

Steps towards sustainable student support: Stressors among international high school students living in a boarding house

ORIGINAL PAPER

High school is a stressful time for any adolescent. But what about teenagers who recently moved across the world to live in a boarding house and start at a competitive international school? This study aimed to discover what stressors boarding students at an international school experience through a literature research and 15 semi-structured interviews with current students and recent graduates. The findings indicate that the boarders experience a wide variety of boarding-, peer-, and school-related stressors. Interventions are suggested to address the mentioned stressors and to help the school design effective programs to promote student wellbeing.

Keywords: adolescence, stressors, boarding school students.

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INTRODUCTION

Adolescence is a critical time in child development. It is a time where one starts to make one's choices independently (Reyna, Chapman, Dougherty, & Confrey, 2012). Bandura's (1977) observational learning theory explains that people imitate behaviours of others, if they have a good reason to do so, such as fitting in. During adolescence, these social role models tend to be one's peers, especially one's friends (McWhirter, McWhirter, McWhirter, & McWhirter, 2013). Thus, living with one's peers rather than one's parents is likely to have large impact on adolescent development.

Attending a boarding school in a foreign country during one's high school years will be a life-defining experience. It can allow students to grow, but it is not an environment free of challenges. Mead's (1928) sociocultural theory of adolescence that one's environment determines the type of stressors adolescents experience more than the genetic processes that take place during puberty. Mead's theory illustrates that 'typical' stressors in adolescence can take on a new meaning in a boarding school. By illustration, falling in love, developing intimate friendships, and exploring one's identity are common during adolescence (Bauminger, Finzi-Dottan, Chason, & Har-Even, 2008; Kerpelman et al., 2012). The intensity of these experiences is likely to be amplified when living with one's peers. The same increased intensity may be true for other adolescent experiences, such as bullying, depression, or loneliness (Newman, Holden, & Delville, 2005; Vanhalst et al., 2012). Various mental disorders are prevalent during adolescence, such as anxiety and mood disorders, eating disorders and adjustment disorder (Mann et al., 2011; Swanson, Crow, Le Grange, Swendsen, & Merikangas, 2011; Pelkonen, Marttunen, Henriksson, & Lönnqvist, 2007). These disorders can all be explained by the diathesis-stress model, which states that a particular genetic predisposition may only result in the disorder if one is exposed to environmental stressors (Wilmschurst, 2011). Living in a boarding house may increase the prevalence of disorders by affecting the intensity, amount or type of stressors.

A boarding house also adds context-specific variables. Leaving home as a high school student results in several potentially stressful changes (Wannebo & Wichstrøm, 2010). Wannebo and Wichstrøm found that these stressful changes lead to internalizing problems among girls. In a comparison of day and residential students, boarding students are at an increased risk for psychological problems (Niknami, Zamani-Alavijeh, Shafiee, & Seifi, 2011). High school students immigrating to foreign countries without their parents often experience culture shock and homesickness (Tartatovsky, 2007). A study with American college students about roommate living shows that both roommate conflict and close roommate friendships can cause significant stress (Dusselier, Dunn, Wang, Shelley, & Whalen, 2005). Acculturative stress, homesickness, and roommate living are likely to affect boarding students.

Most residential schools unfortunately do not recognize the importance of this and rely on student resiliency as well as empathy of their residential and teaching staff to help students cope with psychological stressors. However, one particular school in Europe decided to initiate a research project investigate their students' psychological and emotional needs so that these can be addressed through a school-based program. A meta-analysis found that such school programs effectively reduce stress and promote coping (Kraag, Zeegers, Kok, Hosman, & Abu-Saad, 2006). The particular school where this study takes place is not a regular international school. The school educates over 500 students from 85 nationalities, aged 2-19. It recently opened a boarding house, where 100 students who take the International Baccalaureate (IB), a two-year pre-university program, live. All students in the boarding house are provided with merit scholarships to finance their education. These students have left their homes to come to this school and had to pass a highly competitive selection process. This study aims to investigate what stressors

are related specifically to being a boarding student at this particular school. It is based on semi-structured interviews with three recent graduates and twelve current students, as well as literature research.

