

# Aspects of Flexi Practice

Exploring ways of working in EREA Flexible Schools I Ed. 01, MARCH 2021



EDMUND RICE EDUCATION  
AUSTRALIA

## Operation by Principles: The Story and Practice

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This paper gives a brief overview of the operation by principles model using staff perceptions of their ways of working with young people and colleagues from a research project conducted within flexible schools. Data were drawn from a questionnaire (30 respondents), interviews with staff in the network of flexi schools (16) and written evaluations from a series of Reflective Practice groups. The four principles of respect, participation, safe and legal and honesty, provide a common ground for relationships in learning communities where young people and adults commit to participate in a learning environment that is democratic, relational, safe and inclusive. Examples drawn from interviews with educators who use the four principles in their work to enfranchise young people are provided. This paper explores the four principles as the foundation of the work, as tools for negotiation in decision making, and as a framework for resolving conflict nonviolently. The complexity of this way of working is highlighted.



## The history of the four principles in flexi schools

The Centre Education Programme, the first Edmund Rice flexible school in Queensland, was developed from the Christian Brothers' work in Logan City in the Juvenile Justice System through the Children's Court, and the establishment of a community-based organisation, Youth and Family Service Logan City Incorporated (YFS). A common experience of young people who came to YFS was varying degrees of truancy. The Christian Brothers were asked in 1985 "to investigate the educational implications of chronic truancy in Logan City" to determine whether there was a need and if so, did the Brothers have something to offer in response (One Step Beyond, 1996).

In the early years of the Centre Education Programme, a group of people including some Presentation Sisters, another teacher, some social workers and youth workers, came together with the Brothers to explore ways of working with young people who had been disenfranchised from conventional schooling. They drew upon the Youth Sector Training Manual (1990) and the experience of outdoor education workers from The Outlook at Boonah, and agreed to use the four principles of respect, participation, safe and legal, and honesty

## Common ground for relationships

The four principles provide a common ground for relationships.

*The concept of "common ground" applies to all who choose to participate in our services. Adults and young people alike commit to participate in a learning environment that is democratic, relational and operates through key principles. Relationships at our services are based on a respect for personal dignity and recognition of difference. An emphasis is placed on the peaceful resolution of conflict and spirituality is recognised as a universal human experience. Within this understanding of spirituality is the belief that all individuals are unique and gifted. (FLCN, 2005)*

## The four principles apply to all

Appreciating that the four principles apply equally to young people and staff emphasises a democratic way of valuing in the work with young people. Common power dynamics between adults and young people that are often experienced in conventional education settings are shifted (Nabavi & Lund, 2012). When staff accept that the four principles apply equally to them as well as to the young people, they are opening themselves to the possibility of ‘power- with’ rather than ‘power- over’ (Stuart, 2004). Staff expressed willingness to be accountable to working with the four principles in their relationships with young people.



When staff genuinely appreciate their responsibility to be accountable to the four principles, they “respect each other and be very open and honest if things aren’t working”. Some staff felt able to admit mistakes and one participant commented that “the respect and the chance to do better and learn from your mistakes has been genuinely practiced”. Younger staff expressed a feeling of being valued and respected by older, more experienced staff. One experienced staff member commented that working with the four principles can sometimes “impact badly”. Staff may have “a different view of how others are working” which can create tensions and disagreements. This was not seen as problematic as the educator had realistic expectations that differences occur, and she adopted a practical approach requiring problem solving. “You try every point of the compass until you find one that works”.



## Foundation for everything – tools not rules

One staff member described the principles as the foundation for everything and made the distinction between using the four principles as negotiation tools rather than as a set of rules. Additionally, this educator made the connection between the context of the young people’s lives and why using the four principles as tools of negotiation rather than rules was so important. Developing an understanding of why young people may react at times to being ‘boxed in’ or compartmentalised is supported by the idea of the four principles as the foundation of all work with young people.

*They’re not really a set of rules, they are a set of negotiation tools which is really different . . . we are dealing with extraordinary humans that have been through extraordinary situations.*

In some ways using the four principles captures a way of valuing that aligns with democratic principles of equality, participation and having a voice.

