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.

Developing values-based schools

The Chapel Hill Cluster (Qld) used an existing history of collaboration between the schools to ensure they each adopted a more conscious, whole of school values approach.

Chapel Hill Cluster, Queensland
Cluster coordinator: Lorne Willadsen, Chapel Hill State School
Participating schools:
- Brookfield State School
- Chapel Hill State School
- Fig Tree Pocket State School
- The Glenleighden School
- Kenmore South State School
- Mt Crosby State School
- Upper Brookfield State School
- Kenmore State High School

UAN critical friend: Associate Professor Pam Christie, University of Queensland, Qld

The Chapel Hill Cluster (six primary, one high school and one small independent school catering for students with primary language disorders) wanted to use its existing history of collaboration to ensure each school adopted a more conscious whole school values approach.
Although each school already was undertaking some worthwhile values work, they all also recognised, as their final report explains:

It was, for the most part, operating as the hidden curriculum; unplanned, implicit and dependent on the commitment and initiative of individuals or small groups … In keeping with the priorities of the National Framework, our vision was to make values education a conscious whole school initiative involving the teaching and non-teaching staff, parents and students and embracing all facets of school life.

The cluster sought, in this context, to implement a three-year plan that would see it, in the first year:

- raise awareness and increase dialogue about values education and the National Framework;
- establish Values Teams at each school entrusted to:
  - conduct a values audit
  - identify the values of the school community (surveys and forums)
  - align these values with the nine Values for Australian Schooling
  - develop a three-year strategic plan to map the effective transmission of these values;
- reach the point where it could begin the development of values frameworks for the schools – ie a whole school developmental values education framework, from P–7 in the primary schools, and Years 8–12 in the high school.

At the beginning, each of these objectives was seen as having equal weight, leading in years two and three to the provision of professional development for staff, the location and/or development of classroom resources, and then using the whole school framework to deliver values education in each of the schools.

As the project transpired, however, it became clear this was because ‘we had no idea about the enormity or complexity of the task involved in implementing objective one’, as the cluster explained in its story of progress using the metaphor of lighting and tending a fire.

From mid 2005 on, the project’s leadership team sought to ‘light the fire’ by generating discussion in each of the cluster schools. The first difficulty that arose in this context, however, which required some ‘checking’ of the flame, was being confronted with a number of ‘honest questions and genuine, but troubling thoughts emerging from our ranks’, which needed to be addressed. These included such comments from staff forums as:

- Whose values are we talking about?
- This all smacks of indoctrination.
- Are values taught or caught?
- If values is about moralising, I’m not interested.

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• Values are easy to agree on until you start unpacking them in real contexts, with real people who hold different world views.

This prompted a change in direction, which one of the schools described in the following terms:

At first it was thought that values education was about the nine values for schools, but as the project continues, it has become clear that the whole notion of values is huge. How to go about it is becoming more of an issue. Teachers will need considerable PD and will need to feel confident in their ability to manage values education without bias. There is great variation in the opinions and points of view even among the leaders in the field. This is, to say the least, confusing and will necessitate spending time to think through what would be the best approach.

What the project leaders started to see, though, as they worked this problem through, is that they actually were involved in a form of values education within their school communities as they began, in their own words, ‘to enquire and seek a truthful and accurate understanding of what the values were in our lives, as we functioned as real people in real contexts’.

Having tackled this for some months, a ‘dragon’ then entered the den in the form of a visiting British academic, theologian and author with a high profile in values education in the United Kingdom. His extended work with cluster schools challenged them to see that values education is as much as anything else about ‘engaging young people in passionate, relevant and rigorous debate about the deeper questions confronting their lives and their world, and providing them with the intellectual tools to be able to confidently participate in this process’.

The visit set them ‘on fire again’, with each of the schools committing to

… values education that goes far beyond a simplistic or superficial approach … values education that was concerned not only with developing cognitive understandings of what the values might look like, feel like and sound like in lived contexts, but also with educating our students, P–12, to think well and to ask important questions.

