Geraldine Nicholas, Professional Learning Coordinator, Tournament of Minds

- Meeting the variable needs of students
- A challenge based environment to build creativity
- Using cross-aged teams

All students need nurturing as well as the support and opportunity to participate in programs and activities that enhance their strengths and challenge their weaknesses. Tournament of Minds (TOM) is one program that aids in catering for the variable needs of all students.

TOM as a program, runs within a wide variety of schools and follows no particular model of best practice. How each school or teacher provides the opportunity to participate in TOM is highly dependent upon the finances, time allowance, resources and willingness of staff and administration to identify and foster the needs of those children involved. However, what is immediately evident is the enjoyment and direct benefits, social, academic and emotionalfor those who engage in TOM.

Many students are not identified through the use of the traditional testing methodology that can overlook ability or potential in many high ability students but TOM draws in a wide pool of students and can be a valuable early predictor of adult creativity and even hint at possible career choices (Olszewski-Kubilius & Lee 2004).

For the thousands of students that have been involved in TOM, it meets the need to be challenged; provides enjoyment in a rigorous environment; the joy of finding 'like-minded' people where age is not the indicator of friendship groups; and the benefit of working in a team to achieve a creative output. It

provides a competitive environment where excellence is celebrated and creativity is applauded. It celebrates that there is never a right or correct answer. The solution to the challenge or problem is always open ended and your interpretation is important as long as you meet the criteria.

## What can schools learn from **Tournament of Minds?**

TOM's mantra of cross aged teams based on their interests or passions has repercussions on the way groups are organised in schools. To allow students to be grouped not only on their ability but on their level of knowledge or even readiness is powerful. Using different strategies to group students is important as this allows the high ability students to act not as teachers but as guides or mentors within the mixed ability group. It also allows for the other students to share their own strengths and perhaps 'show off' skills and knowledge that is not

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within the realm of the gifted student.

The use of criteria to assess and judge teams means that the solutions created are not purely prescriptive or to a formula but generates the possibility for imagination, creativity and originality to be fostered and encouraged. Thus the journey is almost as important as the destination for many teams and here success is measured in not just winning but by putting together a presentation with six others.

All TOM challenges are attempted by both secondary and primary teams. The non-age element of the challenges means that teams are exposed to content, ideas and knowledge that could be beyond their year level. This reinforces Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development theory where children learn best when pushed beyond their level. Thus, by struggling within an environment that accepts risk taking with ideas, provokes the quest for knowledge just beyond what they know and demands a solution that needs

> creativity, TOM provides many students with the opportunity to gain many benefits such as leadership, persistence, being flexible and communication.



# What schools have said about their participation in Tournament of Minds:

Ivanhoe East Primary School

We see those students who participate in Tournament of Minds grow in both personal and social confidence. The student centred approach means that they direct the process, they lead, they plan and they accomplish a significant project on their own terms. Maturity, independence, thoughtfulness, considerate working relationships and courage are all skills that are nurtured, enhanced and applied throughout Tournament of Minds.

## Sherbourne Primay School

For our students to become involved, we firstly ask them to write an 'expression of interest' letter to the teachers. In this letter, the children explain why they think they will be well suited to the program. This letter is also a way for the teachers to see the level of commitment and interest by the students.

The teachers read through the letters and look to balance the number of students from each grade level. The teams need to be carefully constructed, given that each team must have the correct numbers of children from year levels and most importantly it must be a well balanced team. A maths/engineering team without a great scriptwriter or artistic person will struggle to present their solutions effectively.

We try to ensure that each team has at least one person capable of writing the script, making props and costumes, organizing meetings, checking problems/rules, researching, controlling the budget and acting in front of others. Most importantly each person must be able to work effectively as a team. We need some members who can think 'on their feet' and others who think deeply.

This program is really for the gifted and talented students in our school. These students need to work together as a team and sometimes encounter difficulties working in this situation. They learn a great deal about perseverance, these are often the children who find school relatively easy but TOM will really challenge their thinking. They develop their team skills, their co-operation and social skills. They learn to listen to each other and build on ideas.



Tournament of Minds owes a huge debt of gratitude to the founding committee who saw a need and developed a program that was developed here in Victoria and to the thousands of students, teachers, parents, principals and other associated professionals who have given their time and passion to participate in a program that has allowed TOM to run for 27 years. A special thank you goes to my fellow contributors Karen Paul and Clare Jones and their supportive principals who have generously written the testimonials and granted permission to use their schools in this article.

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### references

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