

The Impacts of the Values in Action Schools Project, Australia.

Research summary by Dr. Neil Hawkes.

The evidence...conclusively shows how Values Education can transform classrooms, relationships and school environments, teacher professional practice and parents' engagement in their children's schooling.

Background:

Since 2002, the Australian Government has made a concerted effort to fund and foster a range of activities to support schools in developing explicit, informed, systematic and effective approaches to Values Education in all areas of school policy and classroom practice. Values Education is seen as a means of nurturing Australia's common democratic way of life, which includes equality, freedom and the rule of law. Values Education has been supported throughout Australia by schools and communities who have been keen to address Values Education from a community perspective. Values Education and Student Wellbeing are now an integral part of Australian schooling as they are seen as central to fostering high academic standards in the context of an ethically based school community.

I am delighted to have played a part in this process, having been invited to be a keynote speaker at two National Values Education Forums. My practical experience and research, as a former British Headteacher who has implemented Values Education in a school, is being used to underpin the professional development materials for teachers. I have made seven visits to Australia to share good practice and to inspire school communities to underpin everything they do with positive human values such as respect, integrity, responsibility and compassion. My own research at Oxford University (Hawkes, 2005) made a number of tentative claims regarding the contribution that Values Education can make to Quality Education. My research conclusion stated that a larger-scale research would be required to validate my reach findings. I am delighted that these have now been validated by a large-scale action research project in Australia.

The Values in Action Schools Project (Education Services, Australia, 2010), commissioned by the Government, is the third phase of a program of action research (2008 – 2010) into the effectiveness of implementing Values Education. Earlier stages (2005-2008) involving 309 schools, working in 51 clusters, identified areas of good practice including ten principles of good practice which were adopted by the Values in Action Schools Project (VASP). These principles were identified through the research conducted by Newcastle University (Lovat et al, 2009). This research described how values-based schools give increasing curriculum and teaching emphasis to Values Education. As a consequence students become more academically diligent, the school assumes a calmer, more peaceful ambience, better student-teacher relationships are forged, student and teacher wellbeing improves and parents are more engaged with the school.

The important principles for developing good practice in Values Education, which I commend to all schools, are:

1. Establish and consistently use a common and shared values language across the school.
2. Use pedagogies that are values-focused and student-focused and student-centred within all curriculum.
3. Develop Values Education as an integrated curriculum concept, rather than as a program, an event or an addition to the curriculum.
4. Explicitly teach values so that 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, 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 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.

The Values in Action Schools Project's aim was to build on earlier research and explore additional evidence of impacts that result from effective Values Education. In October 2008, Australian schools were invited to apply to form clusters (3 to 10 schools) and apply for funding to conduct Values Education projects. After a three-stage evaluation and selection process, 15 cluster projects were selected for funding which represented a wide-variety of contexts across Australia. The values projects of the clusters were subsequently analysed through both quantitative and qualitative means, to identify areas of impact that could be identified because of the school values projects.

The data revealed the following five key interrelated impacts of VASP:

1. **Values Consciousness**
2. **Wellbeing**
3. **Agency**
4. **Connectedness**
5. **Transformation**

These five identified impacts support my assertion that; a systematic and planned approach to Values Education can improve students' engagement with schooling and promote better learning outcomes, and enhance their social and emotional wellbeing. The evidence contained in VASP conclusively shows how Values Education can transform classrooms, relationships and school environments, teacher professional practice and parents' engagement in their children's schooling. The Australian research has made a major contribution to the understanding of what good Values Education is and can achieve and thereby make a significant contribution to the whole purpose of schooling. The impacts can be summarised as follows:

Impact 1: Values consciousness

Deliberate and systematic Values Education enhances Values Consciousness. For instance, students, teachers and parents developed an increased consciousness about the meaning of values and the power of values education to transform learning and life. Such increased awareness was more than a superficial understanding of values but was related to a positive change in behaviour. Teachers thought more deeply about their teaching and the values that they modelled both in and outside of the classroom. Students reported on how a values consciousness had impacted on their actions, which had become more altruistic.

