Connecting to the community

Engaging the school community in values education and the development of young people as productive citizens and contributors to society was pursued by five clusters of schools.

Using place to develop citizenship

The Children and Place Mapping Group Cluster (WA) was designed to draw out students’ ideas about what nourishes or sustains them in their local places, and what it is they care for and would take action about.

Children and Place Mapping Group Cluster, Western Australia
Cluster coordinator: Kathryn Netherwood, Lance Holt School
Participating schools:
- Kerry Street Community School
- Lance Holt School
- Moerlina School
- Nyindamura Family School of Creativity
- Strelley Community School

UAN critical friend: Professor Barry Down, Murdoch University, WA

The five schools comprising the Children and Place Mapping Group Cluster may be geographically dispersed from the Pilbara to Perth and beyond, with all the structural and compositional differences that ensue, but they are held together by the common history of being established as small, community-based, independent schools. All, as the schools themselves explain, were established in the early 1970s and 1980s

as a consequence of families and communities seeing the need to have education sit on a series of core values such as social justice and responsibility, the rights of children to respect, care and quality education, the importance of nourishment, creativity, wonderment, and nurturing, the need for students to learn to participate actively in planning for their future, the importance of family and community involvement and stewardship of country or ecology.
In addition, they all had a strong history of parent involvement and active family presence and participation in everyday learning at school, as well as working with a range of local individuals and groups such as Indigenous elders and organisations, academics, artists, businesses, special consultants and other community members.

The Children and Place Mapping Project was designed in this context to draw out students’ ideas about ‘what nourishes or sustains them in their local places, and what it is they care for’. This is achieved through a series of exercises that involve students in mapping the various uses of places that have meaning to them, after first having explored the values they and their school community hold dear in relation to their local areas. It is an approach premised on the view that ‘this kind of work is best carried out when students participate in activities that have them 1) getting out and into their local places, 2) doing this with others in their community, 3) sharing stories with elders and others, 4) animated and exercising their creative talents, and 5) involved in inquiry-based discovery learning’.

Sitting behind the whole project, and in fact the formation of the cluster in the first place, was a desire for students from different schools to share and compare their values and experiences:

The Children and Place Mapping Project occurred because a number of schools wanted to extend children’s understanding, appreciation and practice of caring for their country or place. Those involved were keen to see schools from different places and with different students come together to exchange experiences and work out how we sustain, share and connect to our places. It represented a chance for children to think about and share their values in this regard, drawing on various devices such as field visits, mapping, language and literacy, writing, arts practice and multimedia.

Each of the schools adopted a common process in this context involving the use of a base, and then four overlay maps which the cluster detailed in the following terms:

Together with the children, teachers chose a base map of the local area. A range of different maps were used. The base map was either an aerial photograph, topographic map, street map, pictures, children’s paintings, other novel pieces of art work, or a traditional painting of an area. Indeed, throughout the course of the project, many different forms of ‘maps’ emerged … The classes that used the overlay maps represented four dimensions of sustainability: ecological, social, economic and cultural values.

To help children better connect the mapping exercise to the actual areas under investigation (areas that had already been established as familiar and important to
them), classes visited the place again, walking, riding, sitting and carefully reminding
themselves of their experience …

The next stage of the process involved the four clear transparencies being placed
on top of the base map one at a time. The class was then asked to use markers to note
areas of significance in relation to one of the dimensions of sustainability (ecological,
social, economic or cultural). In other words, the class was asked to concentrate on
one dimension of sustainability at a time, thinking about the ecological, social,
economic and cultural places of importance for them. For example, the cultural layer
could include: Indigenous sites and heritage, market places, theatres, art galleries,
town squares, parks, bush land, cafes. The social layer could include: hospitals,
libraries, market places, parks, police station, cafes, clubs, pubs. The economic layer
could include: malls, port, art galleries, farms, tourist sites, market places. The
ecological layer could include: beaches, sea, parks, bush land, farms, night sky.

This stage was critical in maximising children’s participation in leading the
identification of how they value their local area. However, in addition, children were
asked to think about how others value these places, comparing and contrasting what
they knew about others with their own ideas. Invaluable at this point was the role of
parents, Indigenous friends of the schools and the children’s research and discussions
in ‘adding’ to children’s values about place.