Findings about the stressors experienced by residential students at this particular school may be generalizable to those of boarders at other (international) boarding schools. This study encourages other schools to consider the stressors experienced by their students and design health interventions.

Academically, this study will fill a gap in current scientific literature. There are no published studies on psychological wellbeing of adolescents who had to go through rigorous selections before being able to go to an international boarding school. These adolescents differ from other teenagers in residential schools as they personally chose to attend boarding school and had to compete for a place, while typical boarding students are sent by their parents. The findings will offer insight in the stressors of boarders at this particular school and will extend the overall scientific knowledge of fields such as Health Psychology, Developmental Psychology, and Pedagogy.

METHODS

Pilot Needs Assessment

A needs assessment is a study of what is happening and what should be happening, with regards to a target population and situation (Gilmore & Campbell, 2005). It is important to be aware of a community's strengths and weaknesses, as this can help health educators design interventions that will maximize the community's unique resources (Bartholomew et al., 2011). This study will function as a pilot for a larger quantitative needs assessment.

Data Collection

A qualitative research methodology is opted for, as no prior research has been conducted on stressors in this specific context. Therefore, it is important to understand the mental health situation from the view of the boarders, as main stakeholders. Qualitative methods are ideal for exploring their needs from an unbiased perspective.

Explorative interviews were conducted with three recent graduates to investigate relevant topics. The pilot interviews raised awareness of stressors such as the competitive environment, misunderstandings with teachers, roommate issues, and cultural differences. These topics formed the starting point for a literature research, which provided guidelines for the development of the interview guidelines for individual, semi-structured interviews with twelve current students. Individual interviews were used so that the students would feel comfortable enough to freely share their thoughts, as psychological wellbeing can be a sensitive topic. To recruit participants, the headmaster to posted a recruitment message on the students' Facebook group. The first to respond were included in the study, resulting in convenience sampling. The final sample consisted of twelve participants: five

first years and seven second years, five boys and seven girls. Together, the boarders represented eleven nationalities: six from the Americas (Latin America, North America, and the Caribbean), four from Europe (both Western/Eastern), and two from the Middle East. The age of the participants ranged from 16-19.

The interviews were conducted in a room at the boarding house. Interviews were recorded. No one withdrew participation or refused to answer certain questions. Students were compensated with *stroopwafels*. Each interview lasted 20-30 minutes.

Ethical Considerations

To ensure student anonymity, all names were changed into gender-neutral ones and any other identifiers (gender; country) been altered on the transcripts. The full transcripts are not accessible to staff or students at the school, to further protect confidentiality. The school's anonymity is also protected. Prior to the interviews, informed consent was given (in the case of minors by the headmaster). This study is part of a research line approved by the Research Ethics Board of the Faculty of Psychology and Neuroscience, Maastricht University, nr. ECP -04-09-2012.

