

Evaluation of Learning Away

Hypothesis 8: Interpersonal relationships, cohesion and sense of belonging

**Centre for the Use of Research and Evidence in Education
(CUREE)**

4 Copthall House,
Station Square
Coventry CV1 2FL

☎ +44 (024) 7652 4036

☎ +44 (024) 7663 1646

✉ info@curee.co.uk

This report should be cited as: CUREE (2012) *Evaluation of Learning Away: Hypothesis 8: Interpersonal relationships, cohesion and sense of belonging*. London: Paul Hamlyn Foundation.

Hypothesis 8: Interpersonal relationships, cohesion and sense of belonging

High quality residential learning programmes can significantly boost, interpersonal relationships, cohesion and a sense of belonging across a cohort of students or whole school community.

Background

An 'interpersonal relationship' is an association between two or more people that may range from fleeting to enduring. Interpersonal relationships usually involve some level of interdependence: people in a relationship tend to influence each other, share their thoughts and feelings, and engage in activities together. The relationships teachers have with each student, and that the students have with each other, are integral to a classroom culture that optimises learning. At the heart of such relationships is reciprocal respect, shared control of the learning process and the development of a learning community in which students are encouraged to see themselves as part of a team and therefore having a part to play in others' learning as well as their own¹.

The term 'social cohesion' is used to describe the bonds or 'glue' that bring people together. Triggers for such bonds can include eating meals and playing games or doing activities with other people, collective/shared experiences and competitive sport. A cohesive community is one where strong bonds and relationships are developed between people of different backgrounds and circumstances.

'Sense of belonging' or 'community' in an educational environment has been defined as 'students' sense of being accepted, valued, included, and encouraged by others (teacher and peers) in the academic classroom setting and of feeling oneself to be an important part of the life and activity of the class'². Failure to feel a sense of belonging may lead to feelings of social isolation, alienation, and loneliness. Studies³ consistently show that students who experience a sense of belonging in educational environments are more motivated, more engaged in school and classroom activities, and more dedicated to school. Students who feel they belong to learning environments also report greater enjoyment, enthusiasm, happiness, interest, and more confidence in engaging in learning activities, whereas those who feel isolated report greater anxiety, boredom, frustration, and sadness during the academic engagement which directly and negatively affects academic performance.⁴

1 Peters, J., Le Cornu, R., & Collins, J. (2003) Constructing relationships for learning. *Paper prepared for NZARE/AARE Joint Conference, Auckland* November 30th – December 4th, 2003. Available at: www.aare.edu.au/03pap/pet03355.pdf

2 Goodenow, C. (1993) The psychological sense of school membership among adolescents: Scale development and educational correlates. *Psychology in the Schools*, 30, pp.70-90; McLellan, R., Morgan, B. (2008) Pupil perspectives on school belonging: an investigation of differences between schools working together in a school-university partnership. - *Paper presented at the British Educational Research Association Annual Conference, Heriot-Watt University, Edinburgh, 3-6 September 2008*

3 Osterman, K. F. (2000) Students' need for belonging in the school community. *Review of Educational Research*, 70, pp.323-367

4 Furrer, C., & Skinner, E. (2003) Sense of relatedness as a factor in children's academic engagement and performance. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 95(1), pp.148-162

Programme wide outcomes related to interpersonal relationships, cohesion and sense of belonging

Improved student-staff relationships

a) Enhanced knowledge and understanding of each other

All clusters quoted better relationships between staff and students both during and after the residential. Students and staff felt that the residential gave them time to *'understand each other better'*. A member of staff from Burley cluster commented, *'I now look at a very strong character differently because I have seen her vulnerable side'*. One teacher from the Calderglen cluster frankly admitted that she *'didn't have a very good teacher-student relationship with some of the children in the year group'*. She felt that with the more relaxed atmosphere the residential created, it was easier to identify the positive things the students were doing. She felt that the residential gave her the chance to *'build bridges with some students and bring those positive relationships back into school'*.

b) Showing attention and developing trust

Similarly, many students (particularly the more vulnerable students) commented on how teachers listened to them more and dealt with situations more effectively on residential. Hanover cluster reported, for example, how one child in particular found it difficult to trust adults and was nervous about going on the trip as she has a bed-wetting problem. The post residential 'group work'⁵ evaluation activity revealed that she felt this was dealt with effectively by staff and she was able to form a trusting relationship with them.

