Research on Australian boarding schools

Dr Julie Hodges is a post-doctoral research fellow in the School of Psychology and The University of Queensland. Her PhD thesis comprised three studies which compared perceptions of important aspects of the boarding environment, and evaluated a boarding staff training program called connXionz for Boarding School Staff. Below is a summary of Hodges’ work which is relevant to Alliance members who have boarding schools.

The importance of boarding schools

Research “supports a direct comparison between the home and boarding environments, and as such, boarding staff who fulfil an in loco parentis role have an integral part to play in the developmental outcomes of adolescents” (Hodges, 2012, p. 102).

Boarding schools are busy and complex living environments. Staff and schools are responsible for promoting adolescent health and safety, for responding effectively to emergency situations and also for playing an integral part in the developmental and educational outcomes of the young people in their care. One might argue that the legal and practical responsibilities are in fact the easy part of the role and that it is the shared responsibility staff have for the development of happy, resilient young people that is most difficult. (p. 104).

The state of boarding and research into boarding in Australian schools

There is a lack of literature on boarding, both in Australia and overseas but ongoing research is essential. Approximately 20,000 Australian adolescents live in ~ 154 boarding schools and these schools are more likely to be independent day schools with attached boarding schools, with only a small percentage of students defined as ‘boarders’ (p. 16).

What is apparent is that while boarding numbers fluctuate, boarding schools are an important, and it appears, an enduring feature of Australia’s schooling landscape. It is also abundantly clear that the expectations of boarding schools are far in excess of the provision of a safe, secure environment, but extend to what are generally thought of as parental responsibilities, that is, the social, emotional and spiritual development of each child. Boarding staff vary greatly in age and level of experience, yet all have the responsibility for the nurture and welfare of the young people in their care. The implications of these expectations are that all boarding staff require a comprehensive range of skills, and training must not be limited to information or knowledge, but also involve skill development. (p. 32)

Boarding staff and boarders’ perceptions of the boarding environment

Hodges administered questionnaires to staff and boarders in several Queensland boarding schools to “assess important aspects of the boarding environment and staff and boarders’ intra-personal experiences, and subsequently to draw together a questionnaire package for on-going use in boarding schools” (p. 45).
An interesting pattern of relationships was found between staff and boarders’ perceptions of social support, boarding school climate and conflict. Boarders and staff perceived these constructs differently such that the better the staff perceived the climate and social support to be, the lower the boarders’ assessment of these factors were. It appears that while staff might believe that the boarding environment is supportive and conducive to positive outcomes, boarders do not share staff perspectives. There was no relationship evident between staff and boarders’ perceptions of conflict in the boarding environment lending further support for the different viewpoints of staff and boarders. The pattern of relationships revealed in this study points to the need to further explore staff and boarders’ perceptions of the boarding environment. This pattern of relationships also indicates the need to explicitly assess both contextual and intra-personal factors from the perspective of both staff and boarders. (pp. 55-56).

Some data was analysed for gender. Female boarders indicated that:

- House Mothers (32.7%) and friends (20.4%) offered them the most support
- In the event of a problem, female boarders would most likely turn to their peers (35.1%) or the House Mother (20.9%), with only 9.5% likely to approach family members
- The Director of Boarding offered them least support (32.2%)
- A significant theme that emerged for female boarders was poor relationships with staff, lending support to the perspective of lack of emotional support (pp. 98-104).

**connXionz research trial**

After establishing the need for a “skills-based training programs tailored to meet the needs of boarding staff in their in loco parentis role” (p. 144), 121 staff from several single-sex and coeducational boarding schools in Queensland participated in the connXionz research trial.

Hodges (2012, p. 172) found that “boarding staff in the intervention group strongly endorsed the program with 80% either strongly agreeing or agreeing that they were satisfied with the course, and 77% agreeing that they had the skills necessary to implement the program.” Therefore “connXionz for Boarding Staff, as a skills-based training program, has the capacity to significantly improve the competence and self-efficacy of staff in their in loco parentis role. It also shows promise in its capacity to reduce levels of stress and to create greater cohesiveness in participating staff” (p. 172).

**Conclusion**

Hodge’s study “supported the conceptualisation of the family and the boarding environments as similar, and by inference the considerable influence that boarding staff have on the developmental outcomes of boarders.” (p. ii). Therefore there is a need for boarding staff to be trained in a parenting role and “connXionz for Boarding School Staff has the capacity to increase the competence and self-efficacy of staff in their parenting role” (Hodges, 2012, p. iii).