

MODULE 2.4

EMPOWERING STUDENTS

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Empowering students

Objectives

- Schools implement youth led student empowerment processes to develop skills for resilience.
- School staff are able to support student skill development through their daily interactions with students.

Outcomes

- By completing this module participants will understand student empowerment and learn key elements useful for fostering it at their school. Participation in this module will allow schools to begin planning for student empowerment in mental health promotion within their own context.

Key messages

- Empowerment is a process through which people increase their participation in decisions that matter to them.
- The process of empowerment involves an ongoing commitment to listening to, hearing and supporting the active role of students in their own lives, their education and the promotion of mental health in their schools and communities.
- When students are empowered to have a say and take action about issues affecting them they experience better mental health outcomes, develop strong self-concepts and positively engage with learning.
- Five elements support the success of student empowerment in a school setting. These are: commitment, knowledge and skills, confidence, opportunities and responsibilities and active support.
- Student empowerment is more than students being involved in projects related to mental health. It can involve students being supported by adults to lead projects and discussions about mental health at their school as part of a whole school approach.

What is student empowerment?



Student empowerment means giving young people the opportunity to actively participate in school activities and decisions that will shape their lives, the lives of their families and the lives of their peers.

Examples include:

- seeing young people as assets, valuing their experience, and adopting a positive view of their potential rather than focusing on problems
- focusing on resilience and strengths instead of risk factors and deficits
- providing opportunities for contribution and participation for all students, regardless of ability, location, status, background, culture or sexuality
- active participation from students and support from leadership.

What does student empowerment look like?

Student empowerment is student-led, and will therefore look different in every school. The fresh perspective of youth coupled with imagination and enthusiasm means that there are no limits to what students could propose and achieve. Empowering students is a process of discovery, surprise and serendipity. When students have the right knowledge, skills, support and environment, it's amazing what they can produce.



Student empowerment is a partnership

To enable true student empowerment, students and teachers need to be active partners. The school's role is to facilitate and support students as active partners, rather than devising an initiative and handing it over to students to run, consulting with students then ignoring their ideas or allowing students to lead an initiative without any support.



Empowerment requires ongoing support

Genuine empowerment means that students are supported by adults in leading projects and discussions about mental health. Although students require preparation and support, this process may challenge existing power relations in a school. It can sometimes be really hard for an adult to be quiet and give students space to explore mental health promotion.

Adults knowing when and how to step back as well as when and how to step forward is important.

Empowerment is more than consultation

While all schools involve students to some extent, it's less common to find students involved in significant ways throughout the course of an initiative. Sometimes schools make a symbolic effort to involve young people, perhaps by recruiting one or two students to be involved in a consultation or onto a committee. This gives the appearance of consulting with and involving students yet can also be seen as tokenistic. Student empowerment involves a way of working that truly engages young people as full partners in the design, implementation, and evaluation of strategies and initiatives.

How empowerment benefits individuals



Improved awareness of mental health issues

By participating in self-directed mental health initiatives, students develop a better understanding of relevant issues.

Better decision making

Young people make better decisions when they have been involved in the decision-making process. This improved decision-making flows on to improved mental health.

Enhanced resilience

Student participation in decision-making strengthens resilience factors such as supportive relationships, sense of personal choice, problem solving skills, opportunities for success and mastery, and peer support and help seeking.

Sense of being valued

When students participate in a respectful and meaningful context they are more likely to feel that their views, knowledge and involvement are valued. This then leads to increased confidence, self-belief, knowledge, skills and educational attainment.

Improved capacity to help

Involving students as partners in mental health promotion increases their motivation and skills for supporting their peers.



How empowerment benefits the school

More informed whole school approach to mental health

Encouraging young people to share their perceptions and understandings about mental health can provide important information to schools in planning the implementation of MindMatters. In particular it's important to hear from students who may feel marginalised or vulnerable, or who may be experiencing mental health difficulties. These students are often the ones who do not traditionally 'speak up', perhaps due to stigma, lack of opportunity or high rates of absenteeism. Consulting with and listening to these students provides information and perspectives that may otherwise be hidden.