Improved student peer relationships

a) Tolerance and better team working

Alongside their improved relationships with staff, all clusters reported on how the students developed better relationships with each other. They also worked better as a team and listened to each other more. Students' better tolerance of alternative points of view with students inviting other students' opinions was noted by staff in most clusters. For example, at Tallis when completing a plank balancing exercise students made contributions such as:

Student A: *"It will be easier if I go in front because I'm lighter."*

Others: *"No! You aren't as strong you won't be able to pull it so far!"*

b) Caring and supportive attitude

Students displaying a caring attitude was an often unexpected, but widely observed and recorded phenomenon. There were many examples of when the children encouraged each other as they participated in challenging, outdoor activities and/or spontaneously congratulated each other after they had successfully completed them. The caring supportive attitude was also evident during daily routines whilst sharing rooms and tents. Members of staff from Christ Church cluster, for example highlighted examples such as:

⁵ See: www.schoolslinkingnetwork.org.uk/resource-area/teaching-resources/who-am-i/blob-tree/

- three boys sitting on a bed – one boy reading a ‘Goosebumps’ book to the other two, but saying ‘blank’ when he got to a scary bit, because the boys were a bit scared;
- two boys quietly playing ‘Top Trumps’ in their room, being really kind to each other; and
- the general thoughtfulness of the girls when getting ready in the morning – doing each other’s hair etc.

Students developing new friendships

Participating in the residential also helped the students to develop much wider networks of friends. Not only did the children get to ‘*know [their] friends better*’, their friendship groups were also extended to those in their classes they had never spoken with before, as well as students from different schools and age groups, as these students commented:

‘We’ve got to know everyone in our groups, I know all of their names off by heart and it’s good to know people well’.

‘I have learnt to work in different groups with children that I don’t normally work with’.

Residential also worked well in the context of overcoming particular relationship challenges. Hanover cluster reported on how the residential resulted in improved relationships for one particular child who previously had experienced difficulties in making friends. The child was very able and verbally confident, although her written work did not always reflect this. She found it hard to form lasting friendships and tended to end up in fractious friendship groups. She generally sought the company of peers who were not her intellectual equal, but was easily frustrated by them. There was a socio-economic pattern to this. The child was from a very disadvantaged background and tended not to identify or form friendships with more socially advantaged peers, even though they were her intellectual equals.

The child reported that she had, ‘*a really fun time*’ on camp because, ‘*I could be myself*’. She said she was happiest when socialising with friends and commented on choosing a range of people to spend time with: ‘*I felt happiest when I had free time with people from different groups*’. She did engage in fractious behaviour at times and was involved in a major argument, but commented that she felt much more listened to by adults on camp than usual, and that this helped her move on from the negative situation.

Staff believed that feeling relaxed and able to be herself during the residential enabled her to socialise more widely than normal. The residential removed many of the aspects of life that normally differentiate students socially, and this may have helped the child get to know people she would normally shun. Adult involvement was important for helping her to manage fractious social situations. The staff concluded that feeling listened to was key and could prove a useful strategy back in school.

c) enhanced social cohesion and sense of belonging

Only a few (see next section) clusters had a sense of belonging as an explicit aim of their residential. Nevertheless, different elements of social cohesion were present in all of the residential programmes. One special needs child from the Christ Church cluster summed up how such activities

contributed to his sense of belonging. Before the residential, he commented how *'sometimes I feel lonely'*. After the residential, he commented *'I wasn't lonely at [the residential]'*. Similarly, a quiet girl who lacked confidence from the Hanover cluster said she felt *'surrounded by people who cared for me even when I was sad'*. She did say that she sometimes *'felt left out and homesick'*. She was quiet at the start of the week, tending to follow others rather than participating more actively. However, her confidence and involvement with others gradually increased. She took on a significant role in the end of camp show, something she would normally have shunned in school. Again, at Walney, a looked after child from the pupil referral unit was able to blend in with the other children and 'not stand out' like she did in school whilst a child with significant health and sleeping issues, who had been very nervous about camping, found he 'laughed himself to sleep' with the help of his tent mates.

