CATHERRINE DEVINE works at St Monica’s College, a coeducational Catholic school. She is the coordinator of the Melbourne Interfaith Intercultural cluster, from the Good Practice Schools Project bringing together five diverse schools, St Monica’s College, Thornbury High School, The King David School, King Khalid Islamic College of Victoria and Siena College to challenge students’ social and cultural assumptions and find common ground.

Encompassing Catholic, Islamic, Jewish and Government schools, the inspiration for the cluster was as a constructive response to the 2005 Cronulla riots, and an acknowledgement of the 5th anniversary of the September 11 terrorist attacks in the United States.

The pedagogical imperative of the project was to encourage young people to interact and engage in intellectual debate and discussion on socially significant issues.

The cluster operated as a Socratic circle, embracing the Socratic philosophical technique whereby individuals arrive at answers through reflection in response to questioning. In this instance, students were given material to read, and then engaged in a series of questions which encouraged fundamental insights into values and value systems.

Devine says some students experienced what could best be described as a revelation – the discovery of core common values that we all share regardless of backgrounds, beliefs or personal circumstances.

The transformation that occurred during the project was acknowledged and expressed by the participants. Devine says they changed their perception of “other”, and were less inclined to sweeping generalisations based on difference. The students developed an increasingly sophisticated understanding of values, and expressed sentiments such as actually welcoming difference instead of shunning it. Devine says a hallmark of the project was the sense of community created, and the desire of the participants to actively contribute to community building. They respected the notion of citizenship, not simply as Melbournians or Australians, but as global citizens, and formed an understanding of their place in the world around them.

Perhaps one telling measure of the success of the project has been the eagerness with which the students have continued its principles in their daily lives. Devine says the relationships forged within the cluster are blossoming beyond it – with students maintaining and extending friendships, independently of the project framework.

Devine noted “Most times when schools interact with other schools it’s in a competitive field…whereas we have shown there is a lot be to be gained from creative collaboration with other schools”.
She contends there’s a demonstrable connection between values education and academic achievement, and says if Principals can reconcile the energy and commitment required for values education with the learning curriculum, it has a tangible impact on standards of achievement. “When young people are given opportunities to be confident leaders, they are more motivated in other areas as well…the notion of educating the whole person has really been revealed in exciting ways” Devine says. She says students who were borderline disciplinary cases went to greatly improved academic performance, and believes the cluster project sets a viable precedent for values education in Australia.