Data Analysis

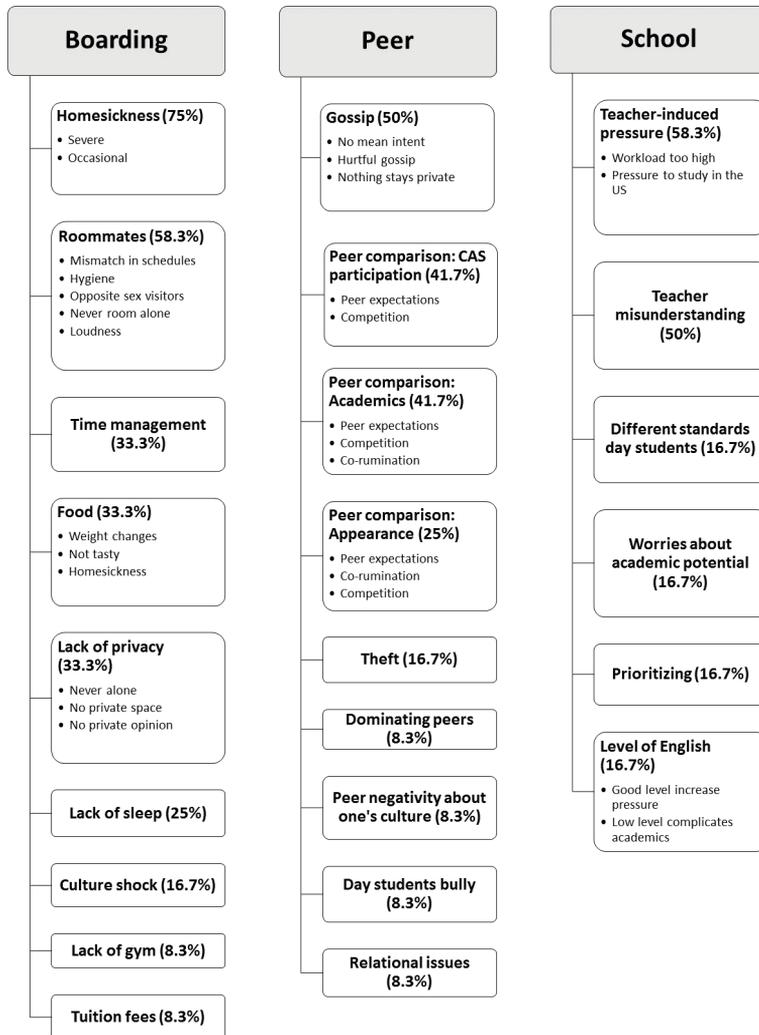
For data analysis, the grounded theory approach was been taken. This approach creates theory based on generated data and thereby reverses the conventional scientific approach, whereby data is collected only after a hypothesis has been formulated based on existing theory (Henwood & Pidgeon, 2003). According to this approach, the first step is to create inductive categories for coding. The key categories created were boarding-related stressors, peer-related stressors, and school-related stressors. Based on these categories, the interview data was coded and memos were created. Lastly, a written and pictorial analysis of the emerged themes was done.

RESULTS

Overview of Stressors

These interviews aimed to discover what stresses boarding students at the school. Table 1 on the next page represents a pictorial overview of these stressors. This model is simplistic, as it does not represent the interactions between the various stressors, but it indicates preliminarily what topics in what domains should be addressed for a health promotion intervention at the school.

Table 1. Overview of stressors. The percentages show what percentage of the participants brings a specific topic up as a stressor, regardless of whether it was mentioned as a personal stressor or one that they see other boarders experience.



(n = 12 participants)

Boarding-Related Stressors

The most-mentioned boarding-related stressor is homesickness. Many students have experienced homesickness. This seems inevitable, given that for the vast majority of boarding students, coming to this school is the first time they are separated from their family. Homesickness also includes missing one's culture or home country, such as food or the weather. Overall, homesickness does not appear to cause significant stress in all students. Some students say that there is

too much going on to be homesick. Others characterize it as occasionally missing home, for example around the holidays. However, a third group says that there are definitely boarders who struggle with severe homesickness. Riley actually claims homesickness as a major reason that one of his/her friends chose to leave the school. Simone explains that in the beginning it was very hard to be so far away from his/her family, but that in the second year (s)he somehow got used to this and that it was no longer such shock not to be able to go home often.

Seven participants say they have (had) issues because of living with roommates. These issues are very diverse and can be experienced as extremely intense. It can be the occasional argument, but also a yearlong struggle to live together. A major issue seems to be a mismatch in day-wake schedules. Different levels of cleanliness can also be a source of conflict among roommates or stress for an individual. Two participants say that it can also be problematic if there are frequently visitors of the opposite sex in the room. For instance, if one roommate has a serious relationship and spends a lot of time with his/her partner, others may feel uncomfortable in their own room as a result. On the other hand, many participants say how much they value their roommate relationships, as they have become even better friends by living together. It appears that roommates are mostly viewed as stressful when the students are only roommates and not friends. In a typical environment, students would be able to avoid those who they do not connect with and stay away from arguments. However, by sharing a room, conflict and the accompanying distress seem almost inevitable.

