confidence in speaking their minds and a sense of responsibility for their opinions and actions. Students also become more aware of the ethical issues that touch their lives as well as of the thinking tools that can help them develop their own values and principles.

Because philosophical enquiry involves students in the consideration of alternative points of view, students develop greater respect for diversity and deeper empathy for the experiences of others. Students become more attentive and fair-minded in their interactions, more skilled at cooperating and negotiating, and better able to resolve disagreements.<sup>8</sup>

In these ways, philosophical enquiry fosters productive collaboration and develops students' self-esteem, confidence, self-expression and capacity for respectful dialogue. Where philosophical enquiry has been systematically incorporated into school curricula, measurable improvement has been observed in students' socialization, including self-esteem, confidence, class ethos and discipline.<sup>9</sup>

*Big Questions* engenders a sense of inclusive community in which wide participation is encouraged and all participants' voices are heard.

## **(2) Addressing socio-economic and educational disadvantage through partnerships with disadvantaged schools**

*Big Questions* is unique in Australia in introducing the practice of philosophy to primary school students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds. It represents a strategic step towards broadening participation in philosophy and improving its accessibility to population groups that have traditionally been excluded from the discipline.

Unfortunately, many people hold negative views about philosophy: they irrationally fear it, regard it as irrelevant to daily life, deride it as semantic nitpicking or dismiss it as empty waffle. Peter Worley (CEO of the Philosophy Foundation, UK) argues that providing students with a grounding in philosophical thinking from a young age can effectively inure them against such attitudes, while also empowering them intellectually, socially and politically:

Philosophy [is] often seen as the domain of the middle classes and therefore it seems that many of those not in these groups find the intellectual process inaccessible to them. I argue that a grounding in philosophy from primary school onwards has the potential to unlock these intellectual doors to many otherwise potentially disenfranchised citizens. I believe that philosophy has the ability to increase the autonomy of the citizens of any democratic society and the positive freedom of individuals... There is potentially no intellectual forum closed to anyone who has assimilated philosophical reasoning methods. By the time the students who have participated in a philosophy programme in primary school reach a mature age and are engaging with adult themes for themselves they will already be used to long words and complex, abstract reasoning regardless of their family or class background, they should therefore feel no barrier between themselves and any kind of intellectual exchange.<sup>10</sup>

*Big Questions* is one such program that unlocks intellectual doors.

From the earliest years of schooling, students from low socio-economic status [SES] backgrounds in Australia experience educational disadvantage. There continues to be an unacceptable gap between low SES students and other students on a range of measures including school engagement, educational achievement, educational aspiration, school completion and rate of progression to tertiary education. Those students from low SES backgrounds who do reach university remain underrepresented in fields like Philosophy, and are less likely to find places in the most prestigious institutions.<sup>11</sup>

There were good reasons to believe that programs like *Big Questions* can make a difference in overcoming the systematic entrenchment of educational disadvantage; in instilling an appreciation for the value of philosophical thinking; and in alleviating the alienation from university culture often experienced by low SES students (particularly those whose parents have had low levels of education).<sup>12</sup>

In general, programs geared towards primary education can raise students' aspirations

and achievement and can improve rates of access to university by low SES students in subsequent years.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, *Big Questions* was designed specifically to respond to a range of evidence-based recommendations for promoting educational equity. The program design engages students in deep learning tasks that they regard as interesting, challenging and important;<sup>14</sup> involves regular visits to primary schools by university students, thereby boosting students' motivation, confidence and self-belief;<sup>15</sup> increases behaviour expectations among students and strengthens peer support;<sup>16</sup> broadens students' horizons; and builds the capacity of low SES schools to boost aspirations and to support high achievement.<sup>17</sup>

*Big Questions* thus features a variety of innovations in classroom teaching that can be expected to improve retention rates of under-represented student groups at school and potentially, in the longer term, at university. Having participated in *Big Questions* students, students are more likely to regard Philosophy as a subject that has personal relevance to them.

### (3) Involving university students as mentors

*Big Questions* is truly innovative: it is the only program in Australia that connects primary school students with highly trained philosophical thinkers. This offers benefits not only for the students, but also for the mentors who work with them.

Mentors benefit by developing their general capabilities through a range of special educational, professional experience and civic participation opportunities. Specifically, *Big Questions* build mentors' confidence, broadens their professional practice and hones their conceptual, communication and facilitation skills. *Big Questions* invigorates mentors' passion for the discipline of Philosophy, engages them in teaching and learning, and offers them a powerful and satisfying experience of civic engagement.

## PROGRAM TIMELINE

The *Big Questions* program development began during a long initiation period (September 2010 – July 2012), during which partnerships were formed, funding was sought, and mentor selection and training began.

Towards the end of this period, the *Big Questions* program became the inspiration for a unique conference, described below.

After a hiatus, the partnership between The Philosophy Club and Mahogany Rise Primary School was consolidated and the program unfolded between February and September 2013. From February to August, mentor training, curriculum development, school liaison and staff briefing were conducted.

The program was delivered at Mahogany Rise Primary School on three consecutive Fridays in August and September 2013.

