

Positive, Practical and Productive

A Case study of

HANDS ON LEARNING in action

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Context

Hands on Learning (HOL) is an early intervention educational program that seeks to increase attendance and retention of middle years students regarded as at risk of disengagement and/or early school leaving. Established and piloted at Frankston High School in 1999, “*in response to a clearly identified need amongst troubled students*”, the program and its philosophy have since informed foundation of the not-for-profit organisation Hands on Learning Australia . At the time of writing, more than 23 HOL programs operate within secondary schools throughout Victoria and on Cape York Peninsula, Queensland. More than 1000 young people have participated in HOL programs to date.

As part of its long-term evaluation strategy, HOL recently commissioned Deloitte Australia to prepare a major report that strongly argues the case for government support in view of the initiative’s potential socio-economic and cost benefits to the community.¹ The Deloitte Report examined the impact of the program at a “macro” level, underlining HOL’s strong alignment with government policy, and confirming its economic soundness and capacity to address challenges posed by the Gonski Review.

By contrast, the current report examines the HOL’s impact at a “micro” level, and provides a short case study of delivery of the program at a specific regional Secondary setting, Benalla College in North-east Victoria. Utilizing data drawn from interviews and focus groups with HOL staff, school leadership and participating students (past and present), the case study focuses particularly on the impact of HOL in facilitating academic improvement and renewed (and generalised) engagement with learning. To that end, the performance and attitudes of a sample of young people undertaking HOL will be compared in an Appendix with those of a similarly small cohort of young people who have been identified as meeting the selection criteria for inclusion but, for various reasons, have opted NOT to undertake the program.

The project, undertaken by the Youth Research Centre at the University of Melbourne, augments and adds value to a larger YRC project, *Evaluation of the Education Benalla Program (EBP)* for the Tomorrow Today Foundation.

Set up in 2010, the EBP is a long-term community-based undertaking that seeks, through application of philanthropic funding, to facilitate improved educational aspirations and

¹ Deloitte Australia, *The Socio-economic benefits of investing in the prevention of early school leaving*, Canberra: Deloitte Access Economics, 2012

outcomes, from infancy to young adulthood, in the Benalla district. The program is a direct response to the Vinson Report which located Benalla within Victoria's 40 most disadvantaged post-codes. (Benalla has been identified as "highly disadvantaged" based on the ABS 'SEIFA' Index for Areas and the Jesuit Social Services analysis of Postcodes). In addition to such activities as establishment and operation of pre-Kinder Play Groups, a Middle Years Mentoring program, individual tutoring and a number of Parent Education programs, the EBP actively supports HOL at Benalla College through funding a staff member and maximising linkages between HOL and other EBP components.

Theoretical Context – The Hands on Learning Philosophy

Hands on Learning grew out of an educational initiative at Frankston High School in 1999 in which, mentored by a teacher and professional builder, students initially co-operated in constructing a straw-bale hut. Over several years, students at the school completed a range of other activities that included construction of steps, bridges, seats and fences, revitalising old buildings, mosaic work and boat-building. In 2004 the program attracted the support of Social Ventures Australia, enabling it to be replicated in other schools. The not-for-profit Charity Hands on Learning Australia was established in 2008.

HOL is informed by three key procedural principles: (1) Target the student early and long-term; (2) work outside the square; (3) Don't just talk, Do! The program seeks to recruit "at risk" students before disengagement becomes entrenched, provide them with the 'release valve' of a day out of their normal classes, working co-actively on community projects within a relationship-based setting. Philosophy and practice of Hands on Learning confirm substantial current research in the areas of Middle Schools curricula that traditional teaching methods and classroom content have become increasingly irrelevant for a large sector of secondary school students. Black (2007) and Stokes & Turnbull (2009), for instance, have confirmed the nexus between both external (geography, SES) and internal (pedagogy, curriculum) variables and engagement or disengagement with schooling.² They have highlighted the importance of module-based educational experiences that are authentic, cater for individual differences in learning styles and interest, and are characterised by emphasis on teamwork, communication, negotiation and the achievement of personal success.

² See Black, R. (2007). *Crossing the Bridge: Overcoming entrenched disadvantage through Student-Centred Learning*, Melbourne: FYA; Stokes, H. & Turnbull, M. (2009). *Reimagining Learning*, Melbourne: FYA.

Criteria for selection

Young people are identified as potentially suitable for inclusion in a Hands on Learning class based on the range of social and academic indicators of disengagement or risk detailed in Diagram 1 below.

