Perceptions of Teachers as Attachment Figures at a Boarding School Running Head: Residential Schooling & Attachment

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Abstract

This study looks at the relationships between students at a boarding school and their dormitory parents, those individuals who are teachers who live in the dormitory and take on a parent-like role; they are responsible for the emotional, mental, physical, and social wellbeing of the students who reside in dormitories. We asked if students perceived this bond as an attachment relationship. Through the use of a questionnaire, 33 former students were asked about their relationship with one or more dormitory parents at a boarding school located in Southern California. While 77% of participants said they saw one or more dormitory parents as an attachment figure, boarding students tended to view their dormitory parents as attachment figures more than day students. Overall, 81% of participants reported that they saw this boarding school as a safe-haven. In addition, all students reported feeling comfortable speaking to one or more dormitory parents whenever they needed guidance or support, and they felt that they could confide in dormitory parents more than their parents.

Keywords: teachers, attachment theory, residential living, dormitory parents, international students

1. Introduction

The parent-child relationship has long been a dominant target of child and human development research. In more recent years, however, research has shifted towards looking at the adult-child relationship (Verschueren & Koomen, 2012). This change in perspective allows us to replace the parental role with teachers present in the lives of children, not just any adult. While we may not typically think of a teacher as a parental figure in a child's life, special situations are worth examining. Specifically, it is worth studying those teachers who live at a boarding school with their students and act not only as classroom teachers, but as dormitory parents as well.

The role of many dormitory parents, here defined as those individuals who are teachers and live in the dormitory who take on a parent-like role, are responsible for the emotional, mental, physical, and social wellbeing of the students who reside in dormitories. This individual often attends to dormitory logistics, such as events, community building, dormitory cleanliness, and morning and nightly routines for all students who reside there. Finally, dormitory parents are also responsible for establishing and maintaining positive relationships with the students who live in their dorms, while also serving as a means of support for them. Often, no figure other than the child do actual parents or legal guardians have ever assumed such an important role in the child's life. This study seeks to understand if it is possible for an adolescent to have an attachment to a teacher at a boarding school that is similar to that of their parents. The research question for this paper is as follows: Can a teacher-child relationship at a boarding school be acknowledged as an attachment relationship?

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2. Theoretical Perspective

The origins of attachment theory go back to the work of John Bowlby, who argued that social support found in the parent-child relationship, including both caregiving and attachment (Bowlby, 1982), was essential for the development of children (Fleming, 2008). According to Bowlby, attachment is a bond with a person who provides security and is typically thought of in the form of a mother-child relationship (Bowlby, 1958). Bowlby developed his theory around two attachments: secure and insecure. In a secure attachment, children feel safe and are content with exploring the world around them when their parental figure is near (Ainsworth & Bell, 1970; Bowlby, 1980). This is a secure, positive, and healthy relationship. Insecure attachment involves inconsistencies in reactions and often has the child rejecting the parental figure (Fleming, 2008). Insecure attachment is further divided into three other categories: anxious attached, avoidant attached, and disorganized attached. These consist of different reactions from children, such as inconsistency, insensitivity, anxiety, and a child being frightened (Fleming, 2008).

Bowlby's attachment theory mostly pertained to young children and their relationship with their parents, most often the mother figure, although Bowlby argued that attachment should be examined at all ages (Bowlby, 1988). Work by more recent researchers has taken Bowlby's attachment theory and extended it to attachment between young children and their teachers. For example, Verschueren, Douman, and Buyse (2012) viewed attachment theory through their examination of the effects of early attachment on children's academic adjustment to schooling. They found that children who had more secure attachment to their mothers were more likely to establish a warm relationship with their first-grade teachers. Sabol and Pianta (2012) also investigated this relationship between children and teachers, determining that this relationship is strengthened depending on the attachment level between mother and child.
Research shows that there is a clear link between attachment theory among mothers and children and the relationship of children and their teachers. Applying Bowlby's original attachment theory allows one to develop these and other relationships further. We use the work on attachment theory of Bowlby to ground our research and drive our theoretical framework for this study.

3. Literature Review

There is currently no research on how attachment theory plays a role among teachers and students in a boarding school setting and whether the teacher-student relationship can, in fact, be seen as an attachment. In our literature, we begin our review of the literature on attachment theory, as related to teacher-student relationships. We then examine teacher-student relationships more broadly before discussing out of class communication in teacher-student relationships. We close our literature review by linking our literature to what is known about boarding schools.

