Values investigators: teachers and students researching values together: Lanyon Cluster of Schools, ACT

Background
The Canberra-based Lanyon Cluster of Schools comprised one government high school, three primary schools and the Birrigai Outdoor School. The cluster group had previously worked together in Stage 2 of the Values Education Good Practice Schools Project. The values investigators: teachers and students researching values together project focused on teachers as designers and implementers of high-quality curriculum that is values-based, engaging and connected to students’ life worlds.

The project used teachers and students as action researchers: collecting, analysing and presenting evidence of learning, particularly learning about values. The five cluster schools built upon the values work they began in 2007, in which they integrated values across the curriculum using the Learning by Design approach. They developed a preschool to year 10 continuum in values education. They also integrated a culture of ‘giving’ as an opportunity for students to apply their values learning.

Teacher scholars (teachers as scholars) used an action research model to evaluate teaching and to produce evidence of student learning in relation to both values and academic learning. This deepened teachers’ understanding of pedagogy, curriculum and assessment. Further, they explored new technologies by documenting their reflections and evidence on a project wiki and discussion forum.

To further develop their resilience and wellbeing students worked as co-researchers with their teachers, collecting and documenting their own evidence of how they had been transformed in relation to the values being studied.

Phase 1: project set-up and design
This phase established the action research model and the action research tools. In it teachers also planned and documented curriculum and began the action research cycle by collecting pre-data.

- Initial professional learning with teacher scholars from each school, led by University Advisors and Cluster Coordinators, to describe the project; review the National Frameworks for Values in Schools; set up the project wiki; explore aspects of action research and initial planning of Learning by Design learning elements.
- Design phase – teachers collaboratively write learning elements and contribute reflections to blog.
- Pre-data collection.

A successful professional learning day was held with all teacher scholars, their mentors, and project coordinators attending.

Teachers discussed who their focus students might be and also mapped their ideas on Learning by Design placemats, which became the basis for their learning elements. Each teacher was allocated a further two days to plan and document their learning element. Teachers completed the drafts of the nine learning elements by the beginning of term 2. These were:
After initial difficulties in getting the project wiki and discussion forum established teachers slowly began to contribute their reflections.

Teachers collected pre-data and some post-data. This included interviews, student reflections, surveys, First Steps Writing maps, photos and student work samples. A survey for secondary students was also established by the end of term 1 so students could contribute to it before the implementation of learning elements began. Five classes completed the initial survey (approximately 100 students). Two classes completed their learning elements in term 1 before the survey had been finalised.

Phases 2 and 3

These phases were the main data collection phase and so provided the evidence for the most significant change stories and evidence of key objectives related to student learning. These included increasing understanding of values in students' lives, academic diligence and resilience.

Phase 2 – Implementation

- Implementation of learning elements
- Data collection
- Reflections on wiki

Phase 3 – Write-up phase

- Collection of post-data
- Reflections on wiki, including most significant change stories
- Interim project report

The evidence that this phase was achieved included reflections, photos, interviews and examples of students' work on the project wiki. This supported data collection and reflections on learning by teachers and students.

Activities that assisted the achievement of this phase included mentoring by support and executive teachers to refine the learning elements, reflect on the learning that occurred, and lesson observations.

Year 3 and 4 students from Charles Conder PS and Bonython PS also attended camps at Birrigai as part of the planned learning in their values learning elements. This enabled the Birrigai teacher in the project to work closely with the student scholars and the teacher scholars and offer further support.

The focus on giving as well as evidence of how the student investigators reflected on their learning were evident through the wiki and the data gathered.

Phase 4: finalisation
Impacts on students

Improved resilience and wellbeing

'Giving' in the classroom was identified as a positive outcome of the project. Students gave compliments and put-ups which changed the classroom environment and which in turn created a stronger learning environment with improved resilience in areas of academic challenge.

Across the primary schools there were many stories of individual students describing a greater understanding of themselves and what they needed to improve their sense of wellbeing.

- 'I feel happiest when I help other people.'
- My goal for the rest of this year is: 'to be the nicest girl in class.'
- 'I want to be more caring and compassionate.'
- 'I think I'm more patient with people ... I'm a kinder person now.'

Examples of improved resilience and wellbeing were also reflected in changes in whole class and individual actions and the way students were able to articulate their learning of values.