Issue Category	Typical Presenting Symptoms	Identify Nature of Issue	Note Appropriate Intervention/s	
Academic	Difficulty with completing learning tasks. Avoidance so as to conceal an inability to cope with the academic program.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Literacy/numeracy assessment Cognitive assessment/disability Speech/Language Student Engagement Assessment 	<i>Internal</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> Literacy/Numeracy support via applied learning plus 1:1 <input type="checkbox"/> Hand On Learning <input type="checkbox"/> Individual Learning Plan modifying educational program to meet needs <input type="checkbox"/> Home work programs / cross age tutoring <input type="checkbox"/> PSD Application
			<i>External</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> Lewis and Lewis referral <input type="checkbox"/> SSSO allied health assessment <input type="checkbox"/> Respite Service referral for students with intellectual disability <input type="checkbox"/> Register with Disability Client Services <input type="checkbox"/> Referral to Centrelink for Disability Support benefit
Peer	Engages in behaviours that alienate them. Socially isolated and unable to sustain friendships. Dysregulated and impulsive.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Bullying Student Engagement Assessment Mental Health (Depression, anxiety, self harm, eating disorders) Autism/Aspergers Risk assessment to determine behaviours that expose young person to harm associated with substance misuse/sexual activity 	<i>Internal</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> Social skills / Personal Development support and education <input type="checkbox"/> Hands On Learning <input type="checkbox"/> Referral to SSSO <input type="checkbox"/> Social Emotional PSD <input type="checkbox"/> Restorative Practise <input type="checkbox"/> Behaviour modification programs; reward programs <input type="checkbox"/> Leadership Activities <input type="checkbox"/> Behaviour management plan to support self management <input type="checkbox"/> Logical consequences connected to school discipline policy
			<i>External</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> Referral to GP <input type="checkbox"/> For mental health plan <input type="checkbox"/> Referral to private clinician for counselling <input type="checkbox"/> Paediatric review for developmental assessment <input type="checkbox"/> Referral to STU <input type="checkbox"/> Referral to camping and school holiday programs <input type="checkbox"/> Referral to CAMHS for students in the clinical range of distress <input type="checkbox"/> Referral to drug and alcohol service for students engaging in self medicating use <input type="checkbox"/> Referral to mentoring programs in the community
Family	Ongoing issues related to poverty. Family has high levels of needs due to mental health/disability/homelessness. Family requires support with parenting.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Communication/interview with family to determine level of need. Domestic Violence Substance misuse Gambling Grief and Loss Family Break down 	<i>Internal</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> State School Relief support with Uniform <input type="checkbox"/> EMA assistance with excursions for students to participate in education program <input type="checkbox"/> Social skills / Personal Development support and education <input type="checkbox"/> Referral to SSSO <input type="checkbox"/> Social Emotional PSD
			<i>External</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> Referral to Centrelink for family support benefits <input type="checkbox"/> Child First Family support Referral <input type="checkbox"/> Emergency relief <input type="checkbox"/> Community support services referral for financial and/or case management family assistance <input type="checkbox"/> Community Health Programs <input type="checkbox"/> Possible referral to DHS <input type="checkbox"/> Respite services <input type="checkbox"/> Parent Support Group <input type="checkbox"/> Parent Information/education programs

At an academic level, for instance, the student typically has difficulty completing learning tasks or may have developed strategies to conceal his/her inability to cope with a particular subject or program. At the Peer level, the student is likely to be socially isolated, impulsive and unable to sustain friendships. In many cases, at a Family level, the young person may be dealing with issues related to poverty, mental health or disability.

The HOL Model

A successful HOL program contains SIX key elements. These are:

- Administration of the program (this includes documentation of student progress, student reviews, parent information and resource management);
- Applied Learning skills in interconnected projects;
- Supportive relationships through interpersonal skills;

- Recording of student achievement through HOL record keeping tools and liaison with key school staff to support knowledge transfer of positive change throughout out the school;
- Team management of student behaviours through use of focus plans;
- Training and support of staff through participation in HOL cluster meetings.

Hands On Learning Australia recommends several principles they claim underpin any successful HOL program. These are:

- Selecting building projects that have an environmental and community focus. Such projects need to be structured, modular, engaging, and able to fit into school days;
- Training and support of staff through participation in regular cluster meetings and professional conferences to help build collegiality and understanding of key practices;
- Providing students with a degree of predictability in routine and opportunities to rotate through a range of tasks within any individual project;
- Linking HOL to the student wellbeing structures in the school to develop clear intake processes and to feed into the overall support of disengaged students.

Staff need to ensure

- that the selected project is the “right project” for the particular group of young people (i.e. that it creates a meaningful structure within the school, involves teamwork and multiple skills, is inexpensive to construct yet aesthetically pleasing, is modular and requires a mix of student and professional skills)
- that the students have high level involvement in the project (while appropriate technical input ensures the construction is sound)
- that a project has a foreseeable end-point and can be completed within a realistic time frame

The cornerstone of any HOL program is the creation of a Hut or Shelter that serves (a) as a home base for staff and students, and (b) as a ‘safe’ space away from others. Construction of the Hut is typically the HOL team’s first collective undertaking, relatively inexpensive, requiring team effort and interaction, persistence, and hard work, and “beyond the normal expectations schools place on kids”.

Other HOL activities typically include such larger projects as construction of a pizza oven; smaller projects such as landscape gardening, vegetable garden construction, paving,

building a kitchen table; and so-called maintenance tasks that include harvesting vegetables, chopping wood or cooking lunch.

Hands On Learning also uses 'focus plans' which are positive statements that identify an area of behavioural change for students to focus on with the support of the Hand On Learning team, for instance 'show us you can use more appropriate language', or 'show us you don't have to have the last word', etc. Through encouragement and feedback from both staff and peers students help each other to learn the key social skills of teamwork, cooperation, and participation. Each students' focus plan is relayed to relevant teachers so they can also use them in the classroom.

Research Design

The evaluation project is guided by the research question:

What is the impact on educational re-engagement and academic achievement of participation in the Hands on Learning project as currently delivered at Benalla College?

This report aims to examine HOL's success or otherwise in facilitating four key objectives:

1. Increased school attendance
2. Reduced suspension
3. Increased engagement in learning and active and positive participation across the school week
4. Development of an educational pathway into employment or further training.

Timeline

The research was conducted in November- December 2012, with a Report presented to HOLA in March 2013.

Activities

1. Desk-top review of HOLA literature
2. Collation of existing Benalla College HOL data (based on interviews for the Education Benalla Project in 2011 and 2012)
3. Focus groups/Interviews with :
 - Four young people who are current or former HOL students
 - Four young people who have not taken part in HOL
4. Interviews with HOL Staff and School Leadership at Benalla College

The Benalla College Hands on Learning Program

At Benalla College, Hands on Learning has been offered to selected students for three years (i.e. since the start of 2010). The program is delivered as a partnership between the school and the Tomorrow Today Foundation and is one component of the Education Benalla Project (EBP).³ Benalla College HOL addresses a key EBP objective, i.e. *Improved Student-assessed levels of well-being*. In practical terms, TTF contributes to the partnership by funding the salary of one of the HOL staff members, a qualified tradesman who shares program delivery responsibilities with a teacher drawn from within the school.