When searching the literature on attachment theory, current research is primarily being conducted on the teacher-student relationship and how it is related to attachment at the elementary level. While mothers provide what is often described as a "safe-haven" for their children, a close and supportive relationship with their teachers allows children to extend their attachment relationship to the teacher-student setting (Bretherton & Munholland, 1999; Verschueren & Koomen, 2012). For instance, Sabol and Pianta (2012) examined attachment security links between mothers and children's relationships and their teachers at an early age. They found that this link continues into elementary school: the quality of the attachment between the mother and child was consistent with that of the elementary teacher and the student. O'Connor, Collins, and Supplee (2012) found similar results when looking at children's relationships with their teachers from first through fifth grade. They found that the level of attachment that a child had with their mother at 36-months indirectly affected students' behaviors in fifth grade, depending on the quality of their relationship with the teacher.

Moving beyond the interactions of teachers with students and parents, and mothers more specifically, we next examine teacher-student relationships. These relationships have been studied for the most part in the context of classrooms as social systems (Hughes, 2012). The teacher-student relationship provides a stress regulation for children, which can be an enhancement for students' engagement with tasks and peers in the classroom (Bretherton & Munholland, 1999; Verschueren & Koomen, 2012). Strong relationship between teachers and students also help develop a positive learning environment and class climate (Blair, 2010), which can lead to a more structured classroom (Patrick, Kaplan, & Ryan, 2011). The teacher-student relationship, as separate from attachment theory, has been a topic of study for some time. This has allowed for researchers to look at teacher-student relationships beyond elementary school. In her work with secondary school students, Wallace (1996) found that teachers' approach to their content was less important to students than the interactions and relationships teachers had with their students.

Additionally, when students lacked the attention they needed from their teachers, they faced difficulty in the classroom both socially and academically (Wallace, 1996).

Others have documented that students enjoy teachers who take time to talk, listen, and relate to them, going beyond what is normally expected in the classroom (Woods, 1990; Cooper, 1993; Nieto, 1994). Students' communication with teachers outside of class can also be important to their learning (Dobransky & Frymier, 2004). Such out of class communication can strengthen the teacher-student relationship and helps other teacher-student relationships to form and interpersonal communication occurs (Dobransky & Frymier, 2004; Miller & Steinberg, 1975). Students and teachers can engage in conversations about advising, class content student organizations, and non-class related issues (Nadler & Nadler, 2001). Out of class communication easily encompasses all the conversations a teacher at a boarding school might engage in with their students. Furthermore, because the biggest problem facing students at a boarding school is homesickness, developing a warm and supportive relationship similar to the one they have at home with their parents helps students adjust and succeed (Atli, 2018). Boarding school teachers who are also dormitory parents spend long hours with their students, and, therefore, they potentially allow for their relationship to transform from a teacher-student relationship into a parent-child relationship.

4. Method

4.1 School Context

Data was collected from former students of a boarding school located in Southern California. This school was selected for primarily two reasons: 1.) The teachers have strong relationships with their students and dormitory residents; and 2.) The researcher previously taught at this school and had access to interviewing the former students included in this study. This boarding school serves no more than 100 students each year, 88% who are residential students and 12% who are day students. While day students do not live at the boarding school, it is typical for them to have breakfast, lunch, and dinner on campus and to participate in all weekend events with the rest of the school. The average class size is nine students, with a 4:1 student-teacher ratio. 40% of the student population is international, primarily from China. Of the 60% of students from the United States, 83% are Caucasian and 17% are defined as Black and Hispanic. 25% of the students attending this boarding school receive some form of financial aid to help pay for tuition and fees. The yearly tuition for domestic boarding students is $50,500, $57,000 for international students, and $23,500 for day students (non-boarders). The boarding school in this study is a college preparatory high school with an emphasis on the visual and performing arts, as well as a strong environmental and sustainability education program. All students are required to take four years of English, at least one art elective each year, at least one team sport each year, and all are highly encouraged to participate in extra-curricular activities such as the music program or performing in the fall drama or spring musical.