Next the four overlays were placed over each other helping students identify ‘hot-
spots’ or extra-special places for them. In other words, the places featuring in two or
more overlay maps offer an indication of the likely importance of places to students.
When the plastic overlays were all laid on top of the base map, the children began to
see that there are some sites of very special significance, where many cultural, social,
economic and ecological values come together. For example, particular parks, a town
beach or a market place. They began to appreciate that, although a place may have
separate cultural, social, economic and ecological layers, in practice these sometimes
interact and combine. Alternatively, they noticed that sometimes this does not happen
and the various layers do not interact as much as they should.

Finally, a composite map was produced by children to help articulate or give
public expression to how they thought about these special places. Many of these maps
included photos, drawings, paintings, poems and stories, all stuck onto the map.

In some cases, digital representations of the map were prepared using the Image
Mapping facility on a web-page making programme. This made it possible to use these
maps as a means to make further connections to other work carried out during the
Values Education Project and allow people using the website to click on a map and
access information, stories, pictures and other products.¹

For many of the teachers involved, though, this mapping exercise only constituted
the start of working out how to further engage students in exploring their

¹ Many samples from the schools involved can be found on the cluster website at
http://www.kidsplacemaps.wa.edu.au

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
© Commonwealth of Australia, 2006
relationship to place. To help build further depth to the experience, teachers adopted a range of other strategies including:

- collecting oral history and interviews with significant people;
- inviting Indigenous people to host excursions, storytelling and language work;
- working with ecologists in the detailed study of special places;
- producing art such as a tableau or silk land/sky/water scape; and
- social action activities such as a letter writing campaign to the local council and painting public facilities.

An indication of how the project grew into bigger things can be found in one school’s outline of how ‘we set out to build a habitat and ended up building an ecosystem’.

After the school went through the mapping process outlined above, it started thinking about ‘our needs in relation to sustainability’ and identified a number of ‘key missions’ including to:

- control and possibly eradicate watsonia weed in the school grounds;
- use lunch scraps for a worm farm for the school gardens and possible marketing;
- create more connection with other schools;
- build a frog habitat.

Through such projects the school has, it explains, ‘become part of this wider “ecosystem” of sustainability values education’. This not only has seen the school develop closer relationships with a number of individuals and organisations of relevance in the community, but consciously engaging students in a series of practical tasks of great interest to them, such as:

- bushwalking led by a teacher with expertise in this regard;
- feeding worms;
- ringing up about costs of hall hire;
- asking parents in professional bands if they would perform for free;
- designing the frog habitat;
- performing at the Burning of the Vines (an annual event).

These activities ‘worked well because they all demanded that the kids get actively involved in doing things, hence empowering them.’ In particular, this school believes, ‘they saw that they could be active agents instead of passive victims, independent and able to achieve things’.

The whole approach provided a platform from which students could develop other skills, as the experience of another cluster school using the mapping strategy makes clear:
Students ... also began by looking at the four layers of sustainability ... They also looked at how life in ... [our] community is different from living in other communities. For example, they explored their distance from others and how they have to drive for a couple of hours just to get to Port Hedland.

The children also took video footage of areas around the school that are important to them. They operated the cameras and filmed each other talking about places that are important to them. As they grew in confidence they started to ask the questions of each other without prompting.

According to teachers, the filming worked particularly well, in part because it is such a hands-on activity. It gave the older kids the responsibility of taking on the footage. As [the teacher] said, ‘They weren’t just able to learn about their community, they were also able to learn about some new technology as well and just being able to take charge of it themselves gave them ownership of the project’.

In a somewhat similar vein, but in the city rather than a remote, rural area, children, teachers and a number of parents had the chance to work with a professional artist on a beach tableau as a result of their mapping work:

The Tableau was a huge school project working with an artist to create a clay and cardboard model of the Bathers Beach area, a very important part of our world adjacent to the school. Over a period of weeks, every child researched a particular animal, plant, historical period, person, architecture or marine vessel to create a piece of the tableau. With help from parents and some very committed staff, the tableau took its beautiful shape and culminated in an opening and show at a local gallery. The scope and depth of the project was not lost on people who were amazed at the host of learning opportunities and curriculum areas that the project covered – mapping, measuring, building, geometry, spatial observations, numeracy, literacy and research skills.

