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.


FERNY GROVE CLUSTER
Queensland

Growing People, Changing Communities

Cluster coordinators: Lorelle Holcroft, Samford State School and Sue Wilton, Prince of Peace Lutheran College

Participating schools:
- Samford State School
- Prince of Peace Lutheran College
- Grovely State School
- Patricks Road State School

UAN critical friend: Professor Peta Goldburg, Australian Catholic University, Queensland

Key messages
1. Teacher professional learning in the values domain is as much about increasing teacher knowledge, skills and repertoires of practice as it is about facilitating the personal growth of teachers as people and as values education role models.
2. School communities will focus on the values in the National Framework in a manner that reflects the needs of the school community. This will nearly always involve selecting particular values and working with them in localised programs to create meaningful conversations.
3. Values education is a curriculum concept that is best infused across all key learning areas and school policy and practice.
4. Children will best engage in learning when they feel the learning offered is personally relevant and when values education links to their way of making meaning in their worlds.
5. Values education approaches build student resilience and self-esteem by creating a sense of belonging through a network of positive relationships with caring adults.
In *Growing People, Changing Communities* the Ferny Grove Cluster focused on improving school values education practices by scaffolding values education learning through the philosophy in the classroom pedagogy, and drama in the classroom. The cluster reflected on core school values in all key learning areas and embedded values in school action and language. Professional learning in the cluster provided personal development opportunities for all teachers.

The project adopted a whole school implementation approach and operated at four levels: classroom, school, community and across-cluster.

At the classroom level, it involved philosophy in the classroom pedagogy to explore core values through a process modelling respect, tolerance and inclusion. In drama classes, philosophical questions and values conflicts were explored more deeply through interactive theatre.

At the school level, the language of values was introduced at staff meetings, school assemblies and chapels. As well, schools developed a shared understanding of what core values look like in action at the school.

At the broader school–community level, staff and community attended courses about relationships, self-awareness, pastoral care and spirituality, and engaged in Funworks, a community forum program.

As part of the professional development program, staff members received mentoring with a trainer in their classroom before attending a second training day. The mentoring involved a trainer from Buranda State School visiting the school, watching teachers facilitate a philosophy session in their classroom and then providing constructive feedback. All staff reported the mentoring experience as a positive one for their own learning.

Other professional development activities included team-building exercises and some Life Be In It games, such as team relays, stage jumping and trust games. All schools reported positive feedback from staff in response to these activities. The reasoning behind this type of teacher-focused activity was a recognition that teachers needed to build their emotional wellbeing and positive relationships in their workplace in order for them to be able to self-reflect and to model the core values in their classroom. This is ongoing work for teaching staff, which is reflected in the availability of free personal and spiritual development courses for all staff through the project.

The cluster project documentation reported that a set of cultural changes occurred in the schools. Children enjoyed the freedom to explore some of the ‘big questions of life’ and this enjoyment led to an increased motivation to listen to each other and be able, when the opportunity arose, to present ideas of their own. Many teachers reported children more actively listening to their peers and showing respect for the thoughts of others. As children participated more and gained confidence in the process, they also opened themselves up to a deeper ‘knowing’ of each other. ‘Intentional listening’ was cultivated to encourage this process.

Children began to practise compassion and respect for each other – not because they were taught that this is the right thing to do, but because they were beginning to enjoy hearing the creativity of each other’s ideas, and feel the value of receiving such respectful attention themselves. In practice they were experiencing the mutual benefits of a values-centred classroom.

Occasionally, during a philosophy lesson teachers reported that ‘a ripple of wonder’ was heard around the group as a student presented an idea that was clearly creative and new. The process, therefore, inherently encouraged and built respect and care for others. Aside from the pedagogy of philosophy in the classroom itself, the subjects discussed through philosophy lessons also aimed to develop values in an intentional and explicit way.

One of the lessons conducted by almost all classes in the philosophy project was around the issue of stealing. Through the discussion of the idea as presented in a story, children openly explored the issue of stealing and whether there could be any situations where stealing might be the right thing to do. Teachers reported that, rather than fostering a morally flexible view of stealing, this discussion revealed that children had a deep understanding of the ways that stealing hurts individuals and groups in our communities. They have a more fundamental grasp and appreciation...
of the notion of honesty and trust through open-ended philosophical engagement than they might have had through the more didactic imposition of a rule such as ‘you should not steal’.

Using philosophy in the classroom, children also explored topic areas around civic rights, religion, multiculturalism, and community roles and responsibilities. The methodology creates a safe and supportive learning environment for such issues to be deeply explored. As children explored their own ideas and challenged the ideas of others they assumed ownership of the values as they wrestled with thought-provoking and challenging questions and formed their own conclusions in the context of their own lives and experiences.

Another positive outcome of the philosophy in the classroom approach reported by the cluster is the increase of potentially ‘teachable moments’ for values education. Teachers reported many instances, both inside and outside the classroom, of being able to show children clear examples of ‘what respect for each other looks like’ and how children can learn to express their freedom and individuality in appropriate ways. Moreover, some teachers claim improved thinking skills and improved relationships in the classroom as a consequence of being involved with the project.

Cluster schools reported less fighting and bad behaviour. They observed that students began developing the ability to talk through their differences in a more respectful way.

One teacher reported on the sort of subtle changes in student behaviour that indicates internalised values learning:

Philosophy is starting to impact outside the classroom when children are talking among themselves. For example, over lunch I overheard two girls talking about a movie that they had seen and the way they were ‘respectfully’ disagreeing impressed me. Their conversation went something like this: ‘I think the movie was good because …’ The other student responded with: ‘I agree with you but I also think it was good because …’

The cluster concluded that philosophy in the classroom is a very effective pedagogical tool for teachers to use in values education. The pedagogy nurtures the professional learning of teachers in that it develops stronger relationships with students and, sometimes, with parents.

In the cluster’s final reflections on their project, participants provided observations on a number of values education implementation matters. These included:

- Professional development should aim to facilitate not only the increase in knowledge and skills of the educator, but also nurture the emotional, social and spiritual development of the inner person of the teacher as values education is dependent to a great extent on the person of the teacher.
- Values education is fundamentally about the way we live together – it’s about relationships.
- Values are communicated and experienced through such things as the availability of pastoral care and support in different forms for all members of the school community.
- Values education is enhanced by personal reflection on learning and relationships. Values education teachers are able to make everyday links between classroom learning and life, meaning and purpose.
- The teaching of higher order thinking and skills of reasoning are strongly linked to the development and ownership of values.
- Teaching children to be reflective, self-aware, and mindful of their world is central to producing internal personal change.
- Story is a powerful vehicle for helping children identify values in everyday life and explore paradigms for making choices in conflict situations.
- Humour and fun are integral in values education, interwoven into the human experience of the school community.
- Creative arts, including the visual arts, provide the opportunity for students to express what they believe and to explore their own identity, gaining insight into their own inner emotional world.
- To be most effective, values education should involve the whole school community. Parents, staff and other community members need forums for engagement in the articulation and implementation of values ideas.
- While values are transferred to children through modelling, values education needs to also include explicit statements of beliefs about the world (world views), and explicit links need to be made from these beliefs to the way schools and classrooms operate.
- A quality education (including values education) should include units of work aimed at teaching about interpersonal relationships, communication and conflict management skills.
- Values being fostered by schools should be observable in all the processes, systems and physical environments in the school, including processes of regular evaluation.