## THE EVOLUTION OF *BIG QUESTIONS*, 2012 – 2014

Year	Events, partners and participants
2012	<p>The <i>Big Questions</i> program, while still in development, inspired a conference entitled 'The Thoughtful Classroom: Teaching to Overcome Educational Disadvantage'. This conference, which I convened, focused on the practice of philosophical enquiry in primary schools and its potential to promote educational equity and social inclusion.</p> <p>The conference was hosted by the University of Melbourne on 2 June 2012 and was co-presented by the Federation of Australasian Philosophy in Schools Associations (FAPSA), the Victorian Association for Philosophy in Schools (VAPS) and the University of Melbourne's Graduate School of Education. The event involved a full day of presentations, workshops and panel discussion featuring distinguished guest speakers.</p> <p><b>Professor Philip Cam</b> (UNSW) spoke about the capacity of the philosophical 'community of enquiry' to stimulate student engagement through its emphasis on learning to think for oneself and its ability to generate a sense of belonging, so crucial for children's wellbeing at school. <b>Professor Lynne Hinton</b> (QUT) talked about how schools can promote good judgement by teaching thinking skills in an explicit and structured way. She explored the extraordinary progress of student achievement and school culture at Buranda Public School since Philosophy was introduced 15 years ago, and she outlined her work at QUT where Philosophy is an integral part of the Education degree. <b>Dr Ron Ritchhart</b> (Project Zero, Harvard University USA) revealed how a classroom focus on scaffolding ideas and thinking (rather than seeking the 'quick right answer') draws on children's natural disposition to make meaning from their experiences, and helps them become more effective learners. <b>Professor Tom Wartenberg</b> (Mt Holyoke College, Massachusetts USA) described his work training undergraduates to lead philosophical conversations with seven-year-olds. He reconstructed the notion of educational disadvantage as a disparity rather than a deficit, for which schools are accountable.</p> <p>Further information about the conference and downloadable conference presentations are available on the FAPSA website:  <a href="http://www.fapsa.org.au/conference/past-conferences">www.fapsa.org.au/conference/past-conferences</a></p>
2013	<p>The <i>Big Questions</i> pilot launched in 2013 with the cooperation of the University of Melbourne and Monash University. Partners in the launch of the program were The Philosophy Club and Mahogany Rise Primary School, a low SES primary school in Melbourne's south.</p> <p>A cohort of 12 senior undergraduate Philosophy students from the University of Melbourne and Monash University were recruited via a competitive selection process. The students participated on a voluntary basis and were not awarded academic credit.</p> <p>Seed funding was awarded under the NAB 'Schools First' school-community partnerships scheme.</p>

<p><b>2014</b></p>	<p>This year, the University of Melbourne’s Faculty of Arts has joined as a <i>Big Questions</i> program partner and has offered funding for the program.</p> <p>Prospective partner schools are currently being short-listed, and a new cohort of mentors is being recruited from among senior undergraduate Philosophy students at the University of Melbourne.</p>
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## PROGRAM STRUCTURE AND SCOPE

Twelve mentors were selected and trained in the art of facilitating collaborative philosophical enquiry among children. Subsequently, for three full days on consecutive Fridays, the mentors visited Mahogany Rise Primary School to facilitate philosophical enquiry with 51 students in Years 4–6.

The students’ enquiry process was catalysed by a series of original short films by David Urbinder, which provided an entertaining and accessible springboard into a range of intriguing philosophical questions such as “What makes a good society?” “Am I free to make my own choices?” and “How do we know what’s real?” The films were based on philosophical thought experiments, contextualised in a science fiction scenario in which the school students adopted the role of ‘onboard philosophers’ on an intergalactic starship. As they travelled on a mission to make contact with distant civilisations, the students needed to exercise good judgment and openmindedness in order to address philosophical problems that could shape the future of humanity.

Working in pairs, mentors were assigned to small groups of 8–10 students who worked together to exchange ideas, examine their assumptions, evaluate different arguments and make thoughtful judgements.

Throughout the program, mentors were offered ongoing training, support and debriefing opportunities.

## PROGRAM PLANNING, DOCUMENTATION, COMMUNICATION AND RISK MANAGEMENT

The program partners worked together towards mutually-agreed goals in a spirit of cooperation, transparency and trust. A verbally-agreed MOU set out resource-sharing and specific roles, task allocations and expectations of partners.

The Philosophy Club coordinated grant applications, program planning, communication, curriculum development, bespoke training, program delivery, monitoring and evaluation. Program development was comprehensively documented through progress reports; minutes of meetings; curriculum documents; records of mentor recruitment, training, debriefing and support; program evaluation; website development and creation of promotional materials. The website URL is [www.BigQuestionsProgram.wordpress.com](http://www.BigQuestionsProgram.wordpress.com)

Measures established to address potential risks included safeguarding child protection via

Working With Children Checks; ensuring validity of prior consent by children's parents/guardians; advising mentors of appropriate conduct and responsibility for safety; ensuring mentor preparedness, reliability and support; ensuring political and religious neutrality in the curriculum; securing appropriate learning spaces; and managing emergency cancellations.

Mahogany Rise Primary School assisted by hosting planning meetings; administering funds; addressing mentors at a training workshop; promoting the program throughout the school community; arranging a staff briefing session; providing stationery and audiovisual support; assisting with the media strategy; and advising on parental consent.

## **MENTOR ROLES, SELECTION AND TRAINING**

### **Mentor roles**

Mentors were assigned in pairs to groups of approximately ten students. Within each pair, mentors shared the roles of facilitator and scribe.

Facilitators presented stimuli, posed philosophical questions and moderated student-centred dialogues. Scribes used informal dialogue mapping to maintain a visual record of dialogues for the purposes of reflection.

As well as facilitating and scribing, mentors sought to share their enthusiasm, build rapport with the students, and build students' self-confidence.

