

The Values Education Good Practice Schools Project – Stage 1

The following has been extracted from *Implementing the National Framework for Values Education in Australian Schools: Report of the Values Education Good Practice Schools Project – Stage 1: Final Report September 2006*.

<http://www.valueseducation.edu.au/values/default.asp?id=16381>

Teaching it well

Teaching and learning were the prime focus of the work of the following project cluster.

Peer leaders ‘catch the spirit’

The TEACH Cluster in Townsville (Qld) focused on developing peer support programmes as a means of shaping school ethos and values development in schools.

TEACH Cluster, Queensland

Cluster coordinator: Anthony Ryan, Townsville Central State School

Participating schools:

- Belgian Gardens State School
- Garbutt State School
- Magnetic Island State School
- Oonoonba State School
- Railway Estate State School
- Townsville Central State School
- Townsville West State School

UAN critical friend: Dr Angela Hill, James Cook University, Queensland

The TEACH Cluster takes its name from a major physical landmark close to all of the cluster’s seven government primary schools in Townsville: ‘Teachers and Educators Around Castle Hill’.

Located as they are in an area characterised by high levels of mobility, in part because of the degree of employment related to the defence forces, and relatively large Indigenous populations, the schools, though different in many respects, are bound together by a history of collaboration, common curriculum frameworks and a ready exchange of staff and expertise.

Their cluster project (Peer Leaders – Catch the Spirit) focused on developing the peer support programme as a means of shaping school ethos and values

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development in each of the schools. More specifically, the programme sought, in its own words, 'to develop young people who are personally responsible for their own wellbeing, able to manage their lives positively and safely and involved in, and supported by, their community'.

The actual programme involves Year 7 students leading activities with a group of vertically grouped Years 1–6 students each week. The activities the students complete support the building of school culture and support for the school community. Each school in the cluster, it should be acknowledged, was at a different stage of implementation of peer support when the project commenced, but pursued a broadly common approach, which the cluster's university associate described in the following terms, as it is experienced in the lead school:

The current structure of the Peer Support programme is based on the Peer Support Foundation's guidelines, but is adapted to the school's needs. Year 7 students are inducted into their role following a two-day leadership training programme ... The training for the students is subsidised by the school budget and additionally this year supported by a Townsville Rotary Club grant ... On completion of the training, the leadership status of the students is celebrated by the presentation of specially designed Peer Leaders Shirts, donated by the local city councillor. Year 6 students are designated co-leaders as part of a leadership mentor role, and are provided with co-leader badges, also presented to students. The badges and shirts are worn each Friday.

The whole school participates in the Peer Support programme in a designated half-hour lesson each Friday at 10 am. The school has approximately 15 Peer Support groups, each with two designated Peer Support Leaders and two Year 6 co-leaders. The Year 7 teachers coordinate the programme and spend from 1.45 to 2.30 pm each Thursday co-preparing the lesson with the Year 7 students. Although initially the school relied heavily on the Peer Support Foundation material as the basis for each lesson, in the last two years with the guidance of Year 7 teachers, the students increasingly determine the curriculum. As a teacher explains, 'In the past the students spent too much time reading out of the booklet and just doing what the booklet said to do'.

The students [now] have established a set format for the lesson, including a warm-up game and then the core lesson segment. Each Friday morning in the half hour prior to the Peer Support lesson, the Year 6 co-leaders meet with their Peer Leaders to review the activities for the lesson and discuss group management, etc. The preparation phase of the programme then, effectively, involves all Year 6 and 7 students, and the Year 6 and 7 teachers.

Having been implemented in the lead and two other schools for six years – to the point where, according to the university associate, it 'has moved from a highly structured programme designed largely to support transient students to a programme with high impact across the whole school culture ... providing a platform to distinguish the school in both its learning environment and student-

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led curriculum’ – the Good Practice Schools Project was really the chance to assess the impact and develop strategic directions for future development of peer support in the cluster as a whole. The upshot was that peer support was integrated with values education and implemented across the curriculum with a particular focus on the literacy programme in most schools. Some of the flavour of the approaches they took can be gained from the reflections and action plan strategies in Table 15, devised as part of the action research cycle for the project undertaken with the support of their university associate.

