The Values Education Good Practice Schools Project – Stage 2 cluster project synopses

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WA DISTANCE EDUCATION CLUSTER
Western Australia

Values at a Distance: Embedding Values in Key Learning Areas

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Participating schools:
  • Schools of Isolated and Distance Education
  • Carnarvon School of the Air
  • Cosmo Newberry Remote Community School
  • Cue Primary School
  • Gascoyne Junction Remote Community School
  • Kimberley School of the Air
  • Meekatharra School of the Air
  • Shark Bay Primary School

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Key messages
1. Isolated and remote schools can participate in successful values education approaches that broach distance and create sustainable school networks using information and communication technologies.
2. Collaborative values education curriculum development implemented across sites using information and communication technologies provides personal and collective teacher professional learning and spans the isolation that distance can create.
3. Students are important evaluators of curriculum content presented to them, and can become better engaged when that content is linked to their lived experiences.
The **Values at a Distance** project faced a unique combination of challenges. The WA Distance Education Cluster is spread across thousands of kilometres. Even though the schools in the cluster have a long-term relationship, the schools have very different local contexts and needs. The smallest school in this cluster is Cosmo Newberry Remote Community School, which has approximately 15 students. Gascoyne Junction Remote Community School has a total community population of 70 and an enrolment of 30 students. The Schools of Isolated and Distance Education in Perth, on the other hand, have an enrolment of approximately 500 students in Years 8–10.

The students catered for by the schools in this cluster range in age from four years to seventeen years and live in a wide range of communities. Students also come from diverse backgrounds including: students travelling Australia or the world; students whose local high school does not offer the subjects they wish to study; full-time students unable to attend a local school due to geographical isolation; and students suffering from a long-term illness.

These remote and isolated small communities are serviced using technologies to span distance and diverse student cohorts drawn from a variety of communities provided significant challenges for the implementation of a values education project. However, with strong project design and positive and consistent leadership the UAN adviser observed that the cluster achieved the following key project outcomes:

- used technologies to create productive learning environments
- developed exemplary support materials to provide engaging and interactive learning experiences in values education
- accommodated cultural and social diversity within a common values framework
- built a sense of collegiality across diverse sites and circumstances
- respected local knowledge, experience and norms, and balanced the need for direction and support and local autonomy
- integrated values education into existing programs and priorities
- appreciated the complexities of working with transient communities and teachers
- acknowledged the different starting points of teachers, communities and students.

During Stage 2 of the VEGPSP the schools in this cluster came together with the expressed aim of designing and publishing a values-rich curriculum in the key learning areas of English and mathematics to:

- improve the behaviour, social interaction and group work of students in real or electronic classrooms
- maintain the engagement, motivation, attendance and participation of students learning in remote contexts.

The educational programs were developed for delivery in two modes: print and online with two separate programs in English to cater for at-risk and mainstream students and one program in mathematics that can be used by students across the Year 8 educational continuum.

To further build on the explicit values education units of work, the schools in this cluster sought to link activities and programs to values education to support the work done within key learning areas. Within this whole of curriculum values approach, schools went about the task using a variety of approaches to suit their local contexts including:

- community forums on values education
- working on students’ resilience
- working on skills for life
- the Friendly Schools and Families program
- implementation of the Aboriginal literacy strategy
- the We all Value Every Student (WAVES) program

The **Values at a Distance** project involved negotiated involvement with several schools from rural Western Australia, part of the Schools of Isolated and Distance Education network. Distance education is undergoing significant change regarding pedagogy and modes of delivery and it was important that schools involved continue to be open to using online delivery with individuals and groups of students. The project instigated several alternative means of communication between the participants including teleconferences, emails, mail, faxes, phone calls, and a face-to-face conference in Perth so that all could keep abreast of the progress of all the cluster
schools. These diverse strategies proved successful in supporting the professional learning of schools involved in the project. An unexpected outcome from the project was the growth in information and communication technologies by teachers in remote areas who otherwise may not have had access to this type of professional learning.

A face-to-face conference provided the cluster with the opportunity to upskill participants by inviting a consultant from the Western Australian Department of Education and Training to present a workshop on mapping the Western Australian Core Values to the Values for Australian Schooling.

A mini-conference provided the opportunity for the Values for Australian Schooling to be presented to the project participants and the structured discussions at this stage enabled the community representatives (principals, teachers, parents) to reflect on their beliefs and values and challenge their thinking before getting involved in trialling the materials.

To determine a starting point with students, all cluster schools agreed to use the Monitoring Standards in Education Social Outcomes of Schooling Survey to evaluate student thinking about values education, available at www.det.wa.edu.au/education/mse/socialoutcomes.html.

A feature of the unit development process was the trialling of units with students and the subsequent improvement of the unit following feedback from students and teachers at the different sites. This process built the units from teacher practice and was a professional learning exercise, and valued the voice of students in the unit development process. These process steps have values education approaches embedded in the activity.

The trial of the materials in the second semester provided many opportunities for the students to participate in real-time sessions on Centra, an online real-time communications technology that allowed teachers to speak to students on the internet and via the telephone. Teachers reported that the students engaged in the sessions positively and, in some instances, attended school more frequently in order to participate.

As a result of participation in the project, there has been a heightened awareness of values education generally, and the Values for Australian Schooling more specifically. The breadth and depth of that understanding varies significantly across the project among the teachers, students and parents involved.

The cluster found that good practice in values education necessitates the development of a shared understanding of values by all stakeholders from the outset. They found that it is vital that all stakeholders are delivering the same message. They further found that in the case of distance learning, that multiple communication modes assist in keeping all participants engaged and on message.

Another key observation from the cluster was the primacy of explicit teaching of values in real and meaningful contexts. As the case study report noted:

Explicit teaching of values was a key issue. We believe it is not sufficient to accept that ‘values are embedded in the curriculum’ and are therefore ‘covered’. This was evidenced by many of the teachers involved in our project saying that they thought they ‘knew’ about values education but realised they had only a very limited understanding when they became involved in the project.

Values education must be seen as relevant and important to all and needs to be in context to the people and the environment they are living in. Although there are Values for Australian Schooling common across Australia, the development of values education needs to be localised and contextualised in order for each student to best internalise them. Each student needs to be able to relate the ideas and concepts to themselves, take ownership and responsibility and, hopefully, develop and grow into citizens that contribute positively to their communities.