### **Mentor selection**

Mentors were selected on the basis of a questionnaire, face-to-face interview and referee checks, from a pool of self-nominated senior undergraduate Philosophy students and recent graduates from the University of Melbourne and Monash University. These students have traditionally had few opportunities to undertake community-based learning as a complement to their formal studies.

Applications were invited from students who fit the following criteria:

- attentive, open- minded and respectful listeners
- confident and clear communicators
- rigorous thinkers with a good academic record
- patient, diplomatic, sensitive and adaptable
- energetic, enthusiastic, positive role models who can inspire children to learn philosophy
- conscientious, reliable and strongly committed to volunteer throughout the duration of the program.
- Applicants were selected on the basis of their interest, availability and commitment; skills and personal qualities; previous experience of facilitating

group discussions; and previous experience of interacting with primary school children.

## Mentor training

Mentor training comprised an introduction to purpose, theory and practice of facilitating collaborative philosophical enquiry (as endorsed by the international Philosophy for Children movement, which has philosophical roots in the American pragmatist tradition).

To complete training for the *Big Questions* program, mentors were required to attend at least a majority of the nine mentor workshops, each 1.5 – 3 hours long (including one meeting with the school's Principal and Assistant Principal); to observe at least one middle-school Philosophy class at the King David School; and to complete 4.5 hours of independent study (30 minutes per week for 9 weeks). Mentors independently studied a range of online texts and videos, curated to prepare them for their classroom roles as facilitators and scribes.

The mentors also participated in weekly debriefing meetings during the program's three-week implementation period at Mahogany Rise Primary School.

The Program Director maintained contact with the mentors via email and e-newsletters. Twelve e-newsletters were sent to prospective mentors in the period June 2012 – November 2012. After mentor selection was finalised, a further twelve e-newsletters were sent in the period April 2013 – August 2013. The e-newsletters included mentor training workshop announcements, reports on past workshops, reviews of relevant books and online resources, volunteering opportunities, invitations to relevant conferences and other events, information about classroom observation opportunities, and mentors' reflections on their classroom observations.

## CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT

A tailored curriculum was developed with expert consultation, building on successes and responding to evaluation findings from previous philosophy in schools programs.

Curriculum materials consisted of the following:

- A detailed day-by-day schedule, tailored to the school timetable, for plenary and small-group activities. The schedule included a breakdown of thematic content, stimuli for thinking, sequenced discussion guides, creative and physical activities and guides for reflection.
- Three original short films, created by David Urbinder, providing an entertaining and accessible springboard into a range of philosophical questions and ideas. The short films may be viewed at:  
<http://bigquestionsprogram.wordpress.com/2013/06/27/short-films/>
- A set of visual and tactile aids to facilitate independent and collaborative thinking.

## EVALUATION BASED ON FEEDBACK FROM PARTICIPANTS

Evaluation included analysis of structured feedback from the participating university students, school staff and school students. Most of the feedback consisted of qualitative self-report and observations (by mentors and school staff) of perceived impact.

This section presents evidence demonstrating that the program achieved each of its aims. It also presents evidence that the program was effective as a whole. For each aim, quantitative evidence is presented (where available), followed by qualitative evidence in the form of direct quotations from evaluation surveys completed by school staff, mentors and students.

### Evaluation of student outcomes against program aims

#### Aim 1: To develop students' capacity for critical and creative thinking

##### *Quantitative evidence*

Survey results indicate that mentors' agreement with the statement "***I think the program helped the students improve their collaborative thinking skills***" was high, rated at a mean score of 4.22 (on a scale of 0 – 5).

##### *Qualitative evidence*

"We were hoping that students would begin to understand **critical thinking** and the process of working through issues in a systematic way. The program was **exceedingly successful and achieved above and beyond my expectations**. The impact was interesting in that students **asked questions in a more astute way** and began to ponder broader social questions." (Principal)

"The program exceeded all expectations. It introduced a new way of thinking and being in the world to our children. Speaking, listening, **thinking** and co-operation skills were all **significantly enhanced**." (Assistant Principal)

"A good way to develop debating and **logical thinking** skills. They also have learned that it's OK to alter their position." (Year 6 teacher)

"I do think the kids became more adept at attempting to **explain reasons for their views** better. Some children became particularly good at expressing that they disagreed with some elements and agreed with others." (Mentor)

"It was also very encouraging to see how much they enjoyed **engaging in arguments** and working with each other." (Mentor)

"I think it helped to **improve their basic reasoning skills** - I noticed kids saying 'I think X \*because\* Y' more and more over the three days rather than simply 'I think X' and then having to prompt them for their reasons (or if I did have to prompt them, they were able to give one instead of saying 'I don't know' or repeating their point)." (Mentor)

"This experience has also given me insight into the way that philosophy can help children **think and analyse issues and arguments** beyond what they are asked to do in the primary school curriculum." (Mentor)

“I like how we question each other, and disagree and agree, and build on each others’ ideas... **like we’re real philosophers.**” (Student)

“I learned that you can disagree with people and everyone has **different arguments.**” (Student)

## **Aim 2: To improve students’ oral literacy**

### *Quantitative evidence*

Survey results indicate that mentors’ agreement with the statements “***I think the program helped the students improve their listening skills***” and “***I think the program helped the students improve their speaking skills***” were very high, rated at a mean score of 4.44 (on a scale of 0 – 5).

