“Together we can do so much.” The Round Square community of schools

By Rod Summerton on 17/05/2017

“Together we can do so much.” This quote from Helen Keller perhaps sums up the strength of the Round Square network, which brings together 225,000 students and 35,000 educators across 50 countries to create one big collaborative pool of talent and inspiration.

Ask any Round Square head or rep about the benefits of being part of this diverse and innovative global network of schools and they will immediately tell you about the positive impact on students.

As a Round Square Rep at a member school in Australia for 20 years I’ve also witnessed it first-hand, having had the privilege to be part of countless individual learning journeys.

Through Round Square, students gain confidence, connect with the wider world, and develop capabilities and attitudes for responsible, compassionate leadership. Their international understanding grows, their aspirations are raised and they show greater tolerance, resilience and ambition. They thirst for adventure, find the courage to speak out against injustice, care about sustainability and embrace active citizenship…. I could go on.

Simply put: From the moment a school joins the Round Square network, its students flourish.

But why?

“It’s all about the network,” says Round Square CEO, Rachael Westgarth. “First and foremost we focus on the students, and the practical opportunities we can offer to support and inspire their development in terms of values, skills, understanding, attitudes, character. But these opportunities only exist because behind the scenes is a committed, innovative, and like-minded network of educators who are prepared to support and collaborate with their colleagues around the world. Access to, and engagement with, this network is the factor that makes all the difference for the majority of Round Square schools.”

The Round Square network encourages member schools to co-ordinate on a wide range of collaborative programmes and activities that engage and develop students in very
practical ways. As part of a holistic programme of learning, students participate in conferences, engage with local and international communities through service projects and have the opportunity to study at a Round Square school in another country through a thriving student exchange network. Managed to a common global standard, these are all tremendously powerful learning experiences that stretch students beyond their perceived capabilities.

“We truly welcome the opportunity to involve our students through the Round Square network in a wide variety of social service projects” says Ambikesh Shukla from The Doon School in India “From an RSIS Project, that brings together students from several different cultures and countries, to the very local initiatives where we work with other Member schools supporting communities here in India, there is a constant menu of high-quality, carefully managed opportunity for students. Because of the network, each of these projects is run by people that I know personally, and can trust either at Round Square or in another Member School. Once our students have taken part in an RSIS or Regional Service Project, we find that they bring ideas and motivation back to our own school, and are inspired to get more involved in service in their local communities. Most go on to develop a lifelong commitment to social service.”

“As a Round Square School you can access a structured program of local, regional and global conferences both as a participant and ultimately a host,” says Steven Page, formerly Head of School at Belgrano Day School, Argentina, recent hosts of a Round Square Americas Regional conference. “The latter experience of bringing a Round Square Conference to your school is an exhilarating and inspiring one. While it provides the perfect opportunity to showcase one’s school to an international audience, it also brings the whole school community together, motivates staff and pupils, and immerses students in a practical and powerful intercultural learning experience. I strongly recommend this fantastic opportunity to all schools.”

For heads and teachers looking to input strategically into the global movement for change in education, Round Square offers the chance to participate in collaborative research projects with some of the world’s leading universities. Last year, researchers from the Cambridge University Faculty of Education conducted a study with the involvement of five case study schools and a survey across the full Round Square network that involved 5000 students, teachers and heads. This year, Round Square will be offering schools the opportunity to volunteer for a research initiative with Research Schools International at the Harvard University Graduate School of Education.

“A recent benefit of Round Square membership is the opportunity to participate in global research projects,” says Renu Puri, Principal at Vivek High School in India, a case study school for the Cambridge University research project. “Not only is it a fantastic experience for the students, who have the chance to carry out research under the guidance of leading university practitioners, but it also enables our school to participate in a high-quality, independent and international research programme that we might not otherwise be able to access.”

“Round Square offers a ready-made network of schools across the world to partner with on exchanges, arrange visits for students and teachers, and connect with at conferences and service projects,” says David Thompson, Round Square Rep at Hotchkiss School in Lakeville, Connecticut.

"I am excited that Round Square is engaging universities like Cambridge to research the impact that teaching and co-curricular programs centered on the IDEALS has on students. I hope that this leads to even more opportunities for teachers at member schools to connect their classrooms as well as collaborate and learn with each other. It
is also comforting to know that there is a range of schools around the world that share similar values, goals and aspirations, who are intentional in the design and execution of experiential education programs, and who are willing to challenge each other to develop even more compelling educational opportunities."

In addition to the range of structured conference and service opportunities, and alongside formal multi-school research programmes, Round Square membership affords myriad opportunities for informal collaboration between individual schools. These opportunities are supported by communication and promotional tools that help to facilitate the process of finding partner schools.

