

## **Values education, teacher professional learning and the United Nations**

*Imagine standing in a General Assembly of the United Nations presenting a country's position on the 2<sup>nd</sup> Millennium Goal for the provision of universal primary education. Imagine having to respond to questions from the US or Chinese delegation about the Australian education system. What would you say? What you like to see in a resolution if you represented South Africa, Costa Rica or Cambodia? What does education look like in these countries?*

*This was the experience of participants in July 2009 at a Model United Nations Conference held at Parliament House, Melbourne as part of a values education teacher professional development program.*

*This article focuses on values education in teacher professional learning and in particular the innovative use of Model United Nations Conferences as a way of enhancing values-based approaches.*

### **Background**

From 2003 to 2008 the Australian Government implemented a national values education program. A National Framework for Values Education in Australian Schools, based on a study conducted in 69 schools, was produced. The Framework promoted principles of practice and was based on nine values for Australian schools. These values included respect, responsibility, care and compassion and integrity and were designed to act as a point of reference for school communities to work into the values arena. The program had the support of all state and territory education authorities from government and non-government sectors.

The purpose of the program was to imbed values education in all Australian schools. A school grants program was the 'flagship' strategy and was supported by a subset of activities such as research, resource development and partnership projects with principal, parent and teacher associations. Deans of Education were involved in the dissemination of information to pre-service teachers.

Despite early skepticism, particularly in relation to the subjective nature of values, the initiative provided an important opportunity for schools to critique educational processes and vision. For many schools the Framework and supporting materials provided direction for values to be constructively discussed in terms of school improvement and quality teaching and learning. Aligning values, purpose and practice became a focus activity for many school communities.

One of the key activities during this period was a participatory research project that involved over 50 school clusters and drew on the experience of thousands of teachers, principals, students and parents as well as numerous academics and education system officers. The Values Education Good Practice Schools Project

(VEGPS) as it was known was facilitated by the Curriculum Corporation in two phases using a case writing methodology. The findings were published in 2008 as a final report, Values Education: At the Heart of What We Do.

[http://www.valueseducation.edu.au/verve/resources/VEGPSP-2\\_final\\_3.pdf](http://www.valueseducation.edu.au/verve/resources/VEGPSP-2_final_3.pdf)

From this report a distillation of the most effective principles and practices in values education were generated. In summary these were:

- 1 Establish and consistently use a common and shared values language across the school.
- 2 Use pedagogies that are values-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 curriculum.
- 4 Explicitly teach values so 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 and 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 their 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. (DEEWR, pp 8-10)

Formal evaluations, findings from the VEGPS and anecdotal evidence suggested that effective values education can help produce enabling factors for improved student wellbeing and academic learning outcomes. As Lovat (2008) and his colleagues found, values education can make a positive difference to student engagement and connectedness as well as improved relationships

...using a variety of methods, and across less than a calendar year, quantitative and qualitative evidence has become available that a well-crafted and well-managed values education intervention can impact positively on student academic diligence, school ambience, student-teacher relationships, student and teacher wellbeing, and, less significantly, parental and family participation. Again, within the limits imposed by the nature and timing of the study, it is evident that the central question that drove the study, namely, *Can the impact of values education on teaching and school ethos, as well as student achievement and behaviour, be tested empirically and observed reliably?*, has been answered in the affirmative (Lovat, et al, 2008 p13).

### **New values projects in 2009**

At the end of 2008 the program came to the end of its funding cycle and faced new national government priorities. However based on growing evidence of the positive impact of values education the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, generated a new national project to fund teacher professional development activities. The project, Values Education Professional Learning Package, thus provided an opportunity to build on the already significant investment in values education and among other things charged jurisdictions to '*Develop teacher capacity, acknowledging that values is a pedagogical imperative*' (DEEWR, 2008 p3).

The messages emanating from the school research, particularly in relation to pedagogy and the 10 principles, provided direction for members of the Victorian Values Education Advisory Committee in the planning and development of the teacher professional development program for 2009. Six projects were developed and implemented. These were:

#### **Teacher professional learning**

This involved the provision of grants to more than 70 schools and the delivery of a series of teacher professional learning activities throughout Victoria, particularly rural areas targeting representatives from school networks. Evaluations suggest that awareness in values education resources and application of values-based approaches has occurred.

