

What makes a ‘Brilliant Residential’?

Learning Away’s Second Interim Evaluation Report (2014): a summary

What is a ‘Brilliant Residential’?

‘Brilliant Residentials’ are school trips with an overnight stay, which are led by teachers, co-designed with students and fully integrated into the curriculum.

They are a ‘multi-tool’ for achieving vital educational outcomes, have a huge impact on students of all ages and can help to deliver whole school change.

Learning Away is a five-year action research initiative, supported by the Paul Hamlyn Foundation. It is working with a group of sixty schools to test the concept of a ‘Brilliant Residential’ – seeking to define and demonstrate the positive impact that high-quality residential learning can have for students and teachers, and engage increasing numbers of primary and secondary schools across the UK in the development of their residential practice.

About the evaluation

In 2012, the Paul Hamlyn Foundation commissioned York Consulting to evaluate the effectiveness of Learning Away. The evaluation has two overarching aims:

1. To build a strong evidence base that will support four key Learning Away propositions, i.e. to demonstrate that high quality residential learning:
 - Has a strong, positive impact on academic achievement and a wide range of student-level outcomes;
 - Can transform the learning experience of students;
 - Can help to transform schools;
 - Does not need to be expensive. Investment in residential learning is money well spent.
2. To generate new insights and understanding about how and why residential learning achieves these outcomes.

This is a summary of the key findings from York Consulting’s second interim report (September 2014).

So what do you want to know first?

- (1) What **impact** can residentials have on students, teachers, and their school?
- (2) What is it about the residential experience that **leads to improved outcomes**?
- (3) **How** can ‘Brilliant Residentials’ deliver great learning experiences?

Key findings

This summary draws on 5,456 pre-residential surveys, 4,329 post-residential surveys and 673 long-term follow-up surveys from students in 51 schools. This phase of the evaluation also included focus groups with 320 students and 144 school staff, and surveys with staff and parents.

Want to learn about the research methods used? Visit the Learning Away website for [more information](#).

What impact can residential have on students, teachers, and their school?

Here, we have highlighted key findings in five key areas: impact on **relationships**, students' **sense of community**, their **confidence**, **attainment** and **engagement**, and student **leadership** skills.

1. Impact on relationships

One of the most significant impacts of Learning Away was the impact of the residential on relationships, both peer relationships and those between staff and students (at both secondary and primary level).

The main impacts on peer relationships identified were:

- New peer relationships, for example, vertical relationships across age groups;
- The development of more trusting and respectful relationships between students, including a change in existing power relationships;
- Opportunities for students to develop social skills and skills to form relationships.

The main impacts on staff student relationships identified were:

- The opportunity for staff and students to develop new relationships as well as enhancing existing relationships;
- Providing a context where attitudes towards one another could be changed;
- Providing better insights and understanding into each other's behaviour;
- The development of more trusting and respectful relationships.

Survey responses highlight the impact of the residential on both peer and staff student relationships:

- Post residential, 70% of key stage 2 students felt they knew their teachers better and 71% felt they got on better with their peers as a result of their residential experiences. These views were enhanced in long-term follow-up responses where 84% of key stage 2 students felt they knew their teachers better and 75% felt they got on better with their peers as a result of their residential experiences.
- Post residential, more than 80% of secondary students felt that the residential had helped improve their relationships with their peers and teachers. Interestingly, 72% of secondary students felt that as a result of the residential their teachers had a better understanding of how they liked to learn best. Given that only 56% of students felt that this was the case prior to the residential this can be seen as an important finding.
- Post residential, 82% of staff felt that the residential had begun to achieve its aims in relation to improving relationships and 62% stated that immediate outcomes had been achieved in terms of providing opportunities to develop new friendships (61%); enabling participants to get to know each other in new and different settings (59%); and providing opportunities for them to learn in different groups (41%).

These findings were confirmed during focus group discussions with both staff and students:

"You don't really spend time and be in a tent with people from your school all the time. You may do sleepovers... but you wouldn't spend a week in a tent with your friends..."

