Youth Voice: Fostering Inclusiveness, Respect and Tolerance: Maroondah Education Coalition, Victoria

Background
The Maroondah Education Coalition (MEC) is a subset of a well-established network of government secondary schools in Melbourne’s outer eastern suburbs that have been working together since 2005. The three schools (Ringwood, Parkwood and Maroondah Secondary Colleges) that participated in the Youth Voice: Fostering Inclusiveness, Respect and Tolerance project are situated approximately three kilometres apart, and their students access common community and cultural amenities. The schools have very different student cohorts with many Burmese, Sudanese and Liberian refugee families recently coming to live in the area, which previously had a largely monocultural community. Staff at the three schools believed there was a growing need to develop students’ understanding of refugees and build positive relationships between members of different cultures. The project was recognised as a meaningful way to support student wellbeing and facilitate students’ awareness, development and practice of their personal values. A key objective of the project was to establish a sense of community that embraced the whole school, parents and the local neighbourhood.

The cluster used a multi-layered approach across the three school communities. Teacher pedagogy and practice was developed through a common values language and explicit projects. Students undertook relevant classroom projects that related to cultural diversity and the exploration of values, and which included a radio program and the publication of Youth Voice magazine. A pilot program was run for teachers, parents and students on emotional intelligence. There were also three cross-school and community forums held.

Phase 1: Project set up
- Engage with participating project schools and staff to scope activity in each site
- Plan school/community forum
- Engage expert presenters for Emotional Intelligence professional learning and community forum

Phase 2: Implementation Phase
Delivery of the MEC Values in Action Schools Project (VASP) events. These included:

Local Community Forum
Initial activities and conversations with representatives from interest groups such as: Maroondah Youth Services, Victoria Police, Foundation House, parents, teachers and students, to explore what makes a connected and inclusive community. Students, community representatives, teachers, parents and relevant
VASP project advisors, participated in a range of small and whole of group activities designed to connect forum members and to start conversations about community. The forum was facilitated by Second Strike (a leadership and SRC training company) and incorporated many opportunities for students to voice their opinions, ideas and beliefs about what is needed for a connected and inclusive community.

This forum looked at the elements required for connectedness within a community. These were People, Places, Events and Feelings. Forum participants classified their thoughts under these headings and student teams reported back to the whole group on an element of their choice.

At the end of the forum each participant wrote a word/statement relating to community on a jigsaw piece and placed it on a white board. This formed a visual display that captured the attitudes, behaviours and values that foster a healthy community.

**Follow up Forum – as a result of student feedback from initial Forum:**

Student feedback from the initial forum indicated that they were keen to reconnect and further explore the concept of community. The VASP team responded to students’ thoughts and suggestions. Parents were also invited to this event. The VASP team wanted students to explore more deeply the values associated with a healthy community. Feedback from the first forum also indicated that many students were still unclear about the different facets of the values project and what events they could participate in. This event gave us an opportunity to explain the project objectives and to encourage continued involvement in the project. During the afternoon students had the opportunity to view the materials produced in the first forum, to relate their experiences as a member of a community, and to work in teams to create posters about the values that promote a healthy community (See Appendix 1 for ...)

**Class projects undertaken**

Students undertake relevant projects in class that relate to cultural diversity / exploration of values.

**Ringwood SC:**

During Term 1, two Year 10 media classes explored how one photograph can represent a multitude of words. In Term 2, students were asked to submit at least one photograph that represented ‘Multicultural Maroondah’. Each student also explored their own grandparents’ backgrounds and participated in a celebration of foods from different cultures. The student images of Multicultural Maroondah were incorporated into the Cultural Day presentation.

Term 3 classroom projects in English and History focused on Human Rights and the Migrant Experience. Year 9 and 11 History students were encouraged to create meaningful and honest texts related to the Civil Rights Movement or which expressed the complexities of migrant life in Australia. Through the Year 12 English novels, students explored and wrote about issues related to Identity and Belonging as part of their course requirements. At the VASP celebration night, three Year 11 History students expressed their personal viewpoints about a significant issue that they had studied.

**Maroondah SC:**

In the Inspire program, Year 9 students were immersed in a 2 week integrated program on Cultures that culminated in the Multicultural Day.