The new challenge the cluster effectively set itself was to answer the three ‘enquiry questions’:

• What are the intellectual tools our students need so that they can explore their own and others’ thinking and values?
• What will we have to do in our schools in order to provide the spaces for this to happen?
• What does it mean to live a fulfilled human life?

Each of the schools sought its own answers in a place that made sense to them. Three of them, for example, decided to investigate such whole school responses as

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Philosophy in the Classroom, the Mindfulness Project and Action Research for Children. Two others gathered their Values Teams and additional community members to develop their mission statements to reflect their changing understanding of values education and the challenges it presents. Two others opted to work with staff to tease out how this broader vision of values education would impact on the content and delivery of the local curriculum, and the final school linked this thinking to its existing whole school work.

Throughout, the schools continued to work on developing their strategic plans which, for the most part, required some careful auditing to start off what actually was happening in values education ‘right now’, and the subsequent articulation of how it could be done more explicitly in future. In addition, several cluster schools also began taking a closer look at the mandated curriculum at each year level, as exemplified by one:

We completed an audit of our day to day work addressing the nine agreed values. The point was not to identify where explicit teaching of the values was occurring now, but rather to realise how values were implicitly embedded in the material we were covering with our students; eg Year 6 unit on Antarctica, where the teacher identified the value Doing Your Best was exemplified by the courageous undertakings of the early explorers. Staff then discussed how they would make this value explicit by involving their students in the discovery of what the value looks like, sounds like and feels like in this context. They then went on to discuss how they would help students to understand how their taking on this value would assist them to lead a fulfilled human life.

The flames of the fire were, to use the cluster’s terminology, really ‘fanned’ when representatives attended the first state values conference where they were ‘inspired, challenged and in some instances wary of the approach taken by other schools’. Above all, though, they received a range of ideas for further pursuing values education in the cluster and became convinced that values education ultimately is about engaging:

- the head – cognitive understanding and intellectual analysis/critiquing of values and espoused value positions (Think);
- the heart – being motivated and desiring to adopt the values (Desire);
- the hand – the necessity to engage in opportunities to practise and demonstrate espoused values (Act).

This helped them to better understand there are many ways of ‘doing’ values education and that their school communities already were doing quality values work when they engaged in ‘the demanding process of looking more closely at our schools and actively and consciously questioning the fit between our espoused values and our lived values’.

The cluster schools became even more convinced they needed to ‘protect the flame’, to continue their metaphor, by continuing to address their three key questions and
involve the adults in their communities in answering these. A wide range of activities was undertaken for this to be achieved. These included the use of newsletter articles, web pages, discussion groups and small forums, surveys, PowerPoint® presentations, staff meetings, curriculum planning sessions, flyers, school billboard messages, raps, emails, informal conversations, sourcing local support, feedback sheets, assembly presentations, role-plays, students’ public art, songs, special whole school learning experiences, posters, think tanks, and really anything that would keep communities talking and thinking about ‘their core values, the nine Values for Australian Schooling and how living out of them impacted on the quality of our individual and collective lives’.

As this work unfolded in the schools, the project leaders and initiators found a ‘growing enthusiasm’ among teachers and parents, as what had started as a ‘top-down’ process began to also include something of a ‘bottom-up push’. On the other side of the ledger, however, they also found they were overwhelmed to some extent by:

- the time involved in our commitment to adopt a whole school approach;
- the apathy and/or antagonism of a number of adults who saw values education as an additional responsibility and a direct infringement on the concept that state education was meant to be secular, compulsory and free;
- the sheer volume of strategies and approaches that were available in the marketplace and our need to be discerning in how we might engage with this material.

As one of the leadership team cogently observed, ‘we have put values education on the front page, but we are a long way from all being on the same page’.

What really ‘ignited’ their minds at this juncture in the process was the major professional development input they gained, and then were able to arrange for their cluster, from a Resiliency and Reality workshop which taught that ‘clear seeing of reality requires both intellectual skill and moral awareness’, and hence their task as educators is ‘to engage ourselves and our students in the art of good map-making’.

