The Values Education Good Practice Schools Project – Stage 1

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.

Common values for improving student behaviour

The Noarlunga Centre Cluster (SA) explored how to embed values within the schools’ practices as a means of aligning the values the schools espouse, restorative practices and social skills education to increase student empowerment and the application of these values to everyday behaviour and relationships.

Noarlunga Centre Cluster, South Australia
Cluster coordinator: Yannoula Michael, Hackham West Primary School
Participating schools:
- Christies Beach Primary School
- Christie Downs Primary School
- Christie Downs Special School
- Hackham South Primary School
- Hackham West Primary School
- Port Noarlunga Primary School

UAN critical friend: Professor Colin MacMullin, Flinders University, SA

The six schools in the Noarlunga Centre Cluster have sought to focus on ‘taking innovative and socially inclusive approaches to the management of students, particularly those identified with extremely challenging behaviours’. This in turn has seen them ‘exploring the embedding of values within our schools’ curriculum and practices’ as a means of aligning the values the schools espouse, restorative practices and social skills education ‘to increase student empowerment, support students to
effectively apply their understanding of values in their everyday interactions with others, in their development of respectful relationships and in their decision making and behaviour learning’.

The schools within this context specifically have sought to:
• embed values throughout the school and cluster policies and procedures;
• develop and implement common values language to be used by teachers, administrators, leaders, students, parents and the community;
• formalise restorative practices within the schools as a means of incorporating values into the problem solving that occurs in classes, the schoolyard and beyond.

All of this has been underpinned by training for staff in each school in Restorative Practices in our Schools Modules, and training for members of the governing council of each of the schools as well.

To give focus and substance to the work, each school pursued a defined action research question, which they developed in consultation with their UAN associate at an action research workshop he conducted on their behalf. Specific questions addressed by the schools were:
• How can we strengthen trust and respect in our school community using restorative practices?
• How can we improve harmony in the school community?
• How can our values education/restorative practices programme influence students to take greater responsibility for their actions?
• How can we help students to be more respectful and caring of themselves and others in the playground?
• How can we build capacity in our students to become more resilient, to be reciprocal and manage impulsivity?

Typical of the approach used by schools to then answer the question it had posed is the process used by one that involved:
• staff meeting activities and items to raise awareness of the National Framework;
• beginning to use the language associated with values across the school when reinforcing appropriate behaviour or solving problems;
• sharing information with parents and caregivers;
• publication and distribution of parent/caregiver leaflets that provide an overview of the school’s Behaviour Learning Policy, which includes the new school values;
• purchase of relevant resources to support staff to embed values education into the curriculum and the school’s pedagogy, while also acknowledging the diversity of approaches staff will adopt.

As a result this school has already reviewed its values as a whole school community and aligned them to the Values for Australian Schooling which, together with the implementation of restorative practices in the school, has seen:

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• students, parents, caregivers and staff learning to deal with problems in a restorative manner;
• students having a more positive attitude to school;
• students’ needs more readily being identified and addressed;
• students becoming more aware of the impact of their behaviour on themselves and others;
• students more readily acknowledging the feelings and thoughts associated with their behaviours;
• increased instances of behaviour issues being resolved in positive ways and/or improved interactions with others;
• easier and quicker interventions to resolve issues of concern;
• students being guided to develop responsibility for their own behaviour in a safe and supportive learning environment.

In another school, these sorts of positive outcomes from the process are clearly expressed in the following vignette. It not only demonstrates how restorative practices enabled the school to respond positively to its action research question focused on strengthening trust and respect, but also the way in which it consciously involved the staff:

Three senior students had stolen a skate board from a secured area at school, modified it and returned to school with it the next day claiming it belonged to one of them. A teacher noticed significant original features and the boys subsequently admitted stealing it. The school’s behaviour policy was invoked and the students were internally suspended from their classes. During their suspension they worked away from their peers. Two critical factors became obvious. Firstly, the three boys gained ‘hero’ status among some of their peers because of the suspension, and secondly, other students were aware of what they had done, but saw no reason to report it regardless of the impact on the original owner.