Throughout the whole process in each school, however, teachers were clear to always keep the link to values education and the national values in mind. This particularly is evident in the experience of one teacher of pre-primary/Year 1 students in one of the cluster schools:

My class group consists of 24 students aged from 5 to 7. Our class undertakes a lot of inquiry learning projects where we use our school community, the wider community and the local environment to investigate and explore concepts and understandings ...

Initially I found the given topic of Sustainability a difficult one for myself as an adult, and more so as a teacher of young children. My understanding of sustainability was expanded through the PD given at the beginning of the project, and through further reading. The concept of how to use this topic with a group of young children was more difficult to visualise especially with an end point given a map showing sustainability hot spots. I decided to focus on the question, ‘What makes a special place?’ and investigate this with the class in the context of their community.
... although it took many twists and turns, it was this central question I kept coming back to ... We started the project with ‘What places are special to you?’ The children began by identifying places such as their homes, bedrooms or grandparents’ places of importance. We then interviewed a number of people to find out what places were special to them …

Excursions … became a regular feature of this project. Lots of different activities were undertaken on the excursion and back at school … We talked about respect and responsibility in the context of the place – eg being respectful at the war memorial, picking up rubbish at the beach and pulling out weeds …

I was constantly mindful that this was a values project. Many times our project would drift into being a mapping project with no values apparent. Constantly revisiting the values that this project was based on kept me focused and helped us get back on track. The main values we focused on were Respect and Responsibility. We looked at how we can care for places in our community, why they are important to us, why we have a responsibility to care for these places. Values clarification activities and small group discussions helped us keep the link to values alive. Most of our work on values was embedded within the project rather than stand alone lessons where we looked at a value in isolation. By keeping the key values in mind, questions, discussions and activities had a values slant to them.

Though there is no single ingredient the schools can identify for the obvious success of the project, there are a number of reasons why they feel they achieved so much. Central to these is the relevance they attach to the sustainability theme and ‘the value of nourishing and being nourished by important local places’. As one of the teachers involved simply put it, ‘Focusing on places that are important to children helps them “ground” learning about values’.

Another ingredient perhaps growing out of the first was the central place Indigenous people and their involvement played. ‘Providing opportunities for Indigenous people and values to be respected both made children’s work wonderfully interesting to them, and offered many clear examples of how children could see the world in a different way.’

Perhaps of equal importance, since the mix of ingredients rather than their ranking is what really matters most, is the fact it was premised on ‘giving children a voice and listening to what they say and how they say it’. Underscoring it all was the ‘generative approach to values’ the schools chose to adopt, whereby students were encouraged and supported to consider their own sets of values and compare these to how others ‘sustain places that are dear to them’. As the cluster’s final report explains:

This meant that children were encouraged to start with an exploration of their own values, to learn how to extend their repertoire and capacity to publicly articulate their ideas. This not only modelled respect of children, it also provided the means through
which children could compare and contrast their ideas with how others conceptualise values. Important in relation to the national values education process was that this provided students with the platform around which they could explore the four national values of Care and Compassion, Respect, Responsibility, and Understanding, Tolerance and Inclusion.

Other factors that then proved important for the cluster’s success were:

- the basic mapping framework they all used for starting their work with students and associated professional development hosted by the lead school;
- the previous experience teachers in the schools had in what is now called values education;
- the sharing that occurred as a result of working together as a cluster group;
- the high degree of community involvement they were able to gain, as evidenced by one school’s acknowledgement of ‘many people’s willingness to spend the time and effort required … students, parents, teachers, administrators and those outside our school who gave their time and expertise’.

Key messages

1. Engaging students in community-based action enhances their understanding of core values espoused by the school and empowers them to take increased responsibility for their own environment.

2. Using an inquiry-based learning process is enhanced when it centres on questions of substance with values at their heart.

3. Values education requires teachers and schools to give students a voice, listen to what they say and the way in which they say it, and encourage them to explore their own values and their relationship to the nine Values for Australian Schooling.