

## Gather and monitor data for continuous improvement in values education

In a move forward from Stage 1, and in concert with the guiding principles of the *National Framework*, the Stage 2 clusters were encouraged to attend more consciously to monitoring and evaluating the values education work. As the cluster case studies show, a number made significant efforts to develop empirical data based on a variety of measures and tools (climate surveys, test score comparisons, incident reports, staff surveys and the like) that would provide evidence of outcomes for students and for other sectors of the school community. Cluster experiences also suggest that positive outcomes in values education can be achieved through a continuous and supported action research cycle that monitors and evaluates the intended values education approaches among the teaching staff. The 'plan, do, study, act' cycle guides and fosters professional change, encourages reflection and supports the process of monitoring values education outcomes.

Gathering data to inform values education approaches was encouraged as part of the initial briefing of Stage 2 clusters. Within the action research methodology, data gathering is a vital component of the monitoring and evaluation cycle.

Clusters recorded patterns of improvement since initiating their projects by using data gathered at the school level. This data included parent, student and teacher satisfaction surveys, student engagement data, school climate, attendance, reportable behaviour incidents and, in some cases, academic progress data related to key learning areas.

The Lanyon cluster has been involved in values education initiatives for over five years, and argued so persuasively in its final report that the project had affected literacy so significantly that a substantial section of its report is reiterated below:

Through the project we collected quantitative and qualitative evidence of improvement in literacy skills. Performance of students on the ACT Assessment Program (ACTAP) provided quantitative evidence of improvement in literacy. One of the most difficult areas to improve student performance is from Year 7 to Year 9 yet our data for students in reading and writing shows definite improvement and is evidence of the value added that has occurred for students as they moved from Year 7 to Year 9 compared to the system data.

We began work with the Learning by Design framework in 2004. Since 2005 the effects of our interventions are evident in the consistent trend in the decreasing number of students in the bottom 20 per cent and the increasing number of students in the middle 60 per cent and upper 20 per cent in ACTAP. The trend has been maintained in 2006 and 2007 as more teachers in the cluster have implemented Learning by Design and also included the values education focus.

Our data for reading exemplifies this. In 2002 there were 28 per cent of Year 7 students identified in the lowest 20 per cent of students for reading. By the time they were in Year 9, there were 51 per cent in the bottom 20 per cent. This was very disheartening. This changed from 2003 to 2005. In 2003, 42 per cent of students were identified in the bottom 20 per cent in Year 7. By the time they were in Year 9, only 23 per cent were in the bottom 20 per cent – an improvement for 19 per cent of students. This trend has continued in 2006 (32 per cent of Year 7 students -> 25 per cent of Year 9 students in the bottom 20 per cent) and in 2007 (23 per cent of Year 7 students -> 16 per cent of Year 9 students in the bottom 20 per cent).

Qualitative evidence of literacy improvement was provided in the impact stories of the teacher scholars. This literacy improvement was in the linguistic mode (writing), the visual mode (images), the audio mode (music and discussions) and the gestural mode (role-plays and images). Making meaning of multimodal texts is central to multiliteracies. It catered for a variety of learning styles, often incorporated technology, and supported students to discuss and demonstrate their understandings of the values in varied ways.

Clusters, especially at the initiating stage, were tentative about claiming causal links between values education and patterns of improvement. There are many initiatives occurring in the schools that might contribute to improvements in performance other than values education. However, many argued that when values education is in the mix, it makes significant contributions towards calming the school, focusing the students, improving the quality of interpersonal relationships and influencing teacher professional practice.

Many schools produced empirical evidence about increased levels of calmness in their school since being involved in values education. It is conventional wisdom that such things have important effects on students. Unsurprisingly then, many schools provided empirical data about improvements in student engagement since being involved in values education. One school measured the students' 'sense of belonging' and other perceptions over the course of the project and found considerable improvement in academic engagement.

The Toowoomba North cluster reported that ‘there has been a statistically impressive drop in the number of marginalised students being suspended’.

Patterns such as these have recently gained the attention of researchers working in the values education area. Benninga et al (2006), for instance, have speculated that ‘high quality character education can promote academic achievement’. They base this on a comparison of ‘quality’ character education schools with a control group not exposed to such programs where they used the California Academic Index as the comparative measure.

Deakin Crick et al (2005) also suggest that values education ‘can impact on affective outcomes, as well as cognitive growth, in areas such as the development of self-concept, increased self-confidence, and more positive behaviour and can improve students’ communication skills’. According to their review of research it can also enhance student learning and academic achievement.

In her final report on the effects of the values program on the Values Newcastle Cluster (NSW) measured in a pre- and post-implementation study, the UAN adviser reported:

Finally, in regard to the impact of the program on student engagement and academic output [at] most schools, the teachers indicated that learning about ‘responsibility’ had resulted in students being more independent in their approach to tasks and that students appeared to be working more cooperatively and taking greater pride in their work – taking more responsibility to do quality work, cooperating and helping each other complete tasks; taking pride in a job well done. Some teachers also perceived that students were trying harder and the teachers appeared to realise their own influence in recognising and encouraging children’s efforts. ‘Students try to achieve to the best of their ability’; ‘Students understand that all efforts are valued’.