During the program, students surveyed their school community on ‘cultural inclusion’ and represented their results graphically. Other students produced work relating to combating bullying and exclusion of others due to cultural difference.

**Parkwood SC:**

During Term 3, all Year 10 students were involved in a cross-curriculum project on Cultural Inclusion and Human Rights. This built on the work done with the students during the Terms 1 & 2 activities in the project. In English, Year 10 students traditionally study a Holocaust novel and in the Civics class, students study Human Rights.

In the Civics classes, students were involved in studying background material on cultural inclusion by exploring Pol Pot and Khmer Rouge in Cambodia. This unit explored issues around cultural inclusion and exclusion. Students learned about the rise of Hitler and the Nazi Party as background to the work being done in English on the Holocaust novel.

In June, 14 Year 10 students participated in a Defence 2020 workshop with the key theme ‘Are our defence forces good peacekeeping citizens?’ which was an activity that directly related to their class work in Civics and Citizenship and the MEC Values project.

In two of the English classes, students were also involved in preparing and delivering a one hour program for SYNfm – the student radio station which operates from RMIT University. One of the requirements of the program is that students need to have a segment on an aspect of cultural understanding. Students undertook individual research into an aspect of cultural identity/genocide/human rights.

The work done in class and during the radio station project required students to develop written material for the *Youth Voice* magazine. Some of this work was also in digital format.

**Emotional Intelligence workshops (Teachers/students/parents):**

To raise awareness of how our emotions influence the building of positive relationships with others, and how this ultimately affects connectedness in and beyond the classroom, the Values project included a pilot program for students, teachers and parents on Emotional Intelligence (EI). Two workshops were organised for each group (students and parents, teachers). The workshops (facilitated by Dr Karen Hansen) assist the building of connected communities by exploring how our emotions can determine the quality of our relationships with family, friends, peers, colleagues and with other community members. It was intended that this program assist the development of positive behaviours and hence the ability of young people to become tolerant, respectful and inclusive members of society. It was also important for teachers to have an awareness of how to develop student EI through modelling appropriate behavioural responses and by setting classroom tasks that build cooperation, trust and interdependence between students.

**Cultural Day – Maroondah SC:**

The MEC community participated in the celebration of cultural diversity at Maroondah SC. Students, teachers and parents from the VASP schools connected with each other via a range of activities. The day incorporated four main areas.
where participants could connect with others through presentations, conversation, dance, music and sport. The main areas were:

1. **Project presentation.**

A visual presentation of the project to date was shown to all participants at the beginning of the day. Ringwood SC media class contributed their classroom work on Multicultural Maroondah and student leaders from the three schools spoke to the audience about each of the preliminary activities. The presentation set the scene for what the day was about; ‘We’re all in it together’.

2. **Cultural Infusion activities**

These activities were designed to expose students to different cultures through music and dance. Students actively participated and gained an understanding of the relevance of dance, music and ceremony in different cultural groups.

3. **Sporting Events**

Many students were eager to engage with each other during lunchtime either on the soccer field or over the net in Volleyball. Round robin teams were organised for interested students.

4. **Sudanese speakers from the Migrant Information Centre**

The last session of the day highlighted both the main differences of Sudanese culture and family compared to that experienced by most Australians. Students were fascinated by the Sudanese family structure and asked many probing questions. Insight into why the parents emigrated to Australia and the problems faced by Sudanese parents in raising their children within a new culture, was gained by the students.

5. **Focus groups with students from the three schools**

It was decided to take advantage of having VASP students at the same venue. Student focus groups were organised and the University Advisor interviewed the students at lunchtime. Rich data was obtained to contribute to the Most Significant Change story.

**Volleyball match and lunch for the Refugee students from Ringwood SC and Maroondah SC**

The refugee students reconnected via a volleyball match and a pizza lunch – two favourites for this group of students.

**Phase 3: Celebration and overall evaluation of VASP events.**

**Celebration Night – September 14th:**

This event, organised by the students, highlighted the depth and diversity of the Values project. Through the multimedia and student presentations, the class work and event displays, the *Youth Voice* magazine and the student art work, it was evident that our school communities had developed a greater awareness of the values that foster an inclusive and connected community through a multilayered approach to values education that connected students in different ways depending on their needs and interests. The concept of Youth Voice as a powerful vehicle to change opinions and attitudes stood out as you listened to the students.
speak about the project, admired the art work and class projects and read the stories in the *Youth Voice* magazine.

