Q & A with Roger Holdsworth

Former teacher Roger Holdsworth is a senior research associate in the Australian Youth Research Centre at the University of Melbourne. He is the founding editor of Connect – a magazine that publishes student opinion and encourages active youth participation in education.

What part does student leadership play in the Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians?

I’m heartened by the continued stress on issues of citizenship in the Melbourne Declaration, and by the implied recognition of young people as currently active citizens rather than ‘citizens in waiting’. It is important that goals – both for young Australians and for education systems – are set in partnership with young people, rather than what could be seen as a removed and paternalistic setting of goals ‘for young Australians’. Hence, it has been important that students – albeit in a limited way – were consulted and involved in the process of establishing these goals. The Victorian Student Representative Council (VicSRC) discussed the draft documents, engaged students in schools in further discussions and was represented at the national launch of the statement by the only secondary student present!

Representative student groups, such as the VicSRC, anchor a broad and participatory structure of student representation, coordinate student views, and can challenge inadequate and often self-limiting practices of leadership in schools. The vital aspect of this is that students are organising themselves at a state-wide level to advocate the variety of student views – and that they get support from the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, from the community youth sector (the VicSRC is auspiced by Youth Affairs Council of Victoria), and from individual educators.

When did you first become interested in student voice and leadership?

Since starting teaching in the late 1960s, I have been interested in developing real and important things that all students can do as part of their learning. I have also always had a strong sense of social justice, through involvement in migrant education and other initiatives – such as the Carlton Free Coaching Service – that struggled to combat discrimination and disadvantage.
Back when I was working as a secondary teacher at Brunswick Girls High School and Lynall Hall Community School in the 1970s, I was involved in a number of enterprises that sparked my broader interests, such as a cross-age tutoring program that paid students to tutor other students. I was also involved in a student-run community newspaper that was multilingual, a radio program called Ascolta, and curriculum negotiation in the school’s Year 12 and Tertiary Entrance Certificate (STC) Group.

I am interested in the broader ideas of the active participation of young people, particularly in and through schools. ‘Leadership’ is often linked with exclusivist ideas of supporting and training some young people to be leaders; but I want to challenge these views and pose more inclusive ideas of all students being active participants in individual and shared decision-making about their lives – and about their education.

**Where have you seen student leadership experiences take individual students and their schools?**

Many students come to mind who have made significant impacts on their schools, communities and on their own lives. There was one young woman in the cross-age tutoring program at Brunswick Girls, for whom the experience of being trusted and given responsibility for the learning of others was a transformative experience. Another student at Lynall Hall, coming from a difficult home background, topped her university history course, now has her PhD, and is lecturing in education. Other students who have been active in their own student councils have gone on to found national youth environmental organisations, returned to their schools to mentor student leadership and participatory initiatives, and have continued their passions in other community groups.

I also frequently cite the four student leaders at a western suburban high school, who were commissioned by the school to investigate truancy at the school. These were not traditional student leaders on the SRC, but could be seen as ‘leaders in truancy’. They investigated why students wagged school, when, what they did and what the consequences were for students, the school and the local community. They wrote a report for the school, with recommendations for school action. And then, as follow-on from this research and report, they re-wrote the school’s ’Welfare and Discipline Policy’ and had it adopted by the School Council. Their initiative not only transformed their own lives – they completed Year 12 – but also had a profound impact on their school community.

**Tell us about your magazine, Connect.**

In 1979, as a result of publicity about various initiatives, I was being approached by other teachers interested to hear practical ‘how to’ details. I decided to start publishing a small newsletter to collate and share this information. Others – including students – began writing their own stories, and the newsletter grew. Over the years, topics have ranged across primary and secondary school initiatives, curriculum approaches, school governance, and resources for supporting and training students. Recently there’s been a focus on Student Action Teams, marking a strong interest in the active participation of students in meaningful, engaging and action-based learning – frequently with a community focus.

**Connect’s overview is that practices develop through encouraging students and teachers to reflect on their experiences, and through enabling them to share their practical stories and resources in enough detail that others can learn from them and try their own variations. Now, 30 years later, Connect is a national – and sometimes international – practice journal publishing six issues a year. Along the way, Connect has also published books, articles and resources on student councils and student-run initiatives.**

To find out more and to request sample copies of Connect, visit www.geocities.com/rogermhold/Connect

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This interview was conducted by the Research Branch, Department of Education and Early Childhood Development.


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