Benalla College HOL: Program selection

Selection of participants is by teacher referral and based on criteria identified in Diagram 1 (see above). Benalla College HOL seeks to address the needs of “a range of kids”, i.e. a mix of disengaged young people (some with histories of suspension or non-attendance) and others selected more for socialisation opportunities (on the understanding that “*small groups are often better for building kids’ self-esteem*”). Notwithstanding the differing needs of the cohort, an estimated 70-80% of Benalla’s HOL students to date have presented with literacy and numeracy problems. 90% have been male. Duration of enrolment in the program is

³ A major whole-of-community initiative the EBP aims to effect significant improvements in local literacy levels, school completion and post-secondary training rates.

flexible and based on individual need. Two of the interviewees have completed two years in the program, for instance.

The two program staff meet weekly with the school's Assistant Principal/Middle Years Coordinator to review progress, discuss enrolments and ensure a suitable mix of participants – and ages - in each group.

Benalla College HOL: Program Delivery

HOL is offered to two groups, of approximately ten students each, drawn from across Years 7 to 10 at Benalla College's junior campus. Individual student goals and desired outcomes are negotiated weekly with the supervising teacher. (Typical goals might range from *"getting to class on time"* and *"getting sent out less"* to *"getting help with Maths"*). A key condition of enrolment in the program is agreement by the young person that he/she attend other classes. In this regard, HOL is seen as a useful "lever" to improving overall school attendance.

Students work with teacher Peter Janas and experienced tradesperson (in this case, a retired cabinet-maker) Ed Bishop. As part of its EBP commitment, the TTF supports the program by funding Ed's salary, and some materials expenses.⁴ The students spend the full day together, sharing recess and lunch breaks. Following an informal group meeting at the 'Shed' (renovated and decorated by participants themselves on the school site), they undertake a variety of hands-on maintenance and construction projects.

Activities in 2010-2011 were primarily school-focused and included erecting a cyclone fence, acquiring and setting up a camp oven, building chicken sheds, constructing a table, building seats in the school grounds, working in the school garden, painting OH&S strips throughout the campus and constructing a pizza oven. At the time, staff noted:

"They're one-to-one, practical activities, repetitive projects that the kids are able to take over and move on with ... There's not much theory... no books, more verbal and teaching by demonstration ... it's all more about planning, practical maths, incidental literacy ... general skills".

Lunch preparation, including decisions over the day's menu, shopping for ingredients, etc, and continuing to *"spend time as a group"*, have been a consistent element of the program. Incidental training in safety and OH&S is reinforced by online 'Safe at Work' modules. Cooking, like concrete construction activities, has provided opportunities for negotiation,

division of tasks, practical maths (including measurement), practical literacy and other incidental learning opportunities.

In 2012, greater emphasis has been placed on projects outside the school grounds. The broader community focus of the program has resulted to date in the construction of seating and a pizza oven at a local Primary School; construction of bench seating, headstone maintenance and installation of a water feature in the children's section of Benalla Cemetery; and Planting for the Regent Honeyeater Program. The Cemetery project, a full-scale undertaking involving effective co-ordination of cars, trailers, materials and tools, was glowingly profiled in the local press, and is cited by staff and students as the *"achievement of the year"*.⁵

Interviewed at the end of 2012, Peter and Ed expressed satisfaction at the reinvigorating impact of broader community work on the young participants.

"We've had a great, great year. The projects have enabled the kids to show how competent that can be both in the HOL shed and around others within their peer group".

Success of Benalla College HOL at achieving key objectives.

Not unexpectedly, given the complexity of issues faced by many of the young participants, HOL is a more effective alternative for some students than others. (The instance was cited of one Year 9 student for whom the program had little or no impact, and who has since *"dipped out"* of education completely). By and large, however, there are clear indications since the end of the first year that participation in HOL has facilitated (and is facilitating) the attainment of four key objectives.

In regard to Objective 1: Increased School Attendance and Objective 2: Decrease in Suspensions

Data collated by the school over the first two years of the program indicates that:

- Students who started HOL in Terms 1 or 2, 2010, had lower absence and suspension rates that year than in 2009 (i.e. pre-program)

⁵ Benalla Ensign, 26 Sept, 2012.

- The school's Assistant Principal/Middle Years Co-ordinator highlighted a **dramatic 74% decrease in Suspension rates over the past three years** , i.e. from 356 suspensions (a total of 937 days) in 2008 to 92 suspensions (185 days) in 2011. Noting that students who have undertaken (or are undertaking) the HOL Program were "*very much present*" within the suspension cohort, he ascribes the marked improvement to a combination of HOL and the establishment of a House system associated with the School-wide Positive Behaviour Program. "*It's been a combination of both factors*".

At the end of 2012, program staff and school leadership continued to report that :

- suspensions have remained down" across the school , and that "anecdotally we hear their attendance has improved".

A particularly potent example of the program's impact in these regards has that of student with a history of chronic school failure, diagnosed with a severe behavioural disorder, and described as a 'special case'. Although provided with a 1:1 aide, the boy had been expelled from his previous school in Year 6 and was initially (and tentatively) enrolled at Benalla College for one day a week. He connected so well with the HOL group and staff that his attendance subsequently increased to four days a week, two of them in the HOL Program and two days (accompanied by a teacher aide) in general classes. ("*It's been his first positive experience of school*").

Other powerful examples of program impact include:

- A Year 8 student with a history of being "*very difficult*" recently volunteered the statement "*I'm a better kid now*" as a result of successful interaction in HOL.
- As a result of 15 months on HOL, a student seen as seriously at risk of dropping out in Year 9 elected to transfer to the Year 11 campus with the aim of teacher training in the future. ("*She really struggled at school ... out of class every second day. . . We've watched her become more motivated ... Going on to Year 11 & 12 ... she wouldn't have been capable of that in the past*").
- Another student, with a history of absconding from home and sharing drugs at school, was "*induced*" back to school, after accessing the New Bridges program, through the HOL Program.

