

# ABSA Research Article:

## Understanding Boarding School from Residential and Experiential Education Perspectives

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

Proponents of boarding school attest that boarding offers something unique through the experience of living in community in a residential setting. However, this perspective is often based on the assumption that boarding offers something significantly different from day school education and that the distinction can have positive implications for boarding school students. To explore this assumption, in this article we look at residential and experiential education as two factors that differentiate boarding from day school experience. We then examine the potential impact of these two factors on young people's academic and non-academic outcomes and link this back to implications for boarding school.

### Residential Education

Residential education is broadly defined as education provided in an environment where students reside and learn outside of their home. It usually refers to the care and education of young people. Typical forms of residential education include boarding schools, preparatory schools, foster care or orphanages. At times, however, the term residential education is used to describe some forms of outdoor education or specially designed education programs where participants live in residence (e.g., American 'charter' schools, elite sports programs, gifted and talented programs, environmental education programs). In the Australian context, the goal of residential education programs is the development of young people and is generally a broadly-based educational program that occurs through living in a group setting at a school.

The residential education perspective suggests that through living in residence away from home, there is unique potential to address young people's academic and non-academic outcomes. However, there is generally no theoretical basis for this assertion, signalling a strong need for generative theory and research on this issue. What literature does exist tends to be descriptive or narrowly empirical. The descriptive literature on residential education typically describes the types of programs conducted. The empirical literature tends to be narrowly focused on relatively few outcomes of specific residential programs. This limited research suggests that residential education can positively impact children's emotional and behavioural development – and in the case of specialized (e.g., clinical) populations

has been found to improve self-esteem and interpersonal relationships for children with emotional and behavioural problems.

### Experiential Education

Experiential education tends to be an umbrella term encompassing outdoor and adventure education, environmental education, gap year programs, and other educational practices such as active learning, co-operative learning, and service learning (Fig. 1) which utilise 'experience' as the vehicle for change. This perspective emphasises the personal experiences of the learner in their

environment and the changes in the individual that result from that experience – somewhat different from the more conventional, didactic approach to learning where the learner more passively receives information. Fundamentally, the experiential education perspective takes into consideration the interaction of students with the experience and teachers involved, with a view to generating new learning which can be applied and integrated for the future.

Experiential education is very much akin to the boarding school experience as both contexts are based around an experience in which students are challenged intellectually,

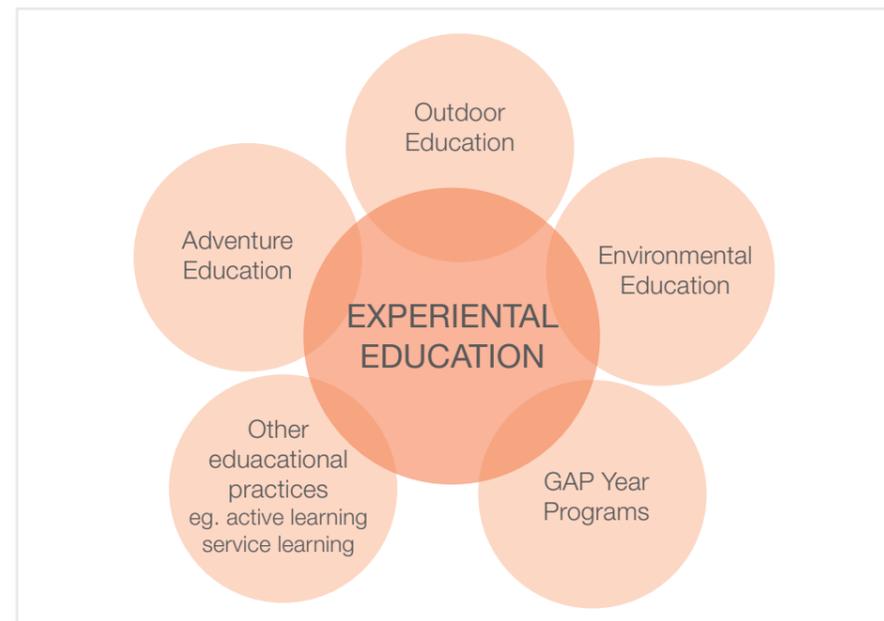


Fig 1: Relationship between experiential education and other related programs or philosophies of education which use this as a basis.

