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Investing in Australian Youth: Nurturing Values Integrated Through Action-based Learning

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Abstract

Current societal trends are creating new opportunities for community organisations – including church groups and non-profit organisations – that specialise in the delivery of extra-curricular services to young people. This chapter discusses the case of a non-profit community organisation in Queensland that uses ‘Values Integrated Through Action-based Learning’ (VITAL), underpinned by a Judeo-Christian worldview, to help young people develop robust personal values. In particular, the chapter conducts a comparative analysis of the approaches used by this organisation and the developmental characteristics of young adolescents. It discusses key implications for educating and working with youth that pertain to enhancing: self-discipline, personal confidence, social skills and a life-long love of learning. It concludes that savvy community organisations that commit to understanding and actively meeting youth needs in safe learning environments are well positioned to ‘make a difference’ to future generations of young people.

1. Introduction

Reform of the middle years of schooling (Years 5-9) is a grass-roots movement driven by parents, educators and community members who are dissatisfied with existing approaches to schooling. While many young adolescents (Years 10-15) enjoy school and have positive experiences, many more have unhappy experiences. Research shows that disengagement, alienation and boredom with school peaks in the middle years (Middle Years of Schooling Association [MYSA] 2008). Young adolescents are generally interested in real-life experiences and authentic contexts for learning, but often less enthusiastic about traditional academic subjects, especially when lessons have little relevance to their interests or concerns (National Middle School Association and Association for Middle Level Education 2010).

A key focus of reform in the middle years of schooling is to help upper primary and junior secondary teachers to recognise the developmental needs of young adolescents and design interesting curricula and create engaging learning activities that are responsive to young people's needs (Dowden 2007, 2014; Rumble and Smith 2016). Unfortunately, many teachers are unfamiliar with the developmental needs of young adolescents and do not know how to design programs that young people will respond to. The reality is that the quality of teacher education for the middle years in Australia is patchy. A few universities in Australia have excellent middle level courses run by expert teaching staff, but most teacher education programs have an inadequate focus on preparing teachers for the middle years of schooling (Pendergast and Bahr 2010; Shanks and Dowden 2015).

2. Developmental Needs in Young Adolescence

As young people move through the developmental stage of young adolescence they face two major upheavals in their lives: Firstly, their personal timetable for puberty abruptly commences, and secondly, they make the transition from primary to secondary schooling. This stage is therefore a time of significant personal change that leads to challenges, some of

which occur simultaneously, and all of which influence educational progress (Caskey and Anfara 2014; Pendergast 2017).

From a biological perspective, individuals experience significant developmental change as they move from childhood to adolescence. Brains are still under construction (Nagel 2014). Emotions increase in intensity and play an important role in mediating motivation and engagement in learning. Indeed, emotion has a major influence on cognition (Damasio 2005). For example, when students like a teacher and enjoy a class, they think more deeply, try harder and concentrate for longer. Due to brain immaturity, students are prone to making black-and-white judgements such as ‘I hate school’, or ‘I love my teacher’. Some of these snap judgments can have a negative impact on the quality of teacher-student relationships if they are reinforced by negative perceptions of the teacher’s classroom management and then reified as accepted mythology among peers.

During young adolescence individuals aspire to adulthood. On-going physical and cognitive maturation is a powerful driver of socio-emotional development but this is reliant on a supportive social context for healthy development. For young people, the first steps towards becoming independent adult learners involve acquiring a range of life skills, such as respect for others, tolerance of interpersonal differences, and accepting increasing levels of responsibility for personal progress; as well as key social skills, such as negotiation and conflict resolution (Brighton 2007; Caskey and Anfara 2014). Many young people also face other personal upheavals such as family relocations that necessitate a change of school, modifications in their family structure due to failed relationships, or significant issues relating to poverty or poor health (Parkinson 2011). Young people also become increasingly aware that their peer group is divided by invisible fault-lines that include gender, ethnicity, citizenship, religious affiliation, and socio-economic status.

During young adolescence, individuals also undergo significant growth in terms of moral and spiritual development (Caskey and Anfara 2014). Moral development is associated with the attitudes, beliefs, values and choices that help form personal identity. Spiritual development is closely linked to moral development and is associated with the need to find meaning in life and, as individuals mature and become less egotistical, learning to give and receive love (Caskey and Anfara 2014).