- A student with a history of behaviour management issues has successfully learned to “go off and find his own space” rather than allow tensions to escalate.

In regard to Objective 3: Increased engagement in learning and active and positive participation across the school week

Interviewed in mid and late 2011 and again at the end of 2012, Rhys Evans, the school’s Assistant Principal/Middle Years Co-ordinator, expressed satisfaction at the overall and ongoing improvement in the students’ level of engagement as a result of HOL. He noted that strong relationships forged between the young people and the program staff were spilling over into better (and more considered) relationships with students and teachers elsewhere in the school.

“Peter and Ed have been somebody else the kids can connect with. [In some cases, including non-HOL days] when the kids get into strife they seek out Pete or Ed and chat. When they’ve calmed down they return to class. In past they would just ‘nick off’ – now we know they’re safe, still at school”.

These findings are confirmed by the results of student satisfaction surveys, initiated by TTF, and delivered in 2011-2012 and 2012-2013. For example, while all survey respondents:

- felt they had a better attitude to HOL than they had to school in general
- indicated that they enjoyed coming to HOL more than school in general.
- (With one exception) rated their effort as higher in HOL than in their school work in general

at the same time (again with one exception) they:

- Felt their overall schooling had improved since joining HOL.
- Believed their literacy and numeracy skills had improved and they felt more prepared than previously to complete work in other subjects.

In regard to Objective 4: Development of an educational pathway into employment or further training, program staff cite a number of examples of young people (a) opting not to drop out of schooling, and (b) developing positive career aspirations that include accessing

school-based apprenticeships or planned pathways into and through TAFE training and Further education.

For instance:

- One student has been able to utilise and draw on trade and social skills learned in the HOL Program by accessing a full-time cabinet-making apprenticeship. (In this instance, the resident tradesperson was able to mentor the student in requirements of the job).
- One HOL student's work was honoured with a GOTCHA Youth Award in 2011.
- Another student (with a school history described as "woeful") was able to prepare a superior Powerpoint Presentation on HOL for his final English assessment, and experience the satisfaction of "getting an 'A' in something").
- One student credits successful engagement through HOL with having nurtured her decision to study Teaching at University. (See case studies below)
- Two students, having completed two years in the program, are being targeted to undertake a Benalla community-based Apprenticeship initiative auspiced by the Tomorrow Today Foundation. (See case studies below)

According to the Assistant Principal: *"We are seeing the kids develop goals ... We're seeing the improvements in self-esteem they need before thinking about pathways"*.

Student Satisfaction data and two (annual) interviews with students indicated that all respondents felt 'quite a bit better' or 'a lot better' about themselves, more self-confident and better able to communicate with others, as a result of HOL. To varying degrees, all felt they:

- were getting on better with parents and family, and
- had a better idea about what they wanted to do in the future. (All but one respondent planned to go on to Year 12)

All indicated they would recommend HOL to other students. Student interview comments included:

- *“HOL is really good. [Before] I just wanted to leave ... hated everybody ... didn’t get on with people. Now I love coming to school. Learning to work with other kids. HOL has made me want to go to my [other] classes and work well there ... It gives you skills to think about your future”.*
- *“My grades have flipped around ... I don’t disrespect people now. At the start, staff took my crap. Now I have a lot of respect for all the teachers at Benalla College. It’s turned my schooling around”.*
- In terms of future delivery of the program, staff highlight the need to incorporate formal assessment criteria into program delivery thereby aligning HOL to the general Year 9 and 10 curricula.

Factors in success

(1) Staffing

There is strong indication that much of the success of Benalla HOL can be attributed to the program staff. The teacher employed to pilot the program in 2010 brought with him extensive and relevant experience working with marginalised youth at Kensington and a strong personal commitment to maximising opportunities for the young participants. While declining numbers at Benalla College meant that he had to move schools in 2011, the school was able to replace him with Peter, a long-serving Benalla College teacher who had Metal and Woodwork skills. (Having completed two years of HOL, he continues to enjoy the HOL challenge. The fact that he works with some of the HOL students in his general classes means that a degree of “crossover” can occur, enabling the young people to put in extra time, when needed or by way of reinforcement, on HOL projects). Ed, the tradesperson employed through TTF, has worked very effectively, throughout the three year history of the program, with both teachers and is described as *“very enthusiastic”* and *“exactly the right person for the job”*. Hands On Learning Australia assists schools to recruit appropriate personnel, and provides ongoing training and practical support to artisan-teachers to ensure their skills, knowledge, and practise are consistent with the HOL model. They also benefit from being part of the broader network of HOL artisan-teachers.

Student interviewees have identified the approach of the staff as a key to their enjoyment of HOL, offering such comments as: *“Peter and Ed do the emotional stuff really well ... give you your own space”*, *“such supportive people, really encouraging”*, *“Ed and Peter lead by*

example”, “I have a really good connection with Ed, can talk to him about anything”, “Peter’s a really good teacher”.

(2) Informed student selection

While there is recognition that the level of program engagement “... varies kid to kid”, it was generally believed that “most of them are doing really well”. There is recognition, however, that HOL is not the right option for every child.

“A number of kids left the program during the year. In some cases, it was not what they wanted or they’d already made up their minds they wanted to drop out. Some were good kids who responded well but their family problems have made it difficult to come in regularly and they were taking up a spot someone else could have been using” [HOL teacher]

On that basis, and given the limited number of places available on the program (a maximum of ten students on each day), selection currently targets young people “most likely to benefit”.