### *Qualitative evidence*

“**Speaking, listening,** thinking and co-operation skills were all **significantly enhanced.**” (Assistant Principal)

“There was so much that was fascinating, but for me it was amazing listening to these students **express themselves with confidence** and, at times, with meta-cognition.” (Year 6 teacher)

“[As a result of the program] the students appear to be more accepting of others’ opinions, and now have **strategies to politely express** their own.” (Year 6 teacher)

“It was very rewarding to see and participate in the **students’ discussions** and see them **improve over just three weeks.**” (Mentor)

“The most interesting thing I learned was: **don’t be scared to share your opinions,** whether you disagree or not.” (Student)

In response to the question *What did you like best about the program?*, one student responded: “**Sitting and discussing because at home I don’t talk.**” (This was not an atypical response. Many of the students’ baseline oral literacy was very poor, and class teachers suggested that this is likely due to an absence of conversation in their home lives, among other factors.)

## **Aim 3: To build students’ collaborative skills**

### *Quantitative evidence*

Survey results indicate that mentors’ agreement with the statement “***I think the program helped the students improve their collaborative thinking skills***” was high, rated at a mean score of 4.22 (on a scale of 0 – 5).

### *Qualitative evidence*

“I think the program deepened students understanding and consideration of their fellow students, leading to **improved relationships and behaviour.**” (Mentor)

“I think that it was most beneficial in terms of improving children’s behaviour and conduct around their peers and adults. **Learning to disagree without upsetting others** is an extremely important skill.” (Mentor)

“Speaking, listening, thinking and **co-operation** skills were all **significantly enhanced.**” (Assistant Principal)

“I liked sharing ideas because it helped me to understand everyone. I liked how we **responded to each other’s ideas politely.**” (Student)

“I liked **working together** because we have good ideas.” (Student)

#### **Aim 4: To ignite students’ curiosity**

##### *Qualitative evidence*

“The biggest hook for the children was the use of the video narrative. **The children were captivated** by this.” (Assistant Principal) (This comment refers to a series of original philosophical short films tailor-made for the *Big Questions* program.)

“The questions were **interesting** and the show was entertaining. We got to **experience new things** and have fun!” (Student)

*Asked to describe the program in their own words, students came up with a broad array of positive descriptors including: “supergenius”, “fantastic”, “extraordinary”, “amazing” and “braintwisting”.*

### **Evaluation of mentor outcomes against program aims**

#### **Aim 5: To engage mentors in meaningful experiential learning**

##### *Quantitative evidence*

Survey results indicate that mentors were unanimously in full agreement with the statement “***I feel that being a mentor was meaningful and worthwhile,***” rated at a mean score of 5 (on a scale of 0 – 5).

Mentors’ agreement with the statement “***I feel that I was a positive role model for the students***” was very high, rated at a mean score of 4.44 (on a scale of 0 – 5).

##### *Qualitative evidence*

“**I really valued the opportunity** to get the kids to think about the difficult issues we covered. It was **especially rewarding** to see the kids engage and offer their insights.” (Mentor)

“I grew to appreciate these kids and their ideas, and found a bit of humility in these classrooms.” (Mentor)

#### **Aim 6: to improve mentors’ communication and facilitation skills**

##### *Quantitative evidence*

Survey results indicate that mentors’ agreement with the statement “***Being a mentor has improved my communication skills***” was high, rated at a mean score of 4.33 (on a scale of 0–5).

##### *Qualitative evidence*

“I think my own **listening and comprehension skills improved** by attempting to interpret accurately what the children were trying to say.” (Mentor)

“[I gained] **clearer communication skills**, being able to be flexible enough to accommodate challenges and needs as they arise... [and] patience!” (Mentor)

“It has **improved my communication skills** (particularly with kids) but in general just being more clear and simple when asking in-depth questions.” (Mentor)

“[I developed] **skills to behaviourally manage a class** of children, clearer communication skills (with kids), **group facilitation skills**.” (Mentor)

### **Aim 7: to build mentors’ confidence**

#### *Quantitative evidence*

Survey results indicate that mentors’ agreement with the statement “**Being a mentor has improved my self-confidence**” was high, rated at a mean score of 4.11 (on a scale of 0–5).

#### *Qualitative evidence*

“**I do feel more confident** about my ability to facilitate a potentially difficult conversation.” (Mentor)

### **Aim 8: to broaden mentors’ philosophical practice**

#### *Qualitative evidence*

“Valuable volunteering experience... Also, it gave me some **first-hand experience with philosophical pedagogy**.” (Mentor)

“I will definitely try and **incorporate many of the discussion techniques in the classroom throughout my career**. Having a deeper understanding of educational disadvantage and generational poverty at the primary school level will also be of benefit and will continue to influence my career decisions.” (Mentor)

“**The mentors role modelled the skills and dispositions of philosophical inquiry** as well as more general life skills such as respect, cooperation and care.” (Assistant Principal)

“**The mentors truly listened** to the students and modelled the behaviour that they expected.” (Year 6 teacher)

“**I gained a significant insight into the different ways kids learn** and the obstacles existing in classrooms in disadvantaged schools.” (Mentor)

*Mentors also submitted written reflections following their classroom observation experiences, during the training phase. Many of their comments reflected a broadening of their philosophical practice, for example:*

“It got me thinking about **how important it is to be patient** in philosophical discussion. It can take a long time to explore an idea deeply.”

“**Accepting and making use of disagreement** is an important part of Philosophy.”

