

Co-curricular activity

Students lead in investigating and implementing values education using a Student Action Team (SAT) framework: St Charles Borromeo Primary School

To achieve an increased understanding within the school community of the nature of core values for Australian schools and how these were represented within personal, school and community spheres

Year levels

Middle childhood (8-11 years)

Explicit values focus

The Australian Government's National Values Framework (*National Framework for Values Education in Australian Schools*, Commonwealth of Australia, 2005), provided the starting point for our project. Firstly, it provided the challenge and structure for the Student Action Teams as they were asked to look at the nine core values contained within the Framework and carry out their investigations and action implementation around these nine values. Secondly, the *Values Education Study: Final Report* (Commonwealth of Australia, 2003) and the National Framework provided the first data source for the work of the teams as they addressed improving whole school cultures, the inclusion of values in Key Learning Areas, increasing student engagement, fostering student empowerment and encouraging student civic participation.

Key learning areas

The Student Action Team framework touches all KLAs as it engages students in real decision making, and action which takes them beyond the classroom to work on issues valued by the students and the broader community which are linked to other mandated goals.

School profile

St Charles Borromeo Primary School is a small Catholic primary school in Templestowe, an outer eastern suburb of Melbourne. We are part of the Serpell Community School Campus. The school size ensures an intimate, caring community in which all the children are known to, and valued by, the entire team of dedicated staff. Our classes are intentionally composed of children of different ages in 'multi-age settings'.

Reason for co-curricular activity

Our main objective was to look at Values Education in our school – where it was or wasn't seen, heard or felt. Student Action Teams were used as we believe that only when we involve students in planning, decision making and implementation do we end up with a true and meaningful outcome that is owned by all.

Implementation and development

Student Action Teams (SATs) were established consisting of 8–10 student members who were to research and develop action around each of the nine values. These SATs were managed by a staff member. Student forums were

established to mark the key points in beginning and ending the project and in moving from the research phase to the action phase. The forums were designed to create an opportunity for student teams to jointly plan, report and share, to provide the action teams with public validation and feedback on their work, to challenge students to explore and practise a wide range of interpersonal communication, public speaking and leadership skills, and to form an accountability framework within which the SATs had to meet agreed timelines, targets and commitments.

Student forum 1

This forum followed intensive teacher preparation and was designed to engage students with the issues and initiate the research phase. The students were asked to think about questions such as 'What is a value?', 'What are our values?', and 'What actions do we see coming from values?' They were to bring responses to these questions to the forum in reports, displays, songs and other presentations. The federal government's nine national values were then introduced and students mapped and compared their values with these, agreeing with some and changing the words of others.

Students built physical displays: the names of values on cards that were linked to other associated values and that were then, in turn, linked to action statements and observations. So this first forum set directions, challenged students and asked if they wanted to accept the challenge to investigate the operation of such values within the domains of self/home, school and the wider community. When students were prepared to accept this challenge, we posed possible research questions: *Why* is this an issue? *What* are the particular issues within our communities? *What* do we need to *find out*? This forum started the planning of possible research directions and strategies.

The research stage

The student research was directed around two large questions: 'What is the importance of this value to our community?' (What does it mean?) and 'What do we find out about this value's implementation?' Students investigated these questions through surveys and questionnaires, interviews and observations. They used a mix of qualitative and quantitative methods. While issues of sampling were considered (we challenged students about how many people they needed to survey or interview), the nature of the research was generally 'introductory' and was used to provide broad information about the issue in order to guide students' discussions and decisions. We constantly challenged the students about the need for data, and emphasised the importance of making decisions based on evidence and logic.

Research workshop

Part-way through this stage, it was useful to organise an extra research workshop for students to discuss methods used to date, and to provide training around the major research approaches. This also introduced ideas about how to analyse and report on data collected, and responded to students' concerns about 'How can we show what we are finding out?'

Student forum 2

The second (or 'hinge' forum – marking the hinge between research and action phases) provided an opportunity for students to report on the results of the research that had been carried out and to think about what action was

appropriate. In order to do so, students were asked to visualise a world based strongly on the values that they were considering, and to compare this with their current world. What would need to change if this idealised world were to exist? What could students do to achieve this? This forum initiated the action stage of the project. It enabled students to feed information back to each other and to plan possible action directions and strategies.

The action stage

The action stage of this project began with an extra planning workshop, and is still continuing. Students looked at their broad objectives and defined the specific things they could do to achieve these. They then began implementing these proposals within their school and community.

Action planning workshop

Again, it was valuable to add in an action-planning workshop for students in which they learned skills about goal-setting, breaking objectives up into smaller actions, time-lining and developing action plans.

Student forum 3

The final forum reported on the actions being taken, including any outcomes observed, and planned future directions. It summarised the journey that the teams had taken. Students made action reports to each other and to external stakeholders (Departments, local government and funding bodies) and celebrated their achievements. In discussing 'Where to now?' students reported on the continuing action and values focus within their schools.

Outcomes

The outcomes of this project are twofold, both for teachers and students. The teachers involved with the SATs have identified a number of important learnings for themselves as teachers. These include:

- the need for teachers to be able to abdicate control in relationships with students;
- the importance of teachers truly acknowledging that children can make a difference through their contributions to teaching and learning and through their interpersonal interaction in the learning setting;
- the recognition that when children assume responsibility for accountability they can sometimes be more rigorous than teachers themselves;
- the realisation that children are prepared to accept accountability from their peers more readily than from the teacher;
- the realisation that it is imperative to start from where the children are at, and not where teachers perceive they are;
- the need for teachers to ask children what they want to know;
- the acknowledgement that real life learning is far more effective than 'pen and paper';
- the observation that individual classroom environments are not the only place that good learning and teaching can take place; and
- the experience that 'I have personally been challenged to revisit my beliefs and practices on how children learn best'.

The outcomes for the students were substantial. The staff involved with the SATs reported that when they were given the opportunity, students developed real leadership skills and were prepared to take full responsibility when they were

engaged with their teacher and their peers. Being active members of Student Action Teams further developed their organisational skills and fostered working collaboratively in groups, within their own team as well as with the other teams.

When asked what being a member of a Student Action Team meant to them, the students stated that they had learnt how to conduct interviews, analyse data and improve their speaking, thinking and communication skills. They felt that their confidence, self-esteem, responsibility, integrity, enthusiasm, motivation and commitment had all improved.

The students involved in the Student Action Teams have demonstrated that they have acquired a better sense of themselves with respect to their peers.