(3) Support within the school

Interview feedback indicates that HOL is enjoying “plenty of support” within the school. “The teachers all know about the program”, was one comment. “Staff on yard duty tend to drop in to say ‘Hello’, particularly around lunch time”. Senior staff recognise that “just making the kids want to come to school” is a break-through, and that by enabling the participants to achieve and display positive outcomes, the program has already had “a lot of value in shifting [teacher] perceptions” of some students. (At a practical level, it is acknowledged also that HOL “gives teachers a break” from some disengaged students). Strong endorsement of the program at School Management level is evidenced by weekly Admin-Teacher meetings to discuss program progress and timetabling that enabled (for instance) detailed handover between the departing teacher and his successor (in 2010), or provided suitable back-up for the trade instructor when the teacher needed to take sick leave (in 2012).

(4) Connections to Community

A number of HOL program outcomes have specifically enhanced the young people’s interactions with, and connections to, the broader Benalla community. Staff have reinforced co-operation and teamwork and have maintained high levels of student engagement and successful completion of projects, by exploiting opportunities to utilise (and become familiar

with) local resources. Initially these included excursions to the pool and a half-day fishing experience at Lake Benalla; more recently they have included activities such as:

- Construction of seating and a pizza oven at Benalla Central PS.
- Planting for the Regent Honeyeater Program
- Assisting with construction of exercise stations around Benalla Lake
- Short-term gardening and maintenance activities at Winton Wetlands and the Indigenous Garden
- Development and enhancement of the Children's section of the Benalla Cemetery.

A full-scale undertaking involving effective co-ordination of cars, trailers, materials and tools, the Cemetery project was the main focus of HOL in 2012. It was glowingly profiled in the local press (*Benalla Ensign*, 26 Sept 2012).

Program offshoots

- A major new development in Year 9 programming at Benalla College has been the creation of Connect Girls, a program that responds to concerns at high rates of absenteeism among Year 9 and 10 girls. The program takes its impetus in the re-engagement successes reported by Hands on Learning. It draws on funding from the State Government Local Solutions to Year 12 Retention grants program and from the Tomorrow Today Foundation. (Just as it underwrites the salary of the trades instructor for HOL, so TTF pays the salary of a Hairdressing Instructor for Connect Girls). In 2012, the program enrolled 17 girls who accessed special classes one day a week with facilitated training in Health, Physical Fitness, Personal Grooming, Work readiness and Career Pathways. (Student intake was monitored per a survey based on the HOL Entry questionnaire). An extension of the program, aimed at heightening the young women's community connectedness, was a specifically-targeted delivery, of TTF's Middle Years Connect 9 Mentoring program.
- The possibility is being explored of the HOL concept being adopted by FCJ, the Catholic Secondary College in Benalla, following a presentation in 2012 by representatives of HANDS ON LEARNING Victoria. In that eventuality, the possibility is being explored of TTF funding current trades-staff-member, Ed, to take on the

extra days, thereby strengthening connections between the Benalla College and FCJ.

The Benalla HOL cohort – a snapshot

According to enrolment data supplied by program staff:

- 63 young people have enrolled in the Benalla HOL program over the three year period to the end of 2012. (While the learning needs, personal circumstances and reason for selection have varied, it is noted that six of these young people have been prescribed ADHD medication; nine have been described as autistic, possibly autistic, or having a mild intellectual disability).
- Time spent by individual students within HOL vary considerably. Some for instance, might stay a few months, some for a year, others for a couple of years. While at least three young people are recorded as having exited the program after only one session, the majority of participants have stayed for more than eight weeks (i.e. a term).
- 33 current or former HOL participants are recorded as still enrolled at Benalla College. Five HOL graduates are currently in Year 12. Ten HOL graduates are currently in Year 11.
- 14 other young people have gone on to access either an apprenticeship or part-time work.
- While destinations data is incomplete, and while some young people may have moved to other towns, schools, etc, eight young people appear to have dropped out of school following their HOL experience.
- Ten young people are described as having demonstrated *significant improvement in general schooling and attitude* thanks to the program.
- HOL has reportedly made “*a significant difference*” to the school and home life of ten young people.

APPENDIX: Illustrating the impact of Benalla College HOL : a handful of case studies

In regard to the research question and key objectives: while it is arguably too early to highlight any significant long-term impact of the HOL Program on the **young participants’ academic achievement**, individual responses cited throughout this report (and below) testify eloquently to its linkages to ***improved attitudes to school, increased engagement and participation in learning, increases in attendance*** (together with ***decrease in suspensions***), and – in some cases – a shift from wanting to ‘drop out’ to ***recognition of the importance of pathways into training/further education***. Interviews with staff and

students have provided several case studies that further illuminate the impact of HOL on a representative sample of young participants.

Multiple recent studies have acknowledged the value and importance of ensuring that the lived experience (and voice) of young participants in alternative and communal programs be captured. Accordingly, the four attached case studies summarise the personal accounts of four young people, interviewed twice by the YRC, in late 2011 and 2012. It would obviously be an oversimplification to suggest that the life-changes chronicled in these case studies are attributable only to HOL. Clearly, multiple variables, factors and contexts are at play here. It is reasonable, however, to argue that the personal testimonies do appear to confirm the importance of practical, real-life, relationship-based learning experiences in re-connecting disengaged and otherwise 'at risk' young people to the Victorian secondary schooling system.

By way of contrast to the four HOL case studies, two additional case studies – exemplifying the recent schooling experiences of young people who chose not to access the Benalla College HOL Program – are included.

JOSH

Having struggled with anger management issues that brought him into conflict with a number of teachers and other students, JOSH was offered a spot on the HOL program after a discussion between the school and his parents.

Uncomfortable with formal classroom learning, in part because of a diagnosed learning difficulty, he has found the relative freedom and physical nature of HOL reassuring. Interviewed at the end of his first year with the program, he expressed satisfaction at having acquired skills with gardening and maintenance tools. He also praised the flexibility of a learning environment in which he was able to “wear off” his emotions by finding his own physical space.

