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A Response to, "The Boarding School in a Canadian Context," by Jean Barman

In her response to my paper, Jean Barman raises several interesting and intriguing points. She quite rightly reminds us, for instance, that the study of residential education would benefit by comparative analysis and, in this regard, her discussion of Canadian schools is especially illuminating, considering how little is generally known about them in the United States. I take it that her major concern is the place of boarding schools in the larger society, while my paper addresses the process by which students are socialized into certain roles. Obviously, the two topics are related and more work needs to be done in synthesizing the material that now exists about residential education. Since Barman suggests little substantive criticism of my thesis, I would like to carry the discussion forward by examining certain of her assertions and by briefly observing some of the variations that exist within the contemporary American boarding school movement.

As I understand it, Barman's central argument is that, "The rise of boarding education, whether in Britain, Canada or the United States, had a single basis." The purpose of residential schools was to insure the offspring of the rising bourgeoisie a special education that would protect them and distinguish them from the rest of the population. She also maintains that the schools that were founded in the era from 1880 to 1914, in the United States, mimicked the British Public Schools in terms of their educational terminology and dependence of Anglican theology. My sense is that she somewhat over simplifies a rather complex set of historical and social ingredients that went into shaping American residential education. For instance, the early academies such as the Round Hill School had, according to McLachlan, a rather important influence on the boarding schools of the 19th Century.¹ Not least among the influences that these early academies exercised was the establishment of the tradition that nature, in and of itself, could be invigorating and enlightening.

It is also fair to say, I think, that the Episcopalian influence on boarding education in the United States has been quite profound. One need only think of St. Paul's School in New Hampshire to see the significance of Episcopalian theology in the formation of American boarding schools. Nor is St. Paul's an isolated case; many of the schools listed by McLachlan as being among the most socially prestigious were founded by Episcopalians. Most of these schools were begun in the period from the American Civil War to 1900.² Even today, nearly 15 percent of all American boarding schools are officially affiliated with Episcopalian Church.³ Other Protestant denominations have few residential schools to which they are affiliated. It should be noted, however, that some of the schools that have no official religious affiliation today were originally influenced by Anglican theology. I still suspect, though, that lurking beneath the British rituals that some of the American schools imported were a number of characteristically American ideas about the process and purpose of education.

Barman's assertion that, "Parents who sent their off-spring to boarding school were inherently conservative," needs some revision in the American context. I suspect that the rising bourgeoisie may have been economically conservative, but politically rather liberal. The world view most prevalent among boarding school headmasters was one that called for the active participation by

their students in the resolution of social problems. Also, we must be careful not to identify residential education as, solely, an upper class phenomenon. In Cuba today, for example, residential education is used as a training ground for creating the new socialist man and woman. Conservatism and eliteness are not necessarily coterminous.

Barman also suggests that, "While boarding education had undergone significant change in the last half century, the rationale for its existence has not greatly changed." I would generally agree with this statement, but with qualifications. It should be recognized that there is (a) variation among boarding schools in terms of their social prestige and (b) there are a number of boarding schools in the United States, at least, that were founded to serve special populations such as those with learning disabilities, emotional problems, or a specific interest in sports; there are, for example, boarding schools whose curricula are based around developing world class skiers.

Even within those schools that are college preparatory (and this includes 90 percent of all American boarding schools), there is variation by region, religious affiliation, sex composition and total student enrollment.⁴ Within this group, curricula vary in terms of the academic requirements students must undergo to graduate. Moreover, many of the most exclusive schools maintain the largest scholarship programs, indicating that the student bodies of these schools may be more heterogeneous than has previously been supposed. In short, the socialization processes may be quite similar within all boarding schools, but the consequences from graduating from any particular school may be quite varied.

I am indebted to Barman for her suggestion that my thesis concerning the socialization processes at boarding schools had a wider application than just the United States. She also raises some extremely important issues concerning research in education. It is my hope that in the coming years more study of residential education will be undertaken and that many of the questions that she and others have raised can be more adequately answered.

Notes

¹ James S. McLachlan, *American Boarding Schools: A Historical Study* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1970), 71.

² Peter W. Cookson Jr. and Caroline Hodges Persell, "A Typology of American Boarding Schools Today" (Paper, American Educational Research Association Annual Meeting, Spring 1982), 9.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 6.