

Assessing values education – is it possible?

By Philippa Lovell of the Melbourne Catholic Education Office

It is not only possible but necessary to measure values in the school setting, writes Melbourne Catholic Education Office's Philippa Lovell. She tells how the Good Practice Schools Project is heralding breakthroughs in this area.

In 2004, following the 2003 National values education study, the Australian Government developed the *National Framework for Values Education in Australian Schools*. It also invested \$29 million to help schools examine their practices and develop further opportunities for teaching and learning values.

Part of these funds went to the Values Education Good Practice Schools Project (VEGSP) encouraging values education in local contexts. Stage one of the VEGSP is now complete and some questions need to be asked: What impact has this had? Are there any measurable differences in the values, skills, knowledge and understanding of our students? Indeed, is it possible to measure values? Before these questions can be addressed however, we need to examine what is meant by values education.

Teaching values education

The purpose of values education in schools is to inspire young people to be the best they can possibly be. Good values education is essentially good teaching which develops a common vocabulary, common purpose and quality relationships. Speaking at the 2006 Values Education Forum in Canberra, Neil Hawkes said: "Teachers send messages into the future. They are the role models who have the ongoing conversation of significance between one generation and the next".

Hawkes argued that because schools had placed so much emphasis on content, knowledge, ideas and skills - that is, quantity - it meant less emphasis on student disposition, identity, meaning and purpose. Ultimately, he argued, a love of learning is critical for quality education. A change of emphasis would see schools turn out individuals who are developed as well-rounded citizens and lifelong learners.

A good school is based on quality relationships and quality teaching and learning. It is a place where the whole community has a common understanding of shared values.

Because so much good work is being done in this area, we need to be able to see that what is happening is making a difference to students in partnership with their families - the whole school community.

Can values be measured?

It is possible to measure values in the school setting and, indeed, teachers continually do this in their daily classroom relationships. Most school rules or acceptable classroom behaviours - often designed by the students in negotiation with the pastoral or homeroom teacher - reiterate the values that are quoted in the National Framework.

For example, schools expect students and teachers to speak to and treat each other with respect and, if this does not happen, there are processes for addressing it. While this happens almost incidentally, schools are now aware that evidence can be collected and efforts can be made to improve situations if

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necessary.

There are a number of tools that allow educators to examine and assess the social domain in schools. School mission statements and national and state essential learning documents refer to personal and social development as being important. According to Pascoe: "To ignore these elements in our assessment and reporting regimes relegates them to a lower level of importance and limits teachers and schools to addressing in an unplanned fashion issues of values, personal and social development and generic competencies" (2005).

Businesses, banks and governments all use social assessment tools as indicators of social capital. Schools too are an important factor in the wellbeing of communities, as the Schools as Core Social Centres project has demonstrated (Tobin 2004). Assessment of social competencies in an education setting is aligned to values dispositions; there is observable behaviour which the community can articulate as being desirable.

Forster and Masters (2002) argue that internationally and at all levels of educational discussion, there is a renewed focus on the social aspects of schooling, including moral and ethical development. Their research at John XXIII College in Western Australia developed a questionnaire around seven dimensions which addressed the attitudes and values of the College. The Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) also continues to develop and refine frameworks against which schools and systems might monitor the social, emotional, moral and ethical development of their students.

Within the domain of traditional assessment, the Ministerial Council for Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs Performance Measurement and Reporting Taskforce (MCEETYA PMRT) Civics and Citizenship Assessment combines assessment of cognitive outcomes with those in the social domain, related to attitudes, values and dispositions. Data is collected from Year 6 and Year 10 students nationally.

Monitoring Standards in Education (MSE) assessment in Western Australia conducts social competencies testing which includes teacher observation, self-reporting and student response to particular scenarios. Developmental scales identify where a student sits on a continuum ranging from seeing no problem in the scenario to showing compassion and valuing others. This evidence-based data can be used to develop school programs around values that the school community deems important.

Good Practice Schools Project - stage one

Reports into the project show that the clusters of schools involved nationally (reaching more than 30,000 students), have noticed improvements in understanding, behaviour and expected standards. The school communities were more socially aware, and interconnectedness between the wellbeing of the individual and their school was strongly implied.

Not only is it possible to assess values, it is also necessary for schools to know that their quality teachers and programs are making a difference to young people and their society.

**For more information and report findings visit
www.valueseducation.edu.au/values/**

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