Today's young people live in an urbanised, globalised and digitally connected world that is radically different to the teen-age world their parents and teachers experienced. They are exposed to trillions of unedited adult messages received 24/7 in a kaleidoscope of seductive images and sound-bites about a panoply of issues including: Friendship, love, sex, beauty, fashion, music, diet, obesity, alcohol, drugs, violence, suicide, loneliness, spirituality, and saving the planet (Carrington 2006). Yet, despite easy access to digital connectivity, some young people are not well connected to each other or their communities.

Effective schooling in the middle years interweaves relevant subject content from the disciplines with the development of important social skills for learning. Done well, schooling in the middle years champions diversity by specifically teaching students to tolerate, value and celebrate difference in the classroom (Pendergast et al. 2017). It also teaches essential social skills and creates the right conditions for developing sound personal values and catalysing a love of learning that ensures young people become committed lifelong learners. Done poorly, schooling in the middle years alienates a sizable minority of young people and some individuals develop dysfunctional behaviours that create significant barriers to educational progress and socio-emotional development (Smyth and Hattam 2004). In some cases, young people who are at risk are reluctant to accept help unless it comes from outside the classroom or beyond the school gates.

3. Harnessing Local Community Organisations

Community organisations have the potential to play an important role in the education and personal development of young people, especially those who are at risk. School communities in Australia well understand the value of extra-curricular activities for young adolescents, such as participating in organised sports or over-night camps, but the reality is that most activities are expensive; with extracurricular fees being hundreds or even thousands of dollars on top of standard fees in the independent school sector, and unlikely to be fully funded in the public school sector.

A generation ago most communities in Australia boasted a range of sporting clubs – especially team codes – and popular youth movements such as boy scouts and girl guides. The emphasis was on participation and inclusion, and fees were nominal. Most community organisations were run by an informal army of volunteers but nowadays extracurricular activities are much more difficult to run. Moreover, schools could often rely on members of the local community to assist with extra-curricular activities such as raising chickens or growing a vegetable garden (Dowden 2011). These days, however, organisations are routinely faced with large overheads relating to insurance and licencing, while others struggle to find new volunteers. Activities are increasingly expensive and in competition with virtual activities online. The advent of professionalism means that many, if not all, sports clubs are oriented more towards developing elite players than promoting mass participation and, as a result, fewer individuals are willing to work without pay.

Current trends are creating new opportunities for highly focused community organisations that specialise in the delivery of extra-curricular services to young adolescents. Indeed, some community organisations are becoming so effective in this role, and the related role of supporting families at risk, that there is a case for government recognition or support (Parkinson 2011). The rest of this chapter discusses the activities of a non-profit community

organisation which is focused on helping young people develop personal values, with respect to research understandings about the developmental needs and characteristics of young adolescents as outlined above.

3.1 Values Integrated Through Action-based Learning

V.I.T.A.L. (Values Integrated Through Action-based Learning) ProJeX – hereafter referred to as VITAL ProJex – is a non-profit community organisation based in South East Queensland that utilises a broadly Judeo-Christian worldview to help young people realise their personal potential by exploring their developing morals, values and ethics (www.vitalprojex.com).

One of VITAL ProJex’s programs called ‘Unlimited’ targets young people aged 10-14, especially those at risk of prematurely exiting schooling due to disengagement, suspension or expulsion.

3.1.1 Unlimited Program

The Unlimited program aims to:

- Help participants understand that personal potential is essentially unlimited;
- Create safe learning contexts where participants develop respect for self and others;
- Help participants discover the importance of appropriate behaviour via action-based learning;
- Empower participants to make healthy life decisions by accepting personal responsibility for their actions; and
- Encourage participants to discover enhanced meaning and purpose to their lives.

The Unlimited program is informed by Glasser’s (1998) theory of psychological needs which, in turn, predicts the development of healthy attributes in high school students. As Kesici (2015) explained, when young people’s psychosocial needs for sufficient belonging, freedom, fun and power are met, this is manifested by a range of positive attributes including better friendships, greater tolerance and increased honesty.

At the commencement of each new Unlimited session, the facilitators and participants collaboratively establish ground rules (or ‘principles’) to guide individual behaviour. Young people need the security of boundaries but also the freedom to exercise degrees of responsibility. In particular, they tend to test the limits of acceptable behaviour. Girls will often test adults in incremental steps as a group, whereas boys tend to operate on an individual basis and test adults in increasingly brazen ways that, in some contexts, are related to gaining status within their peer group. Indeed, research broadly supports the notion that young adolescents typically act as well or as poorly as they are expected to act (Pendergast et al. 2017). Unlimited assumes that when participants are treated with respect and adults set high expectations, there is little they cannot accomplish.

