An introduction to values: The Tasmanian Values Cluster

Background

The first phase of the three-phase Values in Action Schools Project (Tasmanian Cluster) was about planning the particular focus of the project, for the cluster of four schools as a whole and for each school’s individual projects. It was decided that a strong pedagogical thread would underpin the values work in each school, and from this starting point further aspects of the project would be developed. It was also decided to start small within classrooms and then ripple out to other sectors of the school community so that values would strongly permeate all aspects of school-life. This phase aimed to allow students and teachers to ‘enrol’ in the values education project, and to ‘tune in’ to its concepts and vocabulary.

Some shared principles were established that became the foundation for the project as a whole. It was agreed that:

1. The initial stage would ensure the development of a shared language to articulate values
2. Literature would be used as the means through which the pedagogical attention on values was to be established (all classes initially responded to Colin Thompson’s ‘The short and incredibly happy life of Riley’ and later worked with Mark Ludy’s *The Flowerman*)
3. Students from the four schools would come together twice during the life of the project as a way of sharing and celebrating their work
4. Ongoing reflection on the classroom-based values work would be captured through the use of journals (for staff and students)

The foundation of the project in teaching and learning was firmly established through this phase, and provided a clear basis for wider engagement across the whole school community.

Activities that assisted in the achievement of the phase:

Waimea Heights Primary, Blackmans Bay and Albuera St primary schools began their values project through the explicit teaching of values. The range of activities students engaged in included:

**Waimea Heights**

- Coming to understand the meaning of the values through inventing a scenario for one of the nine values. This was done at school and at home, and raised awareness and informed students and parents about Values Education.
- Using Bruner’s concept attainment, pedagogy students worked on synonyms and antonyms for the nine values as a means of going deeper in acquiring personal meaning.
- Students enacted a value and recorded the enactment as a photo. This allowed students to think about living the values in their daily lives.
- Using a ‘community of inquiry’ approach to discuss values using Colin Thompson’s ‘The short and incredibly happy life of Riley’ as stimulus literature.
Blackmans Bay

- Focusing on values was introduced to students through a study of Colin Thompson’s ‘The short and incredibly happy life of Riley’ using the Harvard pedagogy of Ron Ritchhart, *Making Thinking Visible* including thinking strategies such as See, Think, Wonder. As a follow-up, students also considered messages portrayed in Colin Thompson’s *Dust*.
- Student participation in a Community of Inquiry to investigate the difference between ‘needs and wants’ and to inquire into what we truly value.
- Using cooperative group learning, students reflected on the meaning of the nine values for Australian schooling. They used materials based on Bruner’s concept attainment as an approach to this task.
- Students worked in small groups to decide on a list of what they thought were the values that were most important to them at school and decided on their three top values.
- Using the inclusive approach of ‘Tribes’ provided a forum for learning and interacting in the classroom and beyond, within the school community.
- In preparation for the values forum, students reflected on their early learning and identified a symbol that reflected their personal commitment to values.

During stage one, Blackmans Bay established an awareness of values and the inclusion of values as an explicit aspect of the curriculum and school climate.

Albuera Street

- Gaining student information about values included accessing prior knowledge and understanding by tuning in to the following two questions: What do we already know about values? Do we already use ‘value words’ as part of vocabulary?
- Teaching about values began with tagging values concepts and terminology to students’ comments and social behaviours, and making these explicit through a ‘visual jigsaw’ in which students were asked to respond to two questions: What would I value from this year? What am I prepared to give?
- Exhibiting ‘jigsaw’ results allowed for ongoing reflection and additions to be made and became a continual reading source for children and parents. As an outcome the classroom continued to have a visual display of student-initiated key words such as trust, cooperation, respect and others related to the developing of positive relationships, as well as responses such as: I want my class mates to include me I am prepared to give my trust Collecting initial data allowed for comparisons to be made later in the year when students were to be asked: How have I valued this year? What did I give? Going further, students were asked to engage in role reversal and take on the persona of a parent. They reflected and wrote about how they would want to bring up their child.
- You are the Parent
  - Write about how you hope to bring up your child.
  - What values and ideas do you hope to pass on?
  - How will you do it?
Comments were used to elicit underlying values. One comment from a ‘child-parent’ insisted ‘I wouldn’t let them get away from their chores.’ This comment was aligned with the value of responsibility.

An outcome of the role reversal activity included following up child-parent responses at parent-teacher interviews (with the real adult parents). Parents were able to view and respond to their children’s expectations and perceptions.

Feedback from the parent-teacher interviews suggested delight and affirmation at the opportunity to discuss ‘home values’ at school and to make these explicit.

Reflecting on their developing knowledge, understanding and actions, students were asked to respond to a questionnaire. Questions included:

- What are values?
- Why are they important?
- Should there be a common universal set of values? Explain your answer.
- If yes, what do you think those values should be?
- Examples of student definitions of values varied but a common theme was that there shouldn’t be a core set of values as no one would be unique or different.