Particularly noticeable is Josh’s strong pride in the program as exhibited in his keenness to show visitors the work space, tools and completed projects. “He has a real sense of ownership of our work” was one teacher comment. Interviewed again, at the end of a second year with HOL, Josh describes himself as “just plodding along”, still not particularly enjoying other school subjects. He concedes, however, that his attendance had improved and (reluctantly) agrees with his peers that his overall attitude is better than it was. “Considering

when I started ... if I can keep doing this, I can bring some of it [response to HOL] to my other classes”, he admits.

Josh is unequivocal about the program itself (“HOL is awesome”) while his peers describe him as “a different person at HOL to other sessions”. When asked what his chief legacy is from HOL, he cites “determination ... with helping me overcome my Learning difficulty”.

There are strong indications that HOL has provided Josh with the incentive to stay on at school rather than leave Benalla following a sequence of family crises that have included a parent’s death in the past year. “Some teachers don’t help you with problems ... Ed is a good bloke to talk to . I had a problem [at home], wasn’t going home ... he sat down and talked to me and persuaded me to [stay]”.

Josh concedes the need to stay on at school if he is to follow pathways into work as a building mechanic or a butcher, or an apprenticeship as a kitchen hand. He similarly credits the positive interactions with students and staff at HOL with having improved his general confidence in talking to other people . He cites as examples, a fruitful series of conversations with the community cemetery caretaker and his ongoing enjoyment of the company of friends who have since exited HOL.

PETER

PETER transferred into Benalla College, very reluctantly, in Year 8, following a period of upheaval at home. *“I just wanted to leave ... hated everybody ... didn’t get on with people”.*

Peter was first interviewed, together with his HOL peers, by the YRC in late 2011. At that stage, he had been a HOL participant for four terms. While clearly very shy (he had to be mildly coerced by a staff member to join his peers for the focus group), and hesitant when speaking, he was able to describe his day to day progress as “really good now ... with [HOL] I love coming to school”. He noted that his enthusiasm for HOL had extended to renewed interest in some other classes and he expressed the aim of staying with education and eventually accessing a Carpentry apprenticeship.

Interviewed 12 months later, Peter arrived for the interview ahead of his peers, and offered to help set up the meeting room. He exhibited a major growth in self-confidence, readily chatting while waiting for the interview to get underway. Peter credits HOL with providing “a different environment” which gave him responsibilities, built his confidence, and enabled him to form strong friendships. *“It’s totally changed my attitude ... helped me feel I’m part of the*

school ... I'm much more confident about speaking up in class ... I've got friends ... I get along better with most of the teachers".

Peter reports (a) that his enjoyment of HOL helped his attendance 100, and (b) that the HOL experience (in his case, a 12 month experience) taught him a lot about patience (particularly when working with people who might 'snap' easily), and enriched his people- skills and knowledge of 'life'. In the past year, he has successfully applied for and started a part-time job at Mitre 10 – a job which he enjoys, notwithstanding its interactive demands. He relishes being paid, hoping to save up for a house and to successfully complete an apprenticeship. He has some thoughts about becoming a Diesel mechanic. *"Otherwise", he says, "I'll do Year 12"*.

LEE-ANNE

One of a small number of girls who have undertaken HOL at Benalla College, LEE-ANNE has participated in the program for 15 months (in 2010-11) and, at first interview (in 2011), credited it with having facilitated a complete turn-around in her behaviour and attitude.

Acknowledged by staff as having been a "real handful", with a history of absenteeism and classroom disruptiveness, Lee-Anne described herself (at first interview in 2011) as "hard work" – and seriously underperforming - in Year 8. *"I just didn't come [to school] and then they put me in HOL"*.

In 2011 Leanne cited the combination of teamwork, supportive people she could talk to, encouragement and forbearance displayed by staff and peers at HOL as having influenced her journey from *"wanting to drop out the second I could"* to wanting to go on to University. *"I want to get a teaching degree. Take the experience with me and turn around little turds like myself ... HOL has made me become a better person".* ..

Noting that *"I used to fight with people. Some people I wouldn't talk to, they're my best friends now ... You make awesome friendships"*, she reported *"My grades have flipped around and I don't disrespect people now"*.

A somewhat rocky year later, and despite having thought seriously about dropping out of Year 11 following her transfer to Benalla College's senior campus, Lee-Anne is pleased to report having *"stuck it out"*. Realising she has only one more year of *"sitting in classrooms all day"*, she seems determined to complete Year 12 (*"Otherwise all that hard work goes down the drain"*).

She notes that the close bond she developed with HOL participants and staff has continued to pay dividends (*"You make friends and keep them"*), citing the value of still being able to chat from time to time to Peter and Ed about day to day problems. She also acknowledges that teachers at the Senior campus have been sensitive when she was experiencing *"a bad spot"* and have *"been there to support me"*. Just as reconnection to mainstream learning helped her Year 10 English results substantially, she is pleased that her Year 11 Maths result *"went through the roof"*. At the time of writing, Lee Anne remains on track for teacher-training.

DENNY

Denny has had a disjointed sequence of life experiences, including major disruptions to his living situation that have included erratic (and less than ideal) periods with one or other parent or older siblings, or the relative stability of living with his grandmother.

A participant in HOL for two years, he has also taken part in a two-year mentoring initiative through the TTF. (This relationship enabled him to participate in a range of sporting activities, learn to drive within the confines of a farm, and to acquire some agricultural skills). Denny also participated in the first delivery of Connect 9, a mentoring project that is a component of the Education Benalla Program.

Interviewed when he was in Year 9 (2011), Denny expressed some interest in eventually training as a cabinet-maker. Although a sociable young man (a self-described "chatterbox"), he hinted that bullying had been a factor in his pattern of school refusal, and he credited HOL with having facilitated an attitude change. "I didn't come because I was being picked on ... I'm here every day now, basically". Denny likewise credited HOL with having helped him get on better with people. He welcomed the practical nature of the program (the fact that the group "didn't do the same thing every time"), the opportunity to get to know new people, and "learn more stuff". He proudly spoke publicly about CONNECT 9 to the TTF AGM and, at one point, posited a number of suggestions for future delivery of the program (eg. Bowling, a pool table, computer games).

