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Promoting positive education, resilience and student wellbeing through values education

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Abstract

This paper provides details of a government funded national Values Education and Student Wellbeing Schools Project, implemented in Canberra, Australia. The Project focuses on student wellbeing and values education through curriculum implementation and staff development across early childhood, primary and secondary sectors. It comprises two stages: Stage 1. School-based project implementation and reporting of evidence related to the aims of the key objectives; and Stage 2. Research and evaluation conducted by university research teams on the impact of Stage 1 to provide an evidence base for further developing a whole school approach to values education, student wellbeing, resilience and positive education.

The collaborative processes, development and findings from the Stage 2 research component form the basis of

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this paper and provided valuable information as the research proceeded. Mixed methodologies were adopted to capture the richness and impact of the work being conducted in schools. Data collected from ten schools saw the emergence of a number of themes and outcomes that highlighted the positive impact of the Project on teachers, students and the school culture and community. The findings of the study highlight the importance of a whole school approach to values education in promoting positive change in schools and student wellbeing through quality pedagogy and curriculum, increased opportunities for student participation and leadership and establishment of stronger school-community engagement.

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1. Introduction

Values education is often seen as a multi-faceted process and different approaches have been used over time to initiate young people into society's behavioural norms. Some early researchers define values education as concepts that include moral education and citizenship while Kohlberg et al. (1985, 1989) identified a number of stages of moral development, and believed that children needed to be involved in open and public discussion of day-to-day conflicts and problems in order to develop their moral reasoning ability.

In more recent times an increasing number of concepts, addressed under the umbrella of values education, include: moral development, citizenship education, personal development, social development, cultural development, spiritual development and religious education (Taylor, 2006). Values education has been a focus in many countries globally and Taylor's comparative overview indicates the current variety of approaches taken by 26 different countries in Europe and the United Kingdom in 1993.

2. Values education good practice schools project – national perspective

The Australian perspective on values education began in 2003 when the Australian Government funded a Values Education Study followed by widespread consultation on a draft framework. This framework acknowledged the significant existing background in values education in both government and non-government schools at that time, and also identified the need to develop effective approaches for the twenty-first century.

Nine common values emerged from the school communities engaged in this first stage of consultation: care and compassion; doing your best; fair go; freedom; honesty and trustworthiness; integrity; respect; responsibility and understanding; tolerance and inclusion (Department of Education Science and Training, 2003, p.4). Based on the identification of these nine common values, additional funding was made available for a much more detailed national implementation of values education in government and non-government schools throughout Australia.

Stage 1 - Implementing the National Framework for Values Education in Australian Schools followed with a report published in 2005. The 166 schools involved across Australia worked within their own contexts and developed a variety of values education projects. Findings from these projects led to recommendations that

identified principles of good practice in values education and informed the work of the increased number of schools participating in the subsequent Stage 2 of the project.

Stage 2 - Involved an additional 143 schools and distilled ten further principles of good practice in values education. New understandings that were not obvious in Stage 1 resulted in the following findings and recommendations as a result of Stage 2 research and evaluation (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2008, pp.9-12).

1. Establish and consistently use a common and shared values language across the school.

2. Use pedagogies that are values-focused and student-centred within the curriculum.

3. Develop values education as an integrated curriculum concept, rather than as a program, an event, or an addition to curriculum.

4. Explicitly teach values so students know what the values mean and how the values are lived.

5. Implicitly model values and explicitly foster the modelling of values.

6. Develop relevant and engaging values approaches connected to local and global contexts, and which offer real opportunity for student agency.

7. Use values education to consciously foster intercultural understanding, social cohesion and social inclusion.

8. Provide teachers with informed, sustained and targeted professional learning and foster their professional collaborations.

9. Encourage teachers to take risks in their approaches to values education.

10. Gather and monitor data for continuous improvement in values education.

During Stages 1 and 2 of the project, schools were supported by the development of specifically designed values curriculum and learning resources, funding of school forums, professional development for teachers and parents, and research by classroom teachers with associated universities. This pattern of support, material provision and research was evident across all stages of the values project initiative and allowed a rich shared level of understanding as the stages of the project progressed.

