The Values Education Good Practice Schools Project – Stage 1

The following has been extracted from *Implementing the National Framework for Values Education in Australian Schools: Report of the Values Education Good Practice Schools Project – Stage 1: Final Report* September 2006.

http://www.valueseducation.edu.au/values/default.asp?id=16381

**Guiding ethos and whole school approach**

The National Framework suggests that quality values education programmes arise in part from schools and their communities identifying what the community values (its guiding ethos) and working together (whole school approach) to see it actualised. Several clusters envisaged that such things would be the emphasis of their efforts over the duration of their project. Some speculated that, building on the Values for Australian Schooling in the National Framework, they would pursue a particular, homegrown set of values either as a whole school or by getting a ‘critical mass’ involved in the project. The following project loosely fits into this part of our taxonomy.

**My happiness ... My choice**

The Airds–Bradbury Cluster (NSW) designed its values project to improve stakeholder engagement in the schools and build community social capital for students to succeed.

**Airds–Bradbury Cluster, New South Wales**

**Cluster coordinators:** Carol Jones and Cath Angel, Airds High School

**Participating schools:**
- Bradbury Public School
- Briar Road Public School
- John Warby Public School
- Woodlands Road Public School
- Airds High School

**UAN critical friend:** originally Ms Kate Keeley of Macquarie University, NSW, who was replaced by Dr David Saltmarsh of Macquarie University at the end of 2005

Working as they do in an environment where most of the school population is drawn from a public housing estate, and student absenteeism and retention are significant problems, the schools in the Airds–Bradbury Cluster designed their values education project to

> … improve the engagement and commitment of pupils, teachers and parents. It was designed to build in the whole community a real sense of mutual support, validation for,
and valuing of the schools in the cluster; a real sense of the great rewards to be achieved working within this community in our struggle to overcome shortcomings in numeracy and literacy skills, identified parental socioeconomic disadvantage and low exit education levels, and some negative school culture factors.

In particular, our priority was to address what was perceived by many to be a lack of ‘social capital’ among students. This is characterised by: poor work ethic/study habits/self-discipline; inadequate resources outside of school to ensure school success; a diminished sense of connectedness and valuing of the school’s role; a negative sense of wellbeing; and some hopelessness about the future.

This involved a five-pronged approach embracing:

- school policy development;
- teaching and learning;
- values modelling;
- community partnerships;
- student empowerment and resilience.

All five were held together by the umbrella concept, ‘My happiness … My choice’. This emerged from the detailed conversations the schools had with their communities and the subsequent philosophical journey the cluster coordinators took. As they explain it themselves, with all of the complex background data in hand, they undertook a journey of their own

… through the notion of a ‘good life’. The philosophic and moral authenticity of the National Framework values needed to be validated by us before we could confidently move forward and genuinely and responsibly accommodate community input to the framework. The results of the community interviews had consistently corresponded to the ancient Greek idea of the four main virtues of ‘Wisdom’, ‘Justice’, ‘Fortitude’ and ‘Self-control’ (know yourself, respect all life, be strong and control yourself), more so than to the stated elements of the National Framework. The overriding community concern was to be ‘happy’ with other human beings, as best they could. The path to such a place was not clear or easy, but the majority discounted material wealth as a prime concern. Our job became clear: to use our ‘comfortable’ community language, but to also remain faithful to the Framework values. ‘My happiness … My choice’, our values project ‘umbrella concept’ emerged. The correlations were unambiguous. The community and the National Framework were not speaking different languages.

It is interesting to note in this context that the initial focus on identifying school community understanding of the nine values and their respective importance fell flat because the survey instrument proved too ambiguous and inaccessible to many who were asked to complete it. The cluster instead embarked on a series of interviews with a representative selection of stakeholders, which allowed for genuine dialogue to occur about what school community members felt was important in life, what made a good person and where and how such things could be supported and enhanced.

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Specific questions used to stimulate discussion in interviews with students and staff, for instance, were:

- What is important to me in my life?
- What are my values – the things I try to be?
- What do I like about myself?
- What would I like to change about myself?
- What is the importance of teachers in my life?
- Who guides me in life?

Typical of the array of activity undertaken by the schools to build the notion of ‘My happiness ... My choice’ into school policy across the board, in conformity with what the community data gathering showed, was the lead school’s effort to integrate it to all of its welfare policy and programmes. In particular, the major welfare initiatives for anger management and conflict resolution were seen as areas to benefit from a coordinated focus on developing ‘good’ and ‘happy’ students.