Faculty at this school teach a full course load each year, which is five classes, and they are also responsible for advising four to six students, leading student clubs, coaching two seasons of a sport or fitness, attending all school events, and completing other small responsibilities throughout the year. All teachers are also involved in the residential life program, which means they serve as dormitory parents for one to two days during the week and for one weekend a month. As dormitory parents, they must hold check-ins at meals, clean the dorms with the students, run study hall, chaperone students on school trips, complete evening check-in to ensure all students are accounted for, host events at their homes, provide minor medical help as needed, and support the students, generally, emotionally, mentally, and physically. In the event of an emergency, all dormitory parents are to be "on call" and are to help the students and the administrators with whatever is necessary.

While dormitory parents reside in both the female and male dorms, the set-up for each is different. In the female dorm, the space for dormitory parents is limited and does not allow for residential staff who have families to live there. Therefore, the dormitory parents for the female dorm are two single females, each living in one of the two small one-bedroom apartments in the dorm. In the male dorm, however, the apartments provide for the dorm parents are two-bedroom and provide space for families. Therefore, the dormitory parents in the male dorm live with their significant other, as well as their children.

4.2 Student Participants

Thirty-three students (*n*=33) participated in this research project, all of whom were former residential and day students of this boarding school within the past one to five years. Only former students were used for this study as they were all 18 years of age or older.

Table 1 provides an overview of the participants of this study, broken down by residential and day students. Of the 33 students who participated, 19 were male and 14 were female. Nine of the 16 males were international students and four out of the 14 females were international students. The majority of the residential students who were not international students were white. There were a total of 13 international students from the following countries: China (2), South Korea (1), Thailand (1), Italy (1), Taiwan (1), Spain (1), Cameroon (1), Russia (1), Mexico (1), India (1), Ukraine (1), and Panama (1). The majority of the residential students who were not international students were white. 28 out of the 33 participants were residential students, while the remaining five were day students. We find it important to note that all international students were also residential students; however, not all residential students were international students.

Table 1. Demographics of Residential and Day Student Participants

	Residential (n=28)	Day (n=5)
Gender		
Female	11/28 (39%)	3/5 (60%)
International Student		
Yes	13/28 (46%)	0/5 (0%)
Years at Boarding School		
1 year	1/28 (4%)	1/5 (20%)
2 years	3/28 (11%)	1/5 (20%)
3 years	9/28 (32%)	0/5 (0%)
4 years	15/28 (54%)	3/5 (60%)
First Time Away from Parents		
Yes	15/28 (54%)	0/5 (0%)*

Note: *The day students are not away from home because they are non-residential

4.3 Questionnaire Development

In order to develop a questionnaire that accurately reflected an attachment relationship, we created one based on definitions of attachment theory from our literature. First, questions one through five were created as descriptive questions in order to collect information on student demographics, such as their sex, if they were an international or domestic student, their race, and whether they were a residential or day student. The next three questions gathered information about their experiences at the boarding school, such as how long the student had been at this boarding school and whether this was the first time the student had been away from their biological parent(s) or legal guardian(s). These questions were related to our previous discussion of when students develop close relationships with their teachers, they were able to extend the attachment relationship to the teacher-student setting (Bretherton & Munholland, 1999; Verschueren & Koomen, 2012). We decided to ask questions about the length of time these students were at this boarding school and the relationship they had with the parents prior to coming to this boarding school as it may have affected the level of attachment they developed with their teachers.

Questions nine through eleven asked students about whether or not they felt their boarding school was a safe haven. As previously discussed, being in a safe haven can add to the level of attachment a child develops with their parent (Bowlby, 1979). Therefore, we felt it was necessary to ask all students, both residential and day, if they felt being at this boarding school provided an environment that felt like a safe haven. The answers to these questions were based on a Likert scale, starting at "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree." Finally, questions 12 through 15 directly asked students to evaluate whether or not they felt their dormitory parents served as attachment figures. These questions asked about whether or not students, both residential and day, felt their relationship(s) with their dormitory parents could be considered an attachment relationship or not.

We also asked whether or not all students felt they could confide in their dormitory parents as much as their biological parents, as well as a question on if they felt they could confide in their dormitory parents more than their biological parents. The literature states that relationships with teachers outside of the classroom can strengthen the teacher-student relationship, allowing for personal conversations between teacher and students and provide space for the relationship to possibly grow into one of attachment (Dobransky & Frymier, 2004; Miller & Steinberg, 1975).

