

# How boarding school can help to transform young lives

**By John Attwater, Head of King Edward's School, Witley**

It is a privilege to be asked to discuss "How boarding school can help to transform young lives", from the point of view of my own school, King Edward's School, Bridewell Royal Hospital, in Surrey, which currently supports 108 bursary pupils in boarding, 42 of them in partnership with the Royal National Children's Foundation and also the other charities. These are partnerships which are crucial to our mission, for which we are tremendously grateful and of which we are enormously proud.

I hope you won't mind my saying, though - and I suspect my fellow Heads will agree - that a still greater source of pride is the honour and privilege of working day-by-day alongside some really extraordinary young people, some of whom we are hearing from this afternoon.

They, and their stories, are a far more eloquent answer to that question of how assisted boarding transforms young lives, than anything I can stand here and tell you. But from the schools' perspective, perhaps I can outline, first of all, why I think assisted boarding works; secondly, the particular things we can do to make it work most effectively; and, thirdly, why I think assisted boarding needs to be seen as more widely transformative than simply changing the opportunities in life for a relatively small number of people, and what we can do to make sure it is seen in that way.

Broadly speaking, the job of any society in educating its children is to allow them to develop their skills and knowledge (academic literacy, if you like), their understanding of themselves and how they fit into a community (social literacy), and their emotional literacy too. These three aspects, the Academic, Social, and Emotional, are sometimes compared to the three legs of a milking stool, and forgive me if you have heard this analogy before, as it's not original, but bears repeating.

A milking stool, you will know, has three legs because a tripod provides a stable platform on any surface, so long as all three legs are of the same length. To pursue the analogy, in order to provide a stable foundation for someone, the three aspects, academic (school), social (community) and emotional (home), have to be catered for in equal measure. You need to be challenged academically and to learn independently. You need to find your place in

society, discover your talents, stretch your ambitions and develop a sense of responsibility, morality and concern, and you need to discover relationships, with family and friends.

This, of course, is the rationale behind boarding schools. Boarding schools offer the complete package, an academic schooling, community life and pastoral care, and do so equally to all, and in partnership with and complementing what happens at home and in someone's local community.

And this is the key bit - each aspect of boarding school life can grow and assume the required importance in a child's life to make up for any aspect which is not otherwise there. For some people, boarding school provides community, where otherwise they might be isolated and never discover their place in the world; maybe that's because circumstances have forced a different role on them as a carer or even victim, or maybe they are isolated from a peer group because of language or creed or fear or disability or talent or poverty. For some, boarding school provides a second home and emotional stability where otherwise circumstances mean that is lacking.

Fundamentally, boarding creates an environment where the obstacles, the disadvantage, the stunting factors in a child's development can be removed or replaced, and room for a childhood created. And the great thing is, because all aspects are there for all boarders, whoever they are and wherever they're from, these aspects of support are given or drawn on unobtrusively and often subconsciously, according to need.

For example, at King Edward's we have a very strong house system with rather more resident staff than is the norm, and a 24-hour medical centre which provides a range of support, counselling and respite as well as a full medical service. Some rely on this; for others who do not need it, it is still there but almost incidental. We bear in mind finances rather more than other schools: uniform, stationery and bedding are inclusive within the fees, for example, extras are kept to a minimum and a large travel fund and bursaries for instrumental tuition and laptop grants help ensure everyone can benefit from the opportunities on offer: for some of our pupils this is completely immaterial; for others, it is essential. We have strong liaison with parents which is tailored according to need: for some this means receiving school reports and not much else, for others it can mean ongoing

support and advice regarding all aspects of the school experience, as well as help with finances, charitable trust applications and so on.

In the early stages, and before someone joins us, this last bit is very important. Whoever you are as a parent - and particularly if you or your family have never had experience of boarding before and especially if you are on your own or have become reliant on a child - the prospect of that young person going away to a boarding school is a daunting one. Will they be OK? Does this mean I've failed as a parent? How will I cope without him or her? Will he or she still want to know me when they come home?

The great reforming Victorian Headmaster of Uppingham, Edward Thring, said that, for boarding to be justifiable at all, it must be better than home: I believe it must be demonstrably so, for all, and not just for those whose home life makes that an easy hurdle. We try to encourage early contact, visits to the school, and involvement and inclusion of families at taster days and induction events, and all, of course, alongside and on an equal footing with fee-paying parents, who are naturally just as nervous.