(Primary Student Focus Group)

"If somebody that they wouldn't normally look at, never mind talk to was upset or worried they were able to recognise that because they felt a little bit out of their depth as well... [They] were able to show that empathy and comfort them"

(Primary Staff Focus Group)

"Being together for a week, it's made them realise that they are actually equal in a sense and understand people's weaknesses and strengths and work on it, and they've been quite helpful to each other and tolerant and accepting other people more I think"
(Secondary Staff Focus Group)

"We created bonds with the teachers we'd never had before and that means that if we have a problem now we know who to go to, we know the teachers better, we know how to ask people how to help us"
(Secondary Student Focus Group)

"That for me was the best thing – to see them just all sitting, talking, laughing, chatting, just having that time together"
(Secondary Staff Focus Group)

"It empowers us but it takes away our power as well in that we can actually be on a level with the kids and we can sit down on the grass with them. Whereas in a classroom situation it is 'I am teacher, you are student'. You're actually physically levelled and I think that has a massive impact on relationships with students"
(Secondary Staff Focus Group)

2. Developing a 'Learning Away' community

Residential provide the opportunity and experience of living with others. They also provide opportunities for group reinforcement and support, as well as the chance for participants to learn more about themselves and others that creates a 'virtuous circle' of behaviour. In focus groups, both staff and students spoke of the strong sense of community developed on the residential and the sense of belonging that this engendered. Everyone was working towards a common purpose/goal and there was a strong sense of mutual support within the residential context.

The sense of community was reinforced by participants facing common challenges and overcoming adversity together. They were learning how to work together as a team to solve problems and achieve the outcomes central to the residential experience. The residential context was seen as an environment where success could be celebrated and where students were less judgemental and more collaborative. It was felt that the sense of community developed on the residential and engagement in teamwork activities and challenges facilitated the development of these more positive attitudes.

The memorability of the residential experience and the shared memories of participants helped to maintain the sense of community developed on the residential back in school and also helped to sustain the positive impacts seen on the residential.

"Having meals together, then having a tiff over who washes up, negotiating over bed time – gels you as a family and you wouldn't get that on a day trip. It's those sort of little experiences, they aren't planned, it's just the social interactions that gel the group"
(Secondary Staff Focus Group)

"The weather, the tiredness, being with each other all week - they had to overcome all these things and learn to be resilient"
(Secondary Staff Focus Group)

"Some of the children in my year group are neglected in lots of different ways. Suddenly they've got people to talk to and that are listening to them. I'm not talking about the adults but other children. They've got people to play with, it's not being stuck in front of a TV, they've had decent food, they've got shared experiences. The whole shared bit is part of what makes it really special"
(Primary Staff Focus Group)

"Most of the things you had to work together, like the tents, the cooking, the den building or making the fires. You had to do it with at least one other person. You might be partnered with someone you didn't get on with at school but with camping it was either get the thing done or not so... you have to deal with it"
(Primary Student Focus Group)

"Whilst you're there you don't have a mum to tell you what time to go to bed, get off the X-box, go and do your homework... It's more like taking control of your thing and making sure that you are on time, making sure that you've got to take control of your own situations"
(Secondary Student Focus Group)

"To let them stay up until ten o'clock at night, sitting in the dark in the woods with a fire going, blankets round them... a totally different experience"
(Special School Staff Focus Group)

3. Impact on confidence

When participants were asked to identify what difference the residential had made to students, they were most likely to identify an increase in confidence:

- Within students themselves;
- In their learning;
- In their relationships with others.

Positive impacts on confidence were directly linked to consequent positive outcomes such as:

- Improved relationships;
- Better engagement with learning;
- The development of leadership skills.

"Before I wasn't very confident about meeting new people or going overnight but now I am because I know how it's going to be and how other people will probably be, so I'm not as worried"
(Primary Student Focus Group)

"The residential has brought him out of his shell and he's just like a normal kid enjoying himself"
(Secondary Staff Focus Group)

"Their confidence has increased. They are much more 'Yeah, I'm proud of myself'. They hold themselves in higher esteem. They have much more worth than they had thought. We're very good in schools at judging on levels and recording achievement based on... targets... Camp showed them that we're able to value them in different ways, in a different environment"
(Primary Staff Focus Group)

"It shows if we continue pushing on we can reach the top, even past our limits... if you link that to the subject and continue pushing on even if we feel we can't do any more we can still achieve our goal"
(Secondary Student Focus Group)

"Some of the parents have been amazed at the change in their children, particularly the ones who were really nervous about going away overnight. Lots of these children have been asking already if they can go next year. The parents are saying: 'This is amazing', they had to work very hard to get their children to go and now they want to go again"
(Primary Staff Focus Group)