Table 15: Reflections and action plan strategies

Focus	Cluster action	School action (examples)
Training • Staff • Students Peer support implementation Resources Parent and community involvement Middle school transition Values education framework Other	Extend staff training with a focus on the skills needed to do Peer Support well. Build leadership skills and strategies. Enhance student engagement and understanding of concepts – focus on developing best practice in Peer Support. Adapt resources to be more engaging – what does good practice look like? Explore ideas for engaging the whole school community. Develop stronger links to feeder high schools. Raise staff awareness. Showcase Peer Support.	Whole staff training on philosophy and underpinnings of Peer Support. Expand leader training. Look at how to further complement the programme throughout the school – integrate into curriculum. Expand topics covered within Peer Support. Strategies to build parent and community awareness of the programme. Build a network of past peer leaders. Hold workshops and forums. Link Peer Support to restorative justice practices.

Although the detailed strategies adopted differed according to the circumstances and degree of peer support experience of the different cluster schools they all, as a result of their process of reflection and action planning, realised that their primary focus increasingly was ‘teacher professional development linked to quality teaching’. More specifically, the cluster collectively explored the need, in its own words, ‘to develop best practice Peer Support and values education and the links

to quality teaching (Lovat, 2005)¹, which resulted in professional development for staff to build:

- intellectual depth – greater insight to the Peer Support programme as a vehicle for values education;
- communicative capacity – opportunities to talk about their practice and improve it;
- capacity to reflect – consider the impact of Peer Support and how it could be developed further;
- self-management – walking the talk of Peer Support and values education;
- self-knowledge – considering their own practice and relationships with students.

Activities aligned to these purposes – such as school-based staff in-service training and workshops on values education and peer support; peer support training days; cluster professional development sessions; and a practitioner/researcher workshop with their university critical friend – then in turn promoted what the cluster sees as ‘a shift in pedagogy’ that has enabled firmer links with quality teaching to be forged. As some of the teachers involved observed at the time:

- *While many things were achieved through the involvement in the project, the most valuable was having the whole staff involved in a professional development day dedicated entirely to values education and Peer Support. All staff came away from the day with a good understanding of the philosophy of the programme and how values can be addressed explicitly and implicitly through the programme.*
- *Evidence from the project confirms that our Peer Support Programme teaches values within our school. Future planning activities and enhancement in the way the programme is delivered will further strengthen values teaching within the school, that still utilises student leaders as ‘teachers’.*
- *... the strength of the programme will be in the future as we continue to talk the talk and walk the walk.*

In particular, perhaps, the schools note that the project has enabled teachers to see Peer Support as ‘more than a behaviour management tool’; instead seeing it as a vehicle through which values education can be pursued; as evident in the following selection of feedback comments (Table 16) from a Peer Support staff training day and follow-up actions the teachers intend to take.

Table 16: Feedback and follow up to Peer Support staff training (samples)

Things that I will do as a result of the	General comments
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¹ Lovat, T 2000, *Values Education and Teachers' Work: A Quality Teaching Perspective* (available from <http://www.valueseducation.edu.au/values/default.asp?id=8884>)
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training	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Incorporate Peer Support ethos outside of sessions. • Be more encouraging in how I use Peer Support groups. • Integrate Peer Support and literacy lessons. • Reflect on my own practice. • Be more positive and take an active role. • Articulate values more in classroom. • Integrate values language across curriculum areas. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Great to see whole school involvement and awareness of Peer Support as integrated, rather than taught in isolation. • Great links to pedagogy – worthwhile further exploration. • A useful PD in refocusing us on the values of Peer Support and good practice related to Peer Support.