For example, last December, Transylvania College brought together 200 students from eight countries by virtual link for a musical initiative to perform a Christmas song in five a cappella voice parts synchronous with their own students and guests from 26 schools in Cluj. From Canada, Appleby College created a collaborative assignment with King’s Academy in Jordan in which their students exchanged letters and videos to practise language skills before meeting over Skype. Appleby also recently collaborated with Anglo Colombiano in Bogota to make videos on Earth and Environmental Science topics including deforestation, alternative energies, water issues, greenhouse gasses and animal extinction.

This pattern of academic collaboration is replicated between Round Square schools throughout the network, building the shared RS IDEALS of International Understanding, Democracy, Environmental Stewardship, Adventure, Leadership and Service. The common theme of the IDEALS in these activities means that collaborating students and teachers find familiarity in a world of difference and have a touchstone for comparison of different cultural responses. The Round Square Intranet, to which all teachers in the network have access, provides a platform to share case studies and resources that are generated by these collaborative ventures.

“As a member of the Round Square community you have access to high quality resources, guidance and good practice shared by educators in other schools throughout the world,” says Ambikesh “At the simplest level, it’s a time-saver, but beyond that it brings an international dimension that helps you to enrich the learning experience for your own students. Through networking with colleagues around shared themes and experiences you are exposed to a range of different ideas and approaches that inspire and influence you in shaping your own.”

Inspired by the collaborative approach taken by many schools in the Round Square network, a team of heads, Reps and curriculum directors from our member schools around the world came together in recent years to develop the Round Square Discovery Framework.

“The idea was to connect the spirit of the IDEALS with twelve Discoveries that students make on their learning journey, such as inquisitiveness, tenacity, courage and compassion,” says CEO, Rachael Westgarth. “The resulting Framework, now in use in an increasing number of member schools, supports the integration of character education into curriculum programming, and signposts ways in which it can be given tangible value in an academic context. The result is an internationally-developed, globally-robust, common framework around which our schools can collaborate and share approaches, swapping resources such as lesson plans, activity sheets and rubrics.”

The Discovery Framework has also recently provided the Round Square network with opportunities for structured professional development including a best practice workshop in Hong Kong last month, which will be replicated in Windsor, UK in June. Further best
practice sharing around a range of topics is encouraged and facilitated between Round Square schools in both formal settings, such as conferences and cluster meetings, as well as informally via Whatsapp networks, Zoom calls and 1:1 mentoring and support between heads and faculty.

“Quite simply the greatest benefit to me as a teacher is the ability to pick up the phone and discuss an idea or a challenge or problem with a counterpart in a like-minded school elsewhere in the world,” says Peter Willet, Art Teacher and Round Square Rep at Aiglon in Switzerland. “You can be confident that the advice will be good and you get a different perspective from someone who understands, and has probably tackled a similar situation themselves. It’s also great for my professional development when I get a call. Helping others to solve their problems and meet new challenges really gets you thinking about how to do things differently yourself.”

The role of the Round Square network as a catalyst and encouragement for “different thinking” is perhaps one of its greatest strengths. “Round Square emboldens and encourages and it gives strength to schools”, says Malcom McKenzie, Head at Keystone Academy in China, “I love this collegiality and connectedness”.

“Our Round Square membership has been transformational for Ballarat Grammar,” says Headmaster, Adam Heath. “Exchange experiences make for lasting international friendships and conferences lead to ongoing connections. The “Noopsi Badge” brought back by a staff member from a South Africa conference led to a project which raised over $300,000 for HIV-positive women and their families. Our Thai Water project has just been running for over a decade. A plaque over the entrance to our Assembly Hall replicates that at Starehe School: ‘From those to whom much is given will much be required’.”

In the spirit of Round Square’s servant leadership philosophy, the support network provided by member schools extends beyond professional support to offering practical assistance in moments of crisis and need. Kurt Hahn, who provided the inspiration for the foundation of Round Square in 1966 famously said “the passion of rescue reveals the highest dynamic of the human soul” and to this day, the Round Square community follows a tradition of rallying to the cause of a member school in need.

“When the earthquake struck in 2015 there was an immediate response from the Round Square community,” says Bhushan Gurung, Principal of Chandbagh School in Nepal. “Messages of sympathy and support from schools throughout the world were soon followed by practical and financial assistance in the process of recovery and rebuilding. Last December, Round Square brought a group of students from 25 countries to work on a local building project and we were able to get our own students involved. It was a great opportunity for them to connect and work on an equal footing with students from partner schools around the world.”

As Bhushan, Adam, Malcom, Peter, Ambikesh, Renu, Steven and David have found, the benefits of being part of the Round Square network are many, varied and constantly increasing. They are tangible, philosophical, practical, professional, sometimes personal, certainly transformational. One thing on which we all agree is that our schools are strengthened by our inter-connectedness and our students flourish as a result.