Student Agency

Develop relevant and engaging values approaches connected to local and global contexts and which offer real opportunity for student agency.

The Stage 2 cluster experiences speak convincingly of the critical importance of enabling and providing opportunities for student agency. Although present in many of the Stage 1 projects, the role of student empowerment and agency in values education practice has been significantly highlighted in Stage 2. Starting from the premise that schooling educates for the whole child and must necessarily engage a student's heart, mind and actions, effective values education empowers student decision making, fosters student action and assigns real student responsibility. Effective values education is not an academic exercise; it needs to be deeply personal, deeply real and deeply engaging. In many of the Stage 2 projects students can be seen to move in stages from growing in knowledge and understanding of the values, to an increasing clarity and commitment to certain values and then concerted action in living those values in their personal and community lives. The teaching and learning is three-dimensional and could not be more profoundly meaningful.

In an important development from the Stage 1 Final Report inferences, which talked about having something worthwhile to teach in the values domain, the Stage 2 cluster experiences drill deeper and report on the effects on students of what was taught, and link it to increased student agency. Teachers assert that increased student agency makes schooling more meaningful, enjoyable and relevant to students' lives.

Student agency refers to empowering students through curriculum approaches that:

- engage them
- are respectful of and seek their opinions
- give them opportunities to feel connected to school life
- promote positive and caring relationships between all members of the school community
- promote wellbeing and focus on the whole student
- relate to real-life experiences
- are safe and supportive.

Many clusters described practices that were designed to encourage students to speak freely and confidently, to explore their own and others' thinking, to take risks and to be resilient in the face of challenges. The student action teams implemented in the Darebin cluster, the values action teams from Manningham and the 'kids teaching kids' approach in the E-Schools cluster are three examples of the many approaches that were used by clusters in creating student agency.

Real-life learning creates agency in students by tapping into what is relevant in a student's day-to-day life as a starting point for further learning. The UAN adviser working with the Cross Borders cluster noted:

> Before engaging in a real-life environmental project, it is important to brainstorm with the students the values that may be relevant in that particular context. Then it is useful to explicitly teach/discuss those values in terms of what they mean and what they look like. Including this cognitive processing component into the values education program allows all stakeholders to learn a discourse, a vocabulary, to review values education understandings. This preparation appears to facilitate values education development when the students are subsequently working in the real-life, hands-on environmental context.

Some made connections between real-life learning and agency, as shown in the Townsville cluster:

> Those involved within the project have outlined that student learning is extending beyond the boundaries of the classroom and becoming generalised, which again links back to the notion of teaching values within context and has links to Guiding Principles 7 and 8. Students are discussing their learning months later and becoming agents for change within the school and home. Parents have outlined what they have learnt from their children and that practices are now being enacted at home as a result of units of work completed within Stage 2 of the VEGPSP.

Many of the values-based pedagogies referred to earlier, such as student action teams, philosophy in the classroom, Socratic circles and the power of story or narrative have wider applications in enabling student agency.

All of them have an applied dimension that encourages students to put values into practice. The importance of student agency is picked up many times in the case studies, the accounts of good practice and teacher case writing.

The UAN adviser working with the Lanyon cluster, which had a focus on community building, reported in his account of good practice that exercising agency also led to greater student engagement:

> Most importantly, perhaps, students themselves have come to own values more deeply through community engagement and via various forms of community service (eg students focusing on practical applications of values in the Road Ready program, Years 3–4 students sending relief to drought stricken farmers, or high school students being involved in tree planting). Uniformly, teachers report that doing something with and for the community increases the students' engagement in their learning. This resonates with an interesting but relatively new proposition in education: when students have opportunities to give to their community, to something beyond themselves, it changes their attitude to the learning tasks. This value runs deep in any attempts of community building; and, it ties in with notions of 'service learning' (Furco and Billig 2002).

The values-focused pedagogies discussed support and produce student agency by offering real-life learning from which students find meaning.

The Stage 2 cluster experiences accord with research findings in the field of social-emotional learning and its relation to building academic success. Zins et al (2004) conclude that safe, caring and orderly environments are conducive to learning; that caring relations between teachers and students foster a desire to learn and a connection to school; and that socially engaging teaching strategies focus students on their learning tasks.

Similarly, the teachers in Deakin Crick's (2002) study found that by introducing shared values into teaching and learning across the curriculum they related to the whole person as learner, incorporating the student's personal and emotional experience and their 'personal story' into the process of learning, rather than just focusing on the student's acquisition of knowledge, skills and understanding.

The UAN adviser working with WestPEERS would concur, as her final report testifies:

> It was clear throughout the project and is evident in the reports from the individual schools that the overwhelming theme of good practice in values education in the Grenfell (St Joseph's) cluster occurred through the affective domain. Children were consistently brought back to how they would feel, to putting themselves in the shoes of others and to experiencing empathy. These are all aspects of emotional cognition that were fostered and developed in the lived experience of both teachers and students.

Effective pedagogies in values education built around a values-rich content, develop students' higher order thinking skills, and provide opportunities for real-world learning and for students to exercise their agency. Often, they engage students' emotions in way that makes learning more meaningful and relevant. These pedagogies establish the circumstances in which students develop improved self-confidence and positive dispositions about social and cultural diversity.