



Professional Learning
Research
Innovation

Learning in Practice

Volume 1 Number 1 November 2017



About the Barker Institute:

- Provides a centre for research, reflective practice, professional learning and innovation in education
- Is a resource hub that facilitates the ongoing development of learning for teachers, allowing them to stay abreast of emerging practice, constantly striving to refine the quality of teaching and learning
- Looks to develop collaborative ventures with other institutions and providers, initiating research and innovation combined with the implementation of new projects and programs for the benefit of students, staff and the broader community
- Shares current research and issues with parents, professional bodies and educators around the globe through ongoing symposia, forums, lectures and conferences

About the Learning in Practice Journal:

As a leader in Christian education, Barker College aims to both demonstrate and inform best practice. This journal was developed to showcase a range of initiatives and research projects from across the School. It explains the rationale behind innovations in practice and archives pivotal developments in Barker's academic, co-curricular and pastoral realms.

Editors

Dr Brad Merrick
Dr Greg Cunningham
Mrs Amanda Eastman

Editorial Assistant

Susan Layton

Creative

Glenn Quevedo

Printing

Barker Print Room

About the Author

Amanda Eastman is an English and History teacher, but she is passionate about a range of KLAs. This interest has led her to various cross-curricula roles. From 2012 – 2014 she was the Assistant to the Director of Studies, overseeing the implementation of the Australian Curriculum. In 2016 she worked in the Learning Support Department, teaching Fundamentals of English and supporting students with specific learning needs. In 2017, she began working as the Assistant to the Director of the Barker Institute. She has also enjoyed participating in the co-curricular life of the School, having coached Softball and Touch football and been acting CCC of Hockey, Assistant CCC of Snowsports and a Boarding Duty Officer.

Reflections from the 'Barker Journey' study: 2016 interviews



Learning in Practice
2017 Vol. 1 (1)
© Barker Institute 2017

Amanda Eastman

Assistant to the Director of Research in Learning
and the Barker Institute

Abstract

What is it that makes Barker special? The 'Barker Journey' study has tracked a group of Barker boys for nine years to examine how their experience at the school has shaped their lives. This paper examines their 2016 interviews and, as they start Year 12, the boys have some fascinating and somewhat nostalgic insights about their School years. In particular, the interviews highlight the range of activities on offer, the strong sense of community, the increasing sense of social justice and morality and the quality of teaching at the school.

One thing Mr Taylor told me in Year 3 ... I asked him 'What makes a Barker student?' and he said 'to treat other people the way you want to be treated' and that's kind of stuck with me as my nine years have passed.

In many ways, this quote is a microcosm of the Barker story. It captures a student profoundly impacted by his teacher, spending the next nine years of his school journey living out the advice given by his role model. This picture of inspirational teachers and cohesive community plays out repeatedly throughout the Barker Journey study. This paper examines the 2016 interviews with a cohort of boys at the conclusion of their Year 11 studies. It helps to ascertain what students gain from their Barker journey well beyond what can be conveyed by marks and statistics. Their stories are all unique, including overseas adventures, life lessons learnt through adversity and eyes being opened to the need for global hope. However, there are also some common themes that resonate very strongly throughout all the interviews and help to capture the impact of the Barker experience.

Diversity

It is almost immediately evident that every student's experience is distinctive. The students in this study are engaged in a diverse assortment of academic and co-curricular aspects of the school. When students were asked about the highlight of their year, the responses included everything from camps and tours to the musical and the play; from watching and playing sport, to cadets; from F1 and Robotics, to Choir and Band; from Mock Trials and Debating to Extension Chinese. Some students, rather than identifying a specific activity, said that being supported in their academic achievement was a highlight with one student reporting that "I have a good time every time I go into each classroom".

Students also seemed really to enjoy all these offerings regardless of their level of success. Some had tried a new sport for the first time, whilst others were aspiring to become professional sportsmen. Some had lead roles in the musical whilst others enjoyed being a member of the chorus or crew. Some began as reluctant participants but ended up gaining much from the experience. For example, one student was hesitant to participate in a sailing

camp but in the end he said he “had a blast”. Another contributor said he used only to participate in sport out of obligation, but to his surprise, he was now enjoying basketball. Another student also said he was becoming more appreciative of all the little things - not just the sport, music and drama - but the classes, chapel services, tutor meetings and so on. The diversity was also evident in the range of plans students had for their years immediately following Year 12.