More effective implementation of programs

Programs (such as anti-bullying programs) will have a greater chance of success if students lead them or at least have an active role in making decisions about program directions.

Improved learning

A sense of self efficacy helps students learn. Given opportunities to develop social and emotional skills within a positive school and classroom climate, students are more likely to engage in classroom activity and ask for help when they need it.

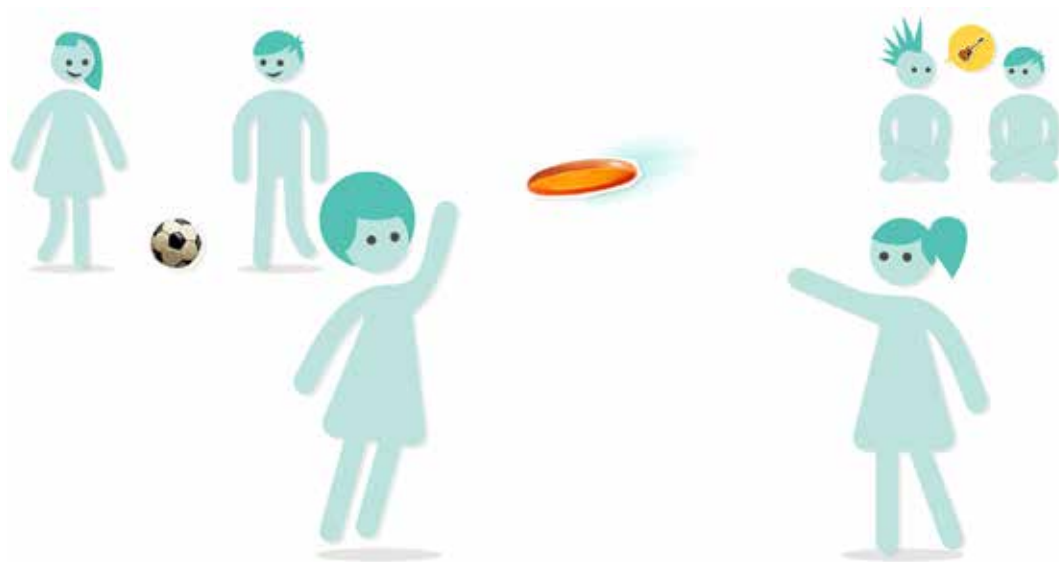


Increased school safety

Students feel safe and protected in an environment where they know the boundaries and have been involved in making decisions about them.

Improved school culture

Student empowerment can include strategies where students with increased knowledge about mental health share this with other students in a variety of formal and informal ways. Such strategies can promote help seeking, reduce stigma, create a safe culture — and have a positive effect on reducing bullying and harassment.



How empowerment benefits society

Showing respect for human rights

Participation in decisions that affect us is a basic human right. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child states that young people have a right to express their views freely in all matters that affect them. Given the diversity of young people in our schools and society, student empowerment processes help address equity and provide an opportunity to invite and act on student voice.



Developing citizenship

Young people are empowered to operate as competent, confident and active citizens within democratic societies by learning and practicing their rights. This happens through the safe and practical application of citizenship within schools and communities. They grow as citizens who know they have value, who work productively with others and are able to make a difference. A school is a community and in a community all people have a voice.

Five keys to student empowerment

Five key elements can help a variety of student-led, school-based actions and programs to evolve:

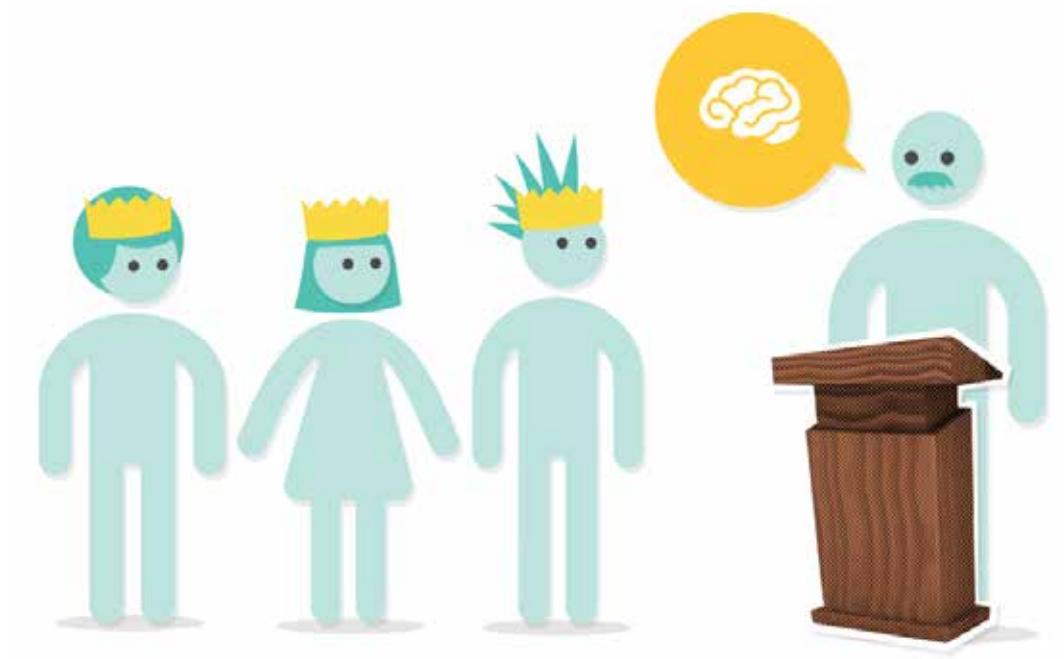
- commitment
- knowledge and skills
- confidence
- opportunities and responsibilities
- active support.



These elements have been identified and articulated over several years by secondary school students across Australia in consultation with Roger Holdsworth from the University of Melbourne.

Having these elements in place helps staff and students plan together. It gives all students the chance to grow and participate in a real and non-threatening manner. These elements give staff some support in how they might work alongside students and how they might include students from diverse backgrounds in planning.

Commitment by the school to the active role of young people



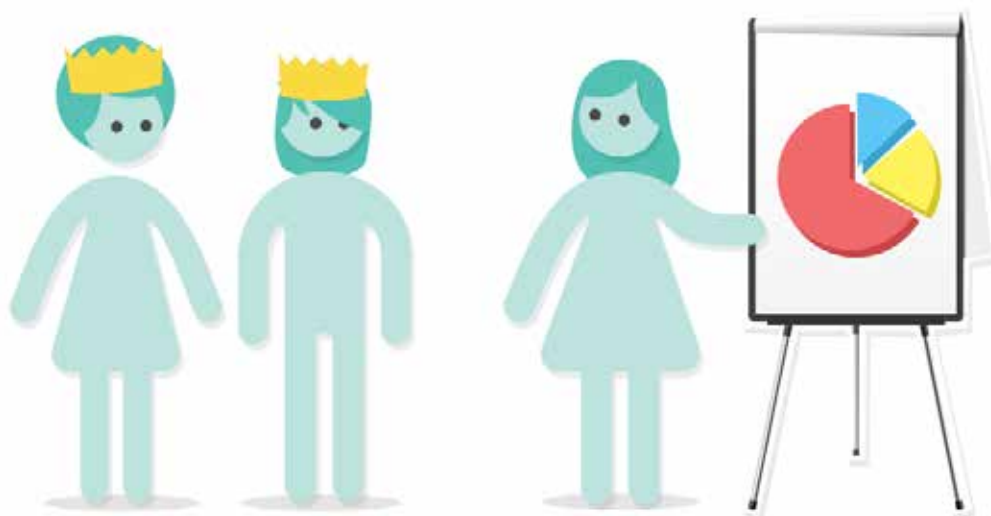
Student empowerment starts with the school staff's understanding of, belief in, and commitment to young people taking an active role in promoting wellbeing at school. This commitment can be achieved in a variety of ways including:

- a public commitment by the principal
- writing student empowerment into the school implementation plan
- making leadership opportunities available to all interested students
- inviting students to join the school MindMatters Action Team
- involving students in the development of the school implementation plan
- including curriculum units where students learn about empowerment and mental health issues
- providing resources such as time and money to support student ideas and empowerment activities
- allocating trained and committed staff to work with students.