The establishment of communication about values between teachers, students and parents through newsletters, community forums and artistic performances, had very positive effects. For instance, giving time and space for teachers and parents to be involved in their children's values education both enhanced relationships and afforded time for parents to reflect on their own values.

Impact 2: Wellbeing

Students' wellbeing was enhanced through the application of values-focussed and student-centred pedagogies, which gave time for them to reflect deeply on the nature of values and what these mean to them and others. Such pedagogies included, silent sitting, reflective writing, multimedia production, drama performances and poetry writing. In thinking about, acting on and feeling values, students developed feeling of self-worth, empathy and responsible personal behaviour. Evidence from the data showed that values education had a very positive effect on the sense of self of students who are 'at risk', marginalised or disadvantaged.

Students developed a greater understanding of the impact of their actions on the wellbeing of others. Values education helped students and teachers to look inside themselves and really work out what they value and who they are.

There was compelling evidence that wellbeing impacts were experienced by teachers, parents and families, and in classroom and whole school environments.

Impact 3: Agency

Agency is the capacity of individuals to act independently and to make choices and act on them. The evidence showed that Values Education strengthened student agency when it involves various forms of giving, outreach and working in the community. For instance, through values action projects that allowed students to enact their values. Agency was developed through meaningful real-life experiential learning, such as in the engagement in community projects, when there was opportunity for the development of student voice, initiative and leadership; and an explicit focus on ethical, intercultural and social issues. Structured reflection on their experiences and learning was a central element in developing agency. Such activity generated a deep sense of ‘self’ and ‘others’. For values learning to take place activities have to be deeply personal, deeply real and deeply engaging. Relationships between students and teachers were enhanced through such activities. This research finding has wide implications for teacher agency and teacher education in terms of understanding appropriate pedagogy in the context of enquiry-based curriculum.

Impact 4: Connectedness

The research showed how Values Education builds positive and wide-ranging connections between teachers, students and parents. It supported student engagement in learning, improved parent engagement in their children’s learning and allowed teachers to develop new relationships with their students, each other and the parents and families in their school community. This was done through shared goals and practices in Values Education, which led to the development of mutual feelings of respect, trust and safety; and varied opportunities for collaboration. The research findings show that the values led to improved stronger relationships between teachers, students and parents e.g. more respectful behaviours in the classroom, school and home. Community engagement led to quality outcomes for teachers, students and parents.

5: Transformation

Change and transformation was at the heart of the values projects and was the result of teachers and students being urged to engage in continuous reflection on the actions they implemented in their schools. Key changes were in changes in professional practice as

well as personal attitudes, behaviours, relationships and group dynamics. Transformations were experienced and observed by teachers, students and parents alike.

The data points to profound transformations in student learning. Students developed deeper understanding of complex issues e.g. how students can take on sophisticated concepts when they are explicitly taught and change their attitude and perception of a value. Students and parents experienced personal change and reported changes seen in others. For instance a student said how the class had positively evolved and that values had helped them to become more mature, adjusted kids. The research showed the profound professional and personal transformation that can result when the parent community is involved in students' learning.

Conclusion

The research evidence shows the growth and impacts that the Australian Values Education Initiative (2005-2009) has had on encouraging quality education. The National Framework for Values Education in Australian Schools provided the vision for the development of Values-based schools. Research identified the ten principles of good practice (noted above) and then demonstrated the five major impacts on students, teachers and the community.

Around the world, countries are searching for ways to help schools to improve academic standards, positively affect student behaviour and engage with parents and the community. Adopting the philosophy and practices of Values Education, as a whole school initiative will, as the research shows, have a positive impact on all these elements.

For further information contact Dr. Neil Hawkes through www.values-education.com

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