Four participants say that it can be quite stressful to manage time. It is a challenge to learn how to decide what to focus on. To illustrate, Riley's experience:

"I was just not sleeping at all and having a lot of social life and a lot of study time and just no sleep at all and that was pretty bad."

Food is seen as a major stressor by four participants. They say that a lot of boarders find the food in their canteen disgusting. More importantly, it seems that the food is linked to weight changes that upset the students. Some are gaining a lot of weight. Riley thinks these gains may be due to students have comfort food either to compensate for the canteen food or because they are stressed about something else. Another reason could be that the food is usually fried and very oily, despite it being steamed in the canteen. On the other hand, Chris feels unable to eat this food and says the food lacks nutritional value, which results in weight losses. Both types of weight changes are perceived as stressful.

When almost a hundred students live together in one building in shared rooms, feelings of a lack of privacy are not surprising. However, the experiences differ. Three students occasionally struggle that they are never alone. According to Spencer, the lack of privacy is experienced as omnipresent and quite intense:

"Your space is not private, your opinion is not private, everything is out for show and that also has an affect on people and on confidence levels."

Lack of sleep also has an impact on the boarders' lives. Prolonged sleep deprivation in adolescence leads to difficulties in cognitive functioning and impairs performance

(Orzeł-Gryglewska, 2010). Furthermore, sleep deprivation increase the subjective experience of stress; it mostly makes minor stressors seem very large (Minkel et al., 2012). Three participants speak about long-term sleeping difficulties. For some, such as Beau, it is upsetting to not get the amount of sleep (s)he wants. In Beau's case, sleep deprivation can be seen as a stressor in itself. For others, it seems that a lack of sleep reduces students' abilities to deal with the demands of the school and to intensify other stressors. For all, sleep deprivation appears to negatively impact their daily life.

Only two participants spoke about acculturative stress. Nevertheless, both claim that many students experience culture shock. This culture shock can be due to the mix of cultures or the Western host culture. Furthermore, the boarding house culture, such as the way second years interact, can also be a shock to some at first. The reason that culture shock is only highlighted by two participants could be due to the predominantly American and European nationalities of the participants, whose home culture may be less different from the host culture than students from Asia or Africa. On the other hand, it could also be that the boarders come prepared to meet and learn about other cultures, because they apply to come to the school. Therefore, they may not experience culture shock as much as other immigrant adolescents who did not personally chose to leave their home country without their parents.

Peer-Related Stressors

With a small community of teenagers living together, gossip appears inevitable. Therefore, it is not surprising that six participants say that gossip is commonplace in the boarding house. Nevertheless, the majority says that the gossip is not intended to hurt anyone. People talk about each other, as they live in a "bubble", and very little stays private. Only two participants say that hurtful gossip is spread at times.

Peer comparison appears to be a major stressor. According to Riley:

"Everyone who came to the boarding house was chosen by a group of people who wanted to choose the most competitive person. ... You're special in some way. And not only are you special, you are not okay with being one in the bunch."

This quote illustrates the school's competitive environment. The three main domains impacted by social comparison are: participation in social service and cultural activities, academics, and appearance. Within these domains, the comparisons are driven by the expectations the students have of each other, the (indirectly) competitive environment, and occasionally by co-rumination. Co-rumination is the *excessive* discussion of personal problems with a friend (Landphair & Preddy, 2012). In adolescent friendships, co-rumination increases the risk of internalizing symptoms (Rose, Carlson, & Waller, 2007). It seems that discussing problems triggers students to compare their experiences to their friends', which causes significant distress.

In comparing preparedness to participate in extracurricular creative or athletic activities and social services, students seem to impose a pressure on one another to fit their ideas of the perfect student. Since very different students are selected

for the scholarships, the students come with different expectations of what the other students will be like. In the boarding house, all are exposed to each other's expectations and that creates a pressure to live up to the social norms dictating the perfect student.

