

# **Albany Primary School, Western Australia – building resilience and civic and social skills through the Tribes® program**

## **School profile**

Albany Primary School is an inner city school with a population of approximately 500 students. Traditionally we have catered for a majority of children from a white, semi professional/professional background. This demographic has changed considerably over the past 5-10 years. We now enrol a greater number of children with “working class” or non-working parents, more Aboriginal students and a greater diversity of cultures. In the last two years we have also enrolled a significant number of students who were attending private schools in the area (both religious and alternative).

Over the years we have witnessed a disturbing lack of tolerance on the part of our students. New children were often not readily included and there were children who were deliberately excluded because they were “poor” or in some other way did not fit in. We wanted our students to realise that all people deserve respect.

In the past values education has not been approached in an organised, cohesive manner. Teachers have been guided by the Curriculum Framework but there has not been a common language or understanding throughout the school community. Over the past two years a few teachers have been “dabbling” in the use of Tribes® as a vehicle to establish core values. This has now expanded such that the majority of teachers and students are using common language to discuss these values. This terminology, based on five core agreements: Mutual Respect, Attentive Listening, Right to Pass, Expressing Appreciations: No Put Downs, and Personal Best is now being introduced into reporting to parents and is used to describe students personal and social development.

Religious Education is taught from Years 1 to 3 and is delivered by visiting secular Religious Education teachers and members of the Bahai faith.

## **Definitions and assumptions**

Tribes® recognises that the skills needed for success in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century are different to those needed in the Industrial Age and that it is incumbent on educators to assist students gain these skills, and to develop the personal qualities needed to ensure success. Tribes® 21<sup>st</sup> Century skills are summarised as: “Basic Skills- reads, writes, performs arithmetic and mathematical operations, listens and speaks well. Thinking skills- thinks critically, makes decisions, solves problems, visualises, knows how to learn and reason. Personal qualities- displays responsibility, self-esteem, sociability, self management, integrity, and honesty.”

Issues of morality, ethics and social justice are addressed regularly as part of the daily dialogue established in every classroom. They are enacted on the small stage of the safe learning community and extrapolated to cover issues within the broader community.

In our school, Values Education is becoming part of our everyday dialogue. We believe that Values Education should not be a “pull-out” program. It needs to become innate in everything we do. It is displayed in how we interact with all sectors of our community. It is expressed most powerfully in the Tribes Agreements, Mutual Respect, Attentive Listening (with your hearts and your ears), Expressing Appreciations/ No Put Downs and Personal Best/Personal Responsibility.

## **Project objectives**

Tribes® classrooms are student centred, use co-operative learning methods, use multiple learning styles, use interactive learning experiences and actively promote the creation and sustaining of a positive learning environment.

- **Student self esteem and self confidence**

*Anecdotal evidence from Point Lonsdale Primary School in Vic is that following the implementation of Tribes® at their school student achievement improved because the students:*

- 1. feel included and appreciated by their peers and teachers*
- 2. are respected for their different abilities, cultures, gender, interests and dreams*
- 3. Are actively involved in their own learning*
- 4. have positive expectations from others that they will succeed*

*These factors are all important for the development of self esteem and self confidence and the promotion of these factors is an integral part of the Tribes® process.*

- **Student connectedness to school**

The initial stages of implementing Tribes® focuses on building relationships, connectedness, conflict resolution and student engagement through inclusion. The building of 'community' is one of the major aims of Tribes. It is done through: Dedication to resolving rather than avoiding uncomfortable problems and conflicts that tend to separate members, learning and practicing collaborative skills, agreements about how to treat each other and time to reflect on the progress of the community.

- **Student behaviour management**

One of the reasons for inappropriate behaviour is a sense of not being 'included'. Tribes focuses on building inclusion and trust with the aim to limit feelings of vulnerability and defensiveness and ultimately to limit the need to "grab influence' through inappropriate behaviour.

- **Student responsibility**

Students are expected to take responsibility for their own learning and are held accountable for their learning and their actions

- **Student resilience and well being**

Resiliency cannot be taught, what we can do is work towards a daily environment which is abundant in protective factors. Protective factors which help develop a resilient child are a major thrust of the Tribes® process. These are factors are summarised as: caring and support, positive expectations and active participation.

- **A safe learning environment at the school**

Through a step by step sequence of strategies, Tribes® develops an on-going culture in the school facilitated and monitored by the students in their peer groups (tribes). These peer groups establish a safe environment where real learning can take place.

- **Student commitment to community and civic participation**

Spencer Kagan (Co-operative Learning, 1994) noted that "Students today do not come to school with the same pro-social values once common: they are not as

respectful, caring, helpful, or co-operative as they were twenty years ago." He refers to this as a 'socialisation void'. We have started to address this "void" at our school, and believe that we have done the groundwork necessary to implement Tribes® on a whole school basis.