Although the schools were, as already noted, at different stages along the Peer Support programme path, the impact in each was profound. As the cluster itself explains:

For those schools in the early stages of Peer Support, the programme was expanded across the whole school and the full year. For those schools that had been implementing Peer Support for a number of years, the focus moved beyond the half-hour weekly session to an integrated approach within the classroom and across the school community. Artefacts from Peer Support became more visible, tangible and rigorous, more communication and sharing of materials became evident and integration into the other curriculum areas began. In particular, teachers saw the benefit of Peer Support to develop literacy skills.

That positive outcomes flow to the students is without doubt. As one school typically explained, it saw

... kids with less pushing and shoving and more inclusion in the playground ... students were reconciling their differences and we had felt the calm come over the school community.

Interestingly enough though, this school, which arguably has the longest involvement in peer support of all the cluster schools, acknowledged it hadn't really reflected on what this meant for the teachers who worked with these students:

When we sat down and divided our school into what we envisioned as the three functional components, Relationships, Curriculum and Organisation, the one thing that linked them all was the Peer Support programme. With this in mind, staff were able to critically reflect on their teaching: did the curriculum I was offering match the

values we were espousing; did I encourage students to make use of these skills in the classroom; and most powerful of all, was I walking the talk?...

[The 'values journey' undergone] has provided many benefits to the students as far as a coordinated curriculum and learning experiences that have offered a sense of belonging, connectedness, resilience and a sense of self. However, there has been none more significant than the reflective change that has occurred in the participant teachers and schools.

A particularly dramatic illustration of how these positive outcomes for students and teachers can build further momentum in a school can be seen in the case of one school where the whole experience was somewhat newer, but many teachers had heard of peer support and its positive impact, and wanted to become involved. As that school's principal explained:

The programme needed to grow so we needed a larger leadership group. A new teacher into Year 7 was keen to get on board and the training of new leaders began.

While the programme was still in its infancy, it was growing as was the impact on the school community as a whole. It was starting to be talked about among some parent groups and they were reporting changes in the way their children interacted at home with phrases such as 'active listening' and 'empathy' coming into discussions around the dinner table.

This was wonderful, but I could see that the programme would not be sustainable without whole school support and involvement. How could we demonstrate the necessity and the benefits of this programme to the teachers who were rightly concerned with an already crowded curriculum and very full timetables? ...

[The Good Practice Schools Project, this principal observes, provided the means at just the right time.]

Working with a group of schools at different stages of implementing the Peer Support Programme enabled me to see how effectively the programme was running in other centres and also see ways that the programme could be improved in these centres as well as ... [this school]. It was very evident, however, that we would not be successful, and the programme would not be sustainable without whole staff and community support. While many things were achieved through the involvement in the project, the most valuable was having the whole staff involved in a professional development day dedicated entirely to values education and Peer Support. All staff came away from the day with a good understanding of the philosophy of the programme and how values can be addressed explicitly and implicitly through the programme.

A staff meeting in which all staff members were involved in deciding which module from the programme should be the focus for the year, and everyone giving input to the structuring of the Peer Support groups, left me with a great sense of optimism for the year ahead.

With the first session going ahead in a week's time, I reflect on how big things grow from small ideas. There is a great sense of possibility in the air.

Key messages

1. Providing time and programmed professional development sessions can assist teachers within a cluster to reflect on their current practices, particularly in terms of making the links between such programmes as Peer Support and the broader values education picture and its links to quality teaching.
2. Staff can benefit from framing their reflections about future directions around their current practice in, for example, such programmes as Peer Support, as well as the big picture of values education and its links to quality teaching.
3. There needs to be whole school support not only for programmes such as Peer Support, but also for values education to be successful and sustainable. This includes all staff, parents and students and, in addition, the principal must be on board.
4. Detailed case studies developed by committed and qualified university colleagues (third parties) can provide a powerful tool for schools to reflect on their values education practices. For example, staff in this cluster were able to critically reflect on their teaching with a focus on such questions as: Did the curriculum I was offering match the values we were espousing? Did I encourage students to make use of these skills in the classroom? and, most powerful of all, Was I walking the talk?