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

Something worthwhile to teach

The following project specifically focused on embedding values in the school curriculum and/or connecting to broader systemic curriculum frameworks that apply.

Philosophy in the classroom

The Gold Coast North Cluster (Qld) built on earlier work in cluster schools to embed philosophy in the classroom, to enable students to exercise judgement and responsibility in matters of morality, ethics and social justice, and make rational and informed decisions about their lives.

Gold Coast North Cluster, Queensland
Cluster coordinator: Gayle Alessio, Oxenford State School
Participating schools:
- Bellevue Park State School
- Oxenford State School
- Southport State High School
- Upper Coomera State College
UAN critical friend: Dr Mark Freakley, Griffith University, Queensland

The four schools that comprise the Gold Coast North Cluster sought to build on prior work to engage with various explorations of philosophical and ethical dimensions of the curriculum to connect more clearly to the National Framework and, to use their own words, create

... a school ethos where students have the capacity to exercise judgement and responsibility in matters of morality, ethics and social justice, and the capacity to make rational and informed decisions about their lives ...

Philosophy in the classroom was the vehicle through which this was to be achieved; with philosophy meaning more than just the teaching of thinking skills with which it commonly is confused.
Philosophy is often described as a thinking skills programme or a course in critical and creative thinking. While it is true that philosophy for children does improve students’ critical and creative thinking skills, calling it a ‘thinking skills’ programme does not do it justice. It does much more as well. Through implementing Philosophy in our respective school sites we aim to build on the students’ own wonder and curiosity about ideas that are important to them. The subject matter of Philosophy is those common, central and contestable concepts that underpin both our experience of human life and all academic disciplines. Examples of such concepts relate directly to the nine values identified in the National Framework. The central pedagogical tool and guiding ideal of Philosophy is the community of inquiry. In the community of inquiry, students work together to generate and then answer their own questions about the philosophical issues contained in purpose written materials or a wide range of other resources. Thinking in the community of inquiry is critical, creative, collaborative and caring.

Although the cluster’s original intention was the somewhat ambitious implementation of Philosophy across the board with substantial community engagement along the way, subsequent reflection revealed that a more realistic and sustainable objective was to really focus on building teachers’ skills. ‘If teachers are not comfortable or willing to engage in philosophical discussion with students, then it won’t happen.’

One question the schools did confront at the start, in this context, was whether or not to ‘mandate’ a whole school approach; with the answer really depending on the state of development of the particular school. One school, for example, believed that although

… we would encounter ‘troubling realities’ as staff struggled to ‘fit’ what they perceived to be ‘another’ thing into an already crowded curriculum, the ‘culture’ was ready for whole school implementation. Strategically, our ‘management team’ could see the ‘links’ and recognised the ‘exciting possibilities’ in adopting a whole school approach. Project funding enabled us to fully support whole school implementation through an extensive focus on professional development and support.

This school, as a consequence, mandated training for all staff and that two Philosophy lessons be included in the curriculum each week.

Two others, by contrast, found it ‘more problematic’ to implement a whole school approach, and instead focused on supporting interested staff in the hope that ‘the critical mass would grow’.

This did not, however, preclude the cluster from implementing a substantial array of shared activities so their common purpose could be achieved, including:

- reviewing school values and purpose statements with staff and parents, and considering how they aligned to the national set;
• distributing the National Framework and discussion with staff, students and parents through their various organisational structures;
• holding school and cluster network meetings to share ideas and provide mutual motivation and support;
• reviewing school structures and policies to identify ways in which they explicitly could and/or implicitly do promote student knowledge and understanding of values;
• implementing organisational changes that further develop and recognise the skills/dispositions and behaviours of students enacting positive values, such as one school’s V9 Vouchers, where students are awarded certificates in the classroom or playground that have the nine values on them with the one(s) they demonstrated ringed by the teacher and used as the basis of discussion with the student.

