Year 8 camp a buzz

The beginning of a new school year is always coloured by high levels of organisation, catch-ups with colleagues and great hopes for the learning year ahead.

With several newly appointed staff and a Year 8 camp in week 5, the pressure was on! What were our plans for creating a culture of positive engagement and valuing the strengths of our new Year 8 staff and students? Could the camp be the vehicle?

During the induction process for our new Middle School teachers, we discussed the purpose of the camp. We welcomed their input, and acknowledged their experiences and talents for coordinating it. In the week before students arrived, we met to make initial plans. We agreed to begin the school year by facilitating discussions with our students. We would focus on responsibility, equity, organisation and effective communication, and we’d use these as a foundation for planning our year and, in particular, the camp. The students would nominate peers for a core group to represent the six home groups.

The year got underway. At the Year 8 assembly on the second day back, we could feel the excitement building. The various organisational aspects of the camp were allocated to home groups. Class discussions evolved, and the core student group was established. They met daily with the Middle Years coordinator to convey group thinking and to relay shared information back to classes for further input.

In classrooms, the engagement was tangible—the buzz was happening! One home group researched the best deals and availability, and cabin preference forms were designed. Another group booked buses and, in the process, they collated student ‘travel sickness’ data before allocating buses. The catering group was busy surveying students and teachers, checking dietary requirements and allergies, and negotiating a menu democratically based on preferences. Kitchen duty rosters were developed to bring different groups and individuals together and encourage new networking.

Staff and students discussed explicit learning outcomes for the camp. They did collaborative research on the campsite to explore learning possibilities. One class consulted all home groups in an inclusive process to compile ‘camp expectations’. They aptly chose to use the school values as their basis, showing insight that impressed staff!

One home group developed team building activities. They surveyed students’ individual strengths and mixed them up for Trivia Quiz teams. A definite highlight was going to be the Red Faces Talent Night; everyone would be expected to participate, even the adults.

Everyone played their part in ironing out hiccups and problems as they arose.

After much anticipation and a lot of great teamwork, Week 5 was upon us and the Year 8 camp became a reality. Every learner in each home group actively involved in organising it, the attendance far outstpped previous years. Student engagement was high and our new Year 8s achieved all the intended learning outcomes.

Back at school, teachers built on the friendships and the shared experiences. Students continued to work in teams with common purposes. The cohesive culture that had grown at camp allowed them to take risks in their learning, even at this early stage of the year. They all knew something about each other as people; they willingly talked with others about their learning, built on the ideas of their peers and sought assistance from both peers and teachers.

Through planning the camp, and participating in such a successful way, students and staff had all shown immense collaboration and trust. Our year was now set with the safe conditions and connections for students’ rigorous learning.

Deputy principal of a metropolitan secondary school

Justice alert

Who struggles to feel a sense of belonging?

Ways to build a community of learners

Community and service: begin a class/school program where all students take on roles/responsibilities, keep records of their ongoing involvement and are formally acknowledged for their contributions (eg credit towards SACE subject). This strengthens school culture and enhances student’s connection to school. Roles might include peer tutoring, mentorship, forums, action groups, sports coaching, and classroom duties.

First two weeks program: Many schools begin the year with a specific focus on the shared values, attitudes, skills and community goals that will prepare the class/school for success. All learning activities are designed to develop the theme. Home—school links are an integral part of this process which is continually reinforced and revisited.

Embed cooperative activities: Use simple processes to extend students’ connection within the learning community:

Trust Walk—Students pair up, one is blindfolded, and the partner walks beside, guiding the blindfolded person on an outside walk, while using a reassuring voice but no body contact.

Tangles—Eight students face into a circle with their right hands out in front. Each grasps the right hand of another person. Adding to this, the group now grasps left hands, making sure that no two particular people are joined by both hands. Now the challenge is to ‘untangle’ the group back to a simple circle without letting go of any hands.

Trust builders and trust busters—Students consider what they value for their learning community and compile two lists: attitudes/actions that ‘build’ learning community capacity and those that ‘bust’ it. These are revisited frequently.

Think, Pair, Share—Students gather information/make notes alone. Next, students pair off to share ideas/combine notes. Then, each member of the pair joins with a member of another pair to think more deeply. Students continue this process, resulting in total class involvement.

Continued page 34
Language that teachers can use to build a community of learners

- We've agreed on what we want to achieve. What challenges will we set ourselves?
- How can we become better listeners in our learning community?
- I don’t know the answer to that one. How about finding out and then sharing with the group?
- How are we all feeling about the issue? Let’s brainstorm some possible ways forward.
- Would this be a good question for our online learning blog?
- This is what Ruby has achieved so far: … Does anyone have suggestions for how she could go on from here?
- That’s an interesting opinion. Can you tell us more?
- Who can ‘piggyback’ off this idea? What thinking?
- Have you found people who agree or disagree with your view? How shall we get together to hear their ideas?
- What does ‘community’ mean to you? What can we do to build a sense of community in our class?

Practice check

- Do I know each of my students well enough to recognise their different needs for feeling a sense of belonging?
- How do I deliberately develop a learning community with students? Do they all feel a part of the group?
- Do I undermine students’ self-esteem in front of their peers/teachers?
- Do I teach collaboration skills?
- Do my students share responsibility for progress?
- How am I modeling being a community member with other teachers?
- In what ways do I bring the resources of the wider community into the classroom?