MANNINGHAM CLUSTER
Victoria

Listening to the Student Voice in Improving Teaching, Learning and School Culture in Values Education

Cluster coordinator: Sue Cahill, St Charles Borromeo Primary School

Participating schools:
- St Charles Borromeo Primary School
- Our Lady of the Pines Primary School
- St Clement of Rome Primary School
- St Gregory the Great Primary School
- St Kevin’s Primary School
- Sts Peter and Paul Primary School

UAN critical friends: Professor Judith Chapman, Dr Patricia Cartwright and Dr Marian de Souza, Australian Catholic University, Victoria

Key messages
1. Student agency, characterised by students feeling that their learning connects with real-world issues, builds resilience, empowerment and a sense that they can make serious and important decisions about issues that are important to them and take actions to make a difference in their worlds.
2. When student action teams articulate an issue and a purpose for learning, the skills, expertise and knowledge that the students need to address that issue are actively embraced. This form of lifelong learning is transformational as students become managers and leaders of their own learning.
3. A whole school approach to values education focusing on the value of respect as the accepted and expected basis for relationship building produces a calm school ambience, fewer behavioural issues, and students who are engaged with their learning.
4. A school and parent partnership in learning and community-focused research and action is a powerful educational approach for schools to adopt to deepen student engagement and create congruence between real life and learning.
5. Mentors and critical friends encourage teachers to articulate their experiences and critically reflect on their pedagogy in an improvement cycle that is safe, respectful and productive.
6. Supported by the scaffold provided by successful student action team approaches in Stage 1 of the VEGPS, teachers in Stage 2 felt confident that the gains from Stage 1 were such that they could build an ethos based on values education more purposefully across the whole school.
**Listening to the Student Voice in Improving Teaching, Learning and School Culture in Values Education** intended to explicitly teach values in each of the six cluster schools and to establish mechanisms to ‘listen to the student voice’ about ways of improving teaching, learning and school culture through values education. Manningham Cluster participated in Stage 1 of the VEGPSP with a very strong focus on student action teams (SATs) to develop student resilience, self-confidence and leadership skills. In Stage 2, the cluster consolidated and extended their student focus work to values action teams (VATs) with a focus on stronger parental involvement in the project.

SATs and VATs use a particular form of scaffolded learning with students placed at the centre of learning. Students working in groups focus on a values-rich activity. They identify the values, form values propositions, initiate group activities, research and collate data and apply their learning in practical situations. Often, these situations take students out of the classroom and into various community settings.

SATs were formed in each cluster school. At St Charles Borromeo Catholic Primary School, for instance, the SAT comprised ten students from Grades 5 and 6. They met with their values school coordinator (a teacher) fortnightly in a formal meeting and informally as required.

Through their research programs, the SATs identified where the teaching, learning and school culture in their schools could be better aligned with the values in the National Framework. The SAT process enabled the school to listen to student voices about how teaching, learning and school culture might be improved and connected to the real world.

During Stage 1, SATs identified a number of developmental directions they wanted to move towards to strengthen the SAT voice and process in their schools. Stage 2 of the project provided the potential for this work to be progressed through the establishment of VATs. The key development here was the inclusion of a parent voice to the already existing student and staff voices. The potential of this developmental aspect of the work attracted the following comment from the cluster UAN adviser:

Potentially, the VAT will become an official working group in each school, continuing to steer values in the school. This group could maintain resources, assist with policy development, and work on professional development in the school. Student involvement in the VAT would also continue to involve students actively in values education beyond the funding timeline.

From this scaffolding process, a number of approaches to embedding values into school practice ensued. For instance, the explicit teaching of values was carried out in each classroom, every week, on Monday afternoon between 1:30 and 2:30. The values were put into an order by the members of the SAT. The same value was taught in every class for three weeks. The staff used the same teaching resources as their main support and a pack of material was made up of other supporting resources and a list of picture storybooks pertaining to the particular value.

Some of the schools also explicitly taught values at morning assemblies. The assembly was used to highlight the current value. A variety of strategies were used to do this, including a story relating to the value being read aloud, a role-play performed or observations shared about a certain value in action. Values certificates were awarded by staff, students and parents to staff, students and parents. Silent reflection by students, teachers and parents was a part of each assembly.

Visual displays in all classrooms and other public places in the schools further strengthened the explicit embedding of values.

Another developmental aspect of this cluster work was the movement towards a whole school values education approach as a result of their participation in Stage 1 of the VEGPSP. This included the addition of values approaches to all of the schools’ planning documents, including curriculum design and planning documents, school policy and procedures documents.

The SAT also produced a values newsletter to introduce ‘new’ values as the program progressed. This was distributed to all members of the school community.

The SAT process also led to the school being designated a ‘no put down zone’ in an attempt to foster respect of self and others. The students involved in this strategy assigned themselves to a
classroom and a teacher to become the values representative, whose responsibility was to share information and to discuss any questions or concerns.

The SAT process produced a whole school ‘buddy program’ where all students and staff were partnered with another member of the school community. The SAT extended this program to the residents of a local retirement village. The residents and students spent time together at both school and the village to share stories about the residents’ childhoods, workplaces and lives. The students spent time talking about their lives, interests and today’s world. This service learning allowed ‘head, hands and hearts’ to be involved in a values-based partnership.

A professional learning community approach shaped the work of this project. A strong professional group included the six school coordinators, the cluster UAN advisers, the cluster consultant and the cluster coordinator. This group met regularly to support and learn from each other and used their professional learning to go back to the individual schools to listen to and work alongside the SATs. At the same time, the school coordinators, with support of the cluster coordinator, delivered ongoing professional development to the staff in their respective schools.

At a cluster level, professional development of staff and students was ongoing and regular. Major presentations were given by Professor Terry Lovat and Dr Neil Hawkes. The cluster consultant regularly engaged the staff in professional learning about quality teaching.

The Catholic ethos of the schools in Manningham Cluster created a beneficial context for the development of values education since it provided a common understanding and interpretation of the values which has, for the most part, removed any potential tensions associated with ambiguity and uncertainty. The new coordinators found themselves in a supportive and understanding network where the Catholic ethos provided a common core.

Students and teachers developed a sense of ownership of the work being undertaken. As well, students developed self-confidence, leadership and team skills, and resourcefulness through their participation as action researchers in the project. The project has been a constructive and encouraging learning opportunity for teachers and students alike. Most importantly, the quality of the relationships between members of the school community are characterised by mutual respect.

One school in the cluster has put plans in place for strategies to:

- rewrite the school’s vision and mission statements to explicitly incorporate values education
- make changes to school organisation and/or culture that will reflect the values work that is being achieved in the classroom
- change the assembly format so that values education activities and achievements can be celebrated with the whole school
- look at the discipline plan to ensure that values education is foregrounded in the way this is written and ultimately implemented
- look in detail at the curriculum design to seek opportunities for a student values ‘voice’
- ensure that all classrooms are redesigned to explicitly become values-rich spaces in their visual displays, classroom structure and approaches to student relationships.

In the words of the cluster UAN report:

The work of this cluster has been outstanding in many respects. At the final meeting of the cluster UAN colleagues and cluster staff attempted to analyse the features of the work of the cluster that contributed to its success.

The following features were identified: engagement, authenticity, coherence, respect, embeddedness, leadership, ownership, empowerment, clarity of purpose, philosophical commitment, transformational relationships and lifelong learning.