Good map-making, they were advised, involves:
- asking appropriate questions;
- drawing useful and accurate distinctions;
- investigating assumptions;
- looking for significant consequences;
- exploring possibilities;
- seeking alternatives;
- giving and seeking reasons;
- making considered judgements;
- clarifying meaning.

This in turn requires:

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• an ability to see and admit to mistakes;
• a willingness to correct yourself;
• caring more about truth than being ‘right’;
• being able to ‘sit with discomfort’;
• an awareness of when personal preferences or emotions are getting in the way of true and accurate seeing;
• that opinion and dogmatic assertion are held up to scrutiny.

The hearts of staff were then ignited to use these intellectual tools by school-based professional development on ‘how to work with people who are not like you’. This helped them to understand that ‘values education is about the construction of a caring and compassionate reality and that there were essential habits of mind that would help us to live this reality’.

The challenge before the cluster increasingly was crystallising around the notion of ‘creating communities of truth’ where values educators help children to ‘dedicate themselves to mapping reality’ as well as they possibly can.

Certainly the range of professional development undertaken to spark people’s hearts and minds had a profound impact on many, with teachers noting in feedback that:

- I have learnt the necessity of asking questions that evoke students’ deep thinking, and I value the need to create interpersonal intimacy and trust within my classroom, so that it is a truth-seeking community.
- I have been encouraged to put more time into listening to the children’s responses and feelings about topics and experiences, so that they can more easily process their world.

For all of this the project is, the cluster acknowledges, still in ‘very early days’, though they are committed to staying the course, and further major professional development to keep the momentum going already has been arranged. This is not to suggest, however, that they have not already come a long way. As the cluster itself observes in reflecting on its experience:

We set out to raise awareness about values education for the adults in our school communities. Our most celebrated product is that we do have an enhanced and expanded understanding of ourselves, values education and how we can best support our students to live fulfilled human lives. For the majority in our school communities, it is no longer business as usual.

This does not mean, of course, that all 400 teachers in the cluster community are thinking the same way. There still are, for instance, some who indicate they are ‘more comfortable with a simple approach’, and hence are seeking formal programmes they can follow ‘where they can “do” honesty one week and fair go the next’. The cluster believes, however, that if it continues to provide opportunities to reflect and
learn, as it has to date, it in time will see these people become ‘willing to engage more deeply and implement values as “central” to the task of teaching and learning’.

More common, though, as a result of the process pursued, is the sort of feedback provided by the teacher who wrote:

I now see the need, when I am discussing ideas with children, not just to draw on the children’s experience, but rather to extend their understanding of reality. I have a responsibility to provide time and experiences for children to wonder. We need to wonder ourselves. This will help us to understand and improve relationships with others – our children and our colleagues.

Little wonder, perhaps, the cluster now is able to conclude on reflection, that

… undertaking a school audit/scan is one of the most powerful, constructive and informative processes that a school can undertake. No teaching in values is neutral and the audit made us consciously aware of where we were doing values education well and where we were doing it poorly. They also helped us to build on from the good things we were already doing.
Key messages

1. Implementing a planned, systematic approach to values education begins with a dialogue about what values are and what values education means in your school community.

2. School staff need first to explore, probe, debate and develop their own understanding of values education before they can identify what their school needs to provide for students in this domain.

3. Audits are powerful tools to assess what implicit values education is taking place at the school; what the school is doing well and what the school needs to do better. Build on what you already are doing well.

4. Values education can lead to changed professional practice in classrooms and, in particular, in the way teachers relate to and communicate with their students.

5. Not all staff come on board easily, and not all staff will embrace the necessity of something more than simple quick-fix values programmes. Real movement in staff thinking and action comes after professional development in values education and the sharing of different opinions, perspectives and ideas.

6. Real progress comes through taking incremental steps, being flexible and being prepared to go where the work takes you, rather than pushing a preconceived schedule or agenda.