For some students, it was a setback in their main interest area that forced them to explore and appreciate other things the School has on offer. One athletic student described his broken leg as a “blessing in disguise” as for the first time, he could focus more on school work and enjoyed seeing his marks improve. Another student said even though he had surgery that went “horribly wrong”, he was able to take a step back and evaluate his priorities. He has consequently learnt to focus on his studies and to enjoy the support within the year group. This collection of experiences showcases the immense variety of academic and co-curricular undertakings that Barker students enjoy.

Equality

While the interviews showcased the depth and diversity within the candidature, they also highlighted a sense of unity, equity and justice. The benefits of adding girls to the cohort were discussed at length. Some students reflected on the addition being disruptive at first, but said the boys quickly settled down, matured significantly and made new friendships. There was unanimous consensus that the learning experience was improved by becoming coeducational. One said “I love it, it’s incredible. They give it a different flair”. For some, the primary benefit was the broader range of perspectives in class discussions; for others it was being motivated to be the best version of themselves they could be, while for some it was developing confidence and social skills and in many cases it was the way that the girls helped to accelerate their maturity and dampen the “silliness” that characterised Middle School. Many said “it’s a better learning environment” and it has “encouraged the learning process. You want to learn more so you can discuss things on the same level”. There was a sense that the girls made the classrooms more rigorous and academically competitive.

Many students were also able to see how it would be beneficial beyond the Mint Gates, as reflected in the following observations:

“Trying to understand everyone is beneficial for education and life beyond as well.”

“Segregation isn’t really normal, so having that opportunity before you leave school is a very, very good experience to have as it sets you up.”

“It feels a lot more like the outside world.”

“It’s changed my approach to things ... opens you up to what the outside world’s going to be like.”

“You need to be able to go straight into the workforce. It’s good to have that scenario so not only are you mentally prepared but also socially capable.”

Some (particularly those in leadership positions) did acknowledge the need to improve the way the girls are integrated throughout the Senior School. They spoke about making 2017 the ‘Year of Inclusion’ and aiming to make the environment friendlier for the girls. It would certainly be interesting to include girls in a similar study in the future to track how they are shaped by their time in the School.

The theme of equality was not limited to gender equality. One student commented that he thought Mr Heath had played a significant role in growing concern for social justice across the School. Some of the participants in this study had been to Darkinjung, Barker's Indigenous campus. They described it as a "very different environment" and reflected on their increased awareness of Aboriginal culture.

The concern for social justice also spanned the globe. A handful of the participants had been to the Crossroads charity organisation in Hong Kong and had their eyes opened to how blessed we are in Sydney. One reported, "that was the big thing for me, to realise how privileged we are in Australia and how much we can do to help". Another said, "I realised how lucky I am ... there are a lot of people doing it tough ... it's definitely given me a world view and the inclination to help out where I can". These experiences certainly seemed to be highly formative for the boys involved.

Community

Even stronger than the sense of international community was the sense of community within the School. The words "atmosphere", "culture", "community" and "people" were commonly cited as the most enjoyable things about Barker and the elements that will be missed most beyond Barker. Some students mentioned specific events that developed this culture, such as coming together to watch sport, Batting for Change and Coffee House. One of the boarders also spoke very highly of the sense of community within the boarding house, saying "you make the best friends you'll ever make" and emphatically stating that it would be the Boarding House he would miss more than anything.

However, for the majority, it was the informal, daily interactions that cultivated this sense of belonging. The students painted a picture of a particularly tight-knit year group. One of the most memorable comments was: "We're a whole year, not individuals within a year ... There has been really good support and we're building a team to go through Year 12".

In fact, a significant number of students mentioned how much they have valued the time with their year group. When asked what they would miss most about the school, some of the responses included:

"My year group. We are all like one big family."

"I'll miss the environment within the year the most. The mateship, the camaraderie ... building relationships that will hopefully last a lifetime."

There was a definite sense the year had become closer since starting Senior School, as many of the cliques had dissipated and students felt that they could talk freely to anyone without being judged. Some students also reflected positively on making friends from other year groups through co-curricular activities.

One student insightfully pointed out that co-curricular and community go together and, because Barker's co-curricular program is "phenomenal", the development of community is a positive by-product.

