

Student Action About Values

In 2005-2006, grade 4 and 5 students from a cluster of six Catholic primary schools in the Manningham local government area in Melbourne (that covers Bulleen, Doncaster, Templestowe and Donvale), are investigating and taking action around **values**.

The schools are using a Student Action Team approach to make what could be abstract ideas into a concrete and practical area for student investigation and action. The students are working in their individual schools, and then meeting as a cluster at inter-school Student Forums to look at what values are held to be important by families, schools and the wider community, seeing what these values mean and how important people think they are, observing what people do based on these values (or lack of them) and then designing action to make sure that improvements happen.

The cluster has been funded by an Australian Government Values Education Grant through the Curriculum Corporation. The project began in mid 2005 and will continue until the end of May 2006.

Student Forum One

Initially students in each of the six schools brainstormed about what values are and what they thought the important values were in their school communities. They brought these first perceptions to an inter-school Student Forum and shared them with other students and with teachers.

At this Forum, students were also introduced to the nine national values that the Federal Government has defined. They mapped the values that they had identified against these, and in most cases reached agreement that they were talking about similar things. However the students also decided to change the title and definition of some of the national values for their investigation. The students also discussed what the operation of these values might look like within their schools and wider communities.

At this point, the students made an important decision: that they wanted to investigate this topic further, with a view to **doing something** about making sure that action was taken around these values: *if these are important values, they said, we should be making sure that action ... from our homes to our Governments ... is in line with them.*

Researching Values

Student Action Teams were set up in each of the schools. Each Student Action Team chose three of the nine values to examine in more detail, with two schools looking at each value. In their schools, some Student Action Teams worked within a single class with a teacher, while others were drawn from several classes across the year level.

The Teams started by discussing their chosen values further, writing definitions to show what they meant to them and asking others about this too) and developing 'Y' charts and similar devices to show what each value *looked, sounded and felt* like.

The Teams then designed various forms of data collection to explore these values within their communities. They were challenged to think at three levels: homes or families, schools and community. They surveyed students and parents and community members, they interviewed people, they observed behaviour in the school and through the local media. Some of the survey

questions asked respondents about how important they thought these values were; other questions asked about changes over time, or whether people thought they and others acted in accordance with these values.

Research Workshop

A student Research Workshop was held in October, and this allowed students to discuss the investigations that they were doing, and gain some new skills in research design, data collection and analysis of information. In particular, some students learned how to use computer software to graph results and display findings, how to look at comments and other forms of qualitative data, and how to get information from community sources. In each team, the aim was to have someone who became an 'expert' in the different areas of research and who would then share that expertise with other students in the Team.

Student Forum Two

The second major Student Forum was held late in 2005. Here students presented the results of their investigations. Initially they paired with the school that was looking at the same value, and the two teams of students reached agreement on the definition of the value. They then compared their research and findings and produced a poster summarising their work to date.

Students then went on a 'guided visualisation' in which they each imagined a future world where the specific value that they were investigating was strongly in evidence, and compared this to what they saw today. In school teams they then shared their concerns, and started to define some priorities for action: *What big objectives do we have? What action is best suited to achieving that?*

Finally the groups began to brainstorm possible actions that the Teams could take in 2006. The Teams will now meet again to talk about possible forms of action, define directions more precisely and begin their action phase.

Sue Cahill is project coordinator. For further information, contact her at St Charles Borromeo Primary School, Serpells Road, Templestowe 3106 Vic Ph: 03 9842 7634; e-mail: scahill@stcharls.melb.catholic.edu.au

Teaching and Learning

The operation of the Student Action Teams in these six schools has not only had an effect on the students' learning and understanding about Values. It has also involved teachers in some reassessment of teaching and learning approaches.

Here two of the teachers write about their reflections on the first part of the journey:

Being Challenged

When Sue Cahill invited me to be a part of this project, I honestly did not really know what I had accepted. At the time I probably accepted on blind faith – knowing that Sue had worked incredibly hard on writing this submission – but I knew from past experience that Sue followed very passionate causes. So initially I was happy to come aboard.