“Observing this class made me aware that **it takes a lot of self-restraint to be a good facilitator**, and to avoid interrupting the flow of the conversation.”

“**Balancing student empowerment against productive discussion** is difficult.”

## Evidence of overall program effectiveness

### Program management and delivery

“The detailed planning and follow through with the topic was a highlight. The management, planning and development was outstanding. It was a fantastic program and was well received by students, staff and myself. *Big Questions* opened up possibilities that weren’t there before and has given students and staff the confidence to embrace such programs in the future.” (Principal)

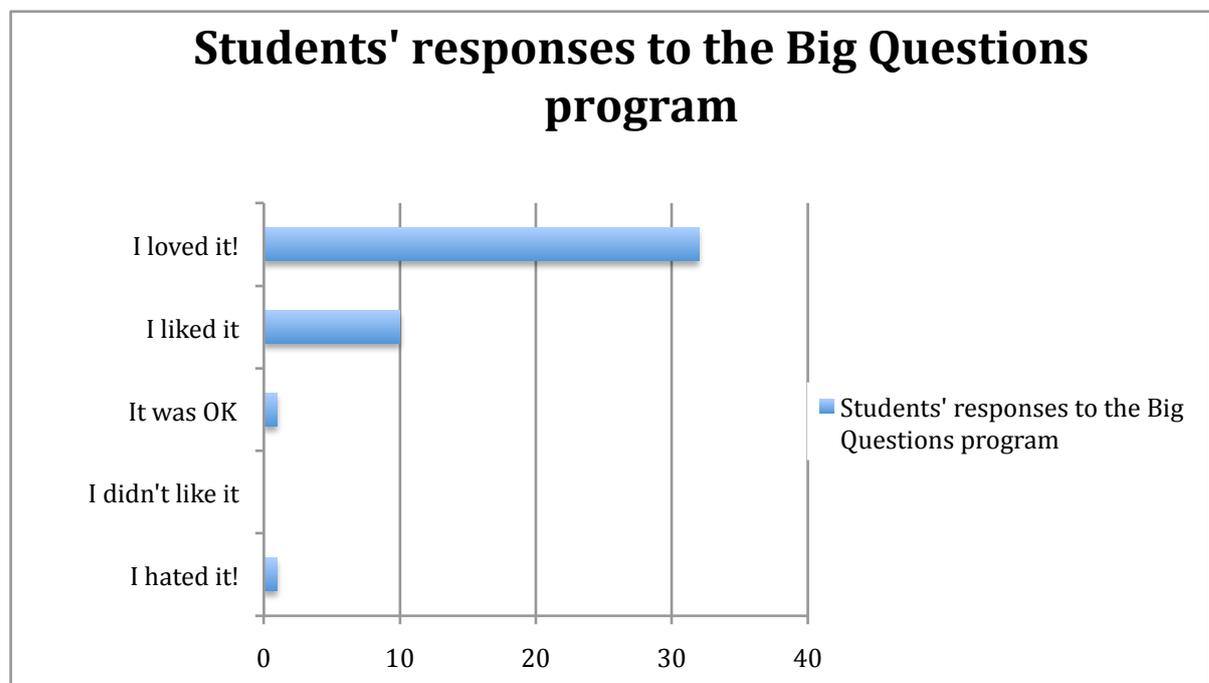
“Very satisfied with the program management [which] could not have been more organised or more approachable. Thank you for inspiring our school community with the *Big Questions* program. You’re amazing!” (Assistant Principal)

“I think the program ran excellently.” (Mentor)

“I loved the whole program so much! It couldn’t have been better!” (Student)

### Student experience

Forty-four students responded to a simple post-program survey designed to assess their enjoyment of the program. Over 95% of the respondents either “**loved**” or “**liked**” the program, as depicted in this graph:



Mentors made the following further comments about the students' experience:

"It was also very encouraging to see how much they enjoyed engaging in arguments and working with each other. That reinforced to me that **anyone is capable of doing philosophy** and that **most people, if given the opportunity and the right setting, are willing and interested** in getting involved in it."

"I think they **certainly benefited from having their views heard and taken seriously by adults**. That seemed to really be quite a new experience for most of the kids."

## Mentor experience

Throughout the program, mentors regularly spoke to me about their enjoyment of the learning process, and commented that their role in *Big Questions* was unique in their experience. One mentor described it as "a fantastic opportunity to gain practical experience in the task of applying philosophical skills beyond a university classroom environment." Another wrote: "I would like to see philosophy take on a meaningful existence outside of the professionalised realm of the universities. The study of philosophy is a specialised field like any other, but the practice of philosophy is open to anyone with a passion for asking questions."

During a mentor training workshop, one mentor said: "I think that this [method of facilitating collaborative philosophical enquiry] should really be taught in first year, as part of our undergraduate Philosophy degree." The other mentors agreed that Philosophy tutorials and seminars would likely be more productive and collegial if this kind of training were part of the mainstream undergraduate experience.