Classroom activity of course is right at the heart of the project for all of the schools, with philosophy lessons used to engage students in discussion of values through the ‘community of inquiry’ approach. In the community of inquiry, the cluster explains, students

… sit in a circle, learn to respect, listen to and understand a diverse range of views. The process of philosophical exploration in this environment encourages students to take increased responsibility for their own learning processes and to develop as independent and self-correcting learners. Students develop the confidence and intellectual courage to put forward their own views in a group. Participation in the community of inquiry develops higher order thinking skills in the context of meaningful discussion. Philosophy achieves these aims by giving students the opportunity to think for themselves about ideas and concepts that they themselves select as the ones which are interesting and worthwhile pursuing.

Examples might be: How should we treat our friends? Should we always think for ourselves? What does giving someone a ‘fair go’ mean?

A typical session consists of a group reading of a source text, followed by the gathering of students’ questions that have been stimulated by the reading. These questions form the agenda for discussion. Each reading usually generates enough questions for several subsequent discussions in the community of inquiry. The students’ collaborative inquiry can be facilitated by the use of appropriate discussion plans and exercises, which function to maintain focus and encourage depth of discussion. Purpose-written texts are just one possible source material. Other written material, images and recordings can also stimulate philosophical inquiry.

Discussion in these lessons is not just a process of swapping opinions but, according to the cluster,

is aimed at the construction of the best answer to the questions raised. This best answer is not provided or validated by the teacher. Instead, the class has the responsibility for
both constructing and evaluating the range of possible responses to a question. Philosophy is not based on the assumption that there are no right or wrong answers. Instead, it is based on the belief that, even if final answers are difficult to come by, some answers can reasonably be judged better – more defensible – than others. Philosophy emphasises a conversation and dialogue based process of inquiry. As all students share their own ideas so each individual must consider many different perspectives. Many students have the experience of seeing that what they thought was obvious is not obvious to people who have different perspectives. This has encouraged tolerance of others’ ideas, and increased students’ ability to work together.

As one teacher involved simply stated, ‘It taught me to think deeper into subjects, and I encourage students to do so too’. And some of the flavour of how this might be achieved can be gained from the following outline (Table 5) one school prepared of how concept development and thinking skills can be developed through communities of inquiry from Years 1–7.
**Table 5: Concept development – Thinking skills**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year level</th>
<th>Teaching sequence for inquiry skills</th>
<th>Thinking tools; concept development activities</th>
<th>Questioning techniques</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Year 1</td>
<td>• questions</td>
<td>Suggestions</td>
<td>• What is it that puzzles you?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• building on ideas of others</td>
<td>Reasons</td>
<td>• What did you find interesting?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• reasons</td>
<td>Agreement/disagreement</td>
<td>• Is someone puzzled by something in the story?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• giving examples</td>
<td>Examples – Bridge</td>
<td>• Why did you say that? What reasons do you have?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 2</td>
<td>• agendas</td>
<td>Borderline cases</td>
<td>• Why do you agree or disagree with …?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• seeking and giving clarification</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Have we some reason to think that …?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• connections</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Would that be a good reason for believing that …?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• explanations</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Does anyone have a different reason? Does anyone have a better reason?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 3</td>
<td>• different points of view</td>
<td></td>
<td>• How certain can we be that …?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• descriptions</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Is that like … said?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• definitions</td>
<td></td>
<td>• It sounds like you agree/disagree with …? Is that right?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• analogies</td>
<td></td>
<td>• alternative possibilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 4</td>
<td>• alternative possibilities</td>
<td>Question quadrant</td>
<td>• Can you think of a case or a time where that wouldn’t work?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• distinctions</td>
<td></td>
<td>• When wouldn’t that happen?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• conclusions</td>
<td>FVC – Fact, Value, Concept</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• evidence</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 5</td>
<td>Assumptions • counter examples • relevance</td>
<td>Agendas</td>
<td>Year 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------</td>
<td>---------------------------------</td>
<td>---------</td>
<td>--------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Counter examples – Crazy case</td>
<td>Criteria</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Generalisation</td>
<td>Discussion map</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Can anyone give me an example of that?
- How could you work out if that was true?
- How do you know?
- Why do you think that?
- How did you work that out? What have you based that on?
- What are we taking for granted here?
- What else might … be supposing? Is … right to make that assumption?
- How is that different from what … said?
- What can we work out from that?
- What does that tell us?
- What follows from what … just said?
- What do you suppose follows from that?
- How do you know?
- Why do you think that?
- How did you work that out? What have you based that on?
- What are we taking for granted here?
- What else might … be supposing? Is … right to make that assumption?
- Does that agree with what was said earlier?