*I think that the four principles provide a kind of a democratic framework to work from. I think the four principles are really complicated; they’re very difficult to work with, because they’re values you know, and people have a very different sense of what those things are. I think that in the messiness of that is the essence of life - that’s what life is. And that’s what learning is about and that’s how you can be together.*

Some staff had a tendency to use the four principles as rules, yet the original intention of the using the four principles was as a tool for negotiation with young people. Negotiation and dialogue are features of democratic ways of valuing that influence educators and are foregrounded in flexi schools. In flexible schools, the centrality of relationships is founded upon the operation by principles model in which respect, participation, safe & legal and honesty are the basis and starting point of the work. The four principles are like an ongoing catalyst for the relational work with young people and staff, that enable a safe learning space. In discussing personal and social relations in education, Thayer-Bacon emphasises important features of teacher-student relationships that incorporate similar values to those captured in the four principles including care, respect, dignity and trust. “In a caring relationship, teachers must focus their efforts on valuing and appreciating students’ needs and learning what their interests and desires are” (2004, p. 168).

## A framework for resolving issues

When faced with challenging issues that occur in day to day situations, some educators talked about their understanding of the principles and the way they used them as a framework for resolving issues. At times this also requires regular conversations and checking in with colleagues. For another educator, learning how to engage with the four principles to resolve conflict, required taking time to observe more experienced staff in their work. Learning occurs as staff respond to situations in collaboration with other colleagues, then reflect on their experiences together. When issues with young people arise, the normal school routine stops and a meeting is held with the young people having a say.



Adults adopt supportive roles, assisting young people to find a solution together. The challenge for adults is to learn to wait, not to try and impose their solution to “fix it”. Rather, allowing young people space, supporting them in finding their voice to contribute to a group solution, gives young people real experiences of resolving conflict nonviolently through conversation and dialogue. These processes support the young people to learn other ways of dealing with conflict. The following insight from an experienced educator captures this process.

*Look, this is how we fix things here, you might go out and there may be fights in your life. But maybe you remember, one of the ways that you’ve learned to fix things differently here. And we’re trying to show you that there are other ways of doing things.*

## Sitting in the grey: Holding complexity

Being prepared to enter into dialogue and a process of resolving conflict to support young people involves uncertainty. Staff require a capacity to be honest and need an ability to sit in the grey, that is, not having immediate answers or solutions for complex issues.

Holding the complexity of challenging situations and allowing a solution to emerge that involves young people having a voice in the process, is central to this way of working. It requires adults to let go of preconceived outcomes and enable young people to feel genuinely empowered. This kind of work practice requires time, reflection, and learning through experience and observation of more experienced others. These mentors are skilled in using the four principles as tools of negotiation to work through day to day processes and challenging issues. The significance of dialogue is highlighted by Noddings who states that in genuine dialogue, outcomes and decisions could not be anticipated. “[Dialogue] is a common search for understanding, empathy or appreciation . . . It connects us to each other and helps to maintain caring relations” (1992, p. 23).

*... in genuine dialogue outcomes and decisions could not be anticipated (Noddings, 1992)*

Working with the four principles offers an alternative to more authoritarian methods of managing behavior. Whilst these processes are challenging and take time and specific skills, they offer young people an experience of being participants in finding a solution. In order for young people to take responsibility for themselves and their choices, they must be given responsibility. The challenge for adults is to step back and allow young people to have voice. Adults who can honestly say to young people that they don’t have a solution can make space for the young people to act.

“I don’t know what to do. We have a problem, I thought we agreed that we would do this activity but it seems that’s not the case. What do you think we can do?”

*Using the four principles requires staff to be able to sit in the grey and hold complexity in their work with young people and colleagues.*



## In Summary

Using the four principles with young people and staff in the flexi schools is described in a range of different ways, both in a favourable light and with a sense of awareness of the complexities associated with working in this way. The common ground approach to using the four principles is that they apply equally to young people and staff; that they are the foundation for everything in the learning context; that they are understood as the basis of all relationships between young people and staff; and, that they provide a framework for resolving issues and require role- modeling from staff. Using the four principles with young people promotes choice and responsibility with a connection to community. All of these aspects of using the four principles are combined with an awareness of the challenges of using the operation by principles model, which requires staff to be able to sit in the grey and hold complexity in their work with young people and colleagues.

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This research was made possible through an Australian Research Council Industry Partnership project: A Values Approach to School Renewal, between Edmund Rice Education Australia and Griffith University. Special thanks to all of the staff who generously participated in this research project. It would not have been possible without your commitment to the young people and your willingness to be a co-learner with them.