3. Impact of the values project on national curriculum development

The Australian Government's national Values Education initiative (2002-2010) as detailed thus far, highlights the strong links and explicit nature of values education as outlined in the *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians 2008* which states that 'schools play a vital role in the oral, spiritual and aesthetic development and wellbeing of young Australians). In particular it notes (pp.6-9) that schools have a responsibility to support young Australians so that they: develop personal values and attributes such as honesty, resilience, empathy and respect for others; have the knowledge, skills, understanding and values to establish and maintain healthy and satisfying lives; act with moral and ethical integrity; and are committed to national values of democracy, equity and justice and participate in Australia's civic life.

The current move to adopt a national Australian curriculum has emerged from the broad framework and underlying principles of the *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians 2008*. In this new curriculum, discipline areas form the central focus of what is to be taught in schools, in conjunction with a number of general capabilities and cross-curriculum priorities. In explicitly addressing the content of each learning area, the general capabilities form the knowledge, skills, behaviours and dispositions that, with the cross curriculum priorities, will equip young Australians to engage effectively and contribute successfully to living in a globalised world.

In writing about the realisation of the new Australian curriculum, Lovat and Toomey (2007) point out that teacher educators as well as teachers need to 'better understand how the double helix relationship between quality teaching and values education might help shape it' (p.21). Mitchell (2012) notes that: 'the outcomes of the multiple projects within this initiative [Values Education] have provided a solid foundation for implementation of values education within the Australian Curriculum.' Whereas formerly values education could be addressed as a separate area of learning, the new national Australian curriculum highlights the focus and impact of the general capabilities framework and three cross curriculum priorities, which are now embedded and an integral component of every subject area in the new Australian Curriculum.

4. Values education and connections to student wellbeing

An outcome of recent research on the impact of values education has been a greater understanding of its connection to student health and wellbeing, and the need to see productive pedagogy and positive education as the growth of the whole person: intellectual, social, moral and emotional (Wyn, 2009; Snyder, Lopez & Pedrotti, 2011). The current understanding of values education has now generated a number of new connections between values education and the notion that it should widen its scope from ethics, civics, and morality to a broader definition, based on an holistic approach to education which includes the wellbeing of the individual student living and contributing to an increasingly uncertain, pressurised and complex society.

A comprehensive values education review by Lovat et al. (2010) details the most up-to date Australian and international research including examples of good practice, where values education is analysed in the context of

student wellbeing and positive education. This handbook highlights new findings that place values education as an integral component in every aspect of student learning. Culled from extensive research and practice, this research provides evidence that:

Values education is an essential component in effective schooling.

There is a measurable link between values education and important educational measures.

Values education is now a contemporary and worldwide phenomenon.

Recent neuroscience and brain research confirms the links between values education and wellbeing.

Values education has proven to be synonymous with the new holistic approach to student and teacher wellbeing.

In the Australian context and building on the earlier Stages 1 and 2 of the Values Education Good Practice Schools Project, a range of additional materials were developed. These are designed to support schools in integrating values in curricular and extra-curricular contexts particularly as they relate to social skills, student responsibility, resilience and wellbeing.

The focus and development of this expanded view of the role of values education has resulted in new approaches to their study, which clearly sees them as a means of supporting student wellbeing, applies them to intercultural and global contexts, and provides learning opportunities through activities and projects within and outside the formal curriculum. The key impacts identified from the Values in Action Schools Project (2010) confirm the additional and

interrelated components that values education is now seen to address. They are consciousness, wellbeing, agency, connectedness and transformation.

A review of values education in the Australian context indicates that much has been achieved in a relatively short time frame. It has seen the development and articulation of support for students, teachers and the wider school community in the important responsibility of preparing students to understand and act responsibly in local, national and global contexts while at the same time developing resilience and skills for an unknown future.

5. Values education in Canberra (Australian Capital Territory)

Ten schools in the Canberra region applied for and received government funding for involvement as a group in the national Values Education Project. Specific aims for the project were determined by the group and allowed each school to engage in a variety of learning and research activities appropriate to their specific needs. The aims of the initial guiding project in the ACT were:

To develop a whole-school focus on student wellbeing and values education through curriculum implementation and staff development.

