The Values Education Good Practice Schools Project – Stage 2 cluster project synopses

The following has been extracted from *At the Heart of What We Do: Values Education at the Centre of Schooling – The Final Report of the Values Education Good Practice Schools Project – Stage 2, August 2008.*


**AIRDS–BRADBURY CLUSTER**
New South Wales

*My Happiness ... My Voice – Many Voices ... One Community*

**Cluster coordinator:** Carol Jones, Airds High School

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

**UAN critical friend:** Dr Leonie Arthur, University of Western Sydney, New South Wales

**Key messages**

1. Focusing on empowering students to determine for themselves what is right or wrong through planned values activities has had a positive impact on student engagement. In the words of one teacher in this project, ‘Kids are talking in a deep way about what is important to them.’

2. Teachers report transformed relationships with their students due to delivering values-based curriculum that engages students, links to their lived experiences and gives them more responsibility for their learning. This transformation is manifested as happier students who are cooperative and aware of themselves and others.

3. Safe and inclusive school environments can create pride in multiple cultures where parents and students feel a sense of belonging and participate more fully in the life of the school.

4. Carefully planned, targeted and sustained professional learning is vital to the success of the embedding of values education into teacher practice and curriculum content. Teachers need to be guided to understanding that values education is a whole of curriculum concept and not a one-off lesson attached to the core curriculum.
Building on their involvement in Stage 1 of the VEGPSP, the Airds–Bradbury Cluster, situated in New South Wales in the Campbelltown School Education Area, included a variety of community, whole school and classroom-based activities designed to use values education to address the influence of socioeconomic disadvantage on educational attainment. My Happiness … My Voice – Many Voices … One Community focused on improving the engagement and commitment of marginalised student groups – specifically Aboriginal and Pacific Islander students and students with disabilities – through a values-based approach to curriculum and school ethos. The project addressed what was perceived by many to be a lack of ‘social capital’ among the students, particularly those in the targeted marginalised groups.

The student population, comprising 56 different cultural groups, is transient and there is a mobility rate consistently around 30 per cent per annum. Historically, student absenteeism and retention have been significant issues. There are high rates of single parent families in the area and high numbers of families access the social security system. While the schools have worked hard to build social cohesion through inclusive curriculum and practices, some student groups within the cluster were not engaged and were therefore not participating in key aspects of schooling.

The project aimed to use a values education approach that welded the National Framework with existing NSW policies on Aboriginal education, cultural diversity, community relations, multicultural education, literacy, anti-racism, student welfare, and safe and ethical practice.

One of the drivers of the project was the strong connection between quality teaching and values education approaches that had emerged from Stage 1. The cluster teachers believed that values education was able to provide strategies for eliminating the gap between the success rates of marginalised student groups and the main student body. The project sought to encourage and acknowledge all student and family ‘voices’ to ensure an inclusive and safe learning environment, with broad engagement levels, beginning with the Indigenous community. Finally it sought to ensure an effective school reform agenda through strong community partnerships.

The project began with a range of professional learning activities. The Airds High School principal and deputy principal led a review of quality teaching documents that specifically explored pedagogy and assessment for targeted groups. The careers teacher and Aboriginal education officer conducted a professional learning workshop on Individual Education Programs – what they are and how they work. The principal at Airds convened a staff focus group to address the needs of Pacific Islander students. Approximately one-third of the staff attended. At other staff development days, Indigenous and Pacific Islander role models addressed the staff from across the cluster and spoke about key issues in the lives of different cultural groups. A sub-group of teachers undertook an analysis of how the cluster schools currently cater for these groups.

The UAN adviser noted that one of the results from the professional learning activities was increased staff knowledge and awareness of the difficult aspects of the lives of their students. This awareness fed subsequent changes in curriculum design and pedagogies:

The values project resulted in greater staff awareness of the issues faced by many Indigenous and Islander students and their families. The principal of one school commented that staff are ‘seeing students differently, and are developing different relationships with students and families’. This principal believed that the project brought to the fore the social disadvantages faced by many Aboriginal and Islander students and highlighted the importance of focusing on positive behaviours, inclusion and respect. Many staff are moving away from a deficit view of Indigenous and Islander families, where they are seen as a problem, to more of a strength-based view focused on [knowledge] and potentials. Teachers across the cluster schools are now generally more supportive of Indigenous and Islander students and are working on ways to effectively support these students. This includes student support groups, inclusion of Pacific Island and Indigenous culture across the curriculum, group rather than individual assignments, bush tucker gardens and so on.