Academically, social comparison and observational learning set the standard for how much to study, what grades to get, and where to go for university. The students say that they feel that they should study, when they see others do so. Spencer says that if one student worries about not studying enough, he/she will talk about this concern to his/her friends and roommates, who will start to worry about their own studying. Alex notes that many boarders were among the top students at their old school, which makes people want, and expect, to succeed academically. This illustrates how co-rumination can amplify academic pressure, even if it was not there initially. Spencer ended up taking the SATs and writing many essays to go study in the United States, but that once (s)he got accepted, (s)he realized (s)he never wanted to study there in the first place and that the social expectancy to study in the US got to him/her.

In the section on boarding-related stressors, food's relation to weight changes has been discussed. Living together, boarders also observe these weight changes in each other. Riley says that it is sort of accepted to gain weight in the boarding house, because so many people do. At the same time, Alex points out that the peer competition also makes students strive to look the best, and perhaps gain the least weight. Spencer's answer exemplifies co-rumination in relation to appearance:

“There are many girls constantly talking about their weight. They are just doing it between them, but started to make each other anxious, as a ripple effect.”

Spencer's quote shows how the social comparison of each other's appearance, especially weight, can be severely stressful to some boarders.

Both Taylor and Michele refer to an incidence of theft in the boarding house this year. In itself, missing money can be stressful, especially for those boarders who already do not have much, because they are from low-income families and receive pocket money from the school. However, both seem to worry more about the impact the theft had on the boarding house. It created a lack of trust in the community, which makes it harder to live together.

School-Related Stressors

The main school-related stressors have to do with the teachers. Seven participants experience the teacher-induced pressure about the amount of studying and homework that need to get done as extremely intense. In the students' eyes, most teachers only care about the IB, specifically their own subjects, and nothing else seems to matter. Jordan says the teachers even scare the students by telling lies. For instance, teachers say all homework count for the final IB grade, which is not true at all. Taylor agrees and finds the teachers quite aggressive, especially towards boarding students. Taylor says teachers would say things like “you are going to fail your IB” to students, who can get extremely upset about this. Taylor even suggests that the

teacher-induced pressure is possibly why some students start to self-mutilate. Riley also finds teacher pressure too intense and claims this was another main reason why his/her friend left.

Another problem with the teachers appears to be that the students feel that teachers do not understand that they come to the school for international understanding and the focus on social service and extracurricular activities, rather than only academics. The students say the teachers do not understand it when at times life in the boarding house is so intense that a student may need a mental health day or struggles to meet a certain deadline once. Taylor notes that the teachers then just think the boarders are being irresponsible. Sam says most teachers have never even been to the boarding house and that therefore they cannot imagine what the boarders are going through. Simone says that the teachers hold the fact that the boarders are on scholarship over their head.

The expectations teachers have of the boarders are influenced by the presence of day students. Two students feel that this increased academic pressure for boarders. The teachers expect the students to only study and work for school once school is out, as the day students do so. The teachers do not seem to understand that it is harder to focus on academics after school due to all the other activities in the boarding house.

Students also have individual worries about achieving their full academic potential, which can increase the stress they put on themselves. Alex observes that quite some boarders study all the time and that it is very frustrating for them to not get the grades they want. In Beau's words,

“I stressed about school so much. ... People would say that it would be fine, but inside that just wasn't the case. It was internal hell.”

Beau's quote illustrates the extreme pressure (s)he was putting on him/herself to succeed academically. Beau uses 'internal hell', as (s)he expresses that it pained to be this stressed, which exemplifies the intensive experiences of academic pressure.

For Spencer and Simone it was a struggle to decide what to prioritize: social life or academics. Partially this has to do with time management, but it also comes down to one's goals. Simone says that one can either want amazing grades and not be social or have relatively good grades and be a part of the boarding community. Spencer found it hard to justify sacrificing academics for social things in the beginning, as (s)he constantly had to justify to others why (s)he would not study all night, but only one hour and spend the rest of the evening socializing.

DISCUSSION

Limitations

Firstly, there are limitations due to the sample. The sample size of twelve is rather large for a qualitative study and comprises more than 10% of the total population of boarders at the school. However, the small number of Middle Eastern students, and lack of African and Asian students, reduces the sample's representativeness.