Examples of residential interventions specifically aiming to improve interpersonal relationships, cohesion and sense of belonging in particular contexts

Hanover cluster explicitly set out to build a community feeling and sense of belonging for their students whilst on a 'back to basics' camping residential. Whilst on the camp, the students were organised into three 'families', each with dedicated staff. Each 'family' slept in tents and the students were responsible (with direction) for all aspects of camp life including putting up their tents, collecting wood for the fire, taking turns to cook for everyone and clearing the site at the end. There were no facilities available other than a drinking water tap. The school wanted students to learn about nature and their place within it, and enforce a sense of community by having to work together.

All students spent supervised time in the kitchen cooking for the rest of camp. The students also participated in activities such as making friendship bracelets, and wood whittling with blunt-ended knives. Emphasis was placed on the students having choice and flexibility in what they chose to do, and some processes were adapted as the trip progressed, e.g. establishing a routine for mealtimes.

The students also took part in an end of camp show with the groups preparing for each other and enacting on a stage they built. Time was also built in for personal reflection, which involved the students making a 'string story', and Circle Time at the end of camp to explore what they had learned, how they felt and what they wanted from their next camping trip.

The cluster leaders explained how the activities on camp were not directly related to curriculum areas such as literacy or maths, as the purpose of the trip was to explore a new and collaborative experience and teach the students how to be self-sufficient and live as a community.

One of the East EAZ cluster's residentials (for Years 3/4) took 'Other cultures' as its theme because their students lived in an area that had undergone rapid ethnic change with the relocation of many newly arrived families settling in the area, which had resulted in some racial tension and evidence of a lack of confidence in other cultures.

The residential provided an opportunity for the children to be immersed in other cultures for three days and two nights during the spring/summer. This consisted of language/communicating, art and

craft, dancing, singing, playing musical instruments, cooking and tasting activities relating to each culture. The residential culminated with a showcase celebration around the campfire to bring the group to the point of actually celebrating other cultures.

Other key components of the residential were team and relationship building (through offering activities such as orienteering and completing an obstacle course) which the cluster believed were critical to creating a cohesive group and also understanding that everyone is different and has different needs.

The residential was followed by a substantial amount of learning back in school. The schools prepared a presentation to feed back the residential elements to those children who had not attended and also to parents. The children studied further language, cooking, art/craft and dance as undertaken on the residential. They also learned in more depth about different cultures to continue with the immersion theme. Learning back in school took place mainly in the classroom and ICT suites. Children utilised the internet and books, and prepared booklets and their own presentations to teach each other what they had learned.

By the end of the programme, the schools reported that they felt that cohesion was particularly stronger in the group of children who went on the residential. One of these schools had a difficult year group, so this was of significant importance.

Newall Green explicitly set out to equip students with skills to build and sustain positive relationships and sense of community in order to promote their happiness and sense of wellbeing. The cluster developed a family learning residential programme, the purpose of which was to break the cycle of poverty and deprivation in the local community. The students selected for the programme were experiencing difficulties at school, such as underachievement, poor attendance and disengagement, due to the home environment.

Each episode of residential learning for a family involved three visits to a property rented by the school in the countryside. The first two visits were attended by the students of the family only; the third was attended by all family members. For each family, an individual plan of activities/support was put together which focused on fostering a change of attitude and ethos of the family towards the importance of education and employment. Once family members had attended a residential, they acted as mentors for other families.

Some of the activities and key aspects of a residential included:

- walking, which provided opportunities for physically challenging students and giving them a sense of achievement as well as focusing their attention on learning about nature and the locality (e.g. completing a questionnaire whilst they walk around a park, stately home and gardens);
- food shopping and preparation which taught students and their families the 'why and how' of healthy eating;
- establishing and following the house rules – the house rules were negotiated with the students on arrival, apart from Health and Safety rules and the TV rule – the TV could be

- watched for only one hour per day; and
- arts and crafts, e.g. creating a Mother's Day card.

The cluster reported how well the families bonded during residentials, as these extracts taken from one of the case studies the co-ordinator of the programme produced show:

'The boys were getting on a lot better: they were working and playing as a family more... Jane⁶ was still very quiet and tended to just watch rather than join in. Dad got quite emotional and mum said she would recommend it to anyone ... it had really helped her family bond and made her realise what her children were missing out on'.