## Quantitative feedback from mentors

### Training and preparation

Answered: 9 Skipped: 0



## Curriculum and support

Answered: 9 Skipped: 0



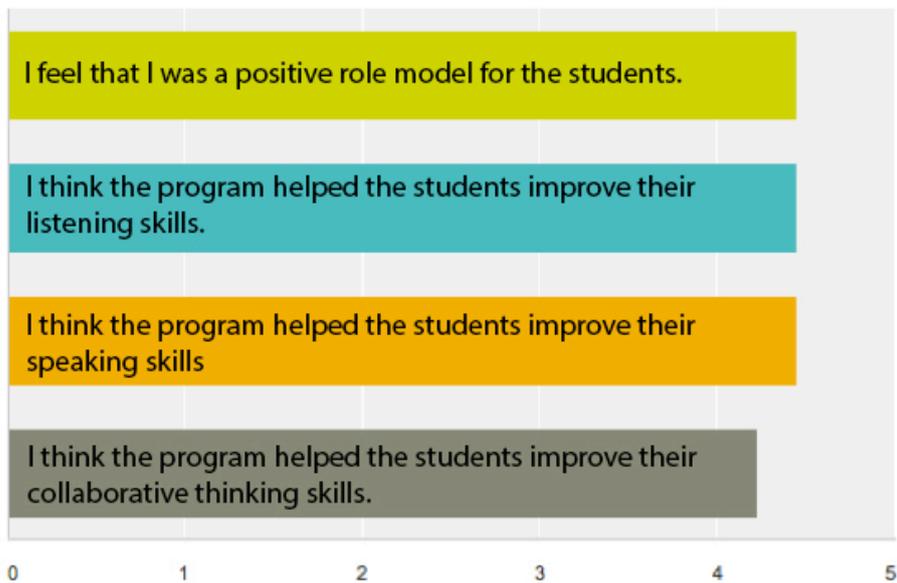
## How being a mentor has affected me

Answered: 9 Skipped: 0



## Perceived impact on the students

Answered: 9 Skipped: 0



## SPECIAL CHALLENGES

### The extent of educational disadvantage and its impact on outcomes

Mahogany Rise Primary School is located in an area of severe socio-economic disadvantage. Literacy levels of students at Mahogany Rise are markedly below state averages, and many students fail national literacy benchmarks. Achievement Improvement Monitor data show results in the bottom 10% of the state for reading, writing, spelling and mathematics. Attitudes to School Survey data indicate that measures of wellbeing, teaching and learning, and student relationships are significantly below state averages.

Like many other schools with a high proportion of students from low socio-economic status backgrounds, Mahogany Rise Primary School needs support for developing students' higher-order thinking skills; higher educational attainment (particularly in literacy); better cooperation among students; and greater school engagement.

The educational divide between students at Mahogany Rise Primary School and students at other schools in higher socio-economic areas was very striking. Prior to the implementation of *Big Questions*, the students at Mahogany Rise had had few opportunities for the practice of sustained argumentative discourse.

At the outset of *Big Questions*, many participating students struggled to meet the prerequisites for higher-order thinking and discussion, such as being still and calm, listening attentively, controlling their impulsivity and their emotions, and treating others with respect. Without these prerequisite behaviours, it was extremely difficult to

establish any kind of philosophical dialogue, so the mentors' task was challenging indeed.

The first day of implementing the program represented a steep learning curve for all participants. After spending an intensive day with the students, the mentors gained a clearer idea of the students' levels of competency. This enabled mentors to understand baseline levels from which change could be effected, making it possible to scaffold learning on subsequent days of the program. Student outcomes did improve thereafter, with students achieving genuine dialogue in their small groups.

In addition to employing the techniques in which they had been trained to facilitate philosophical enquiry, mentors supported student development by: remaining calm and composed; listening very attentively to students; speaking clearly with good vocal projection; offering clear explanations; maintaining their sense of humour; offering encouragement; being patient and sympathetic; and adapting to changing circumstances.

Improvements in students' engagement and competencies were very noticeable between the first and second days of the program. Change was incremental between the second and third days. Over such a restricted time period, it is not realistic to expect to see a major transformation in student competencies. Pleasingly, however, many smaller changes were evident, including more frequent displays of attentiveness and cooperation, and subtle improvements in students' communication, including increased eye contact among students during group discussions.

## **Behaviour management**

Management of students' behaviour was a major challenge on the first day of the program. In subsequent days, a firmer approach to behaviour management with stricter enforcement of rules led to some improvement. Mentors achieved greater discipline by utilising "attention grabbers"; removing distractions; asserting authority; balancing praise and sanctions; issuing warnings and enforcing consequences; expressing disappointment with poor behaviour; and shifting responsibility for behaviour management to a misbehaving student by asking "Which rule are you breaking?"

Although there were more behavioural problems than had been anticipated, there were at least some children in each group who remained cooperative and engaged. It was encouraging to receive feedback from the staff members (Principal, Year 4/5 teacher, Year 6 teacher and teacher's aide) indicating their pleasant surprise at how well the program was going, and observing that the children were in fact behaving better than they had expected.

## **Viability of the three-day curriculum structure**

Mahogany Rise Primary School is located more than 50km from Melbourne's CBD, requiring our volunteer mentors to make long commutes. To lessen the travel burden, program leaders agreed to condense the in-school program delivery into three full days. This structure was a constraint on the students' ability to improve, as it demanded long

periods of focused attention which they struggled to sustain. Future implementations of *Big Questions* will be differently structured to enable briefer but more frequent school visits.

## **FUTURE DIRECTIONS**

Findings from the evaluation of the *Big Questions* pilot program will be used systematically to refine the program and to enhance its effectiveness in future years.

Previous research into the impacts of Philosophy for Children and of university-school mentoring programs suggests that if the *Big Questions* program were to be implemented over a sufficient time period, student outcomes would improve across numerous Victorian Essential Learning Standards (VELS), notably interdisciplinary thinking processes (inquiry, reflection, metacognition, creativity, reasoning, analysing, evaluating) and VELS-identified skills including building social relationships, teamwork, listening, responding, engaging with community, and developing civic knowledge and understanding.