Our Bursaries Officer, is there at open mornings as much to meet people as to advise them. She knows all the pupils we support and provides a personal and permanent link during term-time and the holidays as well. We also have someone on the Parents' Association whose specific remit is to be an extra but less official contact and support for assisted boarding families. Families need to be involved in the process and to know that we are there to support, and not replace, them.

But above all, King Edward's and schools like us work by providing a stable, consistent and - as far as possible - normal environment so that, through assimilation, what is "normal" can be discovered by a child, and what is not normal can be identified and dealt with. And more than anything we as teachers and staff can do, this is where children growing up together are absolutely fantastic. Sharing experiences and learning shared values are how boarding has worked for so many young people, giving them confidence, ambition and security, and very often repairing family life because of it.

And here is the clue to what I believe is the wider significance of assisted boarding in society today. Because assisted boarding is not only a benefit to those children who are directly

supported, but the normalising – horrible word, but I can't think of a better one - influence of boarding has a much broader effect *because* of the presence of assisted boarders within our schools, who become part of that normalising process for others. I think of this as "normalising diversity".

A boarding school allows you to create a community of varied talent, a breadth of ability and a range of social, cultural and national backgrounds. Then, as I have said, children largely do the rest. Growing up in a diverse community means you naturally develop the ability to understand people from all sorts of backgrounds; to cope with cultural differences and people disagreeing with you from principle; the ability to remove prejudice; to understand yourself in relation to others; to develop real and realistic ambition from a global perspective; to sort out what is really important about people; to be able to build lasting relationships. Children take people as they find them. The more diverse the experiences of those whom they encounter, the more encountering diversity becomes a normal experience for them. In other words, you normalise diversity.

And clearly, the presence of assisted boarders in a school can be a wonderful part of this process. You don't generally try to hide the assisted boarder or their experiences or circumstances – a) you can't hide much from children, as you know, and b) it's terribly unhealthy for anyone to be ashamed or embarrassed by their family or situation, and it's really important for people to learn not to be. But you take them at face value as people and their circumstances as matter of fact and largely irrelevant to who they are and what happens at school, and then you learn: from their resilience, their wisdom and their capacity for unconditional love.

In my school, the diversity is perhaps more marked than anywhere else; we have pupils from 100 yards down the road and from 35 different countries, and pupils whose annual family income is zero and some whose annual family income runs into millions of pounds. We have children of foreign nobles and local business people and full-time carers and political refugees and first-generation immigrant families and none of the above, and you can't tell one from another and it is brilliant: I cannot think of a better foundation for life for anyone going out into a global society.

What I am certain about is that everybody deserves to have such a substantial and sure foundation for life. But I am particularly proud that in political and economic times which have seen the gap between rich and poor widening and social mobility at its lowest for 50 years, schools such as King Edward's and charities such as the RNCF continue to make it possible for children who need it to get, not only a stable foundation for life, but the very best foundation, one which is aspired to and sought after throughout the world.

It's easy to be self-congratulatory about the assisted boarding work that the charities and schools do, in terms of their self-evident charitable benefit to those individuals they serve. But if I may, I would like to bring in a note of caution. I think we need to watch out. The landscape in which we operate is constantly changing: the circumstances which give rise to a need for boarding evolve as new threats to family stability arise, and as the effectiveness of, for example, government social policy and its funding wax and wane.

Old criteria and assumptions regarding what is best for the orphaned, disadvantaged and vulnerable need to be re-evaluated and challenged, and changed where necessary. Unless we constantly reassess who we are helping and why, we run the risk of criticism we cannot answer, or, worse in my view, of being regarded as irrelevant or even unhelpful in the wider social picture.

For my school, I know we have to do some things better: we need to identify families in need of help even earlier and support them years, even, before they come to King Edward's. We must support pupils and families more during school holidays to maintain the aspiration and motivation we can create in term time. We may have to find ways to support through university. We certainly have to keep banging the message on and on and on to local and central government and going through churches and other charities where we have to, to find those most in need of help and to be part of that process.

If we are to force the pace on assisted boarding, then, we have to be able to say with conviction that we know what we are doing, that this works, that it is having maximum impact, and that it is of transformative benefit for the whole of society as well as the assisted boarders themselves. We must look beyond successive governments' preoccupation with newer and shinier ideas, but at the same time recognise the need to engage with government as a modern and dynamic force in education and care. We must

work creatively and better with business, with other charities, with those whom we help and with each other. We must be proud but reflective and confident but open and ambitious but resilient.

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