



Pedal Power

Until 2011, cycling was not a common activity amongst students at Al Siraat College. The busy roads of Epping North made it very dangerous, and the modest clothing of the girls is not conducive to bike riding.

‘Cycling is not something our community has been very active in,’ said the school’s Principal, Mrs Rahat Arain. ‘The students usually prefer ball sports, like soccer.’

However, a project initiated by the Independent Schools Victoria SSNP team has seen a cultural shift at Al Siraat College.

In 2011, 40 students from Year 5 to Year 8 learnt how to repair and maintain bicycles during a 10-week course held at the CERES Environmental Park in East Brunswick.

‘The course ignited a desire amongst the students to learn more about bikes,’ said Mrs Arain. ‘They learnt that girls, as well as boys, can fix things. The students were excited about their work, and quite competitive in wanting to be the best at fixing the bikes.’

Mrs Arain said the program, known as ‘Gearing up for Critical Thinking’, had benefits beyond bicycle maintenance. ‘It developed social skills and self-confidence among the students, many of them adolescents, as well as problem-solving skills and critical thinking. There was also the health aspect of riding bikes, plus the literacy skills the students used when creating stories and PowerPoint presentations about their experiences.’

As well as the hands-on activities at the CERES bike shed, the project included mental health workshops run by a local consultancy. The combination of bicycle maintenance and mental health workshops has led to positive behaviours, positive body image, goal setting and assertiveness.

‘The students enjoyed learning new things together and could see the benefits of team work and of being active,’ said Mrs Arain. ‘They also had a lot of fun together.’

Two Year 8 students in particular, Mrs Arain’s daughters Amnah and Maryam, were keen to see that the Al Siraat College’s new-found interest in cycling did not stop with the end of the 10-week course. In mid-2011, Amnah and Maryam set about creating a ‘bike-bus’ so that Al Siraat College students could ride to school.

Al Siraat College is a Prep to Year 9 coeducational Islamic school in Epping with 240 students.

Challenge: To develop students’ critical thinking, social skills and self-confidence.

Action: Forty children from Year 5 to Year 8 complete a 10 week bicycle maintenance program.

Results: Increased confidence in solving problems and in self-esteem as well as increased community links.

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– Mrs Rahat Arain, Principal



A bike-bus is similar to a walking school-bus, with parents and/or teachers supervising students on their way to school. During 2011, 15 students and two teachers signed up for riding to school using the bike-bus idea.

Amnah and Maryam's enthusiasm led to a National Australia Bank (NAB) Schools First Student Award, which recognises partnerships between schools and the community. In this instance, the partnership was with Bicycle Victoria, which advised on the best way to establish a bike-bus.

The girls' enthusiasm also led to their mother getting back on a bike. 'I hadn't ridden for years, and really enjoyed it,' said Mrs Arain.

But Al Siraat College is still on a very busy road, with no school crossing, no traffic lights, and no footpath. The bike-bus is, for the time being, on hold.

'The students ride in their own time, so they are keeping active,' said Mrs Arain. 'We have a large school site here and would like to, one day, be able to build a bike track around the school's perimeter so that students could ride at lunchtime.'

Beyond the world of bikes, the project has led to increased community links, especially important for a school that only opened in 2009. As well as CERES and Independent Schools Victoria, the Gearing Up for Critical Thinking project included involvement with Victoria Police, North West School Focused Youth Services, the Islamic Women's Welfare Council, and Nasihah Consulting.

The children's visits to CERES led to further excursions there, to learn about sustainability and about indigenous culture.

'The program has been successful in several ways,' said Independent Schools Victoria SSNP Advisor Julie Christopoulos. 'The students said that they gained confidence in problem solving and in teamwork, and in taking on more challenging tasks. These are really good outcomes.'

'We are always very thankful for each day and for each opportunity that we are able to benefit from,' said Mrs Arain. 'Schools are an amazing place to be, especially Independent schools, where we are able to be as flexible and creative as our imaginations. The Gearing Up for Critical Thinking program is an example where hurdles are an invitation for challenging ourselves!'