Future implementations of *Big Questions* should corroborate the effectiveness of dialogue-based inquiry as a vehicle for promoting openness to new ideas and for resolving disagreements reasonably. Evaluations of future implementations should aim to assess the extent to which students develop a disposition towards good thinking; improve their ability to follow a train of thought; give clearer expression to their thoughts and ideas, develop speaking and listening skills; build on each other's ideas constructively and collaboratively; and critically evaluate claims in a respectful manner.

## APPENDIX A: Evaluation survey for school leaders

# BIG QUESTIONS

[www.BigQuestionsProgram.wordpress.com](http://www.BigQuestionsProgram.wordpress.com)

### ***Big Questions* evaluation survey for leaders at Mahogany Rise Primary School**

**1) What were you hoping to achieve for your school through the *Big Questions* program?**

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**2) How effectively did the program meet your expectations?**

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**3) What was the most interesting or memorable aspect of the program? \_\_\_\_\_**

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**4) Do you think *Big Questions* will influence your school's future activities? If so, in what way?**

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5) Do you think that the mentors were positive role models for the students? \_\_\_\_\_

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6) Do you think the *Big Questions* program had an impact on your students' learning or development (e.g. listening, speaking, collaborative thinking, etc)? If so, please describe the impact.

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7) How satisfied were you with our management of the program, and our communication with you in the planning and development stages?

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8) Would you like to work with us again? \_\_\_\_\_

9) Do you have any suggestions for improving the program for the future? \_\_\_\_\_

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10) Do you have any further comments to share with us?

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*Thank you very much for taking the time to provide this valuable feedback.*

## APPENDIX B: Evaluation survey for school teaching staff

*Big Questions* evaluation survey for teaching staff at Mahogany Rise Primary School

1) Was the briefing presentation useful in preparing you for what to expect? \_\_\_\_\_

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2) What was the most interesting or memorable aspect of the program? \_\_\_\_\_

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3) Do you think *Big Questions* will influence your future classroom activities? If so, in what way?

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4) Were you happy with your role in the program? Why / why not? \_\_\_\_\_

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5) Do you think that the mentors were positive role models for the students? \_\_\_\_\_

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6) Do you think the *Big Questions* program had an impact on the students' learning or development (e.g. listening, speaking, collaborative thinking, etc)? If so, please describe the impact.

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7) Would you like *Big Questions* to run at your school again next year? \_\_\_\_\_

8) Do you have any suggestions for improving the program for the future?

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*Thank you very much for taking the time to provide this valuable feedback.*

# APPENDIX C: Evaluation survey for mentors

## Big Questions 2013 - mentor survey

Dear mentors,

Could you please complete this survey by Tuesday 10 September. Your feedback will contribute substantially to the evaluation and future improvement of the Big Questions program.

The survey will take 15 – 20 minutes to complete. Survey results will remain anonymous (unless you wish to include your name in one of the comment boxes).

Thank you very much for your feedback!

### 1. Training and preparation

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
a) Overall, I felt well prepared for my role at the school.	<input type="radio"/>				
b) I found the mentor workshops valuable.	<input type="radio"/>				
c) My experience of classroom observation at the King David School was helpful.	<input type="radio"/>				
d) The mentor e-newsletters were beneficial.	<input type="radio"/>				
e) The Required Learning was a useful part of the training program.	<input type="radio"/>				

f) If you have anything further to say about the training and preparation, please comment here.

### 2. Curriculum and support

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
a) The three-day curriculum provided was realistic.	<input type="radio"/>				
b) The students responded well to the videos.	<input type="radio"/>				
c) The students responded well to the discussions.	<input type="radio"/>				
d) The students responded well to the activities and games.	<input type="radio"/>				
e) I felt well-supported throughout the program.	<input type="radio"/>				

f) If you have anything further to say about the curriculum or support provided, please comment here.

**3. How being a mentor has affected me**

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
a) Being a mentor has improved my communication skills.	<input type="radio"/>				
b) Being a mentor has improved my self-confidence.	<input type="radio"/>				
c) Being a mentor has given me a greater insight into others' learning.	<input type="radio"/>				
d) Being a mentor has been useful for my own career decision-making process.	<input type="radio"/>				
e) I feel that being a mentor was meaningful and worthwhile.	<input type="radio"/>				

Note: There is space below (Questions 5 & 6) for you to comment further about how the Big Questions program may have affected you.

**4. Perceived impact on the students**

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
a) I feel that I was a positive role model for the students.	<input type="radio"/>				
b) I think the program helped the students improve their listening skills.	<input type="radio"/>				
c) I think the program helped the students improve their speaking skills.	<input type="radio"/>				
d) I think the program helped the students improve their collaborative thinking skills.	<input type="radio"/>				

e) If you think that the Big Questions program affected the students in other important ways, could you please describe the impact below:

**5. What (if anything) did you gain \*personally\* from the experience of mentoring?**

**6. What (if anything) did you gain \*professionally\* from the experience of mentoring?**

**7. Do you have any suggestions that could help us improve the program for the future - or any further comments?**



Thank you very much for taking the time to complete this survey. We really appreciate your thoughts.

Best wishes,

Michelle Soweby (on behalf of the Big Questions program stakeholders)

## APPENDIX D: Evaluation survey for students

Spaceflight squad (group name): \_\_\_\_\_

Please think about all your experiences over the last three Fridays...

1) What did you like best about this Philosophy program? Why? \_\_\_\_\_

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2) What didn't you like? Why? \_\_\_\_\_

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3) What is the most interesting thing you learned? \_\_\_\_\_

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4) Overall, how do you feel about this Philosophy program? (Please circle one)



I loved it!

I liked it.

It was OK.

I didn't like it.

I hated it!

5) If you had to describe this Philosophy program in one word, which word would you choose?

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## ENDNOTES

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- <sup>1</sup> See for example Worley, P., Enquiry vs. Philosophy. *Teaching Thinking and Creativity*, 9:2/Issue 27. Retrieved 22/03/2014 from [www.peterworley.com/Publications\\_and.../EnquiryvsPhilosophy.pdf](http://www.peterworley.com/Publications_and.../EnquiryvsPhilosophy.pdf)
- <sup>2</sup> See for example Matthews, G., (1984). *Dialogues with Children*. Harvard University Press.
- <sup>3</sup> Summarised in Millett, S. & Tapper, A. (2012, July). Benefits of Collaborative Philosophical Inquiry in Schools. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 44(5), 546–567.
- <sup>4</sup> See Wilks, S. (Ed.) (2005). *Designing a Thinking Curriculum*. ACER Press. See also Sprod, T. (1999). Philosophy, young people and well-being. *Youth Studies Australia*, 18(2), 12–16.
- <sup>5</sup> See Hinton, L. (2011). Making a Difference Through Philosophy. In T. Wrigley, P. Thomson, & R. Lingard (Eds), *Changing Schools: Alternative Ways to Make a World of Difference* (pp. 15–26), Routledge.
- <sup>6</sup> See Topping, K. J. & Trickey, S. (2007), Collaborative philosophical enquiry for school children: Cognitive effects at 10-12 years. *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 77, 271–288.
- <sup>7</sup> See *Big Questions: Essential Learning (AusVELS)*. Retrieved 22/03/2014 from <http://bigquestionsprogram.wordpress.com/philosophical-enquiry/essential-learning-ausvels/>
- <sup>8</sup> See Hinton, L. (2011). Making a Difference Through Philosophy. In T. Wrigley, P. Thomson, & R. Lingard (Eds), *Changing Schools: Alternative Ways to Make a World of Difference* (pp. 15–26), Routledge.
- <sup>9</sup> Topping, K. J. & Trickey, S. (2007). Impact of philosophical enquiry on school students' interactive behaviour. *International Journal of Thinking Skills and Creativity*, 2(2), 73–84. See also Trickey, S. & Topping, K. J. (2006). Collaborative philosophical enquiry for school children: Socio-emotional effects at 10-12 years. *School Psychology International*, 27:5, 599–614.
- <sup>10</sup> Worley, P. (2009, Autumn). The Philosophy *In* Philosophy in Schools. *Think*, 8(23), 63–75. Retrieved 22/03/2014 from [http://www.peterworley.com/Publications\\_and\\_Articles\\_files/Philosophyinp4c.pdf](http://www.peterworley.com/Publications_and_Articles_files/Philosophyinp4c.pdf)
- <sup>11</sup> See James, R. (2012). Social Inclusion in a Globalised Higher Education Environment: The issue of equitable access to university in Australia. In T. N. Basit & S. Tomlinson, *Social Inclusion and Higher Education*, The Policy Press.
- <sup>12</sup> See Bini, M., Burgh, G., Cam, P., Goddard, E., Golding, C., Knight, S., ... Walsh, A. (2009). *The Case for Inclusion of Philosophy in the National Curriculum*. Retrieved 22/03/2014 from <http://fapsa.org.au/curriculum/national-curriculum/>
- <sup>13</sup> Phillips, S. (2012, August). Widening Participation in Higher Education for People from Low SES Backgrounds: A Case Study of Deakin University's Existing Community Partnerships and Collaborations. *Working Papers*, 2(34), Alfred Deakin Research Institute, Deakin University.

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<sup>14</sup> See Morrison Gutman, L., & Akerman, R. (2008). *Research Report 27: Determinants of aspiration*. Centre for Research on the Wider Benefits of Learning, Institute of Education, University of London.

<sup>15</sup> See Centre for the Study of Higher Education (2008). *Participation and Equity: A review of the participation in higher education of people from low socioeconomic backgrounds and Indigenous people*. University of Melbourne. See also Gale, T., Sellar, S., Parker, S., Hattam, R., Comber, B., Tranter, D. & Bills, D. (2010), *Interventions early in school as a means to improve higher education outcomes for disadvantaged (particularly low SES) students: A design and evaluation matrix for university outreach in schools*. Australian Government: Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations. See also Harris, K., & Calma, A. (2009, August). *Evaluating university-to-school peer mentoring in science: the influence of the In2science program in Victorian schools*. Centre for the Study of Higher Education, University of Melbourne.

<sup>16</sup> See Johnson, F., Fryer-Smith, E., Phillips, C., Skowron, L, Sweet, O., & Sweetman, R. (2009). *Raising Young People's Higher Education Aspirations: Teachers' Attitudes*. Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills, UK Government.

<sup>17</sup> See Gale, T., Sellar, S., Parker, S., Hattam, R., Comber, B., Tranter, D. & Bills, D. (2010). *Interventions early in school as a means to improve higher education outcomes for disadvantaged (particularly low SES) students: A design and evaluation matrix for university outreach in schools*. Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, Australian Government.