

# Investing in Australian youth: A community organisation that makes a difference

*Tony Dowden (University of Southern Queensland)*

*Mark Drager (VITAL Projex)*

## Introduction

Society has long recognised that successfully raising the next generation takes more than parental commitment alone. An African proverb, the source unknown, says it takes 'a whole village to raise a child'. The Jesuit maxim of 'give me a child of seven and I'll show you the man', attributed to Saint Francis Xavier in the 16th century, suggests it has been long understood that formal education shapes children and young people.

One of the triumphs of Australian education is that we have grasped the importance of high quality early childhood education and have taken serious steps towards providing universal access to education in the early years and ensuring all early childhood teachers receive specialised training. In contrast, the report card on how we educate young adolescents (10-15 years old) is a mixed bag.

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 traditional approaches to primary and secondary schooling. While many young adolescents enjoy school and have positive experiences, many more have unhappy experiences. Research convincingly shows that disengagement, alienation and boredom with schooling peaks in the middle years (Middle Years of Schooling Association, 2008). Young adolescents are generally interested in real-life experiences and authentic contexts for learning, but often much less enthusiastic about traditional academic subjects, especially when lessons have little or no relevance to their interests or concerns.

A key focus of reform in the middle years of schooling is to help upper primary and junior secondary teachers to recognise and understand the developmental needs of young adolescents and, therefore, design interesting and engaging learning activities

that young people respond to. Unfortunately, many teachers do not know about the developmental needs of young adolescents, nor do they 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 & Bahr, 2010).

## Harnessing local community organisations

Community organisations have the potential to play an important role in the education and personal development of young people. School communities in Australia well understand the value of extra-curricular activities for young adolescents, such as participating in organised sports or over-night

camp, but the reality is that most activities are expensive; with extracurricular fees being 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. 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 few 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. The rest of this article interweaves discussion of the developmental characteristics of young adolescents (Caskey & Anfar, 2014) with the activities of a non-profit community organisation called V.I.T.A.L. Projex<sup>7</sup> <http://www.vitalprojex.com/>.

## 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 is dedicated to helping young people realise their personal potential by exploring their developing morals, values and ethics. One of VITAL Projex's programs, 'Unlimited', specifically targets young people aged 10-14, especially those at risk of prematurely exiting schooling due to disengagement, suspension or expulsion.

## Kobe's story

Kobe (Year 7) was losing control of many aspects of his life. The Unlimited program helped him get back on track. Here is his story: <http://vitalprojex.com/programs-no-limits-and-unlimited/unlimited-grade-school-values-program/>. Kobe's experience raises questions, especially how a short program like Unlimited could have had such a powerful impact. The short answer is that Unlimited created an environment Kobe was able to relate to, accept and take ownership of, thus enabling him to find fresh self-belief. The longer answer is that the aims and purposes of Unlimited align with the developmental needs of young people.

## Young adolescence

As young people – aged approximately 10-15 – negotiate their way through the developmental stage of young adolescence they face two major life upheavals: firstly, when their biological timetable for puberty abruptly commences, and secondly, when they make the transition from primary to secondary schooling. Many young people also face other personal upheavals such



as family relocations that necessitate a changes of school, modifications in their family structure due to failed relationships, and significant issues relating to poverty or poor health. Young people also become increasingly aware that their peer group is divided by invisible fault-lines that include gender, sexual identity, ethnicity, immigrant/refugee status, religious belief and socio-economic status.

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, marriage, beauty, fashion, music, diet, exercise, obesity, alcohol, drugs, violence, terrorism, suicide, divorce, loneliness, spirituality and saving the planet. Yet, despite easy access to digital connectivity, some young people are not well connected to their local communities.

### Unlimited program

The Unlimited program, which is targeted at 10-14 year olds, 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.

At the commencement of each new Unlimited training session, the facilitators and participants collaboratively establish ground rules (referred to as 'principles') to guide individual behaviour. Young people need the security of boundaries but freedom to exercise a modicum of responsibility. They tend to test the limits of acceptable behaviour. Girls will often test adults as a group in incremental steps, whereas boys tend to operate on an individual basis and test adults in increasingly brazen ways that, in some contexts, are closely related to gaining status within their peer group. Research supports the notion that young adolescents usually act as well or as poorly as they are expected to act. 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 best by participating in hands-on activities in small groups. Early activities in each Unlimited program provide opportunities for participants to learn to respect and trust each other. In addition, 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 must avoid undue criticism, humiliation or sarcasm, and be free of shame, guilt or anti-social behaviour.

