

Building a Student Support System Using Sociometry

by Peter McKimmie

Peter McKimmie is the head of the Health and Physical Education faculty at a senior high school in Western Australia. He has been teaching in educational systems for many years and integrating the theory and practice of sociometry, sociodrama and psychodrama in schools. He has been one of the initiators of action methods in schools in Australia, and founded the organisation Parent Education Australia. Peter became a sociodramatist in 1980 and has been a member of ANZPA since its formation 20 years ago.

The Head of the English Faculty at a Senior High School contacts me for advice about setting up an effective student support system in his school. His fellow school management committee members have had experiences of ineffective student support systems and he wants to create something that will work.

I think about his proposal for some time and came up with a support system based on sociometric principles. He likes the idea and invites me to speak to all the Senior High School's eighty teachers about the support system. They vote to accept the proposal.

I am given a period of two weeks – ten teaching days – to develop a student support system in the Senior High School. The school has a population of 1400 students ranging from thirteen to eighteen years of age.

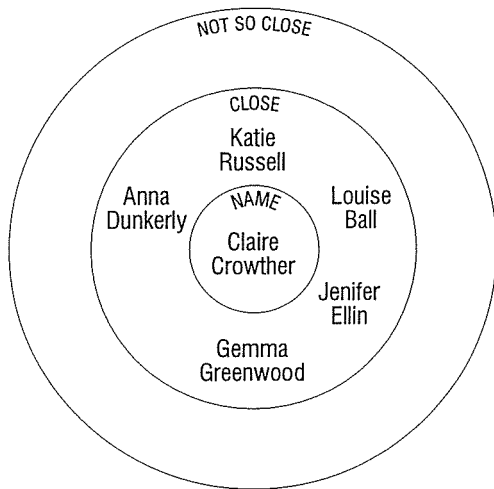
My first job is to timetable opportunities to meet with each class in the school for a forty minutes school period. Fortunately for me, the Head of the English faculty helps. Every time English classes are timetabled, I am able

to conduct a session for one period. This way I came in contact with every student in the school, the whole fourteen hundred. It takes me a week to work through all the classes.

Class Sociometry Sessions

When the students came into the room, I introduce myself and ask them to move the desks aside and sit on their chairs in a circle. It is a lot of fun just getting the class to make a circle rather than the usual rectangle or triangle. I warm the group up with activities such as – 'Can anyone name everyone here?' and 'When I say go, you must leave your chair, sit next to someone different and introduce yourself as though you have never met them before'.

After the initial warm-up we move into action. I place an empty chair next to me and say, 'I need a volunteer to sit on this chair. Who will come out?' Someone eventually comes out and I tell them that they have just won \$10 000 000 and can go anywhere in the world for a holiday. After they pick their destination, I ask, 'Who will you take with



Name: **Claire Crowther**
Form: **B12**

1. Katie Russell	5	✓ * First chosen 5 points
2. Louise Ball	4	✓
3. Jennifer Ellin	3	✓
4. Gemma Greenwood	2	✓
5. Anna Dunkerly	1	✓

FIGURE 1: EXAMPLE OF SOCIOMETRIC KEY

you? You can only take three people and they must be from this class'. When they have picked three students I ask 'Why did you pick them?' I also ask the students who are chosen 'How did you feel about being picked?'

My aim is to warm the students up to making choices and hopefully appropriate choices based on selection criteria. After working with three different students over different choices I introduce the class to the choice which is at the foundation of the student support system. 'Which student would you chose to speak to in this school, if you had a problem?'

Each student in the class is given a sheet of card called a Sociometric Key as shown above.

They are each invited to write down the names of five students they feel they could talk to if they had a problem, in order from first to fifth choice. Then they write their own name in the small circle in the centre and the names of the students they have chosen showing how close they feel to them.

I carry out exactly the same format with each class until I have seen all 1400 students.

Teachers have the option of staying with their class or having a free period.

Most teachers stay with their class for the forty minutes and speak to me informally

about the class and the students. It is probably helpful learning for them to be an observer of the class dynamics, without the pressure of being the teacher. Some teachers make appointments to see me on a more formal ongoing basis.

Collating the Results

After collecting all the data from the students, it is time to set up the system. I manage to co-opt some volunteer parents who come to the school to help me do the analysis. I set out a large sheet of paper near the staffroom, visible to all the teachers, with the students' names in the following format (Figure 2).

Reading from the Sociometric Key forms completed by the students, the results are tabulated by hand by the parents under my supervision.