This was underpinned by a centrepiece activity which saw students from across the school experiencing the Catalyst multimedia presentation, which follows the lives of five young Australians in their journeys through difficult times. Each young person is faced with difficulties and, through good choices, succeeds in turning their life around. This theme was ‘very well received’ by the students who appreciated the way in which the protagonists overcame bad times through good choices. The whole activity then provided the basis for giving students some practical tools to achieve this for themselves, such as the button-pushing and RID strategies outlined below.

The end result of this sort of activity in the cluster, as a direct result of its participation in the project, is the planned development of restorative justice training and practices for cluster schools later in 2006 as a basis for continuing to advance.

Teaching and learning initiatives in the cluster are based on the 4MAT cycle of learning, which the cluster itself explains in the following terms:

First is the experience. When we first experience something new we approach it with our whole selves; our subjective, biased selves. Then we ‘reflect’ or filter the experience through who and what we are and the pasts we have brought with us. The need now is to be more objective. The third stage of the process is when we stand back, examine and narrow the focus. We attempt to conceptualise and understand the new thing. The fourth stage of the cycle is the move to action. Comprehension is not enough and we need to try something, play with it, watch and manipulate it. Finally, we integrate the new thing. We change it to suit us. We place it in our world. We integrate it and are enriched and transformed by the adaptation.

The process begins and ends with the individual. The cycle is about the making of meaning ...
All learning must begin with where the learner ‘is’ and with a climate of openness – the ‘why’ quadrant. There must be dialogue and stories, subjective voices and listening, the establishment of interest and some resonance with the experience. There must be a sense of ‘I know something about this and I want to know more’. The next quadrant addresses the ‘what’ question. Here learners receive ‘expert’ information – the essence pieces, the core concepts, the content. It is a thoughtful and reflective time for organising, connecting, comparing, clarifying, theorising. It is an objective phase. The process moves then to quadrant three, which is answering the ‘how’ question. How will people use the knowledge in life? It is the time for each individual to discover how valid the learning is for their individual life. They must become active and try things for themselves. The teacher becomes facilitator or guide only. The final quadrant is to answer the ‘if’ question. If learning is achieved, what will the learner be able to do that they cannot currently achieve? What new powers will they have? This is the place for celebration and performance – a sharing and questioning place. The new learning may be modified, adapted, edited, performed or totally reworked. The learner is encouraged and championed. Self-evaluation is critical.

(Note: Further information on 4MAT can be obtained at http://www.aboutlearning.com/)

A key teaching and learning unit that was trialed in this context, initially in the high school and then delivered with the involvement of high school students to student leaders from cluster primaries, was a specific ‘My happiness … My choice’ unit delivered to a carefully selected class.

The unit was a full day of activities based on the development of personal and class strategies for improving the happiness and wellbeing indicators of all members of the class as outlined in Figure 4.

Figure 4: The ‘My happiness … My choice’ unit

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>My Happiness … My Choice</th>
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<tr>
<td>Quadrant 1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ranking traits</td>
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<td>Ask students to tear a piece of paper into ten strips. On each they write a word or phrase that describes themselves – the good and the bad. Assure students that no-one will see what they have written, so they can be extremely honest. Then the student arranges the traits in order from what they most like about themselves to what they least like. When done, ask, ‘Do you like what you see? Do you want to keep it? Now give up one trait. How does the lack of that affect you? Now give up</td>
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another … Give up two … Give up another two. Now what kind of person are you? How do you feel about that?’ After giving up six of the qualities, let the student regain the traits one by one. Then have them write in their journals what they kept and what they learned about themselves from the experience.

_Happiness is …_

Students are given a sheet entitled ‘I am happy when … ‘ and are asked to choose two items per section that are most important for their personal happiness and wellbeing. (Note: The sheet, which could easily be compiled by teachers in other schools, lists items under the headings of Personal and family; Friends; Extra-curricular [sport and leisure]; Appearance; School ‘in general’; and School ‘in class’.)

Working in groups, students are asked to decide the top five items from the school categories of the ‘Happiness is …’ sheet. Record votes on a whiteboard for each group. This will involve active discussion and probably compromise. On the whiteboard work out the top five for the whole class.

**Quadrant 2**

Group poster or collage to show: What does ‘my personal happiness’ look like? Students can use drawings, quotes about happiness, cartoons and collage. All will contribute to this. The group needs to ensure all students’ ideas are incorporated.

(Interlude of celebrity trivia in this full-day delivery of the unit.)

Using the top five items from the school page class decision, place the top five so that one each is in the centre of a piece of butcher’s paper. Students then work in groups to complete the following:

On the top half of the paper, ‘If this is happening, then I will see … (1) indicator; (2) indicator; (3) etc. For example, if ‘teacher is in control’, then I will see (1) students on task; (2) a reasonably quiet room; (3) students in seats; etc.