#### **Promoting intercultural diversity**

This proposal consisted of grants to nine schools to report on their practice. Teacher professional learning activities using values-based approaches to intercultural education and global citizenship supported this approach.

#### **Mentoring program**

Nine mentors have been working in local networks/regions to enhance values education and the implementation of resources.

#### **Service learning cluster**

The Association for Independent Schools Victoria facilitated a cluster project involving seven schools in research into service learning. A published report is due early in 2010.

#### **Rural and remote school cluster strategy**

This proposal involved grants to eight remote and rural schools and provision of two days of intensive professional learning focused on values education resources and education programs from the Immigration Museum, Languages and Multicultural Education Resource Centre, Koori Heritage Trust, Victorian Electoral Commission, Public Records Office, City Museum and the Justice Museum.

## **Model United Nations Conferences**

Model United Nations Conferences were the sixth project in this values education project portfolio.

The Victorian Chapter of the United Nations Association Australia (UNAA) has run Model UN Conferences for individual schools, universities and organizations since 2003. The methodology of the conference involves teams of delegates representing countries at a mock General Assembly, debating and voting on a resolution. A General Secretary presides over the day and for all intents and purposes participants become the delegates of a country. They have to 'walk in another person's shoes' for the day as they caucus, seek alliances and try to pass or block resolutions within the context of national interests and international diplomacy.

In preparation for the event students are given a Delegate Pack containing guidelines for researching 'their' country and for gathering background about the resolution. The process of developing awareness of a country's position on an issue such as refugees or global warming is intended to promote deeper and more reflective thinking.

Model UN Conferences for senior secondary students had been piloted in Victoria as part of the values education program from 2007. These events were made free and open to all schools and attracted between 100 – 120 students each. For teachers the interest tended to be on the Civics and Citizenship Education and senior politics or enhancing student leadership, public speaking and debating skills. Whatever their motivation the conferences were judged to be highly successful in engaging students. Teachers reported significant impact on student motivation and engagement with an enhanced understanding of global issues before and after the event. Values such as empathy, respect for the other, tolerance and inclusion were in evidence in evaluations.

## **Model UN conferences for teachers**

In 2009 it was decided to take this approach a step further and design conferences to foster teacher professional learning particularly to reinforce findings from the VEGPS which point to the benefits of placing the learner at centre and to demonstrate how values based approaches can help foster intercultural understanding.

Inherent in values based approaches are pedagogies or processes that help name, model and test beliefs and values. In effect it is the exploration of underlying values that as Aspin (2003) suggests enable learners to make discoveries about meaning, consequences and preferences and then adopt and implement particular behaviours and judgments either directly or by example. Lovat and Toomey (2007) reinforces this idea that values need to be explicit in quality teaching and argued that contemporary values education in Australia is seen increasingly as a pedagogical imperative that incorporates moral, social, emotional, physical, spiritual and intellectual aspects of human development.

The Model UN Conferences simulated a learning environment that touched on a number of values from the National Framework; understanding, tolerance and inclusion, fair go, respect and care and compassion simply by placing delegates in the role of a representative from another country. As one teacher reported *'the most beneficial aspect was having the responsibility of representing a country and looking at the world from their perspective'*. Another teacher said, *'The activity was about self learning with direct application to classrooms and schools.'*

Three conferences were held, and all featured students. Two were based on the resolution, *'Refugees: Rights and risks'* and each involved more than 120 students and around 20 teachers. Teachers were the active observers of these events and a specific professional learning session was held away from the students to review the processes, relevant resources and their application in schools. Student engagement, participation and leadership were discussed and Values Education and Civics and Education resources displayed. The 10 principles of values education practice were presented and discussed.