Exploring values through a ‘community of inquiry’ focus based on Colin Thompson’s ‘The Short and Incredibly Happy Life of Riley’. This activity formed part of preparations for the Student Forum.

Eliciting feedback from the Forum

During stage one, Albuera Street Primary inquired deeply into what is meant by the notion of ‘values’ and how values are ubiquitous in our lives both implicitly and explicitly.

**Campbell Street Primary School**

Campbell Street joined the project later and had a different focus as the values project was based around the recently established Student Council. The Campbell Street project was titled: High Five: What do we value? (The High Five goals are: Be Caring, Be Respectful, Be Honest, Be Peaceful, and Be Safe. They are displayed around the school on the fingers of a ‘high five’ hand, with the summary ‘Be Your Best’ in the palm of the hand.)

The aim of the project was community-centred action research about what our school community values. A Student Council was formed consisting of twelve student members from Grades 2–6, plus one teacher-coordinator. They met during school time about once per fortnight, and liaised with key stakeholders including students, parents/families and teachers to facilitate the research.

The first question raised was to allow students to tune in to the concept of diversity of values: *What values do all schools have, and what values does just Campbell Street school have?*

The Student Council collated responses into groups and the information was published in the school newsletter, to begin the process of acquainting the wider school community with the values project.

The second question focused more on personal qualities, while still keeping the focus on ‘other people’: *Think of someone you admire. What is it that you admire about them?*

A newsletter item summarised the findings so that the wider school community was made aware of the values work being undertaken. As a follow-on from the work of the student council, staff meetings were held for teaching and support...
staff to respond to the following question: *What values do we want our students to hold dear?*

During stage 1 feedback from teachers, teacher assistants and ancillary staff indicated a growing awareness of and engagement in the values project.

**Contribution this phase made towards achievement of the overall objectives of the project:**

Activities in Phase 1 contributed to the achievement of the Tasmanian Values Cluster’s overarching objectives as identified in the original project plan:

- demonstration of students’ understanding of their own and others’ values
- a capacity to articulate the ways in which students’ decisions and actions reflect these values.

The work conducted during Phase 1 also contributed to the action research question:

- How does a focus on values affect the way we interact as a school community?

**Students have:**

- gained awareness of the values and can link behaviours with values
- developed knowledge, understanding and dispositions to act according to personal and shared values clarified through the VASP project activities
- acquired a shared language of values explicitly articulated through all curricular activities
- started the process of taking responsibility for enacting values.

**VASP coordinators (through their classroom teaching and other work within the school community) have:**

- made explicit what was usually implicit in Values Education
- grown through professional development such as collegial dialogue, critical friend structures and formal opportunities for Values Education learning, especially the Values Conference, ‘Shaping Positive Futures’
- linked Values to curricular and cross-curricular emphases in their schools
- started exploring the dimensions of ‘Learning Power’ as identified by the research of Ruth Deakin-Crick.

**Schools have:**

- consolidated their commitment to explicitly defining and modelling positive values in all relationships and interactions
- fostered an interdependent learning ecology within the broader school community
- developed, maintained and extended a positive school climate.
Exploring values through a literacy context

Following is a lesson from Di Smith at Albuera Primary School that explores values through a ‘community of inquiry’ focus based on Colin Thompson’s ‘The short and incredibly happy life of Riley’. This activity formed part of preparations for the Student Forum. Some responses from the students and teacher comments follow the lesson outline.

Lesson 1 Exploring values through a literacy context – Grade 5/6

1. Introduce children to philosophy
   - Aim of philosophy is to cultivate excellence in thinking and to engage children in the search for meaning.
   - Philosophy encourages students to articulate questions, clarify ideas and concepts, make judgments and draw inferences.

2. What is a community of inquiry?
   - Safe place to think things never thought before
   - Place where students can take risks in their thinking and where they will be challenged by others
   - Logic and reasoning underpin ideas as each member of the community challenges the thoughts expressed by others
   - Focus in on listening, thinking, challenging and changing viewpoints.

3. Establishing community
   - Before exploration of ideas can commence, ground rules must be set out. Community must be established
   - Appropriate behaviours and values must be affirmed by the class if a community of inquiry is going to emerge. Children need to:
     - listen to each other
     - take turns
     - respect each other’s contributions
     - feel safe to share questions, feelings, thoughts and views
     - Cooperation is essential to the philosophy classroom.

4. Procedure
   - Establish a community of inquiry. List behaviours and values on board as children state.
   - Read text ‘The short and incredibly happy life of Riley’
   - Ask for some big picture words (concepts). Document on board or paper
   - Ask children the questions they would like to ask based on the concepts list on board. Put children’s names next to questions
   - Try to match the concept words to the questions
   - Isolate one question that we could base a class discussion on – ie ‘Does wealth give people power?’ (broad, open-ended question)
   - Ask for a volunteer to summarise the thinking evolving from the class community of inquiry.

5. Reflection
6. Tasks
   a) Any immediate comments resulting from the session?
   b) Any other discussion questions we could pursue?
   c) I used to think...but now I think...
   d) Choose one other question you would have liked to discuss as a class and
      respond to it in writing.