One parent reported how the main thing he had learned during the residential was how to bond with his family: *'Bonding with my children and wife, playing games without TV. IT WAS A GREAT EXPERIENCE'.*

The co-ordinator concluded: *'By encouraging family cohesion we enabled them to work as a family unit and to become positive members of the community'.*

Common features in the clusters' approaches to boosting interpersonal relationships, cohesion and sense of belonging

Attention to developing interpersonal relationships

Developing students' social and interpersonal skills and their ability to work together was identified as an intended learning outcome for their residentials by around three quarters of the clusters.

Many schools were very precise in specifying the skills which they wanted their learners to develop. Not mutually exclusive, these included:

- supporting children who tend to work independently to recognise the benefits of collaboration and learn to participate in group work successfully;
- ensuring contribution from all children to collaborative activities;
- supporting students to develop collaborative working skills that did not depend on existing relationships (i.e. with peers outside their friendship groups);
- developing children's knowledge of effective group work strategies; and
- identifying core clusters of skills.

a) Identifying and assessing the skills

A number of the clusters deliberately set out to develop their students' interpersonal and teamwork skills through for example, designing collaborative group work activities which would ensure students listened carefully to and built on each other's points. Walney went as far as to define the specific interpersonal skills students would need to succeed in transferring to secondary school and the kinds of evidence that would show these skills have been developed. They also designed an interpersonal skill recognition system on a bracelet and all students and staff were engaged in identifying and recognising such skills development.

b) Student groupings

⁶ All names have been changed.

To support their students in developing interpersonal skills, staff also paid careful attention to their groupings during residentials and organised activities and tasks in such a way as to promote the development of social, interpersonal and group work skills. So whilst the clusters worked hard to ensure that the students shared rooms or tents with their friends, they tended to ensure the young people worked in groups on learning activities that included students not in their immediate friendship groups, and often with students they had not known before, to *'take them out of their comfort zone' and 'extend and develop their relationships'*. Some clusters took this further by enabling students to mix with students from other schools. For example, East EAZ organised a number of residentials on the themes of 'Respect for the world' and 'Other cultures' each attended by a combination of children from 2-3 schools. The children were put into mixed school groups during the day and completed their activities in these. The children were encouraged to work collaboratively with children from different classes, ability groups and schools and to reflect on their role within the various groups.

c) Use of (unstructured free) time

Students from Calderglen cluster commented how the opportunity for having increased and free time together was important for helping them to develop relationships with their peers; simply sharing rooms with their peers and having time to chat, gave them a chance to make friendships more concrete:

'I traded phone numbers with people I didn't know very well before. It helped that we were playing football at 9:30 in the evening'.

Teachers from Walney cluster similarly felt that their students' improved ability to build friendships with new people was specifically linked with the use of unstructured free time that was planned into the residential. During the free time, pupils chose different things to do, such as football, trampoline, or chatting in their tents. Several teachers commented that they had been anxious about the free period, but in the event felt it had been very important for speeding up trust building because it gave children chance to get to know each other and discover shared interests.

Attention to the development of social cohesion and sense of belonging

a) Use of activities around routines and 'survival' and collaborative tasks

Collaborative problem-solving tasks, sharing and preparing meals together, creating artefacts together, putting on a performance together and engaging in collective activities such as pitching tents and singing were commonly used by the schools to help children develop a sense of belonging to the group and community.

b) Organisation of community and physical environment during the residentials

Hanover cluster divided the children into three main groups to give the children the security of belonging to a smaller 'family' unit and staff observed the children to identify problems as they arose and provide immediate support for the children. Thomas Tallis cluster used a model of learning on the residential which placed community at the core. It involved students in making decisions using a democratic system of home, council and community groups. At Walney, although the activities during the day all took place in groups from across the schools so students would get to

meet their secondary school class mates, they slept in tents with their existing class mates. They prepared for this by designing a flag to represent the skills of all the tent residents so that every pupil knew explicitly about the coping and transition skills of those they were sleeping with.

Possible explanations for the outcomes

The findings from the Paul Hamlyn LA cluster echo and illustrate in many ways findings from the wider evidence base relating to the importance of residential for creating conditions conducive to:

- the development of students' relationships and social skills
- promoting cohesion and bonds between students, and
- creating a sense of belonging.

