

Demonstrating the effectiveness of a residential education program for disengaged young people

This article reports on the early results of using behavioural and educational data to evaluate a residential education program. The role of behavioural and educational data in data-informed decision making and program evaluation will be discussed. The purpose of the present preliminary efforts reported in this article, was to demonstrate that using behavioural and educational data would be effective in helping the residential education program achieve 'behaviour change and educational gains' for students enrolled in the program. In terms of behaviour change the expectation was of problem reduction and not necessarily total problem resolution. For education there was an expectation of significant improvements in numeracy and literacy.

The residential education program is Dunlea Centre (the original Boys Town of Australia) in suburban New South Wales. The centre is a 5 day/4 night (Monday - Thursday) per week accredited residential school for both male and female children and young people. In 2019, 27 young people attended the school (20 males, 7 female) with ages at enrolment ranging from 12 to 16 years. The centre is a campus-based facility consisting of a modern school, extensive recreational facilities, and 4 residential houses (3 male - 1 female) with a capacity of 8 young persons in each house. The program serves young persons who have been suspended or expelled from school due to behavioural issues or who refused to attend school. The measures of behavioural and educational progress during care were the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) and the Progressive Achievements Tests (PAT). These data are collected as a part of everyday operations at Dunlea Centre, and are used by staff for care planning and individual behavioural and educational progress reports.

Collecting and reporting SDQ and PAT changes over time provided empirical evidence that the program was achieving its primary aims of "behaviour change and educational gain." The tables and figures based on the SDQ and PAT instruments provided relevant and easily-understood information to young people, their families, and staff showing improvement for young people in the program. The individual reports supported data-informed decision-making efforts within the program by providing detailed information about how each individual young person has progressed, and identifying specific areas in which intervention efforts going forward might be focused. Similarly, reports that aggregated SDQ and PAT data by house or for the program as a whole provided empirical outcome data for program evaluation purposes and advocacy with public and private stakeholders. Collecting and reporting this data has empowered Dunlea Centre to increase program effectiveness through both data-informed decision making and ongoing program evaluation.

Presenters:



Jonathan.Huefner@boystown.org

Dr. Huefner a Research Scientist at the Boys Town Child and Family Translational Research Center, and a consultant statistician at the Dunlea Centre in Engadine, NSW. His research for the last 19 years has focused on residential care. He has a Ph.D. in Organizational Social Psychology from Brigham Young University and 35 years of experience conducting research and university lecturing. Dr. Huefner has published or presented over 110 professional and scientific papers.



frankainsworth@hotmail.com

Dr. Ainsworth is Senior Principal Research Fellow at James Cook University, Townsville, Queensland. Frank qualified as a social worker at the London School of Economics. For the last 10 years or more he has been a Guardian ad Litem in the NSW justice system. For the last 6 years Frank has been a consultant to the Executive Director of the Dunlea Centre (the original Australian Boys Town). He was influential in the Dunlea decision to implement the Teaching Family Model as the practice framework at the Centre.



mastro23@bigpond.com

Mr. Paul Mastronardi is the Executive Director of Dunlea Centre since 2012. Prior to this he worked for the Catholic Education Commission in the Welfare Directorate. Paul has had many years in education and counselling being involved in various leadership roles. Paul was trained as a teacher and has a keen interest in marginalised youth. He gained full registration as an educational psychologist and is currently completing his MBA in leadership and management and is working towards submitting a PhD research proposal centred on residential care.