Re-interviewed in 2012, Denny admits that the year since his first interview has been rather "ordinary". Noticeably less gregarious this time, he explains his reserve as "just one of those days". Where he had previously seemed committed to the idea of seeking a school-based apprenticeship, he now insists "I don't know" when asked about his future aspirations. At the same time, he notes that his school absences have almost halved, that he is doing "much

better” in English, that he still intends to stay at school, and that he has maintained friendships with his fellow HOL participants. (He remains sceptical about the importance of less practical subjects, however, notably failing to see any point to Science, PhysEd, History, Art or Geography).

Denny indicates that work at the Children’s Cemetery resonated with him “because my sister’s there”. HOL staff confirm that Denny has been going through a difficult period and that this is temporarily affecting his (usually up-beat) interactions with others. (It is noted that Denny, like fellow HOL participant Josh, has been identified by HOL staff and the TTF as probable initial participants in the proposed Transitions program, Matching Kids to Work).

The contrasting experiences of two NON-HOL Students

Comparison of the recent schooling experiences of a quorum of young people who have undertaken HOL at Benalla College and two other young people who, following an initial session, elected not to undertake HOL, seems to demonstrate the program’s effectiveness (a) in re-engaging participants with learning processes, and (b) helping re-connect them to general classes.

While it is stressed that, in both instances, the sample is small – and while, clearly, the young people’s educational histories have been subject to a range of external influences and variables - interview data confirms the reported impact of HOL interventions in these regards.

LEON

LEON, currently in Year 10 at Benalla, was identified as likely to benefit from HOL in 2010; however, he opted not to take part in the program. He is described by teachers as a “nice, easy-going kid” who has been through some “rough patches in his life”, including his parents’ marriage breakdown.

Leon acknowledges a degree of boredom with the whole concept of school. He concedes having “good days and bad days” at Benalla College and admits to having been trouble “once in a blue moon” but insists he has learned to avoid confrontation and now feels he is getting on pretty well with students and teachers. (“No matter where I’ve been I’ve had trouble with someone but I’ve stuck it out ... I steer clear if we don’t get on”).

As far as subjects go, Leon has little interest in more academic options (“I struggle with Maths”) and rather more in automotive, machine and technology sessions. Adamant that he “wouldn’t be here if I had the choice”, he refers to days when he feels like “chucking it all in” and trying to find a labouring job through local employers. Even so, he estimates his attendance at “nine out of ten” and he pays lip-service to the importance of education (“otherwise you’re not going to get far”).

Ultimately Leon insists that he would prefer not to commit to anything “second best”. On that basis, he decided not to take on a school-based apprenticeship in Year 10 because he felt he was insufficiently motivated. The peak of his educational aspiration is TAFE (maybe Landscaping or a Technology specialty); there is “no chance” he would consider University. In this regard, he seems to be influenced by his parents. While Mum is prepared to let him leave school early, he is aware that she regrets her own foreshortened education. Dad, who lives elsewhere (and who was also an Early Leaver), would prefer Leon stay on at school as long as he can, and then either seek an apprenticeship or get a full-time job. Leon himself feels his niche would be working as a Diesel mechanic or driving heavy industrial machinery (“my whole life I’ve just wanted to operate machinery”), and he is mulling over the objective of moving to Wangaratta and taking a job with a big earth-moving company there. He recognises, however, that he needs to improve his Maths scores if he is to obtain the necessary Certificate of Competency. Whether or not the need for a better Maths record is enough to keep him at school is open to question.

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Also identified by College staff as a possible HOL candidate, **AMBER** chose rather to drop out of school during Year 9, after a year or so of having missed many classes.

“I didn’t like school very much ... mostly because of the teachers. I got on pretty well with the other kids and had some friends ... but I didn’t like the teachers. I got kicked out of class a lot. I did OK at English because my English teacher was OK. I got on with some [teachers] but most were not very nice. If they had an opinion about you they stuck to that ... their judgment didn’t change no matter how hard you worked”.

Admitting to extreme nervousness around new people that led to anxiety attacks on occasion, she confesses also to having been bored by traditional classrooms and pedagogy.

“I’m not very good at Maths and I thought Science was a waste of time I couldn’t see its usefulness ... I liked more practical subjects. Plastics, woodwork. Hands on instead of just sitting in a room writing stuff down”.

Amber is adamant she will not go back to school, and she is supported in this regard by her mother. She received Maths and English tutoring through the Tomorrow Today Foundation for several months and, at the time of interview, was being home-schooled by her mother (*“trying to catch up”*) with a view to participating in the Goulburn-Ovens TAFE Youth Engagement program from the start of 2013. In her view, TAFE is a “much better” alternative to school. *“The teachers are different there ... not so strict. They don’t treat you like a kid. It’s a good environment to be in”*. Her studies will include English, Maths and Personal Information units. She is taking a long term view, acknowledging that Education is important (*“you need it for work”*) and hoping it will lead to a career working with animals. (Possibly even Veterinary Science). Amber reports that “Mum”, who shares her low regard for local state schools, strongly supports her interest in working with animals.

KEY POINTS FROM THE CASE STUDIES

In regard to Objectives 1 & 2: Increased attendance and decreased suspensions.

Whereas Amber’s anxiety over perceived classroom bullying and frustration with traditional pedagogy resulted in frequent absenteeism and culminated in ‘dropping out’ of school (probably permanently), for her (as for each of the program participants), HOL has been the trigger for major changes in attendance. Denny, for instance, notes that his absenteeism has almost halved as a result of being in the program.

