

## *Residential Education: Key Findings from an International Symposium*

### AUTHOR

Paul Ginns (University of Sydney),  
Andrew Martin (University of Sydney),  
and Brad Papworth (ABSA)

Although 'boarding schools' tend to be one of the more salient providers of residential education, boarding school students are not the only young people 'in residence'. We recently returned from a symposium on residential educational settings at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, held in New Orleans. In this Lights Out article, we review some of the papers presented at the symposium, and some of the reflections on the symposium presented by ourselves and the Discussant, Professor Dennis McInerney of the Hong Kong Institute of Education.

The session brought together researchers from the United Kingdom, Hong Kong and Australia, to understand the academic (e.g., achievement, motivation, engagement, attainment, retention) and non-academic (e.g., self-esteem, life satisfaction, personal development) outcomes relevant to residential care across a range of settings and age groups, using a range of quantitative and qualitative research methodologies. Research on academic and non-academic outcomes of Australian day and boarding students presented by Brad Papworth has been discussed in previous issues of Lights Out, so this article will focus on research from the UK and Hong Kong.

Dr Graham Connelly of the University of Strathclyde, Scotland, authored the first paper on "Improving the education of children in public care: Lessons from pilot projects in Scotland". Approximately 17,000 Scottish children in the 0-17 age range are in public care, including foster care, living with other family, or in juvenile detention. Children may be in care for a variety of reasons, including parental physical or mental ill health; neglect, or for having committed offences. Over the past two decades, there has been increasing



recognition of the academic needs of children in care, over and above the traditional focus on behavioural issues. Analyses of reading, writing and mathematics revealed children in care lag substantially behind children, and that this gap widens with age.

In 2006 the Scottish Government made available £2m by competitive bid for pilot projects aimed at improving the educational experience and attainment of children in care. The 18 funded projects varied substantially, but could be characterised by five categories:

- provision of direct support (e.g. tutoring);
- personal education planning;
- support for children at transition points (e.g. primary to secondary);
- developing staff and parent/ carer capacity; and
- using IT/computer-based approaches.

The research identified effects related to the involvement of the young people in pilot activities (but was not able to attribute effects to specific activities, due to the wide range in target age and project type). Improvements in school attendance and reduction in school exclusions were noted as key results, and younger children who had high levels of involvement in the pilot projects made appreciably more academic progress in one year than less involved students. This is encouraging because it also suggests that providing targeted additional support can raise attainment. Interviews with professionals involved in the projects identified several positive outcomes related to attendance and prevention of exclusion; improvements in attitudes towards education; and improvements

1. Residential education symposium presenters: Prof Dennis McInerney, Brad Papworth, Prof Andrew Martin, Dr Paul Ginns and Dr Louis Lee.



related to attainment. Interviews with children noted improvements in self-concept, relationships and social skills; in their attitudes to learning and achievement; and in their perceptions of improved educational outcomes.

Dr Louis Lee of the Chinese University of Hong Kong presented a case study on developing a new residential college for Hong Kong university students. Several themes emerged from interviews with the two Deans in charge of the college's non-academic and academic programmes. Both Deans distinguished the role of the residential college from that of academic departments and the central university administration, emphasising the residential colleges should play more of a "whole person" rather than traditionally academic educational role. The Deans also noted the advantage of the "full residence" model and smaller scale of the college in comparison to other models (e.g. partial residence), arguing these features supported more effective organisation of and participation in college activities and more substantial interactions between students, as well as fostering greater community spirit.

Another emergent theme was the decision to model the residential college on well-established English colleges, resulting in prominent features of residential life such as communal dining sessions. The Deans acknowledged a number of logistical challenges in this early stage of operation, such as alternative catering options on campus which provided students with attractive alternatives to communal dining, and sufficient funding for student life programme activities. A follow-up survey of students attending both the fully residential and partially residential colleges found respondents from the fully residential colleges tended to be more aware of college events; were more proud of

being a college member; felt more obliged to participate and enjoy their participation in college-related events; and felt that they played a role in college life. These students were also more likely to identify with their college's mission and vision, and to perceive college and university life as intertwined. Taken together, these results suggest the fully residential college setting might indeed help realise at least some of the non-academic outcomes that the Deans in Study 1 outlined.

In drawing together major themes from the set of presentations, Professor McInerney and participants raised a number of points and issues relevant to the provision of residential education:

- When considering the diverse forms of residential education, it is evident that it constitutes a major part of the education sector
- Residential education is a vital means by which children and young people can access educational and social opportunity
- There can be variability in the quality and nature of education provided in different residential settings
- There can be tensions between traditional ways of structuring and delivering residential education and the needs and preferences of modern children and young people
- Transitions into and out of residential education can disrupt developmental pathways and thus must be managed effectively
- There can be tensions between specific units (e.g., boarding houses, colleges) and the larger institutions to which they belong (e.g., school, university) and these must be managed effectively (for example, students can be confused as to their identity regarding their boarding house vs. school)

- There can be differences across outcomes such that students may perform well academically whilst in residential care, but have non-academic (e.g., self-esteem, happiness) difficulties
- Residential settings that care for the whole child seem to yield better outcomes than those more narrowly focused – thus, even those with a specific purpose (e.g., sport, detention) benefit from well-rounded approaches

Taken together, the Symposium was an illuminating opportunity for researchers in residential care to share current research practices and findings from international perspectives. Although there were differences as a function of national context, there were also many congruent features and elements relevant to academic and non-academic outcomes across quite diverse residential learning environments that boarding schools might consider.

For further information about the symposium and our current Australian Research Council/Australian Boarding Schools Association project, please contact Brad Papworth for further details: [b.papworth@edfac.usyd.edu.au](mailto:b.papworth@edfac.usyd.edu.au) or (02) 9683 8490.

Do you have **GAP's**  
in your boarding roster?

Letz Live specialise in the recruitment of GAP / Residential assistants from around the world.

More information can be found online at [www.letzlive.org/boardingschool](http://www.letzlive.org/boardingschool)  
or by calling our office on (07) 56770735.