A maximum number of ten participants in each Unlimited program helps participants to get to know each other quickly. Research supports the view that young adolescents learn especially effectively by participating in hands-on activities in small groups (Darling-Hammond 2008; Dowden 2014; Dowden and Nolan 2006). Early activities in each Unlimited program provide opportunities for participants to learn to respect and trust each other.

Facilitators are trained to work with participants in ways that are trust-building, sympathetic, needs-aware, and relatively power neutral. It is crucial that the context for social learning is supportive; thus the Unlimited learning environment avoids undue criticism, humiliation or sarcasm, and is free of shame, guilt or anti-social behaviour. With skilled facilitation, a safe learning environment is cultivated that keeps participants accountable and, along the way, encourages apologies and mutual forgiveness as needed.

During young adolescence the reality is that each person is adjusting to profound personal changes in the physical, social, emotional and intellectual domains but according to a personal timetable that may be significantly different to others. This can lead to introspection and moodiness that may be triggered by careless remarks when individuals are

feeling vulnerable. Indeed, preoccupation with body image and self-consciousness prompts some adolescents to avoid physical activity. VITAL ProJex addresses these issues by putting participants in Unlimited programs into small and same-sex groups. Although young people learn by doing, they also think in ways that become progressively more abstract. By following up problem-solving activities with an opportunity to debrief and reflect on personal behaviour, students are able to identify how they have grown, and can continue to grow, in terms of their morals, values and ethics. This is especially effective because participants soon learn to recognise incongruence in their personal behaviour and begin to process cognitive dissonance within an emotionally safe and encouraging learning environment.

3.2 Values Development

Young adolescents develop their values in the middle years. Within a very short period they move from an unquestioning acceptance of the values of their parents/guardian and other significant adults to developing their own personal values (Brighton 2007; Lovat 2010). At this stage in their lives, young people are often idealistic and only just starting to perceive grey shades within the appearance of black and white. They need opportunities to consider and justify different choices as well as experiencing the consequences of some of their choices. Challenging group activities followed by debriefing with guided personal reflection are effective learning experiences for exploring fairness, justice and equity (MYSA 2008).

Young adolescents progressively develop a sense of self and personal and social values which shape them as they progress to adulthood. They become increasingly aware they are unique individuals with particular gifts and talents (Caskey and Anfara 2014). Yet young people are fragile. Social maturation is generally slower than physical and intellectual maturation and this is typified by egotistical and less socially acceptable behaviour such as overreacting emotionally, ridiculing others or being easily embarrassed. Indeed, when young

adolescents lack sufficient family or community support they can rapidly lose their ability to cope with life circumstances and become dysfunctional.

3.2.1 Dee's Story

Dee (12) was sent by her parents from the South Pacific nation of Samoa to school in Sydney. She had to learn her school lessons in a new language and an unfamiliar culture and she soon felt alienated. Dee found herself sucked into a negative spiral of violence. In response to being picked on by others, she fought back and quickly gained a formidable reputation for her physicality. She became a bully and, despite wanting to talk to others about her problems, was unable to do so because she didn't know who to trust. Dee was given an opportunity to participate in an Unlimited program. This provided Dee with a lifeline by creating a safe emotional space for her to value herself and to start to trust others. She was soon transformed into a leader who was concerned for her peers (<http://vimeo.com/59965958>).

The Unlimited program provided the catalyst that helped Dee to move from being a schoolyard bully to someone who cared for her peers. Like all young adolescents, Dee desperately needed to affiliate with a group and, once this need was met she was able to reflect on her behaviour. She drew from family and communal values embedded in her Samoan culture and soon stopped being a bully and started to genuinely care for her peers.

3.3 Team Building via Social Activities

Young adolescents need high-quality social interactions with other people. They also need to gain experience making decisions and accepting responsibility for these decisions. Teamwork helps young people to look beyond themselves, moderate erratic behaviour and pitch in to help their peers. Learning to work in a team is an especially important life skill for individuals who tend to be loners or who are unreasonable about their expectations of others.

