DAREBIN SCHOOLS NETWORK
Victoria

Engaging Students in Values Education: A Student Action Teams Approach to Making Values Explicit

Cluster coordinator: Geoff Jones, Darebin Schools Network

Participating schools:
- Preston North East Primary School
- Bell Primary School
- Burbank Primary School
- Keon Park Primary School
- Northland Secondary College
- Preston East Primary School
- Preston South Primary School
- Reservoir District Secondary College
- Reservoir East Primary School
- Ruthven Primary School

UAN critical friend: Dr Merryn Davies, Victoria University, Victoria

Key messages
1. Student action teams harness purposes for learning that connect with the interests students bring to school. Students gained confidence and competence in operating as change agents within and outside their school communities. Teachers reported an increased maturity in students as an outcome of this student-centred approach.
2. The student action team process and the values-rich content of their activities enabled students to gain skills associated with research, analysis and presentation of results.
3. Students developed a common values-based language and explored abstract concepts in complex language. As one student said, ‘We didn’t know what values were at the start. We thought it was the cost of something.’
4. As with a number of cluster values education approaches, teachers as researchers undertook evidence-based actions to guide improvement to their pedagogy and signpost directions for the whole school by documenting successful practice.
The Darebin Schools Network is located in the north-eastern suburbs of Melbourne, an area characterised by a diverse range of cultural groups and high numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families. The schools have a long established partnership working on Victorian education initiatives. In its Stage 2 project, Engaging Students in Values Education, the cluster sought to:

- engage students, teachers and parents in investigating, constructing, articulating and enacting the operation of the Values for Australian Schooling in their school, local and wider communities
- make a significant, sustainable difference to student, whole school and local community values, awareness, attitudes and behaviours
- involve young people in school community decision making about values, in defining and shaping community values and goals and in creating new values roles for themselves
- investigate, develop, evaluate and document explicit school and classroom policies, programs and practices that incorporate effective values education based on productive pedagogies (specifically, student action team approaches)
- continue to enhance student leadership, action, participation, responsibility and wellbeing in the schools.

Student action teams (SATs) are a student-centred, teacher-guided approach to identifying an issue in a school setting on which students can undertake research and subsequently effect change. Like Manningham Cluster, Darebin used the strategy to identify ways of making values explicit in the cluster schools.

The cluster used two key processes to implement the project: a program of action research and a professional learning program for teachers. The whole project was constructed as an action research inquiry, with research questions being investigated at the cluster level, within individual schools and by each SAT, as illustrated in Table 4.

The other key approach to the cluster project was professional learning. Professional development was strongly emphasised by the cluster and was designed to give teachers: first, a deep understanding of the values subject area (discipline knowledge); second, skills and knowledge in the principles of effective teaching and learning (pedagogical knowledge); and third, a knowledge of how students learn a specific subject area together with effective strategies and practices that support such learning (pedagogical content knowledge).

The core professional development strategy involved building and supporting the project team as a professional learning team – or more precisely, a professional action inquiry team (PAIT). The PAIT was the cluster’s means of developing a culture of professional collaboration and collective responsibility across cluster schools. By working in a collaborative manner on real work-based action research of relevance to their own classrooms, teachers committed themselves to an extended process of critical reflection, sharing of experiences, ideas and expertise, and to an ongoing cycle of inquiry that promoted deep team learning.

Complementary yet integral to the PAIT model was a commitment to approaching the project as an action inquiry. Firstly, the PAIT collectively, and then teachers individually, selected the research focuses and decided on what research questions were important to examine to gain insights into current and best practice. The cluster found that action research, supported by case-writing techniques, assisted teachers to become more reflective practitioners and systematic problem solvers.

Professional conversations and study group forums were established. Time was set aside at most meetings for teachers to engage in collaborative interactions and conversations around topics identified by the group. For example, a mid-term review meeting called Stop, Look, Listen and Think was held in early June 2007 to provide an opportunity for reflection, sharing of ideas and concerns, and finding solutions to common problems.

Teachers were encouraged to share their thoughts on the following questions:

- Where is your project up to at the moment?
• What seems to be working well?
• What are some of the facilitating factors?
• What do you have concerns about?
• What are some of the key blockers or inhibiting factors?
• What is one interesting idea you would like to share?
• Do you have any questions you’d like to put to other project team members?

Three half-day forums were held as part of the project. The first forum’s purpose was to introduce SATs to engage them with values education issues; and to set directions and provide impetus for the research stage of the project. Approximately six to eight students, and their teachers, from each of the eleven schools participated in the morning forum. SATs were asked to prepare several items for the forum:

• a poster of the SAT’s definition of ‘What is a value’, in their own words
• three artefacts or objects (each with an explanatory card) to donate to a Museum of Values (Each object was to be chosen to symbolise or represent a different value. Each school was allocated one value from the values identified in the National Framework and was able to choose two of their own. The explanatory cards were to explain, justify or describe how the object symbolised the particular value.)
• three cards with values words or phrases of the SAT’s choice.

The forum program was structured around three main activities:

Why are values important?
An amateur theatre group dramatised several values-laden scenarios. Students were invited to resolve the scenes, choose endings, discuss and clarify the values being displayed.

A Museum of Values
Each school team was invited to contribute their museum artefacts and cards to a central display table, giving a brief explanation. Mixed school groups were allocated a value from the National Framework and challenged to construct a museum display around that value using contributed objects and cards.

Planning research

Students were engaged in a range of activities designed to investigate and work on values issues in their own schools. As each team accepted, they were handed a Letter of Charge, which set down the purposes of, and their obligations to, the project. This moved on logically to the final activity, which engaged students in thinking about how they might undertake the task of researching values in their schools. A number of forums were arranged to share outcomes from these activities.

The Darebin Schools Network reported that the SAT approach was highly successful in engaging students in values education, offering authentic, relevant learning experiences and producing significant rather than superficial learning outcomes. Teachers reported observing students becoming highly literate and competent values users, capable of reflecting on, analysing, modifying and engaging values in real-life situations.

Further, the network saw evidence that the five essential pedagogical ingredients of the SAT approach have been powerful factors in enhancing student engagement with values education and in promoting significant, deep learning outcomes.

Importantly, values were seen to be inherent in the SAT approach – values such as trusting students, doing respectful things, being socially useful, making an important difference to one’s community, being a responsible leader, engendering inclusion and teamwork. Moreover, enabling students to question and envision the sort of community in which they want to live is not only in itself a values journey, but the deeper, implicit intention to empower students to undertake such a task, in the first place, is pre-eminently a values statement – a commitment to valuing students as important members of our community.

The Darebin Schools Network concluded that the SAT approach enriched the values education project and produced outcomes that were not possible using more traditional, teacher-centred approaches. The project was enriched by the explicit focus on values language and concepts.
### Table 4: Darebin Schools Network’s action research inquiry framework

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<th>Level</th>
<th>Research questions</th>
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| Cluster | How can a SAT approach be used effectively to implement a quality values education approach?  
How does working in a cluster facilitate and enhance this?  
How can good practice in values education enhance the quality of teaching and learning and improve student outcomes? |
| Schools | How can SATs be used to promote teaching and learning about values?  
Specific questions of interest such as: Which of the national values is present or absent in the school?  
How can a SAT approach to values education foster intercultural harmony? |
| Students | Each SAT developed and investigated an identified specific research focus and questions based on local issues and contexts. For instance, one SAT researched the extent to which the values were actually being practised at the school and which ones could be better emphasised so as to enable the school to better engage the children. |