

Today's adolescents - different?

Adolescent years are well in the past for most readers and it can be a mixture of delight and embarrassment to recall them. For those who still have contact with the young people of today, they strive to understand them as generations always have. But are they different? If so, in what ways are they different?

A study that I often refer to is from the *Search Institute* www.search-institute.org/development-assets which has looked at what assets an adolescent needs to be successful in study and life. The figures quoted are based on a study of 150,000 students between grades 6 and 12 in 2003 in the United States. Here follows a brief description and discussion of these results. (A similar survey can be done on a self reporting basis through an Australian web site but I was unable to find any composite data for Australia.)

Support

There are 40 assets divided into two groups of twenty - *External* and *Internal*. The first group of *External Assets* is *Support* and there are six assets focussing on family, adults, school and community. The figures are interesting. Participants report 68% *Family support* but only 28% report positive *Family communication* and 29% a *Caring school climate*. For the six assets in this category the average score is 39%. It would seem that U.S. adolescents do not feel well supported.

Communication between adults and adolescents remains a crucial area for development and schools play their part. In Australia, where secondary schools are much smaller than those in the U.S., our welfare (caring) systems are on the whole much better. When high schools get over 1,000 students there is additional pressure on school welfare because there are students who can fall through the system and no teacher actually knows them. At a time when there is pressure on schools to lift their performance in international tests of literacy and numeracy, there should still be time to reflect on how schools provide for students to develop their support assets. As Christians in education this is a big priority that can not get lost in the striving to meet educational goals driven by politics. Education has always been more than an array of subjects and performance in studying them. Socialisations goals remain as relevant as ever they were.

Empowerment

There are four empowerment assets and safety scores only 51%. That only half U.S. adolescents feel safe is a major concern and also reflected in Australian society. Many of us can remember living very free lives in our neighbourhoods while growing up. We went everywhere and did most things and sometimes our parents found out. But today, parents increasingly want to know where their adolescents are every moment and to have them in activities with organised programs. Parents go through a stage of being taxi drivers, not only taking them to school each day (few walk) but providing transport for every activity. With the increased reporting of the horrors of the world it is easy to understand the anxiety of parents and it would seem that anxiety is passed onto adolescents - they don't feel safe.

A response to the asset *Service to others* is encouraging with 48% reporting that they have this asset although only 26% believe that they have the asset of being a resource to the community. Empowerment is about providing opportunities for adolescents and schools and Christian organisations need to spend considerable energy on student leadership

and government programs to see that this asset is enhanced. Adolescents need to be listened to, taken seriously and involved in decision making.

Boundaries and expectations

Six assets and about half the adolescents sampled reported that they have the assets of family, school and neighbourhood boundaries, had positive peer influences and high expectations. However, the asset of *Adult role models* scored only 27%. This is a very concerning matter. Among other social institutions, schools and churches should be sources of positive adult role models. For the U.S. this is even more alarming when you consider the much higher proportion of adolescents that are involved in churches than in Australia. Adolescents are always seeking authentic adults, people who are what they say they are. That they have trouble finding such models is negative comment on older generations and the result is that they develop the asset of Positive peer influence (62%). The peer group becomes the major influence in their lives.

Constructive use of time

This section considers involvement in youth programs, religious communities, time at home and creative activities. All score in the fifties except for *Creative activities* 21%. Are schools and churches engaging students in programs that develop their creative abilities and give opportunities for them to blossom? At a time when Australia is focussing on a national curriculum for students and some subjects are getting more focus than others, it is a good time to reflect on what the curriculum is going to provide for opportunities for all students in the arts, music and dance. How do churches capture the creative talents of adolescents and use them in their worship, outreach and creative activities?

Commitment to learning

The *Internal Assets* begin with five on *Commitment to learning*. Over half the students thought they had the assets of *Achievement motivation* (65%), *School engagement* (55%), *Bonding to school* (52%) and a little less than half *Homework* (47%). The asset that scored poorly was *Reading for pleasure* (22%). As someone who was very slow to read and who still doesn't read for pleasure, I can identify with this asset. I believe that those who read early sustain an advantage in education and that if they also develop a love of reading it places them in a strong position academically and socially and those who only read for information have to compensate. In the early years of schooling there can be no more important outcome than learning to read and when some students enter high school without strong reading abilities, and a love a reading, they are always going to do it tough.

Positive value

Young people report strongly in percentage terms in this section *Honesty* 66%, *Integrity* 66%, *Responsibility* 63%, *Equity and justice* 52%, *Caring* 50% and *Restraint* 45%. It is only when you consider the corollary that the alarm bells ring. 34% report that they are dishonest, 37% that they are irresponsible, 48% that they have no sense of equity and justice, 50% that they are uncaring and 55% that they lack restraint. A gender breakdown for these figures would be interesting especially on restraint where it might be suspected that the boys would score badly. Problems around the world are often intensified by a lack of restraint. Solving problems with violence is the norm for movies and TV and violence in the community remains a social issue. In the U.S., with a different attitude to guns, restraint is one asset that the whole community badly needs, not only adolescents.

Social competencies

Interpersonal competence, Cultural competence, Resistance skills and Peaceful conflict resolution all reported in the forties but *Planning and decision making* was at 29%. In this result there are some educational implications. Pedagogies that allow students to undertake significant tasks that require planning and decision making in conjunction with other students are more likely to develop this asset than textbook driven lessons focussed on examinations that favour rote learning and individual effort. In secondary schools, how teachers learnt, the curriculum and examinations still drive how teachers teach. Australian teachers like their counterparts in the U.S. may have moved towards constructivist teaching, but it would be an exaggeration to say that they have embraced it. Conceptualising learning into a bigger task base framework may develop this competency in adolescents but it will need a change in pedagogy.

Positive identity

In this section 72% had a *Positive view of personal future* while *Personal power* (42%), *Self-esteem* (48%) and *Sense of purpose* (57%) all scored lower. Here again is an agenda for schools as the most time consuming social institution that adolescents are involved in.

Schools have always been about changing people and the future of our society really does depend on the quality of the people its schools produce. There is not much point in having the world's best performers in literacy and numeracy (Julia please note) if they have poor family communication (72%), who feel undervalued in their communities (78%), are unable to find adult role models (73%), are unable to find uses for creativity (79%), who read only for information (78%), lack restraint (55%), are unable to plan and make decisions (71%) and are feeling powerless (58%). This worse case generalisation should make every educator sit up and think: What sort of people do we want our schools to produce and then what sort of curriculum and pedagogy will get us there. It is not only the USA that needs to ask and answer these questions

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