The boys were counselled individually and as a group, using Restorative Justice procedures. The impact on the victim was a priority in these discussions. Among a number of issues discussed, it was decided trust would be a focus of our discussions with the students; what trust meant, looked like and felt like, and how to rebuild trust with their teachers and with their peers. The students’ parents were now part of the Restorative Procedures and were consulted about the process and our aims. This led to a meeting with each of the student’s class teachers, where they talked about their feelings over the issue of stealing and being isolated from their peers. After working with their teachers they then, with their teachers’ support, addressed their class, again expressing their thoughts about what they had done, each openly acknowledging the guilt they had felt and that the punishment only further shamed them. All three confronted peers who were very receptive and mature about the process because this public asking of forgiveness had not happened before.

Because this process was completed with the utmost sensitivity by the staff involved, the three students felt that they had asked for forgiveness and had set about re-establishing/rebuilding trust with their teachers and peers and that, to them, it was not a
public shaming exercise. ‘I thought I’d feel bad talking to the whole class, but they made me feel okay’ – one of the boys.

The cohort of students were also spoken to prior to the students returning to their classes. Here the issue of hero worship was addressed as well as the moral obligation of reporting stolen items, etc. The teachers conducting this ensured it did not become a ‘top down’ address, but one that empowered and encouraged student involvement, questions, feedback and comment. In this activity, the language surrounding our school values and what the values mean and look like was reinforced.

All staff were involved in the procedures around the incident, in a formal staff meeting, how the incident unfolded and the important steps taken along the way. Teachers involved reported on the process and the impact the process and the outcomes had on the students involved and the senior student cohort … The boys’ behaviour has since improved, resulting in fewer referrals for behaviour.

Having adopted this sort of approach to using values to improve behaviour in the schools, some now also are taking the values into the classroom in more concerted ways such as:

- the school that integrated the nine national values to its own set of four (Respect, Care, Cooperation and Success) as a prelude to using this with classes as a means of progressively developing a ‘common values language’;
- the school where an Aboriginal artist worked with all classes to explore and illustrate its agreed values culminating in the production of six large murals owned by the school community;
- the school where each class worked on one of its agreed values prior to a Values Celebration evening where all students were involved in performing either a song or poem reflecting their work.

Taking it even a stage further still, one of the participating cluster schools has also been implementing the Virtues Programme across the school. Using tools provided, students decide which virtues are most in need of attention and the activities they feel would reinforce this virtue. A new virtue is announced each fortnight by the students at the whole school assembly, using role-plays, poems or riddles, and whole school poster competitions and awards/certificates are used to reinforce the concept and deeper understanding throughout the school.

This school has developed individual folders for each of the virtues which contain an explanation of the virtue, quotes and lists of activities and websites that can be used. Quotes also are displayed in the front office and staffroom area that focus on such virtues (and in fact values) as Respect. To bring it all into alignment in the school, staff use the language of virtues in conjunction with restorative practices as they work through behaviour issues which may arise.

Overall, the project undertaken by the cluster reveals that values and restorative practices are closely related, which the schools have been endeavouring to explore. As one of the schools cogently explains:

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Restorative Practices have dovetailed neatly into values education. The culture of the school, particularly within the values of ‘caring’ and ‘respect’ has strengthened significantly. This is most evident from comments of enrolling parents and new students.

The social skills programme, introduced intensively in the first week of the school year, together with regular positive and public acknowledgment of students demonstrating the school values, has complemented the Restorative Practices.

There is scope for further implementation and improvement in values education and Restorative Practices. Not all teachers are confident in using Restorative Practices, but all staff do integrate values education into their teaching and learning programmes.

**Key messages**

1. Collaborative approaches generally are more successful in securing the involvement of all players in values education in schools. Programmes such as Restorative Justice cannot constitute values education in their own right, but they can help to provide focus for the collaborative efforts of the various stakeholders in the school.

2. The National Framework can encourage the bigger picture exploration of values by schools, in terms of their current practices and policies and such values-based programmes as Restorative Justice and Virtues which schools may choose to adopt.