Furthermore, students who are away from their biological parents often become homesick and seek out the role of their biological parent in their dormitory parents, which again can possibly create an attachment relationship (Atli, 2018). The answers to these questions were also based on a Likert scale with the same options ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree." Question 15, the final question, asked students to give specific examples of times when they felt one or more of their dormitory parents served as an attachment figure to them. This provided a space for the students to describe in their own words how they felt about their relationships with their dormitory parents.

4.4 Procedures

Data was collected for this study through a Qualtrics questionnaire that contained 15 questions. All students were recruited through emails with the help of the Dean of Students from this boarding school. Before filling out the questionnaire, participants were given the following brief descriptions of attachment theory: *Attachment theory states that a strong emotional and physical attachment to at least one primary caregiver is critical to personal development*; and safe haven: *an environment where they feel safe and secure and comfortable with their dormitory parents.*

Participants were then asked questions, such as how many years they attended the boarding school, if they were residential or day students, if this was their first time living away from their parents, and if they felt like this boarding school was a safe-haven for them. In addition, questions were asked to both residential and non-residential students if they felt the dormitory parents served as an attachment figure according to the definition provided above and if they felt they could confide in the dormitory parents as much or more than their parents. The final question asked students to give some examples of times they felt the dormitory parents served as an attachment figure.

The purpose of these questions was to get a sense of whether there was evidence for the existence of attachment between teachers/dormitory parents and students. While participants may not have fully understood attachment theory, these questions served as a way for them to reflect on their relationships with their dormitory parents. The purpose of asking these questions to both residential and day students was to see if the groups of students differed in their views of dormitory parents as attachment figures or not. Since the day students had their parents to go home to every night, it could be inferred that they may not have had as close of a relationship with the dormitory parents as the residential students did. At the same time, most of the day students were very present, eating most of their meals on campus and participating in many of the activities with residential students, allowing them the possibility to form similar out of class relationships with most of the teachers like the residential students.

4.5 Data Analysis

Analysis occurred in two stages. The first round of analysis involved finding the frequencies of student responses to most questions. We were interested in the student responses to questions about attachment theory and whether the boarding school as a safe haven. For these questions, we collapsed the Likert scores due to the range of responses. Responses of "strongly agree" and "somewhat agree" were grouped together, and responses of "strongly disagree" and "somewhat disagree" were also grouped together. From here, we calculated the response frequencies to a) the attachment theory questions and b) the safe haven questions.

For our second layer of analysis, we conducted a qualitative analysis for the single, free-response question, to examine emergent themes emerged explaining participants' relationship(s) with their dormitory parents and whether or not these relationships could be considered an attachment. Responses from this question were coded in NVivo using open-coding (Saldaña, 2009). While coding, we looked for evidence in students' quotes that reflected the language used in the literature on attachment theory, highlighting words such as "positive," "healthy," "talk to," "listen to," and "supportive." After coding for all these written responses, the following three themes emerged from student responses: 1) Providing a safe space to speak judgment free, 2) Seeking help or advice, and 3) Comparing dormitory parents to their own parents.

These two types of analyses allowed us to understand in deeper context how students felt about their boarding school and their relationships with their teachers and allowed us to make comparisons between residential and day students, as well as between international and non-international students.

5. Findings

A qualitative analysis of the responses to the survey questions strongly suggests that these participants felt that the boarding school provided a safe-haven for them and that their dormitory parents served as attachment figures. Support for these findings has been organized into three areas: 1) Boarding School Serving as a Safe-Haven, 2) Dormitory Parents Serving as Attachment Figures, and 3) Providing a Safe Space to Seek Help from a Dormitory Parent. In the first two of these sections we focus on our quantitative survey findings, while in the last section we provide descriptive illustrations using our open-ended question. Within each of these findings, we also discuss the differences and similarities found between international and non-international students.