All this depends, of course, on the existence of an appropriate set of protocols about how discussion in philosophy lessons will occur. That is why students in this school have been encouraged and supported to identify such key ground rules for their discussions as:

- We listen to each other – this means one person speaks at a time.
- We think about and build upon each other’s ideas.
- We make sure everyone has a chance to speak.
- We respect everyone’s ideas – this means we don’t use ‘put downs’ or make fun of what others say or do.
• We are helpful and constructive when challenging another’s viewpoint.
• We offer help and support when it is needed.
• We have a right to ‘pass’ if we do not want to speak on an issue.
• We show appreciation when someone explains or does something well, or is helpful in some way to you.
• We are prepared for a discussion – this means we need to ask questions and build upon others’ ideas.
• We need to give reasons to support our opinion.
• We will check assumptions, reasoning, evidence – our own as well as others.
• We will define and discuss points of difference as well as points of agreement.
• We will ask others for reasons, definitions, evidences, examples, assumptions if necessary.
• We will admit when we disagree with something that we may have thought earlier.
• We understand there may be no single right answer.

Such rules in turn are underpinned by a set of specific advice for teachers on conducting a community of inquiry in their class. More specifically, teachers are advised that developing a community of inquiry requires a classroom environment where students and the teacher:
• respect each other’s thoughts and feelings;
• support and trust each other in the exploration of thoughts, ideas and opinions;
• reflect upon the group dynamics and understandings developed through the discussions and activities;
• develop guidelines for the group.

This manifests itself in the sort of approach where a teacher might implement the following strategies:
1. Have students seated in a way that maximises the opportunity for communication and democratic behaviour. This usually is a circle.
2. Establish appropriate guidelines along the lines indicated above.
3. Teach protocols – ‘I agree/disagree with … because…’.
4. Decide on their ‘trigger material’ such as texts, current events, concepts and students’ ideas.
5. Ask children what they found interesting or puzzling.
6. Gather children’s questions on the board, writing the name of the child who asked each one after the question.
7. Group questions that are the same or similar.
8. Discuss the questions in an order decided by a variety of methods, such as voting for the most interesting, or discussing those that have easy answers first.
9. Facilitate the use of ‘wait time’ during the discussion.
10. Encourage participants to talk to the whole circle or directly to the person they are answering, rather than always through the teacher.
11. Have students raise hands or use ‘talking cards’ to facilitate ‘taking turns’.
12. Participate in the discussion, but, as the teacher, also ‘hold back’ sometimes so as not to influence too much.
13. Facilitate questioning that signals cognitive moves that might encourage metacognition.
14. Encourage recognition in the community that many questions are complex and may never be answered.
15. Have children take responsibility for their comments and be prepared to defend, modify or change them as appropriate.

Although all students benefit from philosophy pursued in this way, it is interesting to note the cluster’s experience that

two groups of students find it especially appealing and useful. Most ‘gifted’ students find the chance to engage in philosophical exploration extremely stimulating. They respond especially well to the intellectual challenge of engaging with ideas that are common and central to our lives, but are ultimately contestable. Secondly, those students who seem to not perform well in the traditional school situation can respond very well to participation in the community of inquiry. Since participation is primarily oral, it is an excellent opportunity for students who have difficulties with reading and writing to have their say. Because the subject matter of philosophy includes questions that we all wonder about, students who have difficulty seeing the relevance of school subjects become interested in the ‘deep’ ideas explored in the community of inquiry. The atmosphere of care and safety generated in a community of inquiry provides a space in which less confident students can try out ideas with the guarantee that they will be listened to.