- 'I have realised that giving part of yourself makes me feel really great ... this has helped me to change.'
- 'I felt good ... I could see we were making a difference ... doing something good ...'

Increased understanding of values in their lives

The nine learning elements included explicit teaching about an understanding of values in students' lives. For example, students could connect the value of 'giving' to practical activities which benefitted themselves and others. These included singing outreach, making books for the library, environmental work for native animals, and giving compliments. In two year 10 English classes teachers focused on integrity in sport and standing up for your own beliefs, particularly in relation to racism. Initially students said that they had heard of integrity but could not really define it. They considered scenarios where they could act with integrity and reflected on times when they could have acted with more integrity. One student commented:

'In grade 6 I was, I guess, a bully ... I used to bully an overweight kid ... and I only did it cos my friends were doing it. And it didn't really feel right, but I did it anyway cos I didn't know what respect was, I didn't know what integrity was. So once we had a semester on ... learning about respect and learned what it was and [I] pretty much just stopped. Stopped hanging out with the mean kids. And now I'm friends with [the bullied kid]. Pretty much it [acting with integrity] makes you feel good, doing something you believe in.'

Increased connectedness to learning and their life worlds

Values education provides opportunities to make learning more relevant and connected to students' life worlds. In year 9, the values of integrity and responsibility were incorporated in the study of probability, particularly in relation to the ethics and morals of big business and government. While the teachers were not totally convinced about the application of values in the senior mathematics curriculum, they showed that students were engaged in activities...
where they could connect learning to their life worlds. These included, for example, helping a friend with a gambling addiction, and considering the social implications of probability in games of chance, insurance claims, repair warranties and medical screening.

The students connected to Birrigai, the outdoor school in the Cluster, as a part of their local environment and life world. In the year 3–4 class where students focused on giving, they were able to develop a habitat for a koala as well as a place that other visiting children could enjoy.

In a year 1–2 class the teacher commented that students were more engaged in writing tasks because they could write about their interests and stories and about their feelings. The compliments they wrote were also purposeful as they were for students in their class and so very connected to their life worlds.

**Impact on class and playground behaviour**

With students finding more connections of learning to their life worlds, there were also improvements in students' behaviour. For example, in a year 8 statistics unit, *Sabotaging Statistics*, teachers incorporated the value of respect. Students moved from seeing respect as mainly respect for people's property, the school rules and following instructions, to understanding what it means to respect someone or something, why it is important and ways it could be done. Two teacher scholars noted that respect was used much more in student conversations, and students recognised each other's strengths and weaknesses, helping each other in their work, supporting each other in class discussions, and addressing the teacher and other students respectfully by name. This also created a much more positive learning environment and there was a decrease in teachers having to speak to students about mobile phone use, chewing gum and late arrival to class. One of the students commented: 'Being respectful about how people feel has made me realise that it makes it more pleasant to come to class, because I am not constantly arguing or getting angry when people shout things at me; it is easier to get along with everyone. When I am being annoying or getting disruptive, the class cannot learn and you cannot teach. That is not respectful'.

This example of respect also shows how the students developed communicative competence in the language of values and that this is an essential dimension of transformed behaviour. Hence it was taught explicitly by teachers in the 'conceptualising by naming' knowledge process of *Learning by Design*.

Several teachers in the project also described how the explicit teaching of values within a meaningful context led to transformations within and outside the classroom.

'This was a very critical part of the unit, as students started to make connections with how we should treat each other ... I can feel the positive change in my classroom.'

Another teacher reflected on one of her focus students: 'There have been fewer reported incidences of [the student] behaving inappropriately and she is regularly seen inviting others to join her at play or helping children who are hurt.'

Within the classrooms and on the playground, a number of other changes have been noticed by the project team. The students speak more positively towards each other, there is a reduction in the number of referrals due to playground incidents, and compliments are given more naturally...the students are more inclusive.
Improved academic diligence

The focus on giving impacted on students' academic outcomes, particularly in relation to literacy. The following year 6 writing samples display a significant improvement in the students' writing quality and quantity. Both writing samples were produced after 'singing' events. The first was before the implementation of the values-based learning element and involved a mass choir of many primary school students at a large venue.

The Big Gig

Today I went to Llewellyn Hall. I didn’t enjoy it because I couldn’t see Mr H. Any way they sang songs. I saw a few people picking their noses. Nothing much, caught the bus back. Had lunch. The End

A few weeks later, after the implementation of Singing Together, Giving Together, there was a definite change in the motivation and depth of the student’s writing that was created through ‘giving’, showing the impact of a values-based approach on literacy.

