

AN AUSTRALIAN CO-EDUCATIONAL BOARDING SCHOOL AS  
A CRUCIBLE FOR LIFE:  
A HUMANISTIC SOCIOLOGICAL STUDY OF STUDENTS' ATTITUDES  
FROM THEIR OWN MEMOIRS

by

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## ABSTRACT

The aims of this study were to define an Australian boarding school, provide a summary of international and Australian boarding school literature, and complete a small-scale qualitative investigation of students' views in a co-educational boarding school. At first glance, it appeared that contemporary Australian boarding schools were a reproduction of the influential public boys' schools of Great Britain. Although there have been a number of histories of Australian independent schools, the boarding element has often been portrayed as Dickensian and remains an overlooked area of educational research. In particular, the literature available about Australian residential schooling over the past 20 years has been limited to a handful of significant studies by Cree and Trimmingham Jack.

In this study 45 Australian and overseas students were asked to write memoirs of 4-5,000 words about their boarding experience emphasising their thoughts, feelings and aspirations. The limitation was that all respondents were full-time boarders for at least one year when the questionnaire-survey was completed. The memoir-based humanistic approach of the Polish-American sociologist Florian Znaniecki, as developed for the analysis of personal and group social systems in the culturally diverse context of Australia by J. J. Smolicz, was employed to interpret the memoir data.

The memoir method has been well documented in Australia, as a means of collecting and analysing concrete and cultural facts, mainly in relation to the study of minority ethnic groups and their cultural actions. The humanistic approach emphasized that the researcher must accept cultural phenomena from the viewpoint of its participants and not from that of an outside observer. In the present study, this approach permitted the researcher to understand the experiences and attitudes of individual students towards an Australian co-educational boarding education through their own eyes.

The memoirs analysed were generated from 26 concrete questions, which revealed place-of-birth, ethnic identity, and languages spoken at home. This provided the researcher with verifiable information about the everyday lives of the respondents. The second half of the memoirs required response to 23 questions – these yielded cultural data. These questions required students to reflect on their situation, attitudes and experiences of boarding as a

system of education. This information could only have been provided by the participants themselves and gave the researcher direct access to the memoir writers' individual and group consciousness.

The study discovered that a number of the students were in the process of re-evaluating and re-interpreting the advantages and disadvantages of boarding school as a social system transmitted to them by parents, friends, family, and teachers. The respondent's personal statements revealed that the relationships among students and among students and staff in the boarding House tended to be primary in nature, in that they were personal, informal, and involved the entire human personality. From these data, it appeared that the success of a boarding school was determined by the personal atmosphere, support, and comfort of the boarding House.

Consideration of the empirical data found that 43 of the 45 respondents' memoirs believed that their overall experiences at the research boarding school were positive. Negative observations stressed the pressures of homesickness, tedium of school life and a lack of freedom thereby supporting Goffman's view of a "total institution". The majority of students' memoirs were ambivalent towards religion at the research school. Nevertheless, 11 stressed its significant implication in their day-to-day lives. The memoirs suggested that an education at the research boarding school was a crucible that forged students through a variety of experiences, positive and negative, individual and collective, for life.

Overall, the memoirs support the observation that boarding school acts as a social system for the acceptance of new cultural values, such as the cultural diversity respondents' experienced in their lives at boarding school. The study revealed an attitudinal shift in the group that welcomed the cultural pluralism of the school and recognised the cultural monism of the home. These memoirs revealed that boarding school was a significant factor in fostering independence and embracing cultural diversity as experienced in the crucible of the boarding school. These findings challenged the popular maxim that an Australian residential education was an anachronistic, inflexible, colonial-British model and suggested that it has the potential to act as a system of education that prepares its students for the challenges of life.

### STATEMENT OF DECLARATION

This work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or any other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in thesis.

### PERMISSION TO LOAN AND PHOTOCOPY THIS THESIS

I give consent to this copy of my thesis, when deposited in the University Library, being available for loan and photocopying.

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Date:

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Mathew A. White - 1 October 2004

*To my parents*

## MINOR AMENDMENTS TO THESIS

- p. 3, line 9 up: Kym Beazley **read** Kim Beazley
- p. 4, line 1: Labour Party **read** Labor Party  
line 10 down: predominately-untouched **read** predominately untouched  
line 18 down: Productions' **read** Productions  
line 5 down: Wining **read** wining  
line 2 up: Australian educated **read** Vice-Chancellor
- p. 5, line 2 down: Western Districts **read** Western District  
line 9 down: rôles **read** roles
- p. 7, line up: writers' **read** writers
- p.9, line 5 up: students' **read** students  
line 2 up: research **read** researcher
- p. 12, lines 8-10 down: This approach provided the respondent with a guideline for their memoirs **read** This approach provided the respondent with a guideline for his or her memoir  
line 9 up: who **read** which
- p. 22, lines 5-6 down: Lambert purported **read** Lambert argued  
boarding school was **read** boarding school is
- p. 23, line 7 down: juxtaposed the stance **read** paralleled
- p. 25, line 3 down: Hughes' **read** Hughes's
- p. 27, line 4 down: *The schoolboy's mask: a play in five acts* **read** *The Schoolboy's Mask: A Play in Five Acts*  
line 10 up: *Incidents of youthful life, or The true history of William Langley* **read** *Incidents of Youthful Life, or The True History of William Langley*  
line 4 up: *The world of school* **read** *The World of School*
- p. 28, line 11 down: there was a watershed **read** there was a revolution
- p. 31, line 5 up: set at Eton set **read** set at Eton
- p. 35, line 7 up: was the growing and influence and wealth of the middle and upper classes For example **read** was the growing influence of the middle and upper classes. For example [...]
- p. 36, lines 3-4 down: was history **read** was a history  
line 5 down: Honey **ready** Honey's
- p. 37, line 2 down: Clarendon commission **read** *Clarendon Commission*

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29 November 2004