The effectiveness of VITAL programs stems not so much from the activities themselves as from the needs-based program design, trained facilitator competencies and program sequencing that is based on the stages of the development of group dynamics. A

critical component of each program is increasingly challenging trust activities that produce a supportive environment where participants can safely give and receive feedback.

In one activity in the Unlimited program, a group of participants is presented with a problem-solving activity that involves the group crossing an imaginary crocodile-infested river via a limited number of stepping stones. Successful completion of the activity requires good communication and physical interaction, including preventing each other from falling into the river. Participants quickly learn when they need to rely on their peers and when they should offer assistance and encouragement to their peers. In the debriefing stage of this activity, participants typically give frank feedback to their peers (for example, 'I felt like others spoke over me and my idea wasn't listened to'). With the opportunity to immediately implement their feedback in the next activity and reflect once more in the next debriefing, students can quickly acquire and integrate positive values (Lovat 2010). In some cases participants realise that peer feedback from the activity is similar to feedback that they have been receiving from their teachers at school.

In another activity, participants compete in a game of volleyball but are selectively assigned handicaps such as having no arms or no legs, or being blind or mute. In the debriefing stage of this activity participants typically comment on frustrating aspects of this experience but in the process reflect that they feel more empathetic towards others, especially those with handicaps, and that they have realised that everyone can make a difference.

In another activity, the participants stand in a circle with one person chosen to be in the middle, on a 'stage', who then welcomes the person who was next to them to the stage, announcing the skill they will perform for ten seconds (for example, 'Please welcome to the stage Mark, who is going to sing his favourite nursery rhyme'). Having each experienced personal vulnerability, the group typically bonds at an enhanced level, with individuals learning to face their fears and talk about it frankly.

All these activities help participants, who as young adolescents are still emerging from childhood egotism, to shift their focus from self to others. Drawing from Yalom's (1995) theory of psychotherapy, the approach utilised by Unlimited allows participants to benefit from shared experiences as well as receiving constructive feedback from peers and facilitators, which catalyses the process of breaking down unhealthy beliefs and replacing them with healthy ones. Young people develop positive self-esteem and personal confidence when they successfully complete challenging activities but experiencing success as a team is especially desirable for young adolescents because it creates powerful bonds and strengthens their sense of affiliation and belonging to a group.

3.1 Kobe's Story

Kobe (Year 7) had been bullied and was a bully. He became increasingly angry and violent to the point where his mother believed that she was unsafe and rang the police to ask for help. Kobe was invited to participate in an Unlimited program. The program provided him with an avenue to communicate his feelings in a safe space. It was evident during the program that he started to believe in himself and trust others. After the program he said he was able to trust his school chaplain for the first time. Soon he was engaging much more in his learning, interacting with his peers in healthier ways, and generally striving to succeed (<http://vitalprojex.com/programs-no-limits-and-unlimited/unlimited-grade-school-values-program/>).

The Unlimited program helped Kobe get back on track. Being in Unlimited gave him the chance to express himself. He explained that in Unlimited he had people he could talk to, whereas previously he had believed he had no one. Unlimited provided Kobe with a safe and supportive context where he could accept and take ownership of his thoughts and feelings, which enabled him to break the cycle of violence and find new belief in himself.

3.2 Team Reflection

Group activities in the Unlimited program are always challenging and capitalise on young adolescents' increasing intellectual capacity and their growing ability to apply moral

reasoning. As already indicated debriefing and guided reflection on the outcomes of the activities is an important part of values formation (Lovat 2010). Typical questions include: What did I do? How did I feel? What could I do better? How did I help and encourage others? Was I sensitive to others' feelings? How did the team do? How did we measure success? How could the team improve? Team discussion along the lines of the characteristics that make a true friend or what makes individuals feel sad, angry or embarrassed, and why this might be so, is also likely to be fruitful.

4. Conclusion

This chapter demonstrates that when community organisations cater for the developmental needs of young adolescents, they can successfully work alongside the formal education system to help nurture young people. Once young people establish a healthy foundation for personal growth and, by developing values integrated through action-based learning, start to move from a self-centred perspective towards recognising the rights of others (Caskey and Anfara 2014), it opens the door for schooling to develop excellence of character in the intellectual, moral and civic dimensions (Shields 2011). VITAL ProJex has positioned itself to perform a key role in this process by catalysing values development and ethical formation, thereby enabling young people to overcome barriers to personal growth and become mature and productive citizens.

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