Goodwin Farrer Retirement Village

When I got on the bus I was a bit nervous not knowing what lies ahead. When I got off the bus I was having regrets about coming. Then I went in the building and started singing nervously. But when I started to see the smiles on their faces, I started to sing more comfortably. When we stopped singing, I went to talk to some residents. It was interesting to see how much they enjoyed a talk. Then we started the next song. I went around to a resident no-one was singing to. It made them feel happy and made me feel happy. I was talking to some other people and asking them about their life. They gave me a hand shake. It made me feel really happy. Now I was singing to them better than ever knowing they are nice people. I had a chat with a lady called Elsie. She would answer anything I would ask. Then another song, it was amazing to see them all clapping to the tune. Sadly I had to go. I said goodbye to everyone and left knowing that I made someone else happy.

Academic diligence was also demonstrated through the deep knowledge and understanding students gained in the project. In a year 7 art class a teacher designed a learning element around 2D art including printing and painting techniques such as acrylic and water colour. By looking at Indigenous, Japanese, and African art she also developed students' tolerance and understanding of other cultures. Academic diligence was evident in the intellectual quality of this learning which included conceptual learning about line, colour, tone and composition. The analytical activity involved students discussing the Japanese attitude to nature and how this affected the way people lived their lives. It enabled the teacher to make direct links back to the values of respect and tolerance for others and for the environment. The students then moved from having deep knowledge about Japanese art techniques to developing a deep understanding about how it affected their art and their relationships with each other and the universe.

Initially students were limited in their understanding of tolerance, and understanding about other cultures. Their comments on a class wiki about the importance of knowing about and understanding other cultures included:

- 'Yes, because if u move there 1 day u will have 2 know what 2 do*.'
- 'No because we don’t know them.'
- 'I think we could live without it but it does help you understand other people and why they did some things.'
'Yes, cuz ur learning a lot about history.'

* Note: comments are from the wiki where students use 'texting' language.

The students' final reflections and their artworks demonstrated their changed understanding:

- 'Japanese artists show the unity of the landscape and show that Japan is more than advanced technology.'
- 'It shows us how the Japanese care for nature. And they have a different point view of nature than we do. They have a good relationship with nature.'
- 'The Japanese respect nature very much. They don't feel people are as important as the landscape.'
- 'It tells us more about how the artwork shows the culture and the beauty of Japan.'

Data on academic diligence was also collected by mapping the primary aged focus students on the First Steps Writing Map. First Steps has been validated by ACER.

Evidence was collected on eight students. Typically students remain in a phase for approximately 18 months and yet these focus students moved a whole phase in the six months of the project. There are many factors which explain this improvement, including the explicit teaching that is part of the teacher's literacy program and which is also a focus in our Cluster. Further, when you focus on a student in an action research project, there will often be improvement as explained by the Matthew Effect. However, in all students who were recorded in the data, the teachers commented on the increased engagement and motivation of their students in the values-based units of work.

One teacher discussed the issue of whether the improvement in her student's literacy could be attributed to the values focus.

'I believe that there is no doubt that D's writing skills improved due to the literacy component of the unit. However, I also believe that without the focus on tolerance and understanding the improvement would not have been so great. Firstly, the literacy in this unit is very similar to the literacy that was taught in my classroom during the first term of the year. D did engage with the material; however, his improvement was not so great. Secondly, it was clear that the focus on tolerance and understanding in the classroom gave the children opportunity to express their own opinions in their writing. I believe there was an increase in engagement with the writing tasks because the tasks had a purpose. The children were able to write about their interests, or a story that depicts their feelings, knowing that their work would be valued and appreciated. It was this purpose that engaged and in turn improved the students' writing. Finally, I believe the values component of the unit enabled the students to understand that they all have strengths and weaknesses and that these are all different. My students learnt to value each other's differences instead of teasing each other. This positive environment allowed D and other students to take risks without fearing the mockery of peers.'

After creating a class book titled Min-Na-Wee or Why the Crocodile Rolls, students were asked to design and create an illustration with a partner to match a given part of the text. The teacher reflected that:

'This was a significant moment for one student (and myself) as she had previously refused to work with a partner during a similar activity for a different class book. [She] was able to work cooperatively, with both students contributing to the design and creation of the illustration.'
The student's '…free writing developed from one sentence recounts with many requests for support with spelling, to more detailed narratives incorporating humour; and towards the end of the unit,...an effort to create a coda.'