On the bottom half of the paper, ‘If this is not happening then I might see … (1) indicator; etc.

List all other student contributions on the relevant butcher’s paper to ensure all ideas are represented.

**Quadrant 3**

Students identify indicators they can influence from the top half of the sheets. Students get five dots, one for each sheet. The leader counts and presents the tally on the whiteboard. The top two indicators from each of the top five items then is presented to the group as a whole.
Thinking about these top two indicators in each case, how can you make these things happen more often? In five groups, students list on the butcher’s paper strategies for each of the two indicators using the carousel method to ensure exposure to all.

(Interlude: Riddles)

**Quadrant 4**
Students choose one personal strategy from each of the strategy lists of the top five indicators. Students use one dot on each of the five strategies sheet to indicate their choice for class strategies to adopt. Select three class strategies for each indicator by tally of the most popular, which the class then will adopt.

Ask each student to put a message in an envelope – ‘I promise that by Week 5 I will …’ (list the five personal strategies chosen). Seal them in the envelope and put it in the front of the journal. The envelope will be opened in Week 5 for personal performance assessment.

Finish by having students write the class strategies in their journals and tell them that all teachers of the class will be informed of the five strategies adopted by the class.

It is interesting to note in this context that the top five sources of happiness identified by the trial group for the day were:
1. Getting good marks
2. Teachers who listen and understand student concerns
3. Students respecting each other
4. Parents who were interested and supportive about school
5. Teachers (who don’t teach me) being friendly and acknowledging me.

Subsequent discussion on indicators that this is happening in the school included, in the case of item 3 for example, ‘people getting along’, ‘everyone having friends’, ‘less fights’, ‘happy parents and teachers’, ‘no put downs’, ‘no stealing’, ‘helping each other’, ‘happy faces’ and ‘conflicts getting sorted’.

The five top choices that emerged from the process for improving the class were:
1. Treat people as you want to be treated
2. Do not litter or throw rubbish
3. Do our best at school so parents will be happy
4. Improve our marks – study, homework, attention
5. Participate and listen in class.

Class evaluation sheets revealed it was not an easy unit for the individuals involved, but despite the pressures and difficulties, and the expectation that they really work hard, 15 out of 20 indicated they had fun, 13 out of 20 wanted to do more, 18 out of
20 were willing to make changes to be happy, 12 out of 20 wanted to be part of values leadership groups, and ‘an amazing’ 20 out of 20 felt positive about the choices they can make to improve their lives.

Teacher evaluations four weeks after the event identified the students involved as ‘enthusiastic, motivated, caring and more focused’. They noticed ‘improved team work, willingness to work in small groups, caring toward previously ostracised students and greater willingness to concentrate to develop skills and knowledge’.

Consolidating this sort of success across the schools depends, of course, on conscious and continuous modelling of the values the schools seek to promote.

This has involved the use of a wide range of strategies not only to ensure that teachers ‘walk the talk’ having seen the cluster coordinators do exactly that, but also to provide students with approaches to use to deal with issues and conflicts that emerge and hence achieve a happier outcome. Two that particularly stand out, and which have been used in extended roll call sessions where these apply, are the button‐pushing and RID approaches briefly outlined below.

The button‐pushing approach for dealing with difficult situations was developed by South West Sydney DET Welfare consultants as a simple, easy to remember, useful approach that contains ‘a fashionable twist for the technologically inclined generation’. The steps focus on the metaphor of pressing buttons, where the student progressively presses:

- STOP – recognise a negative thought, feeling, physical reaction;
- REWIND – go back and carefully review what has happened;
- FAST FORWARD – take a leap into how this scene might look from some future time zone;
- ZOOM – check for any exaggeration operating;
- HELP – theoretically advise a friend in a similar predicament.

RID involves Recognising your anger, Identifying something positive (not negative) to do, and Doing the positive thing quickly. It includes a focus on students sharing experiences, reactions and advice on anger management and has helped sustain dialogue among students about anger, and how to resolve matters more peacefully.

Underpinning these and other approaches in the schools is the overall philosophy that ‘relationships matter’ which, in the high school, was enacted in a variety of ways. One of these involved students in a senior Business Services class being introduced to the practice of shaking hands at the beginning and end of each lesson (which soon also extended to Year 7 teachers meeting and greeting each and every student at the beginning of morning roll call). Students affected have appreciated this practice as, what one simply referred to, ‘a great way to start a lesson’.
This all has been underpinned, it should be said, by involving staff in discussions about happiness as well, including around the stimulus of a newspaper article by Ross Gittins (a journalist with the Sydney Morning Herald and the Age) which suggested that happiness depends on relationships with other humans, reasonable time schedules, leisure time, exercise, contact with nature and family bonds. This helped make the whole focus on ‘My happiness ... My choice’ more of a whole school concern, and truly something in the ethos of the cluster schools.