To improve pedagogy through embedding the Quality Teaching model.

To provide structures for embedding Values in Action into the school community.

To develop an awareness and practice of values education as core curriculum rather than as an additional program.

5.1 Research design - Stage 1

Research activities into the ACT Values Education Project began after initial information workshops were held in February and March 2009. The primary source of information from each of the school reports in May and September provided valuable background data to the variety of ways that individual schools utilised the funding provided. It was evident that the schools used an ongoing cycle of planning, implementation and evaluation closely linked to their specific needs in the area of Values Education. This guided and promoted professional change and supported the process of monitoring desired values educational outcomes throughout Stage 1.

5.2 Research design – Stage 2

Building on this earlier work, Stage 2 of the Project commenced. A research group was assembled from two local universities and key staff from the schools. From this group, two teams (Research Teams A and B) were formed for the conduct of the research and each team approached the field work from a different perspective. This paper reports on the outcomes of research conducted by Team A. The following aims were identified to further monitor desired values educational outcomes: to provide an evidence base for developing a whole school approach to values education, student wellbeing, resilience and positive education; to investigate the degree of awareness and practice of values education as core curriculum rather than as an additional program; and to identify the impact of the Values Education Project on students, teachers and the wider community.

Following completion of reports from each of the schools involved in the ACT Values and Student Wellbeing Project Stage 1, members of Research Team A and Research Team B visited the schools involved in the project. The two research teams worked collaboratively to develop a cohesive approach to the achievement of the research outcomes while utilising different approaches for the collection of data from schools and centres across early childhood, primary and secondary sectors. Qualitative and quantitative methodologies were utilised in this research project to capture the richness and impact of the work being conducted in schools and throughout the wider educational community.

Table 1 shows the number of students, teachers, Indigenous students and wider community personnel involved in the schools engaged in the project in the ACT.

Table 1: Participant categories

The data in Table 1 show the variety in school size and sector participating in the ACT Values Education Project. Community members included parents, ancillary and administrative staff, specialist learning support staff, school counsellors, pre-service teachers and members of the police force. In some schools the project started with a small key group of students, staff and the community, whereas in other schools the entire school population was engaged in the project. The ability of each school to choose the focus and direction of the project to suit their particular location provided a wide range of experiences and approaches in establishing best practice. 9

In addition to the initial aims guiding the project a number of contributing questions were addressed by each school at the end of Stage 2. These were:

In what ways is your project reflective of the school identity?

How is the project situated within the scope and sequence of your school-based curriculum and how is it aligned to the ACT Curriculum framework?

How will the reciprocal relationship between the project and the school community be established and maintained?

How does your project articulate and enact the values of the school community, e.g. what opportunities do students have to demonstrate values in action?

5.3 Interview procedure

Semi-focused discussions were conducted at each of the ten schools. The approximate time spent in each school was three hours and with participants' approval, all conversations were recorded and transcribed for further interrogation. In addition to the interviews, qualitative data prepared by teachers, students, schools and the researchers allowed a greater understanding of the progress of the project at each site. All sectors from early childhood to high school levels were represented in the qualitative phase of the research.

The following participants were interviewed: principals and deputy principals (4); teachers (15); administration staff (2); parents (10); students (30 individuals); and, whole class groups (2 classes).

5.4 Analysis

In order to construct meaning from the data, the analytical process in this research drew upon the primary data gathered from the interviews and the information gleaned from the many related documents collected during the period of the research project.

Throughout the research process, the interpretation of data has been informed by reference to relevant documents produced either before and/or after the commencement of the project, or by collecting specifically those that highlighted some significant evidence of learning and change. The process of collection included any documents deemed to have some relevance to the focus of the research and included students' writing, art work, creative drama and music related to values education and material produced for the wider community. In this way, greater

understanding of important elements of the change process, the sequence of events, the communication process, and general strategies adopted by schools was made possible. It also provided valuable information to be shared at the final Evaluation and Reflections Forum attended by all participating schools, parents and people from the wider community.

The systematic analysis of the data gathered proceeded in accordance with a qualitative approach in which the researcher works inductively searching for emergent patterns, as represented by categories, dimensions and classification schemes (Ezzy, 2002).

