

Preliminary Insights and Research Directions

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This article reports preliminary insights of a longitudinal project aimed at examining the role of attendance at boarding school in students' academic (e.g., motivation, engagement, achievement, academic resilience) and non-academic (e.g., life effectiveness, satisfaction with life, self-concept, quality of life) outcomes.

OBJECTIVES

The ABSA study will highlight key factors which may impact on the boarding experience, attempt to disentangle them to gain a better understanding of how these factors interact and the significance of their impact on student growth (see Fig. 1). Essentially, it seeks to examine differences in academic and non-academic outcomes between day and boarding students.

INTRODUCTION

Although there is anecdotal evidence suggesting that students at boarding school benefit from the experience, little large-scale and longitudinal research has been conducted to better understand the processes and phenomena under focus. While research conducted thus far has been good, it has been limited to relatively few boarding schools (e.g. Downs, 2002; White, 2004) or limited to relatively narrow outcome measures (e.g. Han, Jamieson, & Young, 2000; Whyte & Boylan, 2008), and so findings and conclusions are susceptible to the idiosyncrasies of those individual schools, with relatively limited applicability across the sector.

In shaping perspectives and predictions for this research, it is evident there are numerous theoretical, empirical, and applied positions that have a bearing on what might be predicted about boarding school effects. Research and theorising around a number of perspectives, including extracurricular activity, attachment, access and equity, tradition and stereotype reinforcement, 'total institution', are illustrative cases in point. Similar forms of education, such as residential education and experiential education, are also considered.

At this time, no research has shed light on which perspective explains the bulk of effects – hence another reason for the importance of this current investigation.

Preliminary Information on Participants

- 15 schools across each state in Australia (8 boy's, 3 girl's, 4 co-ed)
- 4,517 high school students (30% female, 70% male)
- 2,955 day students (65%), 1426 boarders (32%)
- age range 10–21 years, av. 14.5 years (SD=1.74)
- grade range Y6–Y12, av. Y9.5 (SD=1.37)
- average distance between home and school for day students was 0–49km and boarders 200–499km
- average length of time boarding was 2.9 years (SD=1.4).
- 87% English Speaking Background, 11% Non- English Speaking Background
- 4% Aboriginal, 5% overseas
- voluntary participation, but where possible, whole-school populations of both day and boarding students

MATERIALS

- 204 item, self-report questionnaire
- Academic outcomes assessed included:
 - achievement (NAPLAN results)
 - achievement-related behaviour
 - approaches to learning
 - motivation and engagement
- Non-academic outcomes assessed included:
 - satisfaction with life
 - well-being
 - interpersonal relationships
- Perceived climate of the boarding house or school
- Big Five Personality Inventory (Lounsbury, et al., 2003) to assess personality
- Students' general and family demographics

The initial phase of the study will conduct systematic, large-scale quantitative analyses of academic and non-academic outcomes establishing cross-sectional data on boarding and day students, as well as shedding light on the reliability and validity of survey measures, and mean-level differences between boarding and day students and as a function of key demographics (see Fig. 1). The second phase of the study in 2011 will assess transition and causal modelling by assessing the same students a year later using the same measures (see Fig. 2). The third and final phase will involve hierarchical linear modelling to assess the influence of the boarding environment (characteristics of boarding houses and schools) on academic and non-academic outcomes of individual students.

At this stage, only preliminary, descriptive analyses has taken place as the complete dataset was not available. Further analysis to more fully investigate the nature of mean-level differences between boarding and day students and as a function of key demographics will take place in the coming months before Time 2 data collection commences in early 2011.

DISCUSSION

Do boarders differ from day students in terms of their academic motivation and engagement? Do boarders have particular approaches to learning which are helping or hindering them? What achievement-related behaviour is successful? Are there particular stages of high school in which boarding is particularly influential in shaping areas of personal growth and academic development? Do these areas of academic or non-academic outcomes remain stable or do they change as boarders move from year to year?

Does distance from school or a students' regionality influence make a difference to their experience of school? Are there some personality types more suited to boarding than others? Is there a difference in outcomes for



boys and girls and how does this compare in single-sex and co-education environments?

How do day students compare on these measures of academic and non-academic outcomes and what can we learn from them? Due to the large scale nature of this study (204 questions), this project now has a wealth of data (approx. 8,500 students) which can be mined to answer these questions, and more.

This only represents Year 1 data collection and analyses. Next year we start the process all over again and will then be able to investigate how these effects change over time. The ABSA research is the result of the support and effort of many teachers from approximately 25 schools from each state of Australia – the sector should be very proud of the frontier of boarding research it is pioneering internationally.

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