

Abbotsleigh, New South Wales – a Service Learning approach to developing civic and social skills and values education

The project

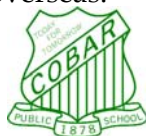
This project was a collaboration between Abbotsleigh and Cobar and Nyngan Public Schools. It involved a visit of 25 NSW country students to Sydney to mix with Abbotsleigh Junior School students and 31 leaders of Abbotsleigh Senior School towards the end of 2002. Through planned activities students enjoyed each other's company and experienced development in their values systems. Much planning and careful thought went into consideration of how the project would best achieve the desired outcomes.

School profiles



Abbotsleigh

Abbotsleigh is an independent Anglican school for girls in the Anglican Diocese of Sydney. The school educates girls from Kindergarten to Year 12 on two sites in Wahroonga: the Junior School (K–6), and the Middle (7–9) and Upper (10–12) Schools. Approximately 150 of the school population of 1380 girls are boarders (Years 7–12) coming from rural properties, regional cities and smaller towns in NSW and from overseas.



Cobar Public School

Established in 1878, Cobar Public School is situated in the western part of NSW. Three stage-based teaching and learning teams provide a comprehensive education for 310 students drawn from the town and nearby properties.

Cobar School of Distance Education is situated on the grounds of Cobar Public School and services an area equivalent to the size of Tasmania. Students from Kindergarten to Year 6 receive lessons via VHF radio, written sets of work and home visits.



Nyngan Public School

Nyngan Public School is situated 160 km west of Dubbo. The population of the school is 187.

Most of the children have not been out of Nyngan except when their families are able to afford a school excursion. Often children will tell their parents that they do not wish to take part in an excursion because they are concerned about the impact on the finances of the family.

Factors stimulating the need for the project, and local and school contexts

The “Outback-City Experience 2002” was one of the first major projects undertaken in the developing Service Learning Program at Abbotsleigh. Abbotsleigh has a strong history of service. Its aim for participating in Service Learning is to enhance that ethic and to integrate some of the service experiences in the school curriculum so that outcomes are met through meaningful service projects. These service projects should meet a community need, and allow students to develop and use skills both inside and outside the classroom. Through reflection on their service experience, students can also make sense of real-life situations. Service Learning also provides co-curricular opportunities to the school and the students.

Abbotsleigh’s Service Learning approach

Abbotsleigh has a strong belief in the value of Service Learning as a pedagogy with much to offer in the personal, spiritual, emotional, cultural, physical and academic development of our students. The program is supported by the School Council and Headmistress as the school is working on developing staff expertise and community awareness.

Values Education and Service Learning are integrally related. US research suggests the essential elements to support effective values education in schools are student involvement and Service Learning. Students in Service Learning develop a sense of caring and responsibility and they undergo personal and social development, becoming

resilient and responsible citizens. The students involved in this project have certainly moved along this lifelong journey.

In this context, the need for the “Outback-City Experience 2002” project was two-fold.

Abbotsleigh wanted to identify a Service Learning project that provided challenges for its students, particularly potential student leaders. The school wanted to undertake a project that required the Years 10–12 girls to:

- Accept responsibility
- Undertake a leadership experience that required them to function in a less structured and less clearly defined way than their previous leadership experiences
- Work hard in a “hands on” way
- Have active involvement with children perceived as less financially and geographically privileged, and people with whom they would not normally interact
- “Open their eyes” to the perspectives of others.

The school was also looking for an opportunity to broaden the experiences of its Junior School girls who also have limited experience of difference, especially across the socioeconomic spectrum. The need for this was highlighted early in the week of the project by a few Junior School girls’ reaction to differences they encountered based on speech and socioeconomic factors. The school wanted to undertake a project that would enable city students to develop empathy for and understanding of the situations of others.

In addition, as Abbotsleigh is a school with approximately 150 boarders, the program seemed appropriate for strengthening its understanding of, and relationships with, country students, staff, schools and communities. This would assist the school’s day students to relate to the boarders and help break down any barriers that exist. It would show the school values its rural students and their lifestyles.

Through this project the school was also able to:

- Provide the Cobar and Nyngan students with “time out” from drought-ravaged properties and towns at a time of severe drought and related economic problems.

It also provided a number of them with “time out” from families experiencing difficult times

- Facilitate an opportunity for the students from Cobar and Nyngan Public Schools and Cobar Distance Education to meet and form friendships based on common experiences and bonds, that would hopefully be maintained after the project ended
- Introduce country students to the opportunities available to them in the city and show them that large cities are manageable places. Inevitably, country children face difficult decisions about their futures in this time of declining opportunities in rural areas.

Thus Abbotsleigh hoped to enhance all participants’ understanding of difference, diversity, and indeed, similarity across our nation through this project, while also allowing them to simply have fun.