5.5 Results and discussion

From the analysis of the data, a number of themes emerged including:

Table 2: Themes and responses

It is of particular interest that the ten schools used a wide variety of creative pedagogical approaches in developing their values curriculum teaching and learning strategies.

In some schools a new whole-school Values Education Curriculum was developed.

Pre and post project surveys designed by school staff were used to inform classroom management/behaviour and future directions for Values Education.

ICT links were made with the Project (e.g. an E-Event with links to parents' home computers).

Use of a 'Values for the Week' computer screen display in the school foyer.

Keynote speakers were engaged, and professional development programs were provided for teachers, students, and parents.

Visual/artistic representation of values evident in art works, students' writing, journals, drama, music.

Staff and schools collected and reported on the progress of the project in their schools in different formats. Table 3 and Table 4 provide a statistical analysis in a government primary school of staff and whole school student responses to the following statements:

Table 3: Staff survey responses

Table 4: Student survey responses 11

5.6. Some revealing quotes

The following comments from a range of participants interviewed at each of the schools provide insights into the impact of the ACT Values Education and Student Wellbeing Project. In addition to teacher comments, they reveal the personal and professional transformation that can occur when parents and the wider community are involved in students' learning.

Explicit teaching of the Values has been the biggest difference, but there has also been considerable behavioural change in the students (*Yr 5 Teacher.*)

Staff are now more aware and more confident in taking a Values focus and applying it in their classes (*Deputy*).

The E-Event on Values allowed me to see what the school was doing by logging on at home. It just blew me away! (*Parent*).

My daughter talks about Values at home all the time, and draws attention to using them in a practical way with her older siblings (*Parent*).

Talking about integrity and tolerance has helped me to understand other people. This is important because it encourages everyone to join in and gives everyone a fair go

(Yr 6 student).

Thank you for not only teaching spelling, but also teaching them to live a good life and show respect and pretty much all the values we teach at home (Parent).

Values are things that you need to do. They are very nice and very important like getting along, be safe, be fair (Yr 1 student).

The Values Education Project has had a considerable impact on the school - especially in regard to school culture – affecting both students and staff and their behaviour, attitudes and practices to a significant extent (High school teachers).

• Our VESW project on the implementation of positive education has had a significant impact on our students - especially with respect to student leadership and participation. It is hard to tell if it is related to our project but parent involvement in the school has also increased this year, along with a more positive perception of the school in the community. I believe our Values Education project has enhanced this (Teachers K-Yr 10 school).

6. Conclusion and future directions

Classroom-focused research and professional dialogue are important factors for successful and positive outcomes for teachers and students. Research undertaken during this project highlights the considerable benefit of classroom practitioners designing and sharing professional learning. The dissemination of the project findings and its recommendations acknowledge the work conducted under this Values Education Project. In addition, these findings provide a sound basis for the implementation of the new national Australian Curriculum, where values education is now required to address a much wider scope of understandings that include student wellbeing, agency, connectedness and transformation (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations 2010).

As part of the educational goals outlined in the most recent ACARA (2012, p.8) statement *The Shape of the Australian Curriculum: Version 4.0*, confident and creative individuals will, among other things:

have a sense of self-worth, self-awareness and personal identity that enables them to manage their emotional, mental, spiritual and physical wellbeing;

have a sense of optimism about their lives and the future—are enterprising, show initiative and use their creative abilities;

develop personal values and attributes such as honesty, resilience, empathy and respect for others; and

have the knowledge, skills, understandings and values to establish and maintain healthy, satisfying lives.

Schools, teachers, students, and members of the wider community who have been involved in this project are ideally placed to understand and embed this expanded view of values education in the national Australian Curriculum areas developed to date in English, Mathematics, Science, History and Geography. The Values Education Project has provided a vision for enhanced quality of education in all schools and, with its elaboration into the new Australian

Curriculum, this should assist in the realisation of the ACARA (2012) goals of education by ensuring the educational needs of all young people are addressed within a socially inclusive and positive learning environment that engenders a sense of optimism for the future and maintenance of healthy and satisfying lives.

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