

## How does a Boarding School affect *Student Outcomes*

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In this article we look at different perspectives that can explain 'how' boarding school affects students' academic and non-academic outcomes.

An important part of research is to identify key factors that lead to key outcomes. In the case of boarding school research, this entails identifying what aspects of boarding school lead to various academic (eg. motivation, learning, achievement) and non-academic (eg. self-esteem, life satisfaction) outcomes. Research such as this answers the 'WHAT' question: what factors predict what outcomes?

Another important question to answer is the 'HOW' question: how does boarding school have its effects?

When we better understand the 'how' of boarding school effects we are in a very strong position to sustain the processes that are working well, address processes that can be further improved, and minimise processes that are not so effective.

In our first column in Lights Out, we introduced a collaborative project between ABSA and the University of Sydney. This project seeks to understand the effects of boarding school on academic and non-academic outcomes. In our series of articles we have been considering the student and contextual factors which form part of the boarding experience. In this article we look at different perspectives that can explain 'how' boarding school affects students' academic and non-academic outcomes.

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In reviewing the possible ways in which boarding school might affect students' academic and non-academic outcomes, we have been struck by the numerous competing positions. Here we briefly look at four different perspectives on boarding school:

- the co- and extra-curricular activity perspective
- the attachment perspective
- the tradition and stereotype reinforcement perspective
- the educational access perspective

### THE CO- AND EXTRA-CURRICULAR ACTIVITY PERSPECTIVE

Co- and extra-curricular activity has been defined as any out-of-class involvement that absorbs students' time, attention, and energy. Well recognised forms of co- and extra-curricular activity include sport, music, drama, art, debating, and the like. Less recognised forms of co- and extra-curricular activity include sleep, homework, television, computer games, social networking platforms (eg. Facebook), friends, and hobbies. When we view co- and extra-curricular activity along this broad continuum, it is evident that boarding can be seen as a form of co- and extra-curricular activity – it is typically out-of-class and absorbs students' time, attention, and energy.

Research suggests that some forms of co- and extra-curricular activity can have a positive link to academic and non-academic outcomes. For example, in relation to academic outcomes, it seems that co- and extra-curricular activity can have a positive impact if it (a) is related to skills needed for academic tasks, (b) increases a student's sense of belonging and identification with the school, (c) promotes values aligned with the school's values, and (d) provides opportunities for students to receive formal or informal assistance and guidance. Clearly, the boarding experience offers all these opportunities to students. Hence, on the basis of the co- and extra-curricular activity perspective, it would be predicted that boarding school can have positive effects on students and that this occurs largely through increased alignment with school and schoolwork (in contrast to television, for example, that typically entails none of these positive dimensions).

### THE ATTACHMENT PERSPECTIVE

Alongside predictions based on co- and extra-curricular perspectives are ideas informed by attachment theory. This perspective might centrally position the role of the parent and home-based care in young



people's academic and non-academic development. That is, students who are under the regular (eg. daily) care of parent and home during out-of-class time are in the best position to form the attachments needed for healthy development. From this perspective, boarding school may distance young people from these important influences and affect development in similar fashion.

Against this prediction, however, is research demonstrating substantial teacher influence on students' academic and non-academic development that is over and above the influence of the home. Also counter-acting the traditional attachment theory perspective is the possibility that boarding school may distance some students from potentially negative parenting or difficult home environments and neighbourhoods. Furthermore, boarders spend significant periods of time at home and are in regular contact with parents and other family members – thus the equation is not 'either-or' but really a mix of both boarding school and home, which may be an effective mix and associated with positive academic and non-academic outcomes.

### THE TRADITION AND STEREOTYPE REINFORCEMENT PERSPECTIVE

Perhaps the most challenging perspective on boarding school is that which suggests boarding school effects occur through reinforcing traditional and stereotypical constructions of gender, ethnicity, socio-economic status, and the like. That is, they are geared towards cultivating development along traditional and stereotypic lines. For example, they reinforce a particular way

of being a boy or girl or they reinforce a particular station in life (eg. one of privilege). To the extent that this is the case, effects will be positive for those students who are able to fit the tradition or stereotype but not so positive for those who do not or cannot fit.

Arguments against this perspective would point to the great diversity of boarding schools and boarding students that would indicate there is no longer as much of a stereotype as there might have been in years past. For example, there are government and non-government boarding schools, there are boarding schools in urban and rural areas, there are boarding schools accommodating high percentages of Indigenous students, and there are boarding schools in upper and lower SES areas. With such diversity in the sector and within schools, it might be argued that there is not such a predominant stereotype to reinforce.

### THE EDUCATIONAL ACCESS PERSPECTIVE

The educational access view would look at the role of boarding school in addressing students' capacity to access education through the course of their development. The nature of Australian geography poses significant educational access issues for many students and their families. Particularly for rural and remote children and young people, schools can be a long way from home; to the extent this is the case, these children and young people have a major educational barrier to overcome. National inquiries into educational access for Indigenous, rural, and remote students have identified boarding school as one

means they can access education and further opportunity. From an educational access perspective and for such students, boarding school provides an opportunity to overcome the tyranny of distance and on this basis would be predicted to yield generally positive academic effects.

### WHICH PERSPECTIVE?

It is clear there are competing perspectives regarding the academic and non-academic effects and role of boarding school. Which perspective is right? At this stage, we don't really know. We suspect for different outcomes and for different students, each perspective will have different levels of relevance. When we identify these outcomes and students we are in a good position to enhance the boarding experience – because we will have identified HOW boarding is affecting outcomes, for which students, and in what ways. To uncover this is the vital role of research. We are about to commence a large-scale, systematic, and longitudinal research program that seeks to bring clarity to this issue and the sector.

### EXPRESSIONS OF INTEREST

Expressions of interest are sought from schools (comprising boarding students) who wish to be part of this research project. For further information, to view a video about the project, or to register your interest, please visit: [www.boarding.org.au](http://www.boarding.org.au) (click on 'Research Project Information' under Latest News). Alternatively, contact Brad Papworth for further details: [b.papworth@edfac.usyd.edu.au](mailto:b.papworth@edfac.usyd.edu.au) or (02) 9683 8490.