Despite Abbotsleigh being an independent school and espousing values of a particular religious dimension, Cobar and Nyngan Public Schools were delighted to join the collaboration with the view that the three schools have similar objectives. The Principals saw the project offered benefits for their students as well as Abbotsleigh’s; as such an exchange would allow the students to see that each person can bring something special and worthwhile to the project. It is expected that the schools will pursue further opportunities to share an exchange in the future.

Values Education – definitions and assumptions

Abbotsleigh

Abbotsleigh aims to instil and nurture positive values, by working with students, parents and the community to develop responsible and caring people able to take their place as active citizens. Such values are the school’s core and direct everything that happens at the school. The school’s Anglican foundations inform its values in policies, curriculum, co-curricular activities and daily interactions. These values are transmitted

through instruction, through discussion, by example, by way of challenge and in everyday exchanges. The school educates the whole person, facilitating the development in the students of the skills required in relating to others and for membership of the community.

It is through experience, observation and modelling that Abbotsleigh develops its Values Education. This Values Education can be defined as the development of lifelong attitudes and values that will enable its students to assume their places as active, responsible and caring citizens with the desire to serve their community. They will be tolerant of diversity and difference and able to respect the perspectives of others. The school aims to educate its students to be the whole person and hopes its values will be reflected in all dimensions of their lives.

The project assumed that Values Education:

- Is an ongoing, lifelong educational experience and that this project could only assist students in moving along the continuum of developing their values structure
- Encompasses the education of the whole person and pervades all the experiences of the person
- Takes place in a diversity of media – experience, observation, modelling of appropriate behaviours and values, through healthy human interactions, through the discovery of the experience of others – and can be also addressed through curricula
- Cannot necessarily be taught – but rather, often happens via osmosis if the setting and climate are right
- Can make an enormous affirming contribution to the lives of the students when carefully considered.

Cobar Public School

At Cobar Public School, Values Education is woven within the fabric of many lessons and is often taught within the context of multicultural and personal development lessons. Approximately 80% of students undertake special religious education as an additional part of their moral development. This is supported by the local community.

The effect of values education within the school can be seen more through the absence or reduction of negative actions as much as the presence of positive ones. Low levels of racial intolerance and a lack of gender stereotypes vindicate the values taught within the school.

Broadly defined, values education at Cobar Public School and Cobar School of Distance Education is the instillation of social ethics that will allow our students to participate effectively in and contribute to society.

Nyngan Public School

Nyngan Public School fosters the common values of the importance of learning, the rights of others, the need for working cooperatively with others, and of a commitment to social justice and opportunity. These are promoted through the curriculum provided by the school – in HSIE, in Creative Arts, in Science and Technology and in Personal Development.

School policies in welfare, discipline and conflict resolution also contribute to the students' understanding of the values underpinning the school and society.

It is clear that the three schools believe in the same core values as important to their students and our communities: respect for and understanding of the self, respect for others, loyalty, care for others, truth and justice. It is with such a common ground that they were able to work with each other and their students.

Project objectives

Abbotsleigh initiated this project as it believes in the importance of the development of the whole student as *an independent, constructive and compassionate world citizen with a will to serve others* (Abbotsleigh Statement of Purpose).

One way of enhancing the engagement of its students with their community, from the local to global scale is through Service Learning and Values Education which the school believes are integrally related.

Service Learning, and particularly this project, had the potential to facilitate personal development and growth, interpersonal development, notions of responsibility, collegiality and improved community relations – all of these facets form the backbone of both Service Learning and Values Education – for all involved: students, staff, parents, and their communities.

Key aims and objectives

For all groups involved, the aims and objectives of the project have both similarities and differences. The essence of the project was the exchange of life experiences between country and city children and between education institutions and systems. These exchanges aimed to contribute to the development of values such as tolerance, understanding, empathy and a sense of social justice in the parties participating.

The project also aimed to “open the eyes” of all participants and to broaden their experiences. For the country students, it was about showing them the opportunities available to them in the city and that large cities are manageable places. Inevitably country children face difficult decisions about their futures in this time of declining opportunities in rural areas. For the city children it was about learning other ways of life exist beyond city limits and that these ways of life, although different, are as valuable as their own. The project also hoped to show that “kids are kids” no matter where they live and what life experiences they have. This, in turn, would allow all the participants to learn to accept others for “who they are” rather than for “what they have”.