I often refer to this project now as being in a 'love/hate' relationship!!! There have been so many aspects of this project that have challenged me both personally and professionally. It has taken me out of my protected and at times small world as a 'primary teacher' into a larger, wider sphere only made up of not only professionals, but people coming from many and varied walks of life.

Having experienced Student Action Teams in the past, through the eyes of my son, I knew that it was a model that I believed in and was excited to be a part of. I was also very keen to be working again more closely with small groups of children.

What I hadn't anticipated was how anxious I became when I realised that I had no idea or maybe 'control' over what would or could evolve at the end!! Many times, when I was feeling frustrated, I would compare the two SATs and would always come up with the response: "theirs is so concrete (raising money for a school in PNG)" and mine was soooooo abstract. It took me ages and many, many hours of debriefing with Sue and the other cluster coordinators to allow the seeds that had been sown to slowly shoot. Once I relaxed and became more affirmed (took the pressure off myself) that it was the **process** that was more important than having a 'super **product**' at the end, I was then much more open to enjoy and develop better relationships with the children.

An insight most definitely for me was that I also realised that they had picked up on my 'tension' and consequently they became tense and unproductive too. When I relaxed, they relaxed also. I also laughed more, and they laughed too. It set up a ripple effect. Children who were not achieving started to really shine. This was also evident at our Cluster Forums. The children now really do believe that they have a voice and can make a difference. I now believe that too.

Geraldine Butler

St Charles Borromeo Primary School, Templestowe

Valuing Values

On reflection, I find it easiest to categorise the project into three distinct areas: the **values** component, **student action team** and my **personal professional growth**.

The **Values** component of the project was a process that made (or attempted to make) the intangible tangible. If a group of teachers were asked to develop a curriculum to lead prep students to not only an understanding of integrity, but also how they could effect change to develop that value in the community, I'm not sure it would be met favourably. But working with a group of 9 to 11 year olds to explore values enabled us to see, with simplicity and clarity, the words and actions existing in our community. The students' understanding of some quite esoteric concepts was extraordinary.

The **Student Action Team (SAT)** component continually reminded me how blessed we are to have the opportunity to engage with the kids of today. Facilitating a process that empowered all who participated to be better people and lead others to be better people has been a deeply satisfying experience.

On reflection, the greatest teaching point in the SAT framework was the continual challenge to listen actively to what the students had to say and to allow for the information exchange between students to be the crux of our gatherings – not merely an introduction or reflection at the end. By developing a list of 'group operation criteria' with the students, it enabled them to operate independently within the boundaries of how a good group operates. By taking away all of the peripheral 'stuff' that prevents student groups from succeeding, the students took control and developed a focus on the dialogue rather than the elements that often cause distraction.

Some examples of this structure are:

- One person speaking at a time;
- Everyone's voice is valued;
- Recording thoughts and suggestions;
- Working within a time limit;
- Rotating group leadership; and
- Seeking assistance when necessary.

A strong framework enables the students to explore, learn and understand in a variety of ways. It gives students the scaffold they need to take risks and, when things don't go exactly as expected, a soft place to land.

Personally, my **learning** has been bountiful!

As an educator, I have always held as sacrosanct the need to put students at the centre of all I do: that I must ensure I don't teach them just knowledge but teach them the skills to understand the knowledge; that good curriculum allows for this to happen while superficial curriculum allows students to regurgitate facts. It's the connections and relationships that students identify that show us the depth of understanding they have come to. So if this has been my history, then what is my future?

The adage, "If you always do what you've always done, you'll always get what you've always got" is so true. However, this year we have attempted to ensure that hasn't been the case. Not only have I operated within a completely new structure within the school by drawing students from six different classrooms, working with multi-age action teams, meeting and communicating with five other schools and outside agencies, **but** the

team of students and I have attempted to effect change in our community by **valuing values**. In the years to come, who knows how successful we will be. But in the immediate future, I know it has made me a better teacher. It has made the students believe they have a valid and important voice. And the project has promoted a structure of support and collegiality between schools.

Michael Fullan says, "It isn't until schools really care about the success of other schools in their area that they are truly successful." (www.michaelfullan.ca)

Leesa Duncan

Curriculum Coordinator, St. Clement of Rome School, Bulleen