Values

It was this sense of community that appears to have had the greatest impact on the students personally. When asked how Barker had shaped them, the most common theme was that their values had been shaped by the people around them — both staff and students. A few commented that they thought the teachers model how people should be treated and have consequently shaped their own interactions. There was definitely a sense that the values were absorbed by being around others who shared them, rather than through explicit teaching:

“Barker builds good people. When you’re around good people you become one yourself.”

“All the values that the school goes by get instilled into each Barker kid but especially once you’re here for this long it becomes a part of you.”

The following quotes show how some students spoke about their values in general terms:

“I think it has definitely helped me to be a better person ... more morals and values.”

“It’s good to enforce values. It’s given me a moral compass.”

“Becoming the best possible version of yourself.”

“Made me into a better person overall.”

“How I carry myself.”

Others were more specific about the values they had obtained with some commonly cited ones including compassion, respect, manners, confidence, character, work ethic and responsibility.

“It’s led me to be a more compassionate person and help people out.”

“You pick up work ethic and social morale.”

“I think a lot of the values that are always taught have impacted me ... being kind and courteous to others and treating them how you want to be treated.”

“One of the values that I take on board is that respect value ... before you make any judgment on someone you’ve got to understand and respect someone’s opinion.”

“It shows you the way to be exemplars within society. It helps you to build a basis of knowledge and reflection upon oneself that is needed within a modern day society, especially in terms of acceptance ... it provides the students with a voice which is what our generation needs to do.”

These reflections capture one of the amazing legacies that Barker offers its students — creating wholesome, selfless, hard-working individuals. One student also gave a moving account of how the School had played a pivotal role in shaping his Christian faith:

Probably the biggest thing it has done for me is allowed me to make a decision to pursue a relationship with God. As well as that, most of the core values that Barker has are Christian values ... all the Christian Studies’ staff are really supportive and allow you to make that decision for yourself. It’s massive for me — it’s the most important thing in my life.

Teaching

Right from the start of the boys' journeys, it is the teachers, not just the students, who have had perhaps the deepest impact. Some spoke very fondly of their Junior School teachers. In one beautiful moment, a student quoted his Year 5 teacher whose words have had a profound impact on him. He "shaped me as a person" and is still "someone I look up to".

When asked about how Senior School differs from Middle School, almost every student spoke about how the relationship with their teachers had changed and deepened. It was evident to the boys how much the staff care, not just about their results but about their lives as well. Some key quotes included:

"While I have developed a lot of relationships with students and made great friendships with them, I have also developed great relationships with the teachers."

"They're really good, they're really engaging."

"Someone to reach out to."

The students found these relationships with the staff motivational and inspirational, with many wanting to work hard to make their teachers proud. Their admiration for the teachers went beyond the classroom, with students naming senior staff like "Gilly" and "Thommo" as people whose influence and support was appreciated.

Another aspect that students appreciated about the Senior School was the ability to home in on subject areas of interest. They were appreciative of the fact that Barker students can choose from a limitless combination of subjects and have state-of-the-art facilities to develop their skills and interests. The art and tech facilities were praised, along with the teacher dedication that allows these areas to be available at a range of times.

Balance

In terms of academic pursuits, many of the students believed there had been a real step up in the expectations and workload in the Senior School. However, all were positive about how they were managing this. One had given up tennis outside of school and one chose to participate in the play but not the musical because of how the timing fitted in with assessments. One missed much class time for robotics, but was confident he had learnt to manage all his commitments now. These examples show the students learning valuable life lessons about prioritising, balancing responsibilities and work ethic. Many had found Barker's structure and routine invaluable and cited this as something they would miss after Year 12.

Conclusion

These interviews capture the value of the Barker experience beyond what can be gleaned from league tables and statistics. When asked what he would miss most, one student responded with a laugh, "I'll miss everything to be honest". It is often difficult to define the culture of an institution and as is the case with this quote, it is difficult to isolate exactly what makes a place special. However, when viewed collectively, these interviews capture a place where students can pursue and be supported in whatever their passions may be, while forming deep and transformative relationships and also learning to look beyond themselves to be inspired to become part of something bigger and more important.



 @barkerinstitute

 facebook.com/barkerinstitute

 www.barkerinstitute.com.au