Survey responses reinforced the views expressed in focus groups:

- Post residential, the majority of key stage 2 and secondary students were proud of what they achieved on the trip (82% and 91% respectively) and these views were maintained in the long-term follow-up surveys (83% and 79%). 78% of key stage 2 students and 88% of secondary students stated that they felt more confident to try new things as a result of their residential experience. Responses to long-term follow-up surveys showed that 82% of key stage 2 students and 79% of secondary students had tried new things that they would not have done before the residential.
- Post residential 74% of staff said that the residential had already begun to achieve its aims in relation to improving students' resilience, confidence and wellbeing and 57% stated that immediate outcomes had been achieved in relation to developing students' confidence through taking risks and working with others; being more willing to try new things and face challenges; experiencing success and being proud

of their achievements; developing greater confidence in their own abilities; increased independence back in school; and quieter students being more willing to speak up back in school.

- Staff felt that the residential facilitated development of these outcomes by providing activities and experiences that challenged students and gave them new experiences, as well as the opportunity to develop new relationships within a supportive group environment. Importantly, they also felt that the residential gave students opportunities to be more independent and helped develop their resilience.

4. Impact on attainment and engagement with learning

Staff and students showed that they felt the residential had impacted on their levels of attainment and provided evidence of students' progress in learning, for example:

- Moving from BTEC to GCSE courses;
- Improving the confidence of lower attaining students resulting in improved attainment back in school;
- Students having a better awareness of their strengths and weaknesses and knowing what they needed to do to improve their attainment.

Impacts on students' engagement with learning were also identified, particularly for secondary students. Both staff and students identified impacts on students' behaviour and attendance and staff noted that the residential experience had helped re-engage those students in danger of exclusion. Residential were felt to be particularly effective for students who had difficulty concentrating and engaging in the classroom context as it gave them a positive experience of themselves. The more relaxed learning environment, the availability of one to one support and small group work, practical and experiential learning opportunities, as well as the chance to experience success, were all felt to contribute to improved learner engagement.

Impacts on students' knowledge and skills were also identified by participants including:

- The development of students' vocabulary and their speaking and listening skills (particularly for primary students);
- Improved creativity as residential provided inspiration and helped to enrich students' work in a range of subject areas (both primary and secondary students);
- Developing a better understanding of the subject e.g. in maths and developing specific skills e.g. in music (secondary students);
- Developing study and research skills (both primary and secondary students).

Survey and focus group responses showed that:

- 58% of key stage 2 pupils thought they would do better in their schoolwork as a result of the residential and 48% felt they would do better in their tests or SATs.
- The views of secondary students continued to be positive in the post residential context with two thirds or more of respondents thinking that as a result of the residential they would make better progress in their subject (71%), had a better understanding of the subject (70%), they were better at problem solving (67%) and would do better in their exams/tests (66%).
- Secondary students were most positive about how they were taught on the residential, with 77% saying that the way they were taught on the residential would help them do better in the subject.
- Positive responses of key stage 2 pupils seen post residential were maintained in the long-term follow-up surveys. Long-term follow-up responses from secondary students were less positive. Nevertheless, more than a third of secondary students still felt that the residential had had a positive impact on them, two to three terms after the residential.
- Post residential, 58% of staff respondents felt that the residential were beginning to achieve their aims in relation to improving student attainment and/or progress in specific subject areas.

"It was quite comfortable, not laid back but the teachers their style of teaching was quite different from school... I understood more than I would if I was in an actual lesson at school, I think it's probably because the environment was different"
(Secondary Student Focus Group)

"They were able to share their experiences and what they'd learned from each day ... if they'd had a bad performance, the next day they got a chance to put it right and to reflect and think about it and improve it"
(Secondary Staff Focus Group)

"I wouldn't normally be in school until this time now [10.30 am] and the trip's made me realise that I need my education, I enjoy education, I enjoy learning and I was in school at half eight this morning, which is a whole two hours before I normally am"
(Secondary Student Focus Group)

"We've found it's enhanced their speaking and listening skills, their vocabulary because it's first hand, it's not from a book, they've experienced it first hand, they can talk about it and their talking leads into their writing"
(Primary Staff Focus Group)

"[Less academic student] she'd just come out of her shell so much, she was able to apply her skills in such a different way... she was chatty... she was willing to have a go and take risks certainly a lot more than she would in the classroom because there wasn't that fear of getting it wrong"
(Primary Staff Focus Group)

"[English lesson] I used a lot of my surroundings, whereas if I was sitting in a classroom I just would have been like, 'Oh I don't know what it looks like' but I could just look up and around me for detail about it ... Compared to the one [essay] I done at [residential], if I'd done one in the classroom...the one from the [residential] would be a lot better because I got to experience more"
(Secondary Student Focus Group)

5. Developing student leadership skills

The most significant evidence of this impact was on secondary students involved in leadership programmes. Student leaders were responsible for planning and delivering residential activities, either for their peers or for younger students.