Josh might be (in his own words) *“just plodding along”* and not greatly enjoying other school subjects, yet he concedes that his attendance has improved over the course of the program. School admin highlights a simultaneous decrease in his suspensions. Peter describes his attendance as having improved 100% thanks to the program. Lee-Anne’s history of absenteeism, disruptiveness and underperformance has been *“completely turned around.”* Interestingly, Non-HOL student Leon seems to have little problem with actual school attendance. He does, however, struggle with an overall feeling of boredom with the bulk of his classes. (Amber is adamant she will not return to school).

According to school leadership, HOL students were previously conspicuous in the College’s suspension data. As noted earlier, annual suspension figures at Benalla College have decreased dramatically, from 356 suspensions in 2008 to 92 in 2011 – a 74% reduction.

In regard to Objective 3: Increased engagement in learning and participation across the school week

In addition to improved attendance, the HOL participants uniformly demonstrate heightened levels of connection to, and participation in, mainstream learning situations.

Josh, for instance, acknowledges having a better overall attitude to learning. He is hopeful that, in time, he will be able to generalise some of his enthusiasm for HOL across his other classes. Peter, who acknowledged the capacity for success at HOL to reawaken interest in other classes in his first interview, reports a total transformation in attitude a year later, and a feeling that he has become well and truly part of the school.

Peter similarly applauds the practical nature of the program, its difference in approach and environment, and its capacity to build confidence, nurture friendships among the participants, and generally improve relationships with staff and peers.

Leanne credits HOL with having effected a complete turnaround in her behaviour and attitude to school: from *“wanting to drop out as soon as possible”*, she is now intent on tertiary study, crediting the legacy of HOL with helping her stay on track (a strong desire to give up in 2011, notwithstanding). Approving strongly of the practical nature of the program (*“learning stuff that is relevant”*), Denny likewise highlights the value of HOL in facilitating friendships and in helping him get along better with people. (The confidence-building capacity of the program has been demonstrated eloquently by the preparedness of both Peter and Denny to talk formally about HOL at a parents evening and the TTF AGM).

Each of the HOL interviewees emphasises the opportunities to make real friendships – and to improve their social and interactive skills in general - as a key outcome of participation. (By contrast, Leon’s relationships with others, while no longer combative, appear to be pretty passive. Intent mainly on *“steering clear”* of conflict, his interactions, while polite, underline an overall lack of motivation and dearth of enthusiasm for school). An obvious adjunct of improved engagement with non-HOL classes has been a revised perception of teachers. Leon’s passive perception, and Amber’s negative perception, of Secondary College teachers in general contrast markedly with (a) the acknowledgment by Lee-Anne that (post-HOL) her Year 10 teachers have been supportive during difficult times; or (b) the improved relations with teachers reported by Peter.

In regard to Objective 4: Development of educational pathways

While both Leon and Amber have some ideas about the future (Leon speculates about an apprenticeship while Amber feels that TAFE may be the conduit to a job working with animals), neither seems to have a strong sense of what they want to do in the future. By comparison, the case studies suggest that the HOL cohort has developed firmer conceptions about the future and, as a result of the program, a greater sense of learner and worker identity. For example: Peter has committed himself to staying at school and seeking an apprenticeship. His plans for the future include saving for his own house and he sees his part-time job as a starting-point to that goal. His education choices are likely to be determined largely by his success or otherwise in accessing an apprenticeship in Diesel mechanics. Lee-Anne is determined to finish Year 12 and then go on to teacher training.

Success at HOL over two years has paid dividends for both Josh and fellow student Denny in being selected to undertake school-based apprenticeships under a new TTF initiative 'Matching Kids to Work'. MKTW is specifically geared towards less independent young people who have never tackled part time employment and who lack the skills to promote themselves at interviews, prepare resumes or access employment networks.

Conclusion

Comprehensive evidence bases affirm and confirm the nexus between educational success and

- the young person's feeling that he/she is cared for by people at the school
- the young person's feeling that he/she is part of the school
- increasing opportunities for the young person to demonstrate competence and to experience autonomy, acceptance by peers and support from adults
- learning strategies that are participatory ⁶

⁶ See for instance: McNeely, C.A., Nonnemaker, J.M. & Blum, R.W. (2002). 'Promoting school connectedness: Evidence from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health', *Journal of School Health*, 72 (4), p.138-146;

Herbert, P. C., & Lohrmann, D. K. (2011). It's All in the Delivery! An Analysis of Instructional Strategies From Effective Health Education Curricula. *Journal of School Health*, 81(5), 258-264;

Natvig, G. K., Albrektsen, G., & Qvarnstrom, U. (2003). Methods of Teaching and Class Participation in Relation to Perceived Social Support and Stress: Modifiable factors for improving health and wellbeing among students. *Educational Psychology: An International Journal of Experimental Educational Psychology*, 23(3), p. 261-274;

The case study data, together with interviews with school personnel summarised in the body of the report, support international findings and demonstrates that participation in Benalla College HOL is having positive impacts on the well-being, confidence and self-esteem of a significant cohort of young people who (in some instances) are dealing with mental health issues related to their personal circumstances. It is reasonable therefore to infer (in line with the evidence, and as the case studies reflect) that these improvements are paying dividends in nurturing the young people's overall academic engagement, improved school attendance, development of learner identity and understanding of educational pathways.

Payton, J., Weissberg, R.P., Durlak, J.A., Dymnicki, A.B., Taylor, R.D., Schellinger, K.B., & Pachan, M. (2008). The positive impact of social and emotional learning for kindergarten to eighth-grade students: Findings from three scientific reviews. Chicago, IL: Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning

Bond, L., Butler, H., Thomas, L., Carlin, J., Glover, S., Bowes, G., et al. (2007). Social and School Connectedness in Early Secondary School as Predictors of Later Teenage Substance Use, Mental Health, and Academic Outcomes. *Journal of Adolescent Health, 40*(4), 357, e359-e318