Building the knowledge and skills of young people

To effectively support mental health at school, staff and students need to build their knowledge and skills about mental health and the importance of help seeking, as well as in responsible decision-making, personal and social skills, and collaboration. They also need to understand what empowerment is and how it works in schools, for example by:

- students and staff learning about mental health
- learning about ways to create a safe and positive school environment
- staff sharing the principles of empowerment with students and discussing how they can work at their school
- offering opportunities such as mental health curriculum units as well as voluntary sessions
- staff teaching students about data and involving them in data collection and analysis so students can see where action might be needed and whether they are making a difference.



Developing the confidence and capacity of young people



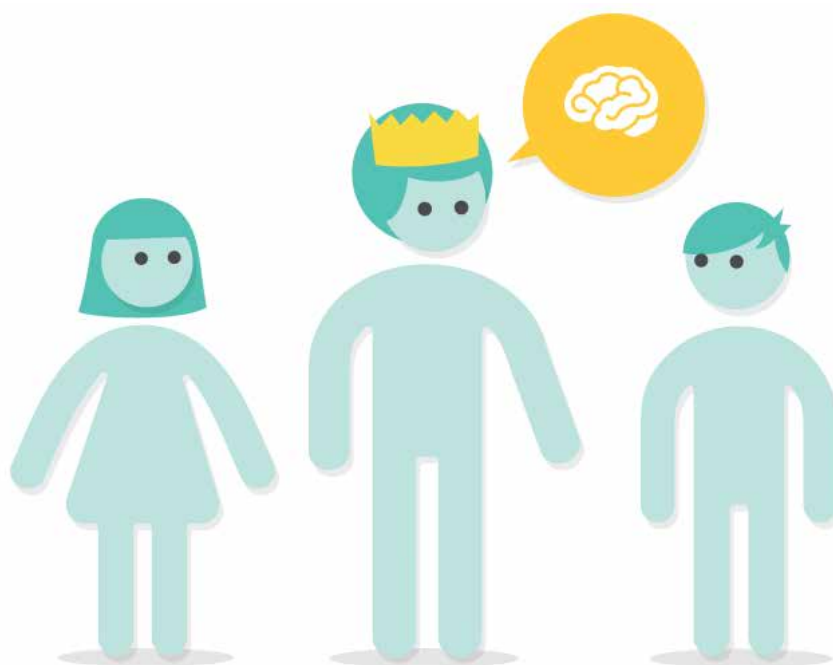
The process of student empowerment includes building the confidence and capacity of young people to speak up, to present and tackle issues, to make changes and to take appropriate risks by:

- creating a safe learning environment where all students are permitted and encouraged to speak up
- allowing students to self-nominate to be involved in learning more about mental health in order to share their knowledge with peers
- supporting students to identify their own specific social and emotional skills, strengths and areas they are interested in developing
- identifying specific groups or individuals who may feel marginalised, for example, students from diverse backgrounds, and encourage them to become involved
- providing opportunities to develop a 'cause', for example, students participating in R U OK? Day or becoming involved in bullying prevention online.