A range of impacts were identified for both student leaders and for those they were leading, including:

- Increased confidence, particularly being given responsibility to lead activities;
- Providing a role model for other students;
- Improved organisational and presentation skills;
- Improved independence and maturity;
- An enhanced learning experience as a result of student involvement in designing and planning the residential.

Students were most likely to identify an increase in their confidence as a result of being involved in leadership activities. Experiencing success in leadership activities motivated students to take on additional responsibilities and made them want to continue with their leadership role again seeing a 'virtuous circle' of behaviour leading to improved student motivation and engagement.

Survey responses showed that students' views changed as a result of their residential experiences:

- Prior to attending the residential, only 40% of secondary students felt they could be role models to others. Post residential 64% felt that the residential had made them realise they could be a role model and this view was maintained in their responses to long-term follow-up surveys. This suggests a positive impact on students' views that were fairly negative prior to going on the residential.
- On return from the residential 74% of secondary students said they had the opportunity to be involved in leading the activities that they thought they would and enjoyed the opportunity to lead activities whilst on the residential (76%). Long-term follow-up survey responses showed that 53% of students had been able to lead activities back in school, but only 43% had got more involved in helping to decide what they learnt or how they learnt in school.

Focus groups with staff and students echoed these findings:

"We could see how they were developing and we could trust them with the children... I think they thrived on being allowed to take responsibility"
(Primary Staff Focus Group)

"Most of the time the teachers didn't want to interfere with what we were doing. They let us be independent and do what we had to do... do what we wanted to do. Unlike when at school they tell us 'do this' and 'do that', you can be more free about it..."
(Primary Student Focus Group)

"I think it's made me more organised ... when I'm doing a session now I know everything that I need, I know what I need to do, how I need to do it, how long I've got ... whereas when I started I just did it until I was told to stop ... I think I've become my own type of boss ... I work independently without any advice"
(Student Leader Focus Group)

"[What was the best thing about the residential?] "That we wasn't getting taught by teachers, we were getting taught by students so it was kind of fun... It was better cos you didn't have as much pressure as you would with the teacher. You... both understand each other and it's better"
(Secondary Student Focus Group)

What is it about the residential experience that leads to improved outcomes?

The evaluation has begun to identify key aspects of the residential experience that make a difference to participants and achieve positive outcomes:

1. **Residentials are a Leveller:** residentials provide a new space and context where participants are equal and existing barriers and hierarchies can be broken down. The residential context allows students to see different qualities in each other, which impacts on their interpersonal relationships, both on the residential and back in school.
2. **Time, Space and Intensity of the Residential Experience:** is key to developing relationships and learning opportunities. Participants are away from home for an extended period of time, away from their usual routines and distractions that provides opportunities for them to be immersed in learning and to develop relationships. Unstructured time provides opportunities for discussion and self-reflection and more informal learning.
3. **Developing a Learning Away Community:** residentials allow participants to create a new community away from their normal distractions and gives them time and space to address their goals (both personal and learning related) within a supportive environment. Residentials help to develop a sense of responsibility and maturity: participants are responsible for themselves and others helping to promote self-reliance and teamwork.
4. **The Memorability of the Residential Experience** and the shared memories of participants helped to maintain the sense of community developed on the residential back in school and also to sustain the positive impacts seen on the residential.
5. **Providing an Opportunity to Experience Success:** in a range of practical and physical challenges impacting on confidence, self-belief and attitude to learning, both on the residential and back in the classroom. Success in activities was linked to success in the subject and these memories were interlinked when students returned to school.
6. **New Ways of Learning:** residential learning provides a context and model for students and teachers to explore new ways of teaching and learning and provides experiential and context-based learning which helps to develop students' understanding and knowledge facilitating their engagement with, and progress in, learning. Residentials provide important opportunities for students to revisit and build on their learning experiences from one day to the next.