In a further values-based initiative, the cluster consulted with various communities about the strengths and weaknesses of current school policies and practices that influenced student engagement and attendance. For example, a survey was conducted at the parent–community level to ascertain the degree of respect and
inclusion that different cultural groups felt from within the school. To ensure an effective school reform agenda through strong community partnerships, the Aboriginal education assistant worked with Aboriginal students on a number of projects, including decorating a free-standing wall in the school’s front garden with the Aboriginal and Australian flags. This created a key cultural marker, an explicit values statement that was visible from the front of the school. It was one of the actions recommended from the consultation process.

Another strategy used to promote student engagement was a landscaping project which used the services of a volunteer landscape gardener who worked alongside a teacher with a group of six students on a major landscaping venture. The focus was numeracy, engagement and social skills. The participants included students with emotional disturbances and intellectual disability. The numeracy component consisted of planning, measuring and design, calculating quantities and pricing, ordering and laying turf and paving materials.

There is strong evidence in this cluster that values education approaches lead to prosocial impacts for marginalised students. Data collected across the cluster schools showed an increase in Indigenous student attendance and a decrease in behaviour-related incidents since the implementation of the values project. While this improvement data is not solely attributable to the values education initiatives, which were being amalgamated with a number of jurisdictional policy thrusts being run in the school, the cluster coordinator argued that:

If Indigenous education had not become a stated priority of the school through the values education project some of these programs and changes in teacher attitude would not have occurred.

In another aspect of the cluster activity, student values teams, similar to those established in the Manningham and Darebin Schools Network clusters, were established to increase student involvement in real-life learning and to develop student responsibility and resilience. There is now an acceptance by staff of student teams as a viable working structure to achieve specific outcomes.

Previously, apart from sport and debating, the only student teams were the formal school leadership team and the Student Representative Council. The notion of student values teams articulating priorities and issues relevant to them and feeding this information to school policy makers was a project learning. As the cluster coordinator says in reference to the Indigenous garden team:

When the team was originally formulated, other Indigenous students asked to join, indicating the project was something they thought worthwhile. When team meetings had to be cancelled for two weeks due to exams and my engagement elsewhere, students sought me out to complain and ensure that it would definitely be running the following week. The students, from Years 7–9, work extremely well together and tasks seemingly distribute themselves evenly. Each student has taken pride of ownership of their ‘adopted’ plant and is researching it assiduously. One student took it upon himself to design a template for plant information so there would be consistency of layout in the final information product. Another volunteered to design a thank you card for all the people who have assisted us so far. Another asked if her father could join our excursion.

Both students and their families enthusiastically embraced the cluster values project, which demonstrated the power of actively engaging students in values-rich real-life learning.

The project’s focus on Indigenous education saw the dance group workshop with the National Aboriginal and Islander Skills Development Association (NAISDA) – a unique world-class cultural organisation providing excellence in Indigenous dance and performing arts education and training. As a result NAISDA has offered scholarships to two dancers.

One of the student values teams proposed a multimedia competition and exhibition. This has now become a combined cluster schools event. Students in the team have a greater understanding of ‘respect’ and ‘inclusion’ through conducting workshops with younger students. They have also refined their skills relating to organisation, publication, petitioning, promotion and resilience under pressure. The Landscape Gardening Project has had the effect of increasing students’ engagement in other classes as well as reducing suspension and other disciplinary actions.

The cluster coordinator captured some of the key learnings from this work:

Student-focused cluster activities expand students’ perceptions of the world outside their homogenous, (sometimes) parochial environment, develop self-confidence, provide different avenues for self-expression,
widen their life experiences, provide leadership opportunities, and provide exposure to, and opportunity to demonstrate, the full range of values in the National Framework.

However, values education is primarily about relationships. A person’s values determine how they relate to the world. Thus, each individual teacher has the capacity (and responsibility) to demonstrate and explicitly deliver values education to their students … one person can make a difference.