5.1 Boarding School as a Safe Haven

Overall, 81% of participants who were residential (*n*=28) students strongly to somewhat agreed that they saw their boarding school as a safe-haven. In contrast, 57.14% participants who were day students strongly to somewhat agreed that they saw their boarding school as a safe-haven, while 42.86% strongly to somewhat disagreed that their boarding school was a safe-haven. Participants who were residential students for 3-4 years were more likely to find this boarding school a safe-haven than those who were residential students for 1-2 years. From these results, we can infer that residential students over non-residential students were more likely to feel that this boarding school was a safe-haven for them. In addition, the same can be said for those residential students who attended this boarding school for a longer period of time.

Looking specifically at the international population, 100% of the international students (*n*=13) said they strongly to somewhat agree that they saw this boarding school as a safe-haven. As previously mentioned, all international students are residential students at this boarding school. Additionally, all but one of the international students who participated in this survey lived at this boarding school for at least three years. Therefore, because the majority of the international students lived at this boarding school between three and four years and all were residential students, it makes sense that they all associated this boarding school as a safe haven.

5.2 Dormitory Parents as Attachment Figures

Prior to coming to this boarding school, 86.18% of participants, both residential and day students, saw their parents as their primary caregiver. Overall, 76.67% of students identified that one or more of their dormitory parents served as an attachment figure for them, while 20% disagreed with this, and 3% neither agreed nor disagreed. More specifically, 85% of residential students strongly to somewhat agreed that they saw one or more dormitory parents as an attachment figure. In addition, 60% strongly to somewhat agreed that they felt they could confide in one or more dormitory parents more than their actual parents. Of the participants who were day students, 66.67% strongly to somewhat agreed that one or more of the dormitory parents served as an attachment figure to them, even though these participants did not actually live in the dorms.

We then looked directly at our international students to examine how this population compared to non-international students. Again, all international students were also residential students, although not all residential students were international students. Of the international students who were males (*n*=9), 100% of them strongly to somewhat agreed that they saw one or more of their dormitory parents as attachment figures. Of the four international students who were females, three strongly to somewhat agree, and one somewhat disagreed with seeing one or more of their dormitory parents as attachment figures.

Regardless of status as a residential or day student and international or non-international student, most participants felt that one or more of the dormitory parents served as an attachment figure for them during their time at this boarding school. Those who were residential students *and* international students more frequently identified that one or more dormitory parents served as an attachment figure. Additionally, over half of these students felt that they could confide in one or more dormitory parents more than they could confide in their parents. This strengthens the claim that dormitory parents were seen as attachment figures, providing emotional support for students through their teacher-student relationships.

5.3 Providing a Safe Space to Seek Help from a Dormitory Parent

We conclude our results with illustrations of specific examples students provided of dormitory parents serving as an attachment figure for them. Both residential (international and non-international) and day students gave numerous examples with recurring themes. We break these findings into three areas: 1) Providing a safe space to speak judgment free, 2) Seeking help or advice, and 3) Comparing dormitory parents to their own parents.

5.3.1 Providing a safe space to speak judgment free.

Most participants spoke of their dormitory parent(s) providing a safe space for them to talk judgment free. Participants saw this as a form of support that allowed them to be listened to whenever they needed. Two participants stated:

> I definitely feel that I had people to talk to when I was having a difficult time, and I could go to them for support (Participant 10, Residential/Non-International Student).

> I always felt as though I had someone who was willing to support me and listen to me at any time I needed (Participant 15, International Residential Student).

In addition, students' level of comfort in speaking to their dormitory parents led to future conversations, where the participants felt at ease and that they would be received with compassion. Two students shared the following:

> I always felt very comfortable talking to the dorm parents because they always gave judgment free responses, making it easier to talk to them in the future. I knew they would always respond to any of my issues in a compassionate way (Participant 7, Day, Non-International Student).

> There was a particular dorm parent that I could talk to about relationship issues or issues that I was feeling particularly nervous about. They were very easy to talk to and would always respond to issues in a compassionate way (Participant 3, International Residential Student).

Being able to speak easily with dormitory parents was important to students and provided students with an opportunity to develop relationships and attachments with these teachers. These students felt a safe haven with their dormitory parents through their conversations.

5.3.2 Seeking help or advice. Participants also saw their dormitory parents as people they could go to for guidance and individuals who they trusted if they fell short of expectations both academically and socially. They would not be met with disappointment or immediate punishment, as expressed by the following two participants:

> When I was in trouble, my dorm parent provided comfort and support instead of getting mad at me (Participant 5, International Residential Student).