It all depends, of course, on the quality of teaching the students receive, which also forms a key component of ensuring the approach can be sustained over time. That is why, as indicated earlier, the cluster determined to focus much of its attention on developing the requisite teaching skills. Aside from the particular professional development and other training teachers received, a teacher network was established for the cluster as a whole which meets each term to share ideas. This, according to those involved, has been ‘a particular strength of this project and … is now extending beyond the project schools’. In addition, participating teachers were asked to complete a reflective learning log and mentoring programmes of support have been introduced.

Little wonder, then, that teachers who in some cases were taking on something new, observed, as one somewhat typically put it, ‘no-one felt alone and we all trusted each other so that we were able, and continue to be able, to have very open and honest discussions’.

The mentoring and opportunities to visit other classes in the schools to observe philosophy discussions proved particularly powerful, as is evident in the following sample of teacher comments on what they learned from the feedback they received:
The most valuable feedback point I received from my collegial coaching mentor is to slow down and not try to cover too much in one session. To take advantage of students’ responses and go with the flow and pick up on interesting statements to investigate further.

The most valuable feedback point I received from my collegial coaching mentor is to look for the unknown, grab hold of it, and just go with it. The unknown being a statement a child has come up with.

The most valuable feedback point I received from my collegial coaching mentor is not to over-plan and to listen carefully to each child’s response as we often miss important statements which we can build upon.

Learning was not restricted to teachers, however, and students also gained much as well. Philosophy lessons provided them, for instance, with opportunities to collaboratively explore and understand the national values, with many staff commenting on the positive impact this had. As the cluster report makes clear, the philosophical discussions in which they have engaged have seen students change attitudes and behaviours that extend through to other curriculum areas as well. As one teacher explained on the basis of their own experience, ‘Students are confidently giving reasons/justifying their statements and answers in class meetings and in Maths. There has been a huge improvement in showing respectful listening during class presentations, oral sharing and assemblies’. It is a case, as far as the cluster is concerned, where ‘the stone has been thrown into the pond and we are now seeing the ripples’.

Certainly in the reflections they have shared, staff across the schools have commented on the fact they have seen:

- improved listening skills;
- an ability to give reasons for their answers;
- higher order thinking such as justifications, distinctions, examples and counterexamples;
- making comparisons and using analogies;
- an ability to write more cohesively;
- a greater sense of class – ie ability to converse with each other;
- reflection on students’ own behaviour and that of others;
- increased confidence in presenting thoughts and understanding of concepts ‘to anyone at any place at any time’.

It is only further evidenced when even quite young students are saying such things as:

- I love Philosophy because it lets me see into other people’s minds.
- Philosophy is something that really lets you let go and just sit and think. It’s also really good for experimenting with your ability to think and debate with people. I love that. It’s something that is different from anything else you will ever do. You don’t experience the same thing in any other activity in life.
This sort of result is only expected to grow as changes in curriculum design and implementation in cluster schools become more marked. One school for instance is developing a learning framework incorporating resource sheets that will further embed values concepts in all of the key learning areas. Another includes in its curriculum plan several whole of school tasks that provide ‘a real life context in which to discuss Australian heritage and values’. One of these tasks related to Australian national identity required students to produce a school concert where they retold the history of Australia through movement, music and drama under the title Big Night Out.

At a somewhat more expansive level still, the lead school in the cluster which is, as a result of participating in the project, currently looking at amending its social skills programmes and affective reporting processes, has built values and philosophy directly into an arresting graphic (Figure 14) it uses to portray its vision of ‘happy, healthy, smart students and teachers’ as the object of its work.
This in turn is reflected in detailed tables the school has prepared where the nine Values for Australian Schooling are teased out in depth in terms of what they really
mean for the school; as indicated in the following sample (Table 6) for the values of Care and Compassion and Responsibility.