This underrepresentation of certain cultural groups underlines that the sample is of a non-random nature, which limits its ecological validity and suggests a possible response bias. It may be that the sensitive nature of this topic made it difficult for some boarders to come forward and discuss this face-to-face with a researcher. Furthermore, some participants mentioned that they had a specific reason why they wanted to do the interview, such as personally having struggled with the current counsellor services at the school. Such motives could further reduce the sample representativeness. The nature of this sample should therefore be kept in mind while interpreting the results.

Secondly, the short amount of time taken for the interviews is a limitation. To be able to delve into certain topics into more depth, more than 30 minutes would have been required. However, longer interviews were not possible, because of the limited time in which this study was conducted.

Finally, a limitation is that the collected data can be interpreted in multiple ways, which is a disadvantage of the grounded theory approach. To increase objectivity, the data has been interpreted in light of available literature and the memos explaining how each quote has been interpreted can be made available upon request.

Important Findings

Despite these limitations, this study had several important findings. Firstly, it becomes clear that students struggle with boarding-related issues such as those linked to sharing rooms, time management, and a lack of privacy. Secondly, the major influence that the boarders have on each other through behavioural modelling is revealed. Thirdly, a mismatch of expectations between teachers and boarders came to light.

Suggested Interventions

These findings lead to several suggested interventions to promote student wellbeing. One way would be to develop a class curriculum for students in the boarding division, which addresses the typical stressors the boarders face and offers advice on how to effectively cope with these stressors. Such curriculum in the boarding compartment could teach residential students how to deal with struggles in roommate living, time management, lack of privacy, as well as how to maintain healthy eating patterns in the college. More generally, the course could address stress management skills. Such school-based stress management courses aiming at universal prevention that address students have been found effective with adolescents (Hampel, Meier, & Kummel, 2008; Kraag et al., 2006). If this course manages to result in one student coping more effectively, their positive effects are likely to be amplified through the effects of behavioural modelling in the boarding house.

Another intervention can specifically address the problems related to food and weight changes. The boarding house could attempt to supply healthier canteen food. A school ensuring that students have access to healthy food and reducing their opportunities to buy unhealthy food has been shown to positively influence students' eating patterns in schools (Cacavas et al., 2011; Traill et al., 2010). Moreover, a meta-analysis of community-based interventions to promote healthy eating

found that multifaceted interventions delivering their message through media (e.g. Internet, videos) are especially successful (Barton & Whitehead, 2008). The impact of modelling can multiply the effect of such healthy eating intervention, because if one student starts to become concerned with healthy eating, it is expected that others will follow.

Specific interventions should be used to address the problems between students and teachers. Improvements in teacher-student relations can significantly increase student compliance with rules, enhance their wellbeing, and improve their academic achievements (Murray & Pianta, 2007; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Hughes, Luo, Kwok, & Loyd, 2008).

To summarize, it is highly recommended that a trained psychologist is hired to help students deal with individual stressors and to include the above stated interventions in the curriculum.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, these boarding students face many additional stressors as a result of the environment they are living in, which can negatively impact their wellbeing. This confirms findings of previous studies conducted on high school boarding students (Wannebo & Wichstrøm, 2010; Niknami et al., 2011; Tartatovsky, 2007). Under boarding-related stressors, homesickness and problems due to sharing rooms are perceived as the most problematic. Additional boarding-related issues include, but are not limited to, the food and time management. Concerning peer-related stressors, the expectations the students have of each other, the competitive environment created, and their perceived inability to help each other seem to be perceived as the most stressful. Co-rumination, though intended as social support, can actually stress and anxiety (Rose et al., 2007). With respect to school-related stressors, the relations between boarding students and teachers are the most problematic, due to differing expectations. Health interventions such as a class curriculum and individual counselling are proposed to prevent the negative impact stress could have on boarders. In conclusion, this study has provided an overview of stressors of the boarders and suggestions on how to improve student wellbeing.

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