> I also had another teacher…whom I confided in many times throughout the four years. I would say over the four years he really helped me build my confidence and sense of self. (Participant 30, Residential/Non-International Student).

Dormitory parents were seen as someone these former students could confide in when they were stressed about social and academic issues, as one of these students shared, *I was concerned about getting in trouble at one point, but I knew I could confide in a dorm parent about my situation* (Participant 17, International Residential Student). Another student mentioned:

> I remember when I was having boy trouble, I'd turn to my dorm parent for advice. They didn't lecture me or make me feel like I was doing something wrong. They acted as my friend and was always comforting to see/talk with them on a daily basis (Participant 11, Residential/Non-International Student).

Participants also appreciated the fact that dormitory parents were not only there to give advice, but they also shared their own personal experiences, as this student explained: *I felt comfortable asking for advice on a lot of issues because my teachers were open and candid about stuff they were going through too. It felt like a really two-sided relationship* (Participant 22, Residential/Non-International Student). Having a trusted advisor in this capacity, again, provide the students with opportunities to develop deeper relationships than one would simply see in a classroom. These dormitory parents were taking time to provide comfort, support, direction, and advice.

5.3.3 Comparing dormitory parents to their own parents.

In almost every response, participants compared a relationship with one or more dormitory parents to that of their own parents. They explained their comfort level talking to certain dormitory parents about certain issues, which exceeded their comfort talking to their own parents in some instances. Students noted that, at times, their dormitory parents knew more about their lives than their actual parents did. As these students explained:

> I saw [this teacher/dorm parent] for close to every day for almost four years. During this time, she consistently asked me how I was and checked in on me. She knew and understood the problems I was facing during these four years. For most of this time, she had a better idea of how I really was on a deeper level than my father did. I definitely relied on her as a source of emotional and mental support for those four years (Participant 30, Residential/Non-International Student).

> I looked to both of [these teachers] as role models during these four years as most kids look to their parents for guidance and support (Participant 29, International Residential Student).

Participants also gave examples of how they felt they could seek out certain dormitory parents and be more vulnerable around them than their actual parents, as two students stated:

After any bad day, I had three teachers that I could go to their homes, cry to them, and eat dinner with them and laugh it off. They were my parents & my best friends (Participant 23, International Residential Student).

> I often felt safer talking to my dorm parents or teachers about topics I was uncomfortable talking to my parents about. They would give me advice, help plan for a realistic future that I wanted, and encouraged me to pursue my interests over the interests of my family (Participant 24, Residential/Non-International Student)

We can see that almost all participants, whether they were residential or day, international or non-international students, had strong feelings towards their dormitory parents resembling friendships, relationships with family members, and as attachment figures. The words they used to describe these relationships are powerful and reflect the language that is often used when one describes how they feel about their own parental figures or close friends. Above all, we can say that regardless of country, race, gender, time spent at this boarding school, and residential versus day students, all students found a relationship with a similar attachment to their dormitory parents.

6. Discussion

This study examined student-teacher relationships at a boarding school and questioned if those students could see their teachers as attachment figures. Overall, we found that most students did see their teachers as attachment figures, but to varying degrees. If the participant was a residential student, which included both international and non-international students, they were more likely to feel that this boarding school as a safe-haven and their teachers/dormitory parents as attachment figures. Since these residential students spent all their time on campus with their teachers and dormitory parents, it makes sense that they felt more attached to them as compared to the day students, who typically went home at 4:00 p.m. each day and remained home during most weekends. Day students did not have the same opportunities to develop and experienced more intimate relationships with their teachers/dormitory parents as residential students, such as receiving homework help after hours, cooking at a dormitory parents' home, watching a movie with them, or asking them for emotional or physical help.

In addition, the findings also suggest that residential students who were at the boarding school for three to four years were more likely to feel that the boarding school was a safe-haven and that their teachers/dormitory parents served as attachment figures, versus residential students who attended the boarding school for only one to two years. Residential students who were part of this boarding school for three to four years had more time to bond with their teachers/dormitory parents and to develop a relationship with attachment characteristics. These students had the opportunity to get to know their teachers/dormitory parents for longer periods of time and at a deeper level both inside and outside of the classroom, as opposed to those who were day students for a similar period of time. These findings can be reinforced by the work of Dobransky and Frymier (2004), who studied student-teacher relationships outside of the classroom and found that the more communication that exists outside of the classroom, the more these relationships can positively support and strengthen the student-teacher relationship. This study also sheds light onto the experiences of international students in a US boarding school. The fact that the male international students were more likely to see one or more of their dormitory parents as an attachment figure than the female international students raises questions.

