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.


MERRYLANDS–GUILDFORD CLUSTER
New South Wales

Creating Connections in Diverse Communities

Cluster coordinator: Belinda Guidice, Merrylands High School

Participating schools:
- Merrylands High School
- Guildford Public School
- Guildford West Public School
- Hilltop Road Public School
- Merrylands East Public School
- Merrylands Public School
- Sherwood Grange Public School

UAN critical friend: Dr Katina Zammit, University of Western Sydney, New South Wales

Key messages
1. When a critical mass of students are given responsibility and supported by all staff to participate in school policy planning and decision-making processes, they demonstrate increased levels of maturity, critical thinking, engagement and prosocial involvement in the life of the school.
2. Participation in values education projects can provide a safe learning environment for teachers to expand their repertoires of practice through the sharing of strategies and supportive debriefing.
3. Sustained whole school professional learning builds a more vital and engaged school community and should involve the voices of students, teachers and parents/caregivers in genuine partnerships.
4. Teachers who routinely monitor and evaluate the impact of what they teach and how they teach it as part of collegial discussions make substantive positive changes to their content and practice, and grow as teachers and as people.
5. Teachers who start with a values proposition in their curriculum design have a better chance of connecting to students’ lives because the selection of content will be more relevant and engaging.
6. In primary and secondary schools, working as a cluster leads to a greater awareness and understanding of issues relating to transition and the needs of primary-aged students and adolescent learners.
The Merrylands–Guildford Cluster, located in western Sydney and comprising seven local primary and secondary schools, examined the links between quality teaching, the settings and pedagogy for the delivery of curriculum (how one teaches) and values education. Building on the work in Stage 1 of the VEGPSP, Creating Connections in Diverse Communities asked teachers to conduct action research into quality teaching. Schools examined the curriculum from a content perspective (what one teaches), and teachers were encouraged to examine the specific content of their lessons and curriculum programs and how this influenced student learning in terms of values education.

More specifically, the cluster sought to:
- improve school community knowledge, understanding and application of values education
- collate data (as a pre-test and post-test) on school community values across the classroom and school
- explore the link between values education and quality teaching
- provide explicit professional learning on strategies to integrate values education into curriculum and classroom practice
- embed the core Values for Australian Schooling from the National Framework into the curriculum across the schools
- have schools design curriculum units of work or co-curricular activities that explore values across curriculum and classroom practice
- have students increase their understanding and application of values.

The project featured an ongoing professional learning program. The majority of professional learning was delivered by the cluster coordinator to a core staff team of 24 teachers from across the cluster. A number of teams were established at the cluster, school and student levels. For example, a core team of 26 student leaders across the cluster schools received ongoing values education professional learning and then designed and implemented initiatives for the cluster that explored the meaning of values.

The teams informed students, staff and parents about the links and connections between the Values in NSW Public Schools policy, the National Framework and the Quality Teaching in NSW Public Schools framework.

It is particularly noteworthy that while the cluster was committed to including a student voice in all decisions within the project, students were also involved in the project design discussions. Students were actively engaged at all levels of decision making. For example, at Merrylands High School, which has a student population of approximately 730, 250 students participate in formal leadership programs in the school. The depth of commitment to student leadership is further manifested in that student leaders were encouraged to attend staff meetings to contribute to the decision-making processes in the school. The cluster coordinator reflected the effectiveness of this approach by commenting on the increase in student capacities in areas such as confidence, self-esteem, critical thinking, responsibility, motivation and engagement in school life.

The project explored 25 strategies that support values education within curriculum and classroom practice. These included a range of cooperative learning strategies, critical thinking skills, reflective journal writing, narrative, decision-making and problem-solving skills and explicit discussion about values, listening, conflict resolution and social skills learning. Embedding these strategies into classroom and curriculum practice was intended to improve teachers’ pedagogical practice and enhance students’ ability to explore and demonstrate positive values.

Staff, students and parents participated in group work activities that explored the core values of the Values in NSW Public Schools policy in terms of:
- What does each value look like in classrooms? Across a school community? From a student leader’s perspective?
- What do our schools do in values education in terms of policy and procedures, classroom and community partnerships?
- What type of school do we want?

The student team was highly involved in the project’s implementation. This core team of student leaders from the seven schools designed and implemented initiatives for the cluster that
explored the meaning of values. For example, episodes from the television series The Simpsons were used to explore positive and negative application of values. Student leaders created a professional learning session on Quality Relationships that they delivered to all the staff in the cluster. They also created a Values in the Classroom DVD and multimedia footage to support other initiatives.

The other core teams were the cluster team and core school personnel team. Collaboratively, these staff members received the professional learning outlined above. It was their responsibility to relay information and professional learning back to each partner school. They were also the staff members who wrote the case-writing examples for their school and participated in action learning. These staff members designed the curriculum or co-curricular units that embedded the core values of the National Framework and values education strategies into curriculum and classroom practice.

The UAN adviser for this cluster noted that:

This strategy provided the means for teachers to embed values education into their units of work and explicitly make links to the national, state or local community values. Students learnt about values in context, not as separate, decontextualised concepts. This authentic learning of values made obvious what had previously been implicit in some of the units.

The cluster devoted a lot of attention to the issue of school climate and improving it. The coordinator designed a school climate survey, which focused staff attention on issues such as ‘How important is …?’ and ‘How evident is …?’ All staff across the cluster, the student leadership team and a sample of parents completed the survey; responses were discussed during professional learning sessions.

To enable teachers to reflect on their own pedagogical practice and share good practices across the cluster, staff took part in a classroom climate exercise, brainstorming the following questions:

- What are the characteristics and skills of successful students?
- What are teachers doing well in classrooms to support students?
- What do teachers need to improve on to further support students?

The cluster case study and UAN adviser reported that as a result of the project, teachers across the cluster now use explicit values education strategies and the ‘backward mapping’ process as a consistent approach to programming across schools. There has also been a discernible development of closer professional relationships among core team members, which has improved pedagogical practice, especially in terms of making the classroom environment more conducive for effective learning. The explicit values focus has resulted in stronger connectedness to students’ lives because the selection of content is now more relevant and engaging.