Community surveys, as indicated earlier, gave way to more targeted interviews which revealed a much richer appreciation of the values parents and other school community members hold dear, and their perception of the cluster schools.

This enabled the coordinators to identify a range of possibilities for improving parent interest and for supporting staff in their interactions with parents and carers associated with the schools. This included such strategies as AAA (attendance, attitude and academic progress) barbecue information nights, increasing the number of positive phone calls home, increased polling of parent concerns and regular information booklets summarising initiatives underway in school and individual classes. The use of regular newsletters was an important means of communication with parents on a regular basis which schools in the cluster were careful not to neglect.

The final prong of the cluster’s approach, student empowerment, is to some extent already addressed by aspects of the preceding four. That said, the key initial motivation for even entering the values project was to deal with levels of disengagement students expressed, particularly in the middle years.

The dream was, as the cluster put it, ‘to develop in these groups some resilience, some willingness to remain motivated by their interests, skills, talents and ambitions, and not to behave only as a group or tribe member, going along so as not to stand out, thus avoiding the painful process of developing valued personal standards of behaviour’.

What is needed to realise this dream is, they believe, ‘students familiar with problem-solving processes; students who considered alternatives, weighed alternatives, sought advice in making decisions and understood the values that were involved in such processes’.

Clearly the unit outlined above was firmly located in developing the sort of skills and strategies that would produce students of this sort. And several of these students have subsequently gone on to become student values leaders for others in the cluster, and especially in the primary schools.
Beyond this and other strategies in use, the whole notion of ‘My Happiness … My choice’ is centred on empowering students in this way with an overall belief in what the cluster describes as ‘the power of one to make a difference’.

Certainly this cluster, like many others, experienced the pressure of time and the difficulty of making the degree of difference it sought in only twelve months. As their final report makes clear:

The time frame of the project was a major impediment to its ease of operation and continuity … the fact that the major school break occurred in the middle caused numerous problems. No other organisation comes to mind where, at a given time of the year, approximately one-sixth of its client base leaves and is replaced by an entirely new group of clients, while … many employee changes occur, sometimes at executive level.

It is pressure which, according to those involved, can only be resolved by consistency of approach over time and continuing to pursue the dream. This in turn, they suggest, needs substantial professional development to equip teachers for the task:

For a teacher to become confident in the teaching of values, intensive personal/professional development is required. One firstly needs to fully comprehend the role values play in his/her own life, to appreciate that others’ values can be slightly different for various reasons. Then understand that students are values developers and need consistent, overt guidance to develop strong values that eventually become instinctive. Finally, teachers need to feel comfortable and competent in their teaching of values to students who often live in a community where values differ from those of the teacher and who are struggling to reconcile what they ‘know’ to be good values with the reality of what they experience – at home, at school, with their peers. Very few teachers have the ability to effectively teach values until extensive professional development is undertaken in the above areas.

Key messages

1. It is important to interrogate the National Framework and ensure it correlates with the language used in the school. This in turn creates a need for consistency in the messages being delivered: in classrooms, between classrooms and within the whole school.

2. Teachers may find it helpful to understand what values mean intellectually, emotionally and spiritually to themselves first, before pursuing them with colleagues, students and parents in the school.

3. Communities, regardless of their socioeconomic status, will have a variety of moral, ethical and philosophical approaches to life. Although the personal values
of individual teachers may not always align to those of their school community, the dialogue between them is what really matters most.

4. Values education can be used to coordinate school policies and initiatives and provide them with a common focus. If values education is separate to other key policies and initiatives, it will be seen as an ‘add on’ that people will reject.

5. Engaging students in activities that make them feel more positive about themselves and their abilities is a key component of values education. Values dialogues with students can start with a variety of open and general discussions focusing on such topics as favourite activities, ideal learning, personal strengths and weaknesses, choices, relationships, body image, parenting, friendships and authority. Student feedback on such activities and approaches is then critical to their success.

6. Values need to be taught and practised explicitly, in the knowledge ‘that students identify the values prominent in a teacher’s manner when interacting with students, and that students look to teachers for example’. Respectful relationships and role modelling between staff and students is critical to effective values education.

7. Awareness raising through professional discussions over a period of time is vital in a context where some staff may be cynical about values education.

There was not sufficient time in the project to make the difference through values education that the schools would have liked. This problem was only compounded by the way the project spanned different calendar years, which saw changes in class groups and staff. Implementing values education in schools will need support for a longer period of time.