The wider evidence base also indicates the importance of continuing the practices experienced by students during the residentials, such as group work activities requiring teamwork, back at school for sustaining these positive effects.

The development of relationships and social skills

Fleming⁷ identified some key elements that enabled relationships to develop during residential programmes that were enhanced during the Learning Away practices. They included:

- relations were intimate because participants shared bedrooms and bathrooms;
- informal bonding took place through opportunities not normally available in school (such as sleeping in the same room or tent);
- participants dropped their facades – their professional titles, roles and behaviours
- no escape – participants could not retreat from one another; and
- relationships forming between individuals who would not normally choose each other's company.

So the residentials encouraged intimacy through sharing a room or even a tent. To help the young people feel relaxed they were often given the opportunity to sleep with their friends. Staff and students noted the way in which they developed a more holistic view of each other, with time and a more relaxed atmosphere cited as a significant factor in facilitating this. Staff often encouraged students to form relationships with new people by paying careful attention to activities and groupings. Stott & Hall's⁸ study further emphasised this point highlighting how residentials enhanced students' social skills through the students developing their ability to control their emotions whilst living in crowded circumstances and motivating others through during challenging activities. Again there are extensive examples of these key practices threaded through the accounts of Learning Away activity for this hypothesis. Walney explicitly identified social skills and planned activities which supported students in developing these.

The promotion of cohesion and sense of belonging

⁷ Fleming, J. A. (1998) Understanding Residential Learning: The Power of Detachment and Continuity, *Adult Education Quarterly*, 48(4), pp.260-271

⁸ Stott, T. & Hall, N. (2003) Changes in aspects of students' self-reported personal, social and technical skills during a six-week wilderness expedition in arctic Greenland, *Journal of Adventure Education and Outdoor Leadership*, 3(2), pp.159-169

Kabel⁹ identified time and space as key elements of the residential experience in terms of bonding and creating a sense of belonging: time *'to be creative, share past experiences and get to know one another'*. Residentials also allowed for more informal and incidental learning as *'dialogue could be used at all times'*; students could continue discussions informally over meals and at other times. Participants in Fleming's study also highlighted how they felt they had more time and space to focus on the activities and themselves; they felt they could finish a discussion or conversation after a structured learning activity had been completed, for example. The clusters planned for extended time for interaction both during structured activities and more informal relaxation time. So, for example Hanover built in time to reflect on the learning that had taken place, whilst Calderglen and Walney noted the value of giving the students free time.

Sustaining the impact of residentials on relationships, cohesion and sense of belonging

Smith-Sebasto¹⁰ found from his student surveys that young people needed to have their experience regularly reinforced by subsequent classroom lessons or activities. He noted how:

'The feeling of belonging [based on student responses immediately and six months later] and teamwork is more strongly present while still in the situation in which group belonging and teamwork is needed'.

Whilst the clusters noted improved relationships, cohesion and a sense of belonging after the residentials, there was not a great deal of evidence that attention was paid to explicitly reinforcing these back at school. To sustain the benefits clusters may wish to consider ways in which this can be done.

Conclusions

The clusters clearly succeeded in boosting interpersonal relationships between staff and students and between students during the residentials. The residentials enabled staff to build bridges with some students and enabled some students to start to trust staff more. The students also became more tolerant and caring of each other and developed a wider circle of friends.

The clusters helped by supporting students to develop collaborative working skills and ensuring students worked on learning activities not in their immediate friendship groups, whilst also giving them time and space to deepen their existing friendships. Activities such as living and eating together, group work and team building exercises helped all children to feel part of the community – it was hard to feel sad, anxious or lonely when surrounded by people who cared.

⁹ Kabel, C. J. (2002) Residential Learning: A Safehouse for Study and Growth, [Online]. In: *Proceedings of the 2002 Midwest Research to Practice Conference held at Northern Illinois University*. Indiana: University of Indiana. Available at:

<https://scholarworks.iupui.edu/bitstream/handle/1805/408/Kabel%20C%20.pdf?sequence=1>

¹⁰ Smith-Sebasto, N. J. & Obenchain, V. L. (2009) Students' Perceptions of the Residential Environmental Education Program at the New Jersey School of Conservation, *The Journal of Environmental Education*, 40(2), pp.50-62