



A question of values

School Based Research Project 2015 Interim Report – St Spyridon, Masada College, and Rouse Hill Anglican College

Project overview

The *A question of values* project is a partnership project involving three faith-based schools of differing faiths and traditions. Each school is committed to providing values-rich education for its students and, by extension, the greater community. In coming together these schools are investigating how their respective ethos and values inform and shape responses to social and ethical responsibilities for their students and the wider community. They are examining how they each promulgate their stated ethos and values, what each school has in common with the others, and what makes them distinct. The research process is also creating opportunities for staff and students to enhance their understandings of self and others, and to build relationships across cultures, faiths and traditions. At its core, this project explores the intertwining of values education with quality teaching.

The research team

The research team is made up of five practitioners from each school, including a nominated team leader. These three team leaders make up the Leadership Team:

- Efrosini Stefanou-Haag, Head of St Spyridon College
- Wendy Barel, Principal of Masada College
- Peter Fowler, Principal of Rouse Hill Anglican College

The research team is supported by their specialist mentor Susi Brieger (OAM).

Project design

The research team has taken a practice-based, multi-dimensional research approach, using a mixed methods/participatory design for data collection. The project uses a two stage model.

Stage One was undertaken throughout 2015 and included:

1. A comprehensive literature review
2. Values identification, by way of teacher engagement and qualitative document analysis
3. The design of and administration of a survey to students, staff and parents.

Stage Two will take place throughout 2016. The data collected from the survey, and observational data from both the research team and Year 10 students-as-researchers across the three schools, will be analysed. Involving students in the research process allows the research team to access a valuable perspective with respect to the kinds of observational data that can be captured. It also engages students in building relationships with others, and explicitly connecting with how values are taught in schools, and how they impact on students' lived experiences.

As this project involves three separate schools, it presents challenges with respect to project management and the equitable and effective allocation of aspects of the research process across team members and sites. Core to the success of this project has been a strong focus on clear communication, fairness, and capacity-building to ensure that all researchers are equally engaged, responsible, and supported. As a result of this approach, researchers have benefited from the opportunity to upskill within a collaborative context in both research practice and professional practice



by way of reflection on the findings that the three schools' diverse approaches to values education have produced.

Progress to date

The literature review process has provided team members opportunities for a greater understanding of the history of values education, and how faith-based values have impacted education and the challenges for schools therein. Of particular interest was the discovery that all three schools' faith-based values in education reference the same foundational sources: the Bible, the Old Testament, and the classical philosophers.

The literature review also focused on school based research practices, providing insights not only into the skills needed, but also the reality of the emergent messiness of the research process. This has helped the team come to grips with how to do research in school settings, and to have a realistic view of the process generally. Along with practical learning, and mentor and expert support, many members of the research team have discovered research strengths, grown skills, and gained a new appreciation for the practice of research.

The values identification aspect of the project entailed a detailed independent document analysis (using NVivo) of core school documents and consultation with teachers about their understandings of the values contained within those documents. The aim was to "enhance understanding of ourselves". The results of the NVivo analysis and teacher interpretations were compared, within and across school contexts. Initial findings indicate that each school's teachers have clear understandings of the values expressed in their school's documentation. Comparison across schools of the identified values and the language used to express them highlights both similarities and overlaps between the three schools and, interestingly, differences in core aspects of some of those values.

During 2015 a survey was also developed to tap into the voices of school stakeholders — parents, students and staff completed the survey, and data analysis began.

Thus far, the research process has fostered in the team a deep appreciation of how their actions must reflect the values of their school. Knowledge gained has also generated an increased sense of empathy for learning challenges that students face.

Where to next?

In 2016 the project will move on from this foundational work, following a theme of "building relationships with others". Survey analysis will be completed, and findings will inform how data is gathered from upcoming student forums and observations. Observations will be conducted both by the research team, and a number of Year 10 students who will travel to different schools, to identify how each school's values are evident on campus. This participatory approach promises to reveal much about how each school expresses and promulgates its values, and how those values translate into the lived experiences of students. The focus of this data collection and analysis will be to "enhance understanding of others" and to "build relationships across cultures, faiths and traditions".



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