> *While this compilation is principally about challenging the operation of Student Councils - in order to make student participation in educational decision-making more effective, **Connect** has always argued that such decision-making must be seen as **curricular** rather than **co-** or **extra-curricular**. Curriculum approaches that are based on active student participation mean curriculum negotiation, or specific initiatives or projects in which students have real roles of recognised value. This article deals directly with those challenges.*

Making a Difference in Keilor Downs:
Taking Action in Our Community

Mary MacKillop is a Catholic primary school in the outer north western suburbs of Melbourne. There are 663 students currently attending the school. Most students were born in Australia from second-generation migrant families.

The school had some existing practice of negotiation of curriculum with students and of inquiry learning which included a 'taking action' perspective. This was particularly evident in the upper school and connected to some staff members' understandings around relevance and engagement in the Middle Years of Schooling. The school in 2001 established whole of school committees with the aim of creating whole school responsibility and ownership for a variety of areas. These teams were also charged with raising the profile of their area within the school and its community. One such committee was the Community Links Team.

The school community in 2002 had a number of new staff members joining the teaching team and has taken time to develop shared understandings of concepts such as democracy, negotiation, citizenship, community links and active student participation.

Negotiated Curriculum

The practices of classroom negotiation of curriculum are most developed in the Year 5-6 area. The processes used here follow the ideas developed by James Beane, in which students brainstorm the significant questions they have about themselves and about their society. Agreement on these questions then defines the focus of studies within the curriculum.

In 2002, this negotiated approach formed the basis of our work in the area of Civics and Citizenship. For example, an important unit of work was developed by Year 6 teachers (using the middle primary materials within the *Discovering Democracy* program) around 'Events and People that Shaped Australia'. This topic was negotiated with students, who identified issues of war, poverty, immigration, culture and identity for development within the topic. As well as bringing the staff to an understanding of the *Discovering Democracy* materials, the school now recognises that, in line with a fully negotiated approach, it would have been better to include the students in consideration of the materials from the start.

The school will continue to value and use a negotiated approach to curriculum and this is seen to be totally in line with ideas of active citizenship. It may be appropriate, in order to find more opportunities to use the *Discovering Democracy* materials, to introduce the materials to students in the negotiation process so that they themselves will identify possible links.

Community Action Curriculum

The other major initiative in 2002 occurred in Years 3 and 4. After a professional development session at the beginning of 2002 school year, teachers were motivated to try to include 'taking action' projects within their classrooms. The practical examples that were developed, extended teachers' understanding of student action, participation and community links.

Two year levels implemented 'taking action' projects with the local community: in Year 4: "Health and Safety in Our Community" and in Year 3: "Landcare in Our Community".

The process began with allocation of planning time within the teaching teams. They worked with the SOSE coordinator to explore opportunities for taking action in and with the local community. This extended planning also provided time for teachers to contact and make links with local community groups.

"After the initial planning," said one teacher, "the responsibility was placed on the children, and my role became that of facilitator. The initial planning session was not only essential but productive. It was great having a practical, time-conscious SOSE coordinator to lead the planning and to act as a sounding board throughout the unit."

Over 7-9 weeks, the Year 4 classes went through a process that involved phases of 'tuning in' (orientation to the topic), 'finding out' (in which they investigated their community and their concerns about its health and safety), 'sorting out' (in which they made decisions about an issue to pursue) and 'going further' (in which they planned and implemented their action). Within their investigations and actions, the students had access to the school's learning technologies ie fax, e-mail, phones, word-processors to communicate with members of the community.

The teachers described the work they saw their students completing. One commented: "I learnt that our students work well in groups and pairs. Children were able to work independently and knowing that they could make a difference gave them a sense of ownership, responsibility and leadership qualities. I saw that the students enjoyed what they were doing and were enthusiastic about everything from the word go, when choosing to take both actions: writing a Letter to Council and creating a Booklet for the School."

Another wrote: "Time was also a main factor in that it took a lot longer to go through the negotiating process when choosing an action plan. Therefore, to make everyone happy, we decided on two plans."

"All our students are capable of a lot more than we give them credit for. They were able to use a number of skills to achieve certain tasks. Their enthusiasm was at times overwhelming," said a third teacher. "Our students bring their own knowledge and experiences to the unit, which has enriched our understandings of the health and safety aspects of our community. They have displayed a keenness for taking action about their concerns, and have also shown responsibility in taking appropriate steps to make a difference."

The classes developed plans for what they would do, and these planning charts – 'process or series lines' (page 106) - were put up prominently in the classrooms so that students could keep track of what they'd done and where they were going. An example is shown here, with the teachers recognising and filling in the formal statements of skills, concepts and values (boxed section on opposite page).

The school has a booklet available that illustrates this process and includes photographs of the group at work.