**Classroom Projects - Student Focus Groups**

**Parkwood Secondary College**

History and Civics and Citizenship classes. The students have developed deep understanding of racial equality, and inequality, human rights, and global perspectives on values through research projects where they investigated global issues and major leaders in the world. Students commented that the projects ‘opened up their eyes to the world’ and helped them to ‘see how vital it is to understand challenges that people have faced in their lives’

Yr 10 English, SYNfm radio project –These students have had authentic and purposeful opportunities to discuss youth issues and express their point of view about a broad range of community concerns and activities. The student reinforced the view that it is important for them to ‘have the opportunity to talk openly about things we are worried about’. Several students noted that ‘this program is the best thing I’ve ever done at school’ and ‘we really have started to look more at how we can have a say about things that matter to us’.

**Ringwood Secondary College**

The focus group at Ringwood included students who had been involved in many different aspects of the program. One student said that the initial forum really challenged her to think differently about what makes a caring community. Another said that the best thing for her was having the chance to meet and mix with students from other schools. Several students said that previously students from Burma had been ignored by local students, but the Multicultural forum activities had encouraged them to socialise and dance and play sport together. So there were been benefits for all. One girl had been involved in the forum, and the emotional intelligence training, and she felt that ‘her eyes were opened up to how I sometimes walk away from people who are different, but this program made me more confident about speaking to kids from other places’.

The Ringwood Secondary College classroom programs provide multiple opportunities for students to extend their understanding of multiculturalism and youth values. Through conversations with the students it was clear that the students were encouraged to clarify their values and opinions through written reflections in English, though art and poetry in Media studies, and through the collaborative energies of whole groups of students in producing the *Youth Voice* magazine

**Most Significant Change Story Day**

This event added a ‘richness’ to the project that was captured by individuals talking about the project in a personal and reflective way. It gave students in particular, another opportunity to express their thoughts about what they had learned by participating in the project, in terms of their own beliefs and attitudes.

Some parents expressed how the values project gave students an opportunity to talk about their own views and feelings in relation to community – something that they would not do much of in ‘formal’ education.

The events that have been undertaken during Terms 1 to 3 directly relate to the project objectives. The two forums and the Cultural day, as well as the classroom
projects, have developed student awareness and understanding of cultural diversity and a broader view of values such as respect and tolerance. By participating in a range of activities, students investigated the values that are important for developing a connected and inclusive community and the initial workshop on emotional intelligence gave them insight into how emotions influence their ability to communicate appropriately with community members. The VASP events were organised so that students would be connected on different emotional levels at different times – from non threatening ice-breaker activities to working in teams and having to present their thoughts and beliefs to an audience.

**Evidence for the project**

Evidence for the project was captured through a number of different methods:
- Digital recording (video and/or still photos) of each forum event
- Production of PowerPoint presentations for presentation and information purposes
- A multimedia presentation that captured visual and audio highlights of the project
- Production of the *Youth Voice* magazine. The magazine contained student work relating to the theme cultural diversity.
- Student artwork on the theme ‘Multicultural Maroondah’ - displayed at the Ringwood SC Art and Technology exhibition.
- Newsletter articles relating to VASP events were regularly included in school newsletters
- Production of student products – such as posters, visual displays from forum activities
- Emotional Intelligence student and teacher workbooks
- Evaluation of each VASP event via participant feedback sheets. Both quantitative and qualitative data was collected.
- Student focus group conversations (from students undertaking VASP classroom projects)
- Student classroom projects, including a SYN FM student radio broadcast and resulting podcast on Human Rights.
- Digital recording of student opinions during class time activities

**Reflection**

All VASP events have had their own specific highlights. The initial Forum was an exciting and motivating introduction to the project that involved local community groups coming together, to explore the concept of community. Observations of this event indicated that participants were having fun whilst engaging in conversations and activities about community needs. There was a feeling of positive energy, with group members listening to each others’ opinions and sharing task responsibilities. Student voice was a highlight of this forum. On return to school, teachers indicated that the refugee students benefited from attending this event and were glad that they had been involved. Student feedback was very supportive of a similar event which led to a subsequent forum.