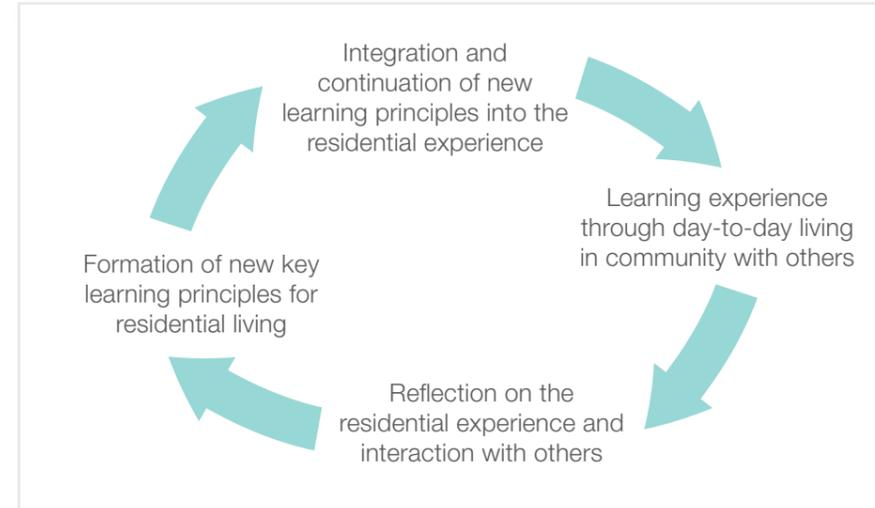


Figure 2. – Adaptation of the Experiential Learning model proposed by Kolb (1983) and Gass (2003) to the residential experience of attending boarding school.

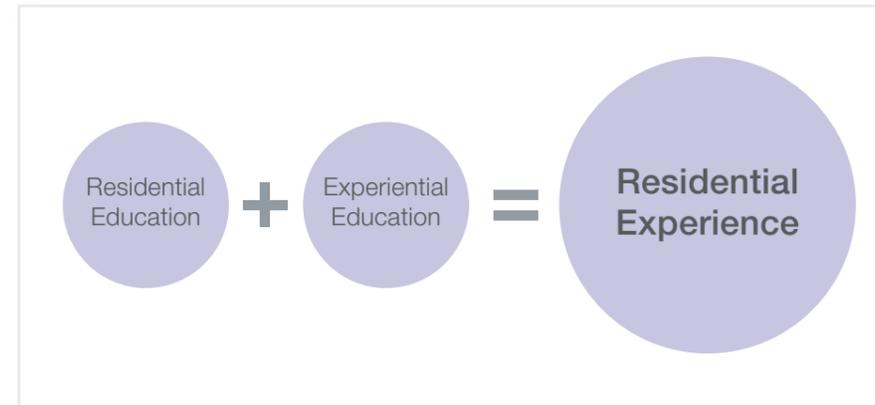


Figure 3. – Does residential education and experiential education combine to form the residential experience?

emotionally, socially, politically, spiritually, and physically in an environment away from home and one in which the student may experience success, failure, adventure and risk taking. Similarly, students are engaging and interacting with the environment and with other students and teachers through this experience. This perspective would suggest that through the immersion in the boarding experience, students explore issues of values, relationships, diversity, inclusion, and community. This can be seen in the adaptation of the Experiential Learning model (Fig. 2) proposed by David Kolb (1983) and Michael Gass (2003) to the residential experience. This illustrates the interaction of the learner with concrete learning experiences, reflecting on those experiences, thinking on this experience and forming a new understanding, followed by active experimentation, application and integration of this learning to how to live in the boarding environment.

As with residential education, limited research

has been conducted in the area of experiential education, in part because of the diverse range of programs. Notably, however, one substantial meta-analysis was conducted by Hattie, Marsh, Neill and Richards (1997) demonstrating that some aspects of adventure education were successful, particularly in the area of self-esteem. Importantly, effects due to adventure education programs improved and were sustained after the conclusion of the program and improved as the length of the program and ages of participants increased. Other studies with an empirical basis are worth noting and suggest that residential education and experiential education have positive effects on academic and non-academic outcomes; however, this tends to be more indicative of the therapy or program involved, rather than the residential experience per se. Hence, there is significant scope for further exploration of the impact of residential education and experiential education (Fig. 3) and how these perspectives explain effects attributable to boarding school.

### Boarding School: Integrating Residential and Experiential Perspectives

We suggest that residential and experiential perspectives provide a basis for better understanding current understanding of the academic and non-academic effects of boarding school. In identifying the key elements of residential and experiential education (above), it is evident that boarding offers a unique combination of living in residence (residential education) and experience (experiential education). This results in a 'residential experience' (see Fig. 3) in which:

1. students from different backgrounds
2. are immersed in community
3. interact with other students and boarding staff,
4. on numerous levels (intellectually, emotionally, socially, politically, spiritually, and physically),
5. in an environment away from home, with a view to
6. generating new learning not possible through other modes of education.

Importantly, however, these contentions must be tested before they can be said to accurately explain the boarding experience. One means of testing them is to investigate the extent to which boarding school is different from other forms of education (e.g., boarding school vs. day school). Accordingly, with particular focus on boarding and day students, we seek to do just this through a large-scale research project funded by the Australian Research Council in a partnership between the University of Sydney and the Australian Boarding Schools Association.