Short-term outcomes

- To enhance all participants’ understanding of difference, diversity and, indeed, similarity of children across the nation
- To establish a safe “learning” environment so the project experience would be positive and inviting for all participants as these are the best conditions for personal growth
- To give all students involved the experience of cross-curriculum activities including drama, music, physical activity and IT

- To allow all students to plan, make decisions and implement aspects of the project:
 - country children to plan cultural exchange, deciding how they can bring the “Outback” to the city. Some country children would be away from home for the first time – they would learn to deal with situations without the direct support of family while away
 - city children to plan what they could do to demystify the city and make the visitors feel comfortable as they learned about what the city had to offer
- To involve Years 10–11 Abbotsleigh students in budgeting and fundraising for the project – allowing them to develop public relations skills and confidence as they approached groups for sponsorship, as well as developing their practical skills such as letter writing, monitoring a budget and time management
- To have all students acquire or enhance relationship skills. It was hoped that this would happen as students participated in the diverse experiences offered. Senior Abbotsleigh students were to work at facilitating positive and fruitful relationships between themselves and the visitors and also between the school’s younger students and the visitors. From positive relationships and experiences it was hoped longer-term values education outcomes would flow.

Long-term outcomes

It was intended that this project would contribute to the longer-term attainment of other values education outcomes. Students would find themselves drawing on their inner resources or learning to deal with new situations.

- Development of values is a life-long experience. The project would contribute to the development of the following values in all participants:
 - Respect for the individual and self
 - Value of inner self (and specifically, a contemplation of specific issues such as those facing rural dwellers, urban dwellers, those whose lives are isolated, those with different skills, those having a less affluent lifestyle)
 - Empathy

- Tolerance
- Fairness
- Compassion
- Honesty
- Responsibility/social responsibility
- Respect for diversity
- Goal setting and direction
- Preparation for life
- Caring for others
- Ability to face challenge/Resilience
- Civic engagement – the duty and obligation to work with others; including participation in processes that impact on the lives of others and democratic processes that consider all stakeholders and their perspectives
- Staff of all three schools would benefit from the professional development of discussion and sharing. Visiting teachers would also have the opportunity to visit and observe city schools to gain ideas which might be implemented in their own schools
- To develop longer-term partnerships with community members and organisations who believe in the value of this and future projects
- To develop an ongoing collaboration between the three schools so that further understanding of each other can be built and future students will be able to experience similar projects and hence, personal growth

Key values addressed

- Respect for the individual and self
- Value of inner self
- Empathy
- Tolerance
- Fairness
- Compassion

- Honesty
- Responsibility/social responsibility
- Respect for diversity
- Goal setting and direction
- Preparation for life
- Caring for others
- Ability to face challenge/Resilience
- Civic engagement

Addressing these values occurred indirectly through the engagement of all participants, enabling them to draw on or develop the values through the activities and interactions with others.

Reflections

Abbotsleigh

For staff, review of this work has primarily taken the form of discussion. This has involved consideration of what was successful about the project and what might have been handled differently. They have discussed the observable outcomes in their students and analysed data obtained from surveys and written comments from numerous stakeholders.

Reflection is one of the vital components of Service Learning programs, for through reflection, students are assisted in making sense of the service or interactions and the outcomes. In fact, without reflection, Service Learning has little merit as a pedagogical tool.

For student leaders, reflection has taken the form of surveys, questionnaires, discussion and celebration. Reflection activities were provided for the leaders at all stages of the project.

Immediately after the departure of the visitors a debriefing session was held for the leaders. This was a time of quiet reflection where they voiced their feelings and suggestions for improvement of the week at a practical, management level (eg smaller groups, more preparation time for city students, more free time). However, the conversation kept reverting to feelings and emotion:

“This was the best thing I have ever done in my life.”

Year 11 Leader

“They (country students) were so enthusiastic about the simple things we take for granted.”

Year 11 Leader

Two of the leaders were given the opportunity to speak to the school at the celebration assembly about their experiences. The response from students and many staff was extremely positive with girls offering to organise another “Experience” for the end of this year. Many others were also keen to participate in such an activity.

Responses to concerns expressed by some members of staff

- “Leaders should not be given certificates for service.”

The experience should be considered as a recognition of the difference the leaders had made in the lives of others, a positive reinforcement for what the leaders had done, and a memory of a significant activity in their lives – instead of an opportunity for students to do service in order to receive a certificate for their CVs.

- “This is not the first time something like this has been done at the school, we have always been involved in service.’

This is about the “marketing” of the projects. The school always goes to great lengths to acknowledge its strong history and ethic of service. But because it is taking a new “slant” through this Service Learning project, a different approach and links to Values Education should be articulated specifically.

- “Anxiety about differences being spoken about in assembly.”

Developing the ability to deal with difference was one of the outcomes and it is obvious that the school should assist its students in achieving it. This is not something that will happen overnight, but it does require work in Values Education and Service Learning to give the students experiences that enrich their lives and assist them to accept difference and diversity. This must commence at Kindergarten level.

What worked in this project?

- The students actually “doing” the project themselves – the “hands-on” approach allowed leaders and younger students to work together and interact in activities.
- Relationships between the students were developed – predominantly between the leaders and country visitors, but also between leaders and their younger schoolmates. Some strong friendships also developed between city and country children. These relationships are maintained through letter writing and email. They present an opportunity for the links to be cemented and also for leaders to continue to model good values for younger folk.

