GRYFFINDOR? SLYTHERIN?
THE CRUCIAL ROLE THAT HOUSE SYSTEMS
PLAY IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS

Dr Todd Zadow
WHO AM I?

- BSc (psych hons), MTeach (research pathway)
- 10 years in the Catholic secondary system
  - Head of Year 7 & 9