**Closing the gap for Indigenous students**

Like schools all over Australia, our Principals have been charged with closing the achievement gap in literacy and numeracy for our Indigenous students. So teacher scholars in the project were encouraged wherever possible to use the project to focus on Indigenous students in their classes and to embed Indigenous history and culture in their learning elements.

One teacher designed and implemented a powerful learning element incorporating values and literacy through Indigenous Dreaming. The values of caring, responsibility, respect and doing your best were explicitly taught. Valuing Indigenous culture in the learning had a positive impact on an Indigenous student as the student related strongly to her cultural heritage in the stories.

In another classroom students were required to interview their parents to learn their family origin. This information was plotted with pins on a world map. One student mapped his mother's place of origin but did not choose to acknowledge his father's Indigenous heritage. 'The next day, however, J came into class and asked to move his pin onto Australia. This was a very big step, as J had not acknowledged his Indigenous heritage up until this point. Following this activity, J was a part of running the NAIDOC assembly at school and no longer hides his Aboriginal identity.'

**Improved participation and attendance**

A year 6 student was identified as a student researcher although the teacher had concerns due to the student's high absenteeism. The student became involved through interviewing other students and residents at the retirement village, and taking photographs. Throughout the life of the project and directly after the project the student's attendance improved by 26%. Improved confidence was reflected by her willingness to read 'Acknowledgement of Country' at a national launch.

Year 2 student researchers reflected that their role gave others a chance to say how they felt about what they did and what they had learnt. The interviewing role was a powerful learning tool, as students were paired to allow meaningful literacy activity for early writers: 'I think I am a better learner ... working with people ...'. This is also an example of improved resilience.

The impact of the students as researcher role was significant for the participation of one student. He had refused to go on any excursions and had to be persuaded via his role as photographer to attend the outreach excursion with 55 of his peers. During the excursion he used the camera as his way to deal with his discomfort. However, after the excursion he asked the teacher if he would be able to take his guitar to the next outreach because he would be able to 'give' by playing his guitar even if he could not give through singing.

**Develop a sense of agency in a variety of communities through giving, such as service learning**

In the above example 'giving' had motivated the student to participate in ways he felt comfortable. He was also demonstrating agency in coming up with his own way of giving. Understanding care and compassion was important in the *Singing Together, Giving Together* learning element and showed that when students had deep understanding of these values they would engage fully in giving.
reflects that prior to their learning and involvement in singing in the outreach program, the students believed their actions of giving would have no impact on themselves or others. As clearly demonstrated by the pre and post-project graphs, there was a huge transformation of their ideas and understanding. The students learned about values and transferring their knowledge in context-created powerful learning.

Students' understanding of the power of giving was shown in their responses to the question of who gains and who loses when involved in a giving project. In the pre-data 17 students felt no-one would gain in the music outreach. By the end of the project, 22 out of 25 students thought that everyone had gained.

In another setting students also examined the concepts of care, compassion and giving. The students' initial understanding of these concepts were very limited and commonly focused on personal gain and material items such as money and presents. The project has helped students to develop their thinking of giving as a way of 'doing' for others. As student understanding developed, so did their sense of agency.

One student describes this: 'I am kinder to everyone. I smile at them which makes them feel good. Giving is more than just presents and money; it is making people feel good like respect.'

Another said: 'I now think care and compassion is considerably more than just giving presents and money and saying nice things. Care and compassion is things like expressing your heart, being yourself and sharing your joy with others...If we didn't give to others what shallow sad people we would all be.'

**Impact on parents**

For the parents of students involved in the project there was an increased understanding of values learning on their children's lives at home and at school. One parent commented that as her daughter recognised the power of 'giving', she became more confident about school. '[She] applied this at home, using 'put-ups' in her interactions with all members of the family, and being very considerate and helpful ... we all do it now.' In this case there was a positive effect on the family too.
Other parents commented:

- 'His attitude to learning improved. [He] is doing what is asked....showing respect, biting his tongue. [He] feels good.'
- 'She was always caring but now talked more about what other people needed...the fact that she was articulating it was new.'
- '...the praise awards... made us feel really good ...it impacted on the whole family.'