The second forum, also involved students that did not attend the original forum and thus the project influence was widening and strengthening. This event delved deeper into values, and one highlight was to see how student thought had developed and matured since the first forum, from the concrete consideration of community needs to the articulation of the values that foster healthy communities.
The emotional intelligence workshops gave students and teachers insight into the importance that emotion plays in the formation of productive and positive relationships. It was rewarding to gain feedback indicating that the students not only found the session beneficial, but were able to connect EI to our project work on values.

The Cultural Day was fascinating, fun, energetic and consolidated the previous forum work. By immersing students in a range of cultural experiences, they gained a greater understanding of difference and an awareness of common needs, such as belonging. ‘We’re all in it together’ was a powerful theme that underpinned the day’s events.

The 14 Year 10 student leaders performed well at the Defence 2020 workshop on the theme ‘Are our defence forces good peacekeeping citizens?’. In the team simulation exercises that identified the values behind making school yard decisions, Parkwood students won the top prize for the best group exercise and also the best girl performer for the day. Students enjoyed the day and came away with a much broader idea of human rights and the part that our defence forces play in peacekeeping overseas.

The Youth Voice magazine was a highlight for two main reasons.

1. It captured our Values project work from a classroom perspective, giving us a product that authentically reflected the depth and range of work produced by students as they explored human right issues and the values that promote a connected and inclusive community.

Many different types of articles were included in the magazine, illustrating the diversity and depth of the classroom projects across the three schools. Some examples include:

- Immigration – thoughts and feelings about surrounded by a different culture and being in an alien land
- Reflecting on Human Rights - ‘Armenians in Turkey, Martin Luther King, 1989 Tiananmen Square Protest, Stalin and the forced famine of 1932
- Writings from Refugee students – ‘All About Me’, My Destiny, Journey to a Dream
- Responses to issues – letters to the editor on ‘Asylum Seekers’, Racism
- Celebration of multiculturalism – art work on Multicultural Maroondah, Holidays for all Nations Calendar,
- Work explicitly related to the respect and tolerance of others - 'An Investigation into Cultural Acceptance at Maroondah SC’, ‘Say No to Bullying’, What is Tolerance?

2. Year 10 and 11 media students worked together as a team to design and produce an exceptional publication that illustrates the power of Youth Voice.

In particular, one Year 10 student who really enjoyed the cultures work done in the Semester 1 Media Class, attended a meeting for the Youth Voice Magazine in response to a notice in the school Daily Bulletin. He not only used his skills to
make the Youth Voice pages look great, but he actually read the articles and chatted to his dad for example, about Stalin and the revolution. To quote his Media teacher, ‘He’s had all these new experiences and wants to be involved further now with what’s going on.’ This is just one example of the impact that the Values project has had on student engagement.

The celebration night was a positive and uplifting event. It highlighted and reinforced the outstanding work done by project participants, in particular the students who had been involved on a number of levels – classroom and/or event participant, student leader, artist or magazine producer. It reflected the depth of thought that students are capable of when given the opportunity to work on a project that fosters curiosity, collaboration, creativity and connectedness to their community.

On reflection of the project outcomes, there is evidence that students have a growing appreciation for, and an understanding of, cultural diversity within their own community. This has been achieved by connecting individuals in ways that promote thinking and communication about cultural diversity and the articulation of the behaviours, attitudes and values that foster an inclusive community. Through the emotional intelligence workshops, we were able to raise student awareness of the importance of verbal and non-verbal communication in forming respectful and positive relationships within any community.

The multilayered approach of our Values project created the conditions for students to be involved on a number of levels. Although it was very demanding at times, the project outcomes far outweighed the effort involved. Observing the students participating at each event and reading their feedback comments was motivational for the teachers as well. We were happy to implement student requests for additional events as this demonstrated that the students were engaged in the project and that key objectives were being achieved. Team members commented that when you see the project on paper you realise just how much has been achieved and the quality of the program offered. A sense of achievement has inspired us to continue our work in some form.

The project team has already started to plan for sustainability next year and will invite other MEC schools to participate in further values work via classroom projects.