One possible explanation is that the dormitory parents in the girl's dorm were not families themselves, but two single females. The dormitory parents in the boy's dorm were each part of a family, which included their own children. Further analysis of our data shows findings that contained common themes among participants that provide a richer look at how they viewed their teachers/dormitory parents. First, participants felt that their relationships with their teachers/dormitory parents were deep enough that they could speak to them without judgment and in a safe space. Students saw this as a form of both very valued and needed support while at this boarding school. While most studies do not look specifically at attachment figures as "judgment free safe zones," attachment figures do provide a safe and secure place that allows the participant to explore their world, very similar to the one described by these students (Fleming, 2008). This overlaps with the next theme, which describes how students felt they could seek out help or advice from their teachers/dormitory parents. Again, in a secure attachment relationship, the child feels safe and secure in their environment and relationship with their attachment figure (Bowlby 1980; Fleming, 2008), which we can link to students feeling safe and secure enough with their teachers/dormitory parents to seek out their help and guidance. In addition, the work of Miller and Steinberg (1975) tells us that when students are given the opportunity to speak to their teachers outside of the classroom, interpersonal communication and relationships occur.

Almost every student spoke about their relationship with their parents and compared it to the relationship they had with their teachers/dormitory parents. Participants described how they felt they could confide in their teachers/dormitory parents with some issues more than their own parents, and they explained that there was a level of comfort and trust there with their teachers/dormitory parents that did not exist with their actual parents. Again, this implies that the students felt safe and secure enough in their relationships with their teachers/dormitory parents that they could go to them and speak to them about things they were not comfortable discussing with their parents. As Nadler and Nadler (2001) tell us, this out-of-class communication is essential for students to develop relationships with their teachers, one that leads to advising in all forms from the teachers to the students. However, we must also consider the fact that many students felt more comfortable speaking to their teachers/dormitory parents because they felt that these relationships were temporary, whereas their parents were permanent figures. In addition, students were probably cautious with speaking to their parents, because they were afraid they may get into trouble and disappoint their parents, while their teachers/dormitory parents seemed like less of a threat in this way.

Finally, our results also add to the current literature on attachment theory by looking at the international student population at this boarding school. Overall, we can say that most of the international students who participated in this study found this boarding school to be a safe haven, one where they felt accepted, protected, and free from judgment. In addition, most of the international students strongly agreed with seeing their dormitory parents as attachment figures. We can attribute this to several factors, including the amount of time they spent at this boarding school, being away from their own parents and families, and the environment of the boarding school itself. Overall, these findings are essential to future international students who are looking to attend boarding schools in the United States.

6.1 Implications for Future Research and Limitations

This study is just a snapshot of the link that could exist between students and their dormitory parents. Future research should look at this study at a larger scale, with residential and day students from various boarding schools. Current students should also be included in the study, not only former students. In addition, the teachers/dormitory parents themselves should be recruited as participants for this study. This will provide richer data that allows for us to determine the degree to which students see dormitory parents as attachment figures. It is important to note that the students in the sample, although recent graduates, were giving their retrospective perspectives. Future research should examine current students in boarding school settings to gain a deeper understanding of their relationships with their dormitory parents.

7. Conclusion

If we look back at how Bowlby defines attachment theory, we see phrases like "provides security," "feeling safe," and "positive and healthy relationship." All three of these phrases resonate throughout the answers and direct quotes from the participants from this study pertaining to their relationship with their dormitory parents and contributes to the exploration of boarding school teacher-student relationships. While more research needs to be done on this topic, it can be concluded that a teacher-student relationship at a boarding school can be considered as an attachment relationship. Most research is focused on the teacher-student attachment relationship solely at the elementary level, with just a few looking at the secondary level, but not as an attachment.

There is the potential for a much deeper understanding of attachment theory by combining these two situations. The level of comfort, support, trust, and guidance that dormitory parents provide for their students affords a platform for the development of this rich relationship that can be recognized as an attachment relationship.

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