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.


**SHIRE 4 VALUES CLUSTER**
New South Wales

Students Building Bridges through Values Education

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**Participating schools:**
- Gymea Technology High School
- Engadine High School
- Heathcote High School
- Jannali High School

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**Key messages**
1. Values education and values clarification activities provide an entry point for addressing or examining issues of perceived cultural dissonance.
2. Student leadership can be a major driver of interschool collaboration expressed through a series of student-led interschool events, such as community values forums, and workshops and drama performances.
3. Teachers need to interrogate their own values and explore how they are expressed in their classroom practice before they can teach values dispositions. It is important not to assume that values are universally understood by all members of the school community.

Students Building Bridges through Values Education from the Shire 4 Values Cluster had two goals:
- to encourage students from the four project schools to meaningfully connect with students from different and diverse cultures
- to facilitate collaboration between student leaders from each school in planning, preparing and presenting a community values forum.
The first goal is significant because each of the project schools is located in the Sutherland Shire – a largely monocultural area of Sydney. The Sutherland Shire comprises predominantly middle-class Anglo-Australians. Much media attention focused on this region following the Cronulla race riot of December 2005, and many of the participant teachers commented at the beginning of the project that their concerns about racial intolerance within the area had prompted their own involvement in the project.

The project built on existing interschool cultural exchange programs. Community harmony was the focus of the exchanges. Students from each school’s leadership group accepted responsibility for organising and conducting project activities.

Students were brought together with the explicit goal of exploring multicultural values, an undertaking that through both content and process promoted authentic learning of social justice values, tolerance, understanding and inclusion among students.

In related project activities, both within and between the cluster school communities, students were given opportunities to gain greater understanding and respect for others by being exposed in a planned way to the many cultures that exist in Australia.

These activities were planned in a variety of ways. A community forum leadership group managed the overall activity at a cluster level. Within each school, a student leadership group provided planning input into community forum and other individual school activities. Some of the activities included whole year-level groups participating in values days. Peer support leaders were involved in values-based activities and different year leadership groups represented the school at special events.

The culmination of this school-based work was a community values forum held late in 2007. The UAN adviser commented on the organisation of the event and on the strength of the student involvement:

The forum itself was chaired and presented by a number of students from each of the cluster schools. The main focus of the night was the National Framework values of respect and tolerance, inclusion and understanding.

Students defined what these values mean to them and their school. The school leaders displayed impressive qualities of confidence, assurance and deep reflection in their speeches ...

The play told the story of a young girl who became separated from her school friends while on an excursion to Chinatown. The girl’s anxiety at being in such a new environment is soon replaced with excitement as she meets a group of young people from diverse cultural backgrounds. The girl brings her new friends to the Shire to introduce them to her old friends – who initially are cautious and unwilling to interact. The play ends with a message of optimism as new friendships are formed and cultural barriers are broken down.

Through the play, the students humorously challenged stereotypical views of different ethnic groups (for example, that all black men can dance). The play provoked much laughter among the audience but in highlighting the multicultural reality of Australia today it also challenged the isolated and monocultural idealisations of Shire life. Overall, the play was thought-provoking and engaging, and highlighted the need for, and commitment to, change within the community.

While the effectiveness of examining values through a student-written play was undeniable, there are other lessons to be learnt from the Shire 4 Values project. The presentation of values through drama evident in this student event demonstrated students confronting important issues using humour, questioning stereotypes and other values-rich approaches. However, successful, ongoing and sustainable values education practices rely on the whole school community being vigilant and constantly reinforcing values messages.

During the course of the project the cluster began to realise the necessity of putting in place structures to ensure the long-term sustainability of values education in their school communities beyond student-focused events. As the UAN adviser observed:

Some schools have put structures in place that will ensure the long-term sustainability of values education within their communities. This includes the celebration of various days, for example, Harmony Day and Anzac Day ... that sustain the language of values. Two schools have gone further by embedding values language into their core welfare and discipline policies.

At a broader school community level, parent and community groups responded positively and reported increased engagement with some of the issues brought forward through the values education project.
Some student outcomes from project activity included students’ reflecting that they have a newfound respect for teachers – a consequence of witnessing teachers’ genuine commitment to the project and to mentoring student leaders. Moreover, students acknowledge that there was a problem, and that they now have pathways and new understandings to help them address newly perceived issues. As one student commented:

To make real change we must work on a community scale rather than just an individual school effort ... by participating in the forum I know how hard my school is going to have to work in this area of respect and valuing others, but I also know that this will be achieve