Building on student enthusiasm following the Conference was an important aspect of the experience. A key message to teachers was that this was more likely to flourish in an environment where notions of democracy, student voice and participation were evident in school policy and practice. Teachers were challenged to reflect on the extent to which values-focused and student-centred activities were evident in their schools. As the research indicates:

Effective values education uses pedagogies that mirror the values being taught. A number of the cluster projects in Stage 2 clearly suggest that the most effective learning experiences in values education are generally values-explicit, student-centred and open-ended rather than values-implicit, teacher-centred and closed. The pedagogies engage students in real-life learning, offer opportunity for real practice, provide safe structures for taking risks, and encourage personal reflection and action (DEEWR, p8)

A third Conference was held at Parliament House, Melbourne in July. The topic, *'Rewrite the Future: The right of every child to a universal education'* was based on the second UN Millennium Goal referring to the provision of free primary education.

This event was advertised for teams of up to three teachers from primary and secondary schools with the option of having one student in the team, again reinforcing this notion of teachers as learners within a community of learners. The event was also open to teacher and subject associations and other educators.

Prior to the conference, 'country consultants' from Canada, Indonesia, USA, Costa Rica, Greece, Mexico, Japan, Uganda, India and Rwanda agreed to act as advisors to teams. The current on-line environment made it possible to connect with these people who had first hand knowledge about the provision of education in the countries represented.

In all 58 delegates, including 9 students represented 20 countries at the conference. Delegates came from 23 schools, the YMCA Youth Parliament Task Force, Social Education Victoria, the Immigration Museum and the DEECD LOTE Unit. Casual Teacher Relief was paid for all attending teachers. Many more schools expressed interest but for a variety of reasons were unable to attend.

This conference was somewhat more risky than regular teacher professional learning activities. We tried to create an environment in which delegates felt they could participate equally and share their views in an atmosphere of openness, acceptance and respect. Ultimately it was up to delegates themselves to make it work. The process relied on their readiness to engage with the resolution; to have bought some understanding of their country's position and carry this through their presentations and caucusing. Fortunately the delegation from the United States was outspoken and suitably provocative early. Sierra Leone presented a passionate case for international support to rebuild the country's fractured education system and so it went on. Indonesia was keen to explore the possibilities of on-line learning, Australia came under scrutiny for its efforts in Indigenous education and Turkey, frustrated by being blocked in joining the European Union tried to form an alliance against European amendments.

The evaluations suggest that the process successfully engaged most participants. The resolution was discussed, amended and voted on and there was general view that much had been gained from the experience. As one delegate explained;

*I've just been listening for an 'hour' to one of our delegates debrief after the UN Conference today. Our team thought it was a truly awesome experience!*

What was also gratifying was the involvement of primary and secondary students as they took centre stage speaking about big educational issues. All delegates were learners in this environment and as such diminished some hierarchical barriers. All students, primary and secondary, spoke and in some cases led the delegations, as was the case for the Russian Federation.

*Thanks for providing my students and I with what was an invaluable experience. All three of us got a lot out of the day, and appreciate being involved in such a special event.*

In terms of translating the experience into practice there have been a number of teachers who have since indicated they conducted similar activities and events in their schools. Most participants reported they have been made more aware of the values education resources, the 10 principles and practices and of values-based pedagogy. One teacher indicated that after the conference she had changed her practice and was approaching her teaching in a more student-centered manner. Such outcomes are nurtured by changes to teachers' thinking and experience, which in this case was her involvement in the Conference.

### **Conclusion**

The Model UN Conference was one of six teacher professional learning activities implemented in 2009. Each activity reflected aims to model and promote values education in ways that would increase teacher skills and understanding and motivate them to strengthen values-based approaches in their schools. These activities were developed from research findings that demonstrated synergies between values education and quality learning and teaching; environments that were student centered, where teachers were encouraged to take risks and where professional collaborations were fostered. Evaluations indicate that teachers engaged with these professional development opportunities in ways that is making a positive difference in their schools.

Evaluations from Model UN Conferences show that they effectively simulate issues in the global context and demand participants think beyond themselves and their borders. They raise awareness of the challenges and dilemmas faced by 'governments' and establish problem solving discussions to overcome them. In terms of peace education such an experience opens minds and builds understanding.

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