Table 6: Nine Values for Australian Schooling (extract)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Related need</th>
<th>Related virtue</th>
<th>Care and Compassion</th>
<th>Responsibility</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>‘Glasser – CT? RT? LM?’</td>
<td>‘The Virtues Guide’</td>
<td>Caring for self and others</td>
<td>Be accountable for one’s own actions, resolve differences in constructive, non-violent and peaceful ways, contribute to society and civic life, take care of the environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This means (as per the National Framework)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Kindness, Forgiveness, Helpfulness, Compassion, Caring</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This happens when

- I consider others’ ideas and feelings.
- I support others.
- I treat others as I wish to be treated.
- I help others.
- I treat things and people carefully.
- I look after others’ needs.
- I listen to others and try to understand how they are feeling.
- I forgive someone who has hurt me and give them another chance to be a friend without hurting them back.
- I do what I can if someone needs help.
- I do things for others without being asked.
- I notice when someone or something needs help.
- I am careful of my own and other people’s property.
- I take care of the environment.
- I contribute to the safety of myself and others.
- I take responsibility for my learning.
- I listen to others.
- I use my learning in different ways.
- I help others to learn.
- I allow others to learn.
- I don’t wait to be asked when I notice something needs to be done.
| Related skills ‘Focus forty’                                      | • Listening
  • Sharing
  • Helping
  • ‘I’m sorry, how can I make it better?’
  • Communicating without words
  • Reflective listening | • Hands up
  • Waiting inside
  • Tidying up
  • Lining up
  • Appropriate noise levels
  • Rights and responsibilities |
|---------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------|
| Related stories or community of inquiry discussions ‘Philosophy in the classroom’ | • Best Friends for Frances, by Russell and Lillian Hoban
  • Books into Ideas, p 71 | Bizzy Road – Thinking Stories 3, Teacher Reference, p 42 |

Hardly surprising in this sort of environment that this school, and in fact the cluster as a whole, should find that although it first saw the benefits of the project as purely related to implementing its philosophy programme, as their ‘journey’ progressed

… we found we were placing values at the centre of our work … Most remarkably we found through implementation of a ‘community of inquiry’, everyone became engaged in the circle of learning. Everyone in the classroom exchange, teachers and students alike, became more conscious of trying to be respectful, trying to do their best, and trying to give others a fair go. We also found that by creating an environment where these values were constantly shaping classroom activity, student learning was improving, teachers and students were happier, and school was calmer.

**Key messages**

1. Philosophy in the classroom can be used to develop and implement a learning framework where philosophical classroom discussions are used to promote the nine Values for Australian Schooling.

2. Values education and philosophy can engage students in a search for meaning, and help them find ways to connect their own ideas and perspectives with those of others so they may build a coherent understanding of the world and their experience of it.

3. Some of the ‘shining stars’ in philosophical values discussions are students who often exhibit inappropriate behaviours or those who don’t always shine in the traditional academic areas.

4. Teachers need to be skilled in the use of such teaching and learning strategies as Philosophy in the classroom. If teachers are not comfortable or willing to engage in philosophical discussion with students then it won’t happen.
5. Not all staff embrace new initiatives with the same vigour as others and some will continue to focus on the negatives of any new project. However, persistent support and collegial coaching can help turn this around and lead to some at least having a go in the interests of improved student outcomes.

6. Providing opportunities for teachers to engage in professional learning, discussion, support and reflection is a key component to success and sustained good practice.

7. Use existing parent forums within the school to further consult parents, caregivers and families on the values to be fostered and approaches to be adopted within schools.

8. Schools ought not be disheartened if they need to vary their expectations along the way or if they need to reshape their original intentions and goals. This particularly is the case given the relatively short timeline for this good practice project noted by a number of clusters and schools.