The children learned that they can make a difference in the world, that they have responsibilities and rights in their community, that health and safety are important issues in the community, that there are health and safety facilities in the community, and how to identify high risk areas. "It is so important to implement a unit like this," wrote one teacher, "as it hopefully fosters life-long commitment and action."

The teachers also saw themselves as learners in the process, both about how to implement such an approach (see the chart following this article) and also about the content of the topics. "Our community is not as safe as it appears to be," said one. "It is actually quite unsafe for the children to be riding their bikes, walking and also playing on playground equipment." Another observed, "Being new to this area, I was able to learn from the students about the community and its facilities, therefore it was reciprocal learning."

It wasn't all easy. Both teachers and students found certain aspects frustrating – such as not receiving replies to their letters. "Sometimes it was frustrating, waiting for some form of communication from the wider community – there was a need to continue with tasks and realise things were out of our hands and control." "Next time we will invite Council members to come to the school to explain their role and to see what we are studying."

Reflections

A question remains about the time it takes to plan for effective learning that includes taking action. How do we rethink our use of time for planning so that we can make the effectiveness of this work sustainable? Locating appropriate contacts in the local community is very time consuming and can be a barrier to realistic planning for taking action. Teachers' work and the constraints in terms of when they are available to contact and be contacted by community organisations sometimes gets in the way of efficient development of links.

We will continue to look closely at SOSE, Science and Health as the most likely KLAs for us to develop action orientated curriculum projects. However, it may be helpful to include active participation here at school at the same time as taking the young people out into the community. For example, the rubbish around the school is a big issue, so how could we link this issue to the whole of school environment and community links teams and to class meetings? Where it is appropriate, the formation of a whole of school student committee may be considered.

In a wider context within the school, it is vital to establish this sort of approach at the beginning of the year when teachers work with the development of their class – how we will work and learn together. It may be appropriate to include a whole school "beginning the year" topic which includes rights and responsibilities and rules, developing understanding of democratic principles for relationships in our classroom and the whole school establishment of class meeting structures.

Safety and Health in Our Community

Year level 4: a 7-week unit in SOSE/Health

Understandings:

We can make a difference in our community to make it a healthier and safer place to be.

- there are services in our community that help to keep us safe and healthy;
- the things that keep us healthy and safe are access to health services, good relationships, law enforcement, rules;
- when services are unavailable, it can make people feel unhealthy and unsafe.

Focus Questions:

- What do you need in a community to maintain good health and safety?
- What are the characteristics of a safe and healthy community?
- Is our community safe and healthy?
- What could make our community a healthier and safer place?
- Where are the services in our local community?
- Who are the people in our local community that help us to keep healthy and safe?

Skills:

- Observe
- Locate
- Identify
- Compare (auditing)
- Classifying
- Labelling
- Sorting
- Constructing and using a key

Key concepts:

- Community
- Health
- Safety
- Services
- Rules and laws
- Facilities
- Characteristics
- Relationships
- Recreation

Values:

- Positive: being able to make a difference
- Appreciate and care for what we do have in our local community
- Respecting roles of those in services

Resources:

- **Are U Making a Difference** website
- **Discovering Democracy** – middle primary teachers' text
- Brimbank Council

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Community Health and Safety: Series Line

Stages	Focus	Activity	Tools and Strategies	Thinking Skills
A: Tuning In	What is a community?	• define • read information text • how are we part of the community? • what are the different groups in our community?	Concept map	Discussion Brainstorm
	Community Services	• list and identify community services we use in a 24 hour timeframe	24 Hour Time Table	Interpreting Reflecting Reinforcing
B: Finding Out	Locating Health Services in our Local Community	• **community walk** • guest speakers (police, leisure centre)	Map of local area Data collection sheet	Observing Note taking Identifying
	Identifying health and safety concerns	• list positive and negative aspects • devise ideas to fix problems	P.M.I.	Responding Questioning Reflecting
	Collating knowledge	• share ideas of what students now know about community health and safety issues	Donut	Listening Expressing
	Differences of formal and informal ways of communicating	• look at structures and features of formal and informal letters	Group work	Identifying Discussing Reinforcing
	Other ways of communicating	• look at structures and features of faxes, e-mails and phone calls	Role Play Expert Groups	Listening Discussing
C: Sorting Out	Re-examine ideas from PMI	• sort into: What can we do? What can others do? Whose job is it? • Contact by 4 communications	3 T Chart Rubric	Discussing Questioning Classifying
	Decision making	• **choose an issue that the class can use as a project**	Spend-a-buck	Prioritising Discussing
D: Going Further	Action plan	• what do we want to do? • who can help us with this? • how can we contact them? • when will we do it? • what resources will we need?	Cross Classification Chart Planning Sheet	Questioning Discussing