How can 'Brilliant Residentials' deliver great learning experiences?

Learning Away has developed the concept of 'Brilliant Residentials', which it defines as residentials that are led by teachers, co-designed with students and fully integrated into the curriculum. The following provides a summary overview of what the evaluation findings suggest makes a 'Brilliant Residential' in terms of improving outcomes for students and developing learning opportunities within schools:

1. **Providing Progressive Residentials:** a sequence of coordinated residential learning experiences for students that help to develop and embed learning and skills year on year. Providing progressive residentials gives students a clear picture of how they can progress in developing their skills and knowledge. The progressive element is important for sustaining and enhancing growth in confidence year on year.
2. **Providing Residentials that are Embedded within Existing Programmes of Delivery** leads to improved learning outcomes. Staff noted that the standard of students' work was enhanced after their residential experience because they were able to draw on what they had learnt on the residential.
3. **Providing Residentials that are Designed and Led by School Staff:** staff involvement in the design and delivery of residential experiences means that activities can be specifically developed to meet the needs and learning objectives of students within their own schools. This approach also helps to embed, reinforce and progress learning from the residential back in school and facilitates the integration of the residential experience fully within the school curriculum. Residentials also provide valuable staff development opportunities and give staff opportunities to share practice and learn from others.
4. **Providing Residentials that are Designed and Led by Students:** involving students in designing, planning and leading residential experiences leads to better outcomes. Students involved in running residentials can be important role models for other students.
5. Residentials **Provide Opportunities for Participants to Mix with Others** and develop relationships which bring opportunities for new insights and learning. For students, this may be opportunities to mix with other students in the same year group, other year groups, other schools, or other communities, as well as working with older students who can act as role models.
6. **Providing New and Memorable Experiences:** the Learning Away residentials have shown that new does not need to be exotic and that memorable experiences are not always planned and are often linked to overcoming adversity.

Conclusions

Findings from the evaluation to date clearly show that students, staff, parents and schools valued Learning Away residentials. The evidence continues to show that many of the positive impacts seen on the residential, for example on the development of relationships, confidence and engagement with learning, as well as the delivery of learning, were also being sustained back in school.

In this second interim report what again comes out most strongly is the impact that the residentials have had on relationships (both peer and staff student) and on students' confidence. There is evidence that impacts in these areas also have positive outcomes in terms of students' engagement with, and progress in, their learning as well as their self-belief and expectation that they will make progress and succeed.

York Consulting has also been able to identify what it is about the residential experience that facilitates achievement of these positive outcomes. Residentials are **a leveller**, they provide the necessary time, space and intensity to foster **new relationships** and **a new community** (away from normal distractions). Residentials provide **memorable experiences**, different opportunities for young people to experience **success**, and a context where staff and students have the confidence to **explore new ways of teaching** and learning.

The evaluators have also been able to evidence the key aspects of Learning Away's 'Brilliant Residentials' that have led to improved outcomes.

When residentials are fully integrated into the curriculum, and are made a part of wider school life for all students, they have the potential to provide rich learning opportunities and can impact on a wide range of student outcomes.

Although residentials can have an immediate impact on attainment and attitudes to learning, they are more likely to have a long-term impact (especially on students in secondary schools), if the learning on the residential is followed up and reinforced back in school.

'Brilliant Residentials' are not seen as 'one-off' special events, but are always closely linked to the learning that takes place in the classroom and are therefore an integral part of the curriculum.

Staff and student ownership of the design and delivery of the residential experience can make a real difference:

- Involving students in designing, planning and leading residential experiences has a positive impact both on student leaders and the young people they are supporting;
- Staff involvement in design and delivery means that residentials are designed to meet the specific needs and learning objectives of students within their own school. This learning can then be reinforced and built on back in school, which also facilitates the integration of the residential experience within the school curriculum;
- 'Brilliant Residentials' also provide the opportunity for staff to develop their practice and learn from colleagues, both within their own and other schools.

The findings in this report also highlight the value of providing progressive residentials, which help to develop and embed student learning and skill acquisition year on year.

Visit learningaway.org.uk for support and advice, and to learn how other schools are developing their own 'Brilliant Residentials'.

York Consulting specialises in evaluation, economic analysis and social research across the public, voluntary and community sectors. Visit the [York Consulting website](#).