- The personal growth of students was phenomenal.

“One aspect of the week, which took me by complete surprise, was humility. I didn’t expect a few kids in Year 5 and 6 to change my perspective of life, but that’s what they did. When we took them to the school Aquatic Centre, a few kids asked; ‘Is this the Sydney town pool?’ They just couldn’t comprehend that this huge swimming pool was only for one school. One of the boys, from Nyngan said; ‘Well, our town diving boards are higher!’...

“...but we were also saddened by the realisation that what many of the kids were going home to what was not most of us here would have to confront on a daily basis. We unanimously agreed that they had taught us, although they didn’t realise it, to be appreciative of everything we have, because we do take so much for granted.”

- Country children were positively exposed to the city and the opportunities it offers.

“The social benefits are great for the children from Nyngan. They find out that Sydney is not a scary place, that city kids are great kids, and there is world outside Nyngan. A lot of Nyngan people grow up in Nyngan and never leave, the children of this generation are going to have to spread their wings and break that mould if they want employment. This program may be the start of the confidence to do just that. If it changes the life of just one child, it will have been successful.”

Marg Haley, Principal, Nyngan Public School

- There have been very positive connections made within the Abbotsleigh community through this project.

Parents and other contacts and a number of staff have gained an insight into the value of Service Learning and Values Education and are very keen to be further involved in other projects. They understand what the project is trying to do and see the value for and growth in the students.

This project brought Service Learning and Values Education to the head of discussion at Abbotsleigh. There has been a shift in culture, which recognises Service Learning and Values Education as important; this was already happening but has been more obvious since this project. For example, in Pastoral Care students will undertake a service experience with thorough preparation and reflection. Their tutors are actually excited about the prospect of working with the students and being a part of their experiences. People believe in service, community engagement and the associated values. In fact, people recognise the responsibility to serve and also the need to serve – partially fulfilling the human need of being appreciated and wanted. Whether all this stems directly from this project is debatable, but it has certainly contributed.

- Issues were resolved through persistence, communication. The success of this is reflected in the fact that all three schools are keen to develop the collaboration between them and their communities. The fact that they share common goals was important and meant that they were able to appreciate each other's point of view.

Other comments

- Perhaps one of the risks of such a project was that it might inadvertently reinforce the belief that some things are beyond the reach of some children. It is important to reiterate the values of respect for self, respect for others, acceptance of difference, setting of goals, and the fact that it is the "who we are" and not the "what we have" which is important. That is also something for the broader community to address.
- And from Bill Field, Principal, Cobar Public School
"The desired outcome of 'Outback – City Experience 2002' was to establish personal relationships between city and country schools. I believe that the

project has allowed us to work towards the outcome but that we have yet to achieve it. Certainly temporary relationships were established. However, to cement the relationship between isolated rural schools and a large metropolitan school it would be necessary to have a reciprocal arrangement so that students from the larger metropolitan school can become immersed in the life that many of our rural students have as their day to day existence.

“The more difficult outcomes to evaluate are those involving the attitudes of the students towards city life. Most of the students are more positive about city life following their experience. Attitudes involving career opportunities and lifestyle choices would best be assessed using a long-term study.

“With the limited outcomes based data able to be produced from the perspective of a remote rural school in this project, I would still consider the project to be a success and look forward to continuing to work towards the outcome of establishing lasting relationships between the schools.”

What didn't work – lessons learnt in this project

- Acceptance does not happen quickly and people cannot be changed overnight. Therefore it is important that schools are persistent with Service Learning and Values Education – and provide a diverse means and challenges for the students. It can take a lifetime to develop and consolidate one's values systems. Indeed, some people take longer than others.
- The schools cannot force people to act and/or respond in certain ways – instead the schools can only provide experiences, model appropriate behaviours and expose the students to diversity and difference.
- Research into the success of the project for the country children was difficult:
 - Many have moved into secondary school and are therefore difficult to contact.
 - The project occurred at the end of the school year and so following up was difficult.

- The country schools were not under quite the same pressure to write the report – although for Abbotsleigh the support and assistance from Bill Field and Marg Haley has been wonderful.
- Some members of country communities had different perceptions of the project.
- Communicating over distance was difficult, although email was adequate. The Director of Service Learning travelled to Cobar to establish the collaboration, which was useful. Communication was as good as it could have been under the circumstances.

One last insight from Abbotsleigh

Service Learning and Values Education programs must be well planned and well considered. All sections of the school must be kept informed and involved if possible to ensure the maximum chance of success. Developing positive relations with the wider community is also important.

It is also important to promote programs and projects with increased vigour – we must show that service and values are important to all of us.