As parents were not a direct focus of the project, the coordinators were quite surprised by the extent of the impact of the project on parents and in the students' home lives. The Most Significant Change process was also very powerful in valuing the parents and so we are determined to involve them more in the future.

**Impact on teachers**

Being involved in the Lanyon Cluster VASP project was transformative for the teacher scholars in the project. All teachers were more reflective about their practice and through planning and documenting curriculum, they gained deeper understanding of effective teaching and learning. This was very powerful learning for our teachers, many of whom are early career teachers. By sharing their action research with other teachers in the Cluster, they developed as leaders of curriculum and brought other teachers on our Cluster values journey. Many teachers across the Cluster described, both orally and in their impact stories, their personal revelations about the importance of embedding values education into the curriculum. Their reflections included:

'The project has allowed me to examine my own thoughts about being caring and compassionate.'

- 'I feel that this project has opened my eyes to how important and essential teaching values is to the curriculum. Students need to be specifically taught each of the values and what they stand for.'
- 'I noticed that attitudes towards my student with Asperger's Syndrome changed. They listen to him, interact and make sure he is included. Before, he was avoided or left out.'
- 'I have discovered that teaching values in no way 'takes away' from literacy or numeracy time; if anything it makes literacy and numeracy more meaningful and thus engages the students more which, in turn, means that their learning is increased.'

Another teacher was inspired to write a school newsletter article entitled *Giving Back: the Power of Positive Thinking*.

Our values education projects have also contributed to the Lanyon Cluster professional learning community in which the teacher scholars collaborated, supported each other and then presented their action research to teachers in the whole Cluster. To see 150 teachers, after a long day at work, engaged in presentations about giving, about teachers being involved in action research and about students learning about values, was very powerful evidence of this learning community.

In conclusion, values education has become central to our curriculum, whether it be through the National Framework of Values Education in Schools, Studies of Asia, Indigenous culture and history or our focus on environmental issues. Our whole cluster approach, our action research model, our focus on transformative
learning and our commitment to embedding values education in the curriculum will ensure the sustainability of the project. The enthusiasm generated by the project and the acknowledgement of the teachers in the project about the importance of values education will also be factors in this sustainability. The Bonython Primary School years 3–4 team really captured this in their reflection:

'What has been really significant to us is how important it is to teach values in our units of work, clearly, intentionally and for a reason. Perhaps we should ask ourselves when we are designing a new unit of work, 'what values are we teaching?' If there aren't any, or we can't see a natural place for them within the unit, is it worth teaching?'

Challenges:
- Staffing changes have provided a few difficulties in maintaining consistency.
- Supporting the teacher scholars with time was very difficult, as relief teachers were not always available.
- Another challenge has been to keep the focus on the intended learning and not losing sight of the original goal.
- Continually documenting evidence was challenging.
- The more IT savvy loved the wiki but others found it more difficult.
- Poor attendance by some of the focus students is tricky for collecting evidence.
- Some teacher scholars found it difficult to give the student co-researchers autonomy in researching their own learning. Interestingly some of the early years teachers were most successful at this.

Highlights:
- Teachers recording their reflections on the project wiki, reflecting deeply about their practice and redesigning learning to ensure it is transformative for their students.
- The high level of involvement by students and parents in the project.
- Hearing the connections parents made between learning about values at school and the behaviour of their children outside of school.
- An inspiring presentation by Dr Thomas Nielsen to the teachers in the whole Cluster on 'giving'.
- The strong Cluster professional learning community in which the teacher scholars collaborated, supported each other and then presented their action research to their Cluster colleagues.
- Observing some great lessons where values are explicitly taught and seeing students using the language of values.
- Years 4–5 students talking with and singing with a 102 year-old as part of a singing outreach program. One of the main spin-offs is the number of students who now feel really comfortable with singing, how many now enjoy singing and how many students have signed up to be participants in Wakakirri (a dance festival) this year.
- Our curriculum has a stronger focus on Indigenous culture as well as values and it was great to see how Indigenous culture and history is being embedded in the curriculum as well as a focus on the learning outcomes of Indigenous students.
- Presenting our action research on Indigenous students at a national forum.
- The power of narrative in the most significant change stories and in the impact stories written by our teacher scholars.
• The success of this project has provided an even more coherent model for continuing our values journey through action research in a Studies of Asia project in 2010.