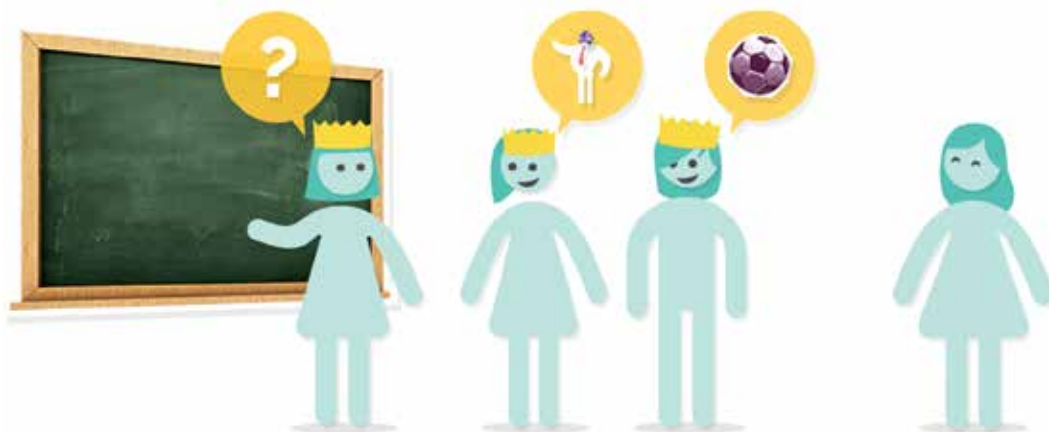
Identifying opportunities and responsibilities

School staff need to provide all interested students with opportunities to support wellbeing in their school in a way that is meaningful for them and their school community. Possibilities include:

- including students' empowerment and any resulting student-led projects as a curriculum focus, as part of integrated learning, or within a citizenship unit
- establishing a peer program (with appropriate training for students)
- involving older students in planning and leading transition activities for younger students.



Active support from teachers and others



Successful student empowerment initiatives require active support from teachers and other adults at the school. Ways that school staff can provide active support include:

- being present in the room when students are working with other students and allowing students to lead when projects are being planned, discussed and enacted
- providing information, planning tools and resources that students may require for their projects
- identifying key support staff, resource staff and space
- allowing students to lead whole school activities for which they see a need
- encouraging authentic, real life participation in community based projects
- knowing when to step up and step back as an adult when young people are learning to take the lead.

Considerations for engaging diverse groups

Empowering students from diverse backgrounds may require enlisting support from adults from the young person's own community. For students from diverse backgrounds to be engaged, schools will need to provide a safe environment. This may mean letting an alternative person support this process with students, for example, an Aboriginal education worker, Pacific Islander officer, Australian Refugee Association youth worker or case manager.

Schools may need to be aware of any specific cultural aspects of mental health and wellbeing. For some cultures there is no separation between physical and mental health. For other cultures the stigma attached to mental illness is so great that to suggest seeking help from a counsellor for mental health difficulties is culturally inappropriate.

Schools will also need to be prepared for any fallout especially with students who may be suffering trauma. It's important for schools to have an understanding of the broader communities the students come from – their aspirations and fears for example. However, it's also important to realise that individual students may not reflect these broader views.

Empowering students requires a supportive school environment. When empowering students from diverse backgrounds this is even more crucial. How empowerment of students from diverse backgrounds manifests may be different and may be culturally challenging. For example, it may not be culturally appropriate for a young person to work alongside an adult, or there may be cultural nuances or protocols relating to student leadership or group work. It may not be culturally appropriate for males and females to work together in small groups. This could be addressed by using male and female groups for certain activities or discussions. If the environment is not supportive, a loss of trust may occur and ramifications may be severe, broad and drawn out within the wider cultural group.

If schools want to engage students from diverse backgrounds they may have to specifically target or recruit them because these students might not get opportunities to develop skills related to leadership, team work and change. Schools may have to use different processes to engage with students from diverse backgrounds than they usually use.



MindMatters is a national mental health initiative for secondary schools developed by *beyondblue* with funding from the Australian Government Department of Health.

See more MindMatters resources at www.mindmatters.edu.au

References and key readings

Morton, M.H. & Montgomery, P. (2013). Youth empowerment programs for improving adolescents' self-efficacy and self-esteem: A systematic review. *Campbell Systematic Reviews*, 2011:5.