What emerges from these results are incred-

KIDS IN SUPPORT SYSTEM: McKIMMIE METHOD														
Form	Name	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	Total
8.1	Adams Mary	5	5	5	3	2	3	3	4	4	1	2		42
8.1	Adeer Tom	1	1	2	3	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	7
8.1	Asan Joan	4	4	3	2	2	1	3	-	-	-	-	-	19
8.1	Ateane Ian	2	2	5	5	4	4	1	1	1	-	-	-	25
8.1														

FIGURE 2: COLLATION SHEET

ible sociometric strands weaving through the school system interlocking all the students.

I want to identify the Sociometric Stars selected by each Year group from Year 8 to Year 12. These are the students most selected by other students as those they would chose to speak to if they had a problem. In the diagram below Mary is the Sociometric Star.

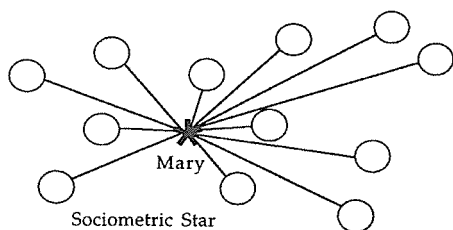


FIGURE 3: SOCIOGRAM

The next step is to select the Sociometric Stars from each Year group from the whole school sociogram. I decide to select the three most chosen from each year group. This makes a group of fifteen Sociometric Stars – three each from Year 8, 9, 10, 11 and 12. In the school support system every student will be linked up to one of these Sociometric Stars.

All information and results are easily available to all staff. I encourage them to talk to me about the student support system. The staff seem very interested and most think that the students chosen are the ones they would have chosen.

YEAR	SCHOOL SYSTEM
8	
9	
10	

FIGURE 4: SOCIO-METRIC STARS BY YEAR

Session with Student Sociometric Stars

The next step of the process is to have a meeting with the student Sociometric Stars. This is an incredible meeting.

The students sit quietly, smiling and listening. I can see why they were chosen – they are great listeners. I tell them why they were chosen, show them the results and ask them

if they want to continue as Sociometric Stars in the support system. They all agree to take part.

I now warm the student stars up to making choices, and to eventually make a choice on a new criterion. 'Which teacher would you choose to speak to, in this school, if you had a problem?'

Once again, the information is collected and analysed and the staff Sociometric Stars are obtained. I decide to keep the number of staff stars at ten. I have a meeting with the staff who are selected and tell them how they have been chosen. I ask them whether they want to continue as staff Sociometric Stars in the student support system, and they agree to. So now the school system is starting to look like this:

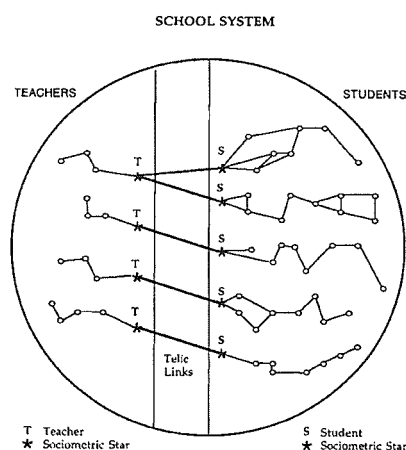


FIGURE 5: SCHOOL SYSTEM

Now the process is starting to identify telic links across the system from students to teachers. I consider this will counteract the 'them' and 'us' attitude between students and teachers. I also think it will lessen the power of peer pressure because each student Sociometric Star will link other students with Sociometric Star teachers. These teachers can be a strong influence amongst other teachers and on committees.

The next step in the formation of the student support system is to strengthen the telic links between the Sociometric Stars. I decide to do this using role training. I conduct a number of meetings of the student and teacher

Sociometric Stars and work with them as a group to develop three roles – speaker, listener and observer.

These students and teachers already have well developed listening roles. They need to develop these further – becoming skilled at passive and active listening, giving effective ‘I’ messages and developing their doubling expertise.

Outcomes

So how does it work? Well, the support system once activated is working away informally all the time. Every time a Sociometric Star teacher meets one of the students who chose them, they speak together and their relationship increases. The student Sociometric Star’s social atom has now expanded to include a teacher and as these telic links strengthen, students at the very extremity of the system can be drawn closer.

The student support system keeps working away day by day informally with people talking, listening, observing. Every now and

then a formal meeting of the teacher and student Sociometric Stars is held. I hold one of these formal meetings while I am at the school to create a credo or mission statement for the support system. After much discussion, brainstorming and action, the group comes up with three important aims:

LISTEN

LISTEN

LISTEN

So as I came to the end of my work at this senior high school I think how lucky I am to have been given the time and the freedom to work with a whole school system using sociometry. I think of the words of Antoine de Saint-Exupery:

‘A rock pile ceases to be rock pile the moment a single man contemplates it, bearing within him the image of a cathedral’ And for me, a school system ceases to be ‘a school system’ the moment a Sociodramatist contemplates it, bearing within him the image of the evolution of the creator.

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