During young adolescence the ever-present reality is that every person is adjusting to profound personal changes in the physical,

social, emotional and intellectual domains, but according to personal timetables that may be significantly different to others. This can lead to introspection and moodiness that might be sparked by careless remarks when individuals are feeling vulnerable. Indeed, preoccupation with body image and self-consciousness can prompt some adolescents to avoid physical activity. VITAL Projex addresses these issues by dividing participants in Unlimited programs into small and same-sex groups during training sessions. Although young people learn by doing and socially, they also think in ways that become progressively more abstract and reflective. 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.

### Values development

Young people develop their values in the middle years. Within a few short years they move from an unquestioning acceptance of the values of their parents/guardian and other significant adults to developing their own personal values. Young people are often idealistic and only just starting to perceive grey shades within appearances of black and white. They need opportunities to consider and justify different options as well as experiencing the consequences of some of these options. Challenging group activities and guided personal reflection are effective learning experiences for exploring fairness, justice and equity.

Young adolescents progressively develop a sense of self and personal

and social values which shape them as adults. They become increasingly aware they are a unique individual with particular gifts and talents and an emerging adult personality. Yet young people are fragile. Social maturation is generally slower than physical and intellectual maturation and this is typically expressed by egotistical and less socially acceptable behaviour such as overreacting emotionally, ridiculing others or being easily embarrassed. When young adolescents lack sufficient family and community support they can rapidly lose their ability to cope with life circumstances.

### Dee's story

Dee (12 years old) migrated from the South Pacific nation of Samoa to Sydney. She missed her mother and felt alienated at school. She soon found herself sucked into a negative spiral of violence. The Unlimited program (then referred to as 'No Limits') provided the catalyst that helped her to make the spectacular move from being a bully to someone who cared for others. Here is her story: <http://vimeo.com/59965958>. Like all young adolescents Dee desperately needed to affiliate with and belong to a group and, once this need was met and she was enabled to reflect on her behaviour, she drew from the values embedded within her communal Samoan culture and commenced to care for her peers.

### Team building

Young adolescents need high-quality social interactions with other people. They also need to gain experience making decisions and accepting responsibility for these decisions. Team work helps young people to look beyond

themselves, curb erratic behaviour relating to self-consciousness and pitch in to help their team. Learning to work as a team is an especially important life skill for individuals who tend to be lone rangers and are unrealistic or unreasonable in their expectations of others.

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 high level communication and extensive physical interaction, including preventing each other from falling into the water. Participants quickly learn when they need to rely on their peers and when they should offer assistance and encouragement to their peers. This activity helps participants, who as young adolescents are still emerging from childhood egotism, to move their focus from self to others. All benefit from the shared experience and positive feedback from each other. 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.

### 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. Reflective debriefing on activities is very important. Typical questions might include: What

did I do? How did I feel? What could I do better? How did I help or encourage others? How did they help or encourage me? Was I aware of the feelings of others? How did the team do? Did I like being in the team? How did we measure success? How could the team improve? Team discussion along the lines of what makes a true friend or what makes individuals feel sad, angry or embarrassed is also likely to be fruitful.

### Conclusion

Despite rapid advances in digital technologies, it still takes a whole community to raise a child. Community organisations can work alongside the formal education system to help nurture and educate young people. In Queensland, VITAL Projex has positioned itself to perform a key role in this process by catalysing personal ethical formation and enabling young people to overcome barriers to becoming productive citizens in Australian society.

### References

- Caskey, M., & Anfara, V. (2014). *Developmental characteristics of young adolescents*. Retrieved from <http://www.amle.org/BrowsebyTopic/Research/ResDet/TabId/198/ArtMID/696/ArticleID/455/Developmental-Characteristics-of-Young-Adolescents.aspx>
- Middle Years of Schooling Association. (2008). *MYSA position paper: Middle schooling people, practices and places*. Brisbane, QLD: Author. Retrieved from <http://www.adolescentsuccess.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/MYSA-Position-Paper.pdf>
- Pendergast, D., & Bahr, N. (2010). *Teaching middle years: Rethinking curriculum, pedagogy and assessment* (2nd ed.). Crows Nest, NSW: Allen & Unwin.