In the short term we will be focussing on change processes relating to relationships and developing a caring culture which will foster inclusion. The purpose of Tribes is to assure the healthy development of every student so that each has the knowledge, skills and resiliency to be successful in a rapidly changing world.

Long term we hope that our school will be recognised as a Learning Community which Peter Senge, *The Fifth Discipline, The Art and Practice of the Learning Community* would describe as "...groups of people who are really committed to something larger than themselves and larger than their personal desires. They support each other in the way that real friendships support each other. They tell the truth to each other and they are continually in a mode of inquiry, knowing that nobody knows and everyone can learn continually."

### **Project activities and methods**

In the eighteen months prior to this phase of the project a core group of staff (those who were already interested in Tribes) trialled parts of the process. We engaged a consultant to assist us with the theoretical background to the process and to assist us to implement some of the strategies. During this phase we also developed a new Student Council structure and School Parliament. The School Parliament meets twice a term and discusses issues raised in class Community Circles. (Community Circles are a vital part of the Tribes process and are used on a daily basis to open dialogue in the classroom and allow every student an opportunity to be heard)

Many teachers discuss the agreements with parents during teacher/parent interviews. At these interviews the student indicates where they feel they are at in terms of the agreements. This has been a very enlightening process and has been very well received by parents, some of whom have indicated that they are now aware of aspects of the agreements that they need to keep themselves.

Another teacher, uses the agreements as the basis for her class discipline policy. This has eliminated the need for negatively worded class rules. Everything hinges on “Which agreement did you break?” Specialist teachers who teach many different classes a week find this system very useful.

The language of the agreements is rapidly becoming common throughout the school with student, parents and staff using it. The process has been an empowering one and there have been a number of anecdotes related in the staff room which indicate that there have already been some major changes in the ways students are treating each other.

We first became interested in Tribes® in 2000 after most of our staff attended Cooperative Learning workshops conducted by leading Canadian educator Barrie Bennett. Barrie recommended Tribes® as being one of his favourite programmes. On examination we found that Tribes® was multi-faceted. Values are just one of the issues/areas of pedagogy addressed. We did not make the decision to use Tribes® lightly. Over the past two years we have read the book, trialled aspects of the process, engaged a consultant to give us an overview (he had completed the training himself but is not an accredited trainer) and formed a small group to further investigate Tribes®.

The mission of Tribes® is :

*To assure the healthy development of every child so that each has the knowledge, skills and resiliency to be successful in a rapidly changing world.*

The goal for a Tribes® school is:

*To engage all teachers, administrators, students, and families in working together as a learning community that is dedicated to caring and support, active participation, and positive expectations for all students.*

This year The Department of Education WA published a document called Pathways to Mental Health and Wellbeing. We were impressed by the ability of Tribes to address many of the key areas of concern in the report

The other values education programmes we looked at were not as comprehensive as Tribes®. The strength of the Tribes® s process is that it is innate in everything we do. It is not a “tack –on” project which would get dropped off when people get busy.

## **Evaluating the outcomes: data**

The first and most obvious outcome has been a renewed enthusiasm among the staff. Students and staff are thinking more about the way they relate to each other, and remind each other if an Agreement is broken. Parents are starting to use the language of Tribes®.

Our data indicates a positive shift in the relationships within classes as well as in the playground. There has been a 30% reduction in behavioural referrals to the Deputy this term with no exclusions.

One of the positive outcomes of this project has been the level of collaboration between our school and other schools which were not part of the study. The Deputy at Gnowangerup Primary School (200km North of Albany) has indicated that he and some of his staff would like to visit our school and observe Tribes in classrooms. We have set up a network via email for all those who participated in the training to share their successes, failures etc.

We believe that we are achieving some level of success with all our desired outcomes, however we still have a lot of work to do. In particular we need to provide ongoing support for those teachers who are only just starting on the Tribes® trail. We also need to continue to monitor (through data collection) the attainment of outcomes. Teacher's reflective journals would be a very valuable tool in assessing the process.

## **Other community engagement**

We have included other schools in the community in our training. The attendance of staff from Albany Senior High School is of particular importance as we are one of their "feeder" primary schools.

Both the Education Department and the union have expressed interest in assisting us to get some of our staff trained as Tribes trainers.

## **Future developments**

We are now a Tribes TLC® (Teaching Learning Community), however we are at different stages along the Tribes Trail. We will be providing support to staff who are just starting out. We will also continue to collaborate with and assist staff from other schools as many of them are at the stage we were at some eighteen

months ago. We plan to provide time for peer tutoring and mentoring both within the school and with other schools (budget constraints not withstanding).

## **Conclusions**

We have made a huge commitment ourselves to this project (financially and time) because we have great faith in its ability to deliver not only Values Education but also to address many other areas of concern in the broader education community. Tribes® is gaining recognition in fields such as Boys Education (the University of Newcastle have recently published an article on this). With the skills we have gained, and hopefully the training as trainers of some of our staff we hope to make the path easier for other schools in Western Australia.