Response to Lesson 1 Exploring values through a literacy context
– Grade 5/6

1. Establish a community of inquiry
The behaviours and values affirmed by the class:
   • it’s about talking and reasoning
   • fun place to be
   • others to consider
   • safe place, trusting place/fair
   • help each other by respecting others who are talking
   • hear lots of:
     o disagree/agree
     o I disagree with...
     o I agree with...
   • no attacking the person – just the idea
   • negotiate/share
   • it’s okay to change your opinion
   • dialogue
   • no right or wrong answer
   • challenging the thoughts of others
   • listen to one speaker at a time.

2. Read text
   • The short and incredibly happy life of Riley

3. Big picture words (concepts)
   1 Perfect 15 Materialist world
   2 Emotions 16 Death
   3 Family 17 Realist
   4 Optimism 18 Selfish
   5 Contrast 19 Wanting
   6 Greed 20 Boasting
   7 Vanity 21 Acceptance
   8 Wisdom 22 Inheritance
   9 Lifestyle 23 Lifespan
   10 Environment 24 Irony
   11 Happiness 25 Less is better
   12 Love 26 Rational
   13 Selfless 27 Reality
   14 Teaching 28 Prepared

4. Student questions
   a) Where did Riley live and does environment affect your happiness? (Angus)
      Environment
   b) How many mice did Riley have? (Kathleen) Family/Lifestyle
c) How would Riley have felt if all those he loved died? (Isaac) Emotion/Family
d) Did Riley always have a good lifestyle? (Hannah) Lifestyle
e) How long did Riley live for? (Sophie) Lifespan
f) Why wasn’t Riley sad about Kevin (Edon) Emotion
g) If Riley wasn’t unhappy would he live longer? (Hayley) Lifestyle/Realism
h) Is Riley’s positive nature inherited by his children? (Angus) Positive/Lifestyle
i) Why do humans want more? (Alex) Greed
j) What was Riley like before he died – did life change his optimism? (Alfred) Optimism
k) How effective is Riley’s optimism – in what way does it show? (Finlay) Optimism
l) What happened to Riley that made him view the world so optimistically? (...) Optimism/Lifestyle
m) How and when did Riley die? (Hyun Jun) Death
n) Were any of his brothers and sisters happier than Riley? (Nina) Happiness
o) Are all rats like Riley – optimistic? (Angus) Optimism
p) Why didn’t Riley take risks and seek challenges? (Emma) Realism
q) Is Riley really happy or is it just a face he puts on? (Angus) Happiness
r) If Riley couldn’t do what made him happy, how would he be? (Kathleen) Happiness
s) Did Riley know sadness? (Erin) Emotion
t) Do humans really do and want what Riley said? (Isabel) Reality

5. Matching the concept words to the questions
Children isolated the following concepts that could be used as a basis of class discussion:

1) Does environment affect your happiness? (Angus)
2) Is optimism a good thing? (Angus)
3) Why do humans want more? (Alex)
4) Are you living if you have nothing? (Isaac)
5) What is the effect of optimism? (Finlay)
6) Can being a personality type affect your life? (Sophie)
7) Is it ever okay to be greedy? (Alex)

Life of Riley Reflection Book

6. One question for discussion
As a class, one question was voted on for discussion:

• Is optimism a good thing?

Students discussed what an optimistic person was. They also contrasted the characteristics of a person who was a pessimistic person. They felt that with optimism comes a personal happiness and, yes, they felt that those people live longer. They felt that pessimistic people were boring and not nice to be around. They also brought into the discussion that you can be overly optimistic and that that could be a stupid attitude to take. They felt that caution should always go hand in hand with a really optimistic person. They felt judgements could be affected if you only ever saw optimism and were optimistic.

The conversation then started on how optimism must be balanced – that there must be a compromise – say be 75 per cent optimistic and 25 per cent
pessimistic. Overall they felt being optimistic was the best way to be in life. They felt being optimistic was energy-giving.

7. Summarise the thinking
Two students asked if they could summarise:
- Clear cut – optimism is a good thing. People should be balanced and not overly optimistic.

8. Tasks
- Students were asked to write for five minutes on another question we could have discussed
- Wrote on 'something I know today that I didn’t know yesterday'.

Teacher comment
Really pleased with their second philosophy lesson. They appeared to easily relate to big-picture words. The questions were very forthcoming. At times we talked about open and closed questions, for example, ‘How many baby rats did Riley have? Would this provoke a discussion?’ I was trying to get the children to also think of open questions that linked to the big-picture concepts, for example, ‘Why do humans always want more?’ (link to Greed). Children were getting better at asking the questions. After the questions were documented we linked each to a word concept.

We then looked at the questions and how we could take the idea and transform it into a question for class discussion. We decided on ‘Is it ever okay to be greedy?’

We then voted on one question as the basis of our class discussion, ‘Is optimism a good thing?’ Good discussion – children getting the idea. More reluctant, hesitant children were coming on board during the discussion and protocols observed.