VICTORIA State Government | Education and Training

cmy Centre for Multicultural Youth

Student-Led Projects - Quick Guide

Student-led projects are a great approach to self-directed learning, offering an opportunity for students to be at the forefront of designing and leading the initiatives that impact them.[1] Student-led projects can be applied to classroom curriculum, or form core activities of student representative councils, leadership and other interest groups. Whilst student-led projects can be a time commitment within schools — generally taking anywhere from several classes, weeks or even a term to complete — they are highly effective, and have been shown to increase student commitment, ownership, confidence and leadership skills.[2]

The role of student-led projects in anti-racism action

When supported by the school, student-led projects can be a transformative way to explore issues that are impacting the lives of students such as racism and discrimination. This is because they allow students to **identify their needs**, to **actively participate** in issues that affect them, and to be **supported to identify and advocate for solutions.**[3] Student-led projects need not be directly focused on issues of racism and discrimination in order to address racism and discrimination. For students who have experienced marginalisation, student-led projects can provide opportunities for self-expression and leadership, which is critically important for those who may have experienced powerlessness and alienation.[4] Whilst leadership opportunities can arise easily for those who face few barriers, student-led projects actively foster a variety of opportunities for those not usually considered leaders. By focusing on issues considered important and relevant to students, the strengths and leadership actions they display in their everyday lives can be recognised and validated.[5]

Don't miss the **Amplify Toolkit** for practical guidance and support to enhance student voice, agency and leadership

1 CMY [Centre for Multicultural Youth]. (2020 forthcoming). *Youth leadership policy paper.* CMY, Carlton.

2 Ibid

3 MYAN (Australia) [Multicultural Youth Advocacy Network]. (2018). *Not just "ticking a box"- Youth participation with young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds.* MYAN, Melbourne. Retrieved from: https://myan.org.au/myan-reports/not-just-ticking-a-box-youth-participation-with-young-people-from-refugee-and-migrant-backgrounds/

4 Ibid

5 Ibid

Role of schools in supporting student-led projects

The success of a student-led project requires the commitment and support of school leadership, as well as the broader school community.

Commitment in this instance may include:

- To listen to and understand their messages.
- To value their ideas and strategies for change.
- To have confidence in their skills and strengths.
- To provide support and guidance as needed.

Support in this instance may include:

- Facilitating students to move through the project phases.
- Providing 'scaffolding' around the project to help assist students who may not have had experience in leading a project or had opportunity to think in a way in which they have agency.
- Informing students of the resources that are available to them in their projects, or to assisting students to identify means of sourcing resources.
- Identifying and mitigating barriers to participation that may arise for some students.
- Assisting students to troubleshoot.

Facilitation skills such as guiding students to critically reflect, problem solve and communicate learning is core practice for teachers. Facilitation in the student-led project space can be a different experience for teachers as they step outside the role of being "content experts" into the space of learning with their students.[6] This includes assisting students to understand student-led project work is a process and not an event. Through supporting all voices to be heard, and managing self-regulation and conflict constructively, teachers can assist students in moving through the challenges that can arise in spaces of uncertainty.[7]

Check out CMY's **Student-led projects – ideas and activities** for exercises and inspiration to assist your students to get their projects underway

Finally having the opportunity to participate in a student-led project which holds personal meaning for the student can be an affirming experience. Validation of student efforts, difficulties and successes is important for building confidence to take risks in the future. Providing opportunities for recognition of the project (and process) can be a positive conclusion to the project.[8] This may include presentation of the project at an assembly or to school leadership meeting, a write up in the school newsletter, or creating a display around the school. Validation can also be achieved by promoting occasions for students to utilise their skills and learnings in future opportunities such as acting as a peer facilitator for the next student-led project cohort.

6 Terronez, A. (2010). *What makes a good teacher great?* [Ted Talk]. Retrieved from: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vrU6YJle6Q4

7 MYAN (Australia) [Multicultural Youth Advocacy Network]. (2018). *Not just "ticking a box"- Youth participation with young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds.* MYAN, Melbourne. Retrieved from: https://myan.org.au/myan-reports/not-just-ticking-a-box-youth-participation-with-young-people-from-refugee-and-migrant-backgrounds/

8 Ibid

Students Leading Change

A secondary college collaborated with CMY's CurioUS program – a whole-of-school anti-racism initiative – to engage their Year 8 students in a student-led project to unpack and address the issue of racism in their school.

The initial component of the program involved specific lessons exploring concepts such as values, identity, culture and discrimination. The next stage involved engaging in a reflection process so that students could explore how concepts of racism and discrimination have interacted with their lives, their families, their school and their broader community. These first steps were essential as they strategically included team building and involved teacher engagement to develop a sense of trust and a shared understanding of the issues. The teachers were able to draw on themes the students had explored through the Respectful Relationships program to help bridge and consolidate their understandings. Both the facilitators and teachers observed that over the course of these sessions students shifted from a space of disengagement to one of interest and participation.

From there, the students had the opportunity to develop their own student-led projects around the theme of racism and discrimination. The students designed, developed and implemented three different projects. The first project focused on taking control of representing their identity through photography. The second project focused on the theme of 'belonging' using a variety of mediums to express what belonging means in their school. The third project involved video mapping 'safe spaces' within the school whereby students can receive support should they have concerns about racism and discrimination.

The school supported and recognised the students' efforts by facilitating a presentation of their projects at a special school assembly. In doing so the students were able to promote their messages of diversity, belonging and solidarity to the rest of the student body. The students overwhelmingly reported positive outcomes from their participation in the student-led projects.

- *"I have never thought about race in this way before."*

- *"I wish we would do this for the whole year."*

- *"I feel good about the session."*

- *"I feel really happy and connected to be in here."*

- *"I have never thought of myself as having a culture until now."*