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.


WESTPEERS CLUSTER
New South Wales

Linking Values Education to Peer Support and Storyfest

Cluster coordinator: Dianne Franks, St Joseph’s Primary School

Participating schools:
- St Joseph’s Primary School, Grenfell
- St Francis Xavier Primary School, Lake Cargelligo
- St Joseph’s Boorowa
- St Mary’s Primary School, Young
- St Mary’s War Memorial School, West Wyalong

UAN critical friend: Dr Helen Russell, Charles Sturt University, New South Wales

Key messages
1. School clusters located in rural and remote areas undertaking values education approaches benefit from the network of support provided by jurisdictional officers, university mentors, statewide and national briefing sessions, and experienced values education mentors. The flexibility built into the action research model underpinning the Stage 2 projects further encouraged stepped and supported learning for these school communities.

2. While schools and teachers may begin their involvement with values education processes from a position of established practice, in this case peer support, as professional learning takes teachers further into values education concepts and processes, their learning and engagement deepens and changes.

3. Successful values education approaches such as peer support lead to students developing leadership qualities that transfer to other aspects of their school life. In this cluster, students initiated service-learning activities around the values of social justice, care and compassion, and service and citizenship. Successful values education approaches foster the development of the whole child.

4. As with a number of other clusters, the power of narrative through stories, in this case Storyfest, provided opportunities for students to demonstrate the value of empathy. Students were able to articulate empathy and link faith-based values with school values.
WestPEERS decided to incorporate their Linking Values Education to Peer Support and Storyfest project with an existing well-established peer support program. The existing peer support program in all participant schools had the support of staff, students and parents. Schools wanted to integrate the changes, not to radically alter their existing programs, especially the values inherent in their school policies. However, as the cluster further developed its project, the focus shifted to implementing Storyfest, a student-centred teaching strategy designed to support and empower students.

Storyfest is a technique of storytelling that:
- develops knowledge and understanding of the Values for Australian Schooling
- explores the values implicit within each story
- allows students to experience the power of story to shape an appreciation of the values.

Storyfest is a gathering of students and teachers for storytelling purposes. In preparation for the Storyfest, students learn storytelling conventions, including attentive listening, use of voice and other strategies for engaging an audience. Students use a variety of genres, including parables, fables, folktales and modern picture books. They are encouraged to read a selection of stories before choosing the one they want to deliver. They then make a story map followed by a short sequence of writing to help them learn the story. In this way the students are encouraged to make the story ‘their own’ and to take on its messages about key values.

In the Storyfest process the students engage other students not only in the story but in values education by discussing the values-rich messages of the story.

A specialist in Storyfest technique visited all the schools in the cluster, and professional development supported teacher engagement with the technique. The work began with a gathering of staff from the whole cluster. The Storyfest specialist conducted activities, games and reflection based around the power of story to hand on values.

Teachers reported a range of changed student and school community behaviours, including heightened student self-confidence and students being able to make connections between values in their stories and the values identified in the National Framework.
This cluster is characterised by its remoteness, and those involved in the project commented on its community-building aspect. As Storyfest brings together students, staff and families, the project has the potential to be an ongoing and sustainable service-learning approach. Significantly, the Storyfest approach connected strongly with the religious education curriculum in this cluster of Catholic schools.

As the UAN adviser observed:

The power of story in values education was used effectively through Storyfest and the potential for narratives to provide an opportunity for empathy and wearing someone else’s shoes. The non-threatening nature of the narratives (i.e., the people in the stories were not people we knew) and in some instances children used animal stories to demonstrate values. Students were not only required to tell the story but were also asked to critically analyse the narrative. This required higher order thinking and an understanding of the feelings of others. Children were hence better able to explain things in terms that both they and teachers understood.

WestPEERS began their involvement with the project with the express purpose of building on what they saw as a strong values base. However, the cluster coordinator commented on a number of unexpected outcomes from the project, which indicated that staff at the school gained new and deeper understandings about values education. Some of these were:

- a greater understanding of emotional cognition demonstrated in relationships between younger and older students
- independent engagement of all students in the learning process and school activities
- closer relationships between staff and staff, and between staff and students
- confident and quality relationships with all members of their school and wider community
- parents used the values language in many situations (e.g., the canteen lines and reading helpers)
- the values education project stimulated topical conversations about values issues locally, nationally and globally
- discovering the power of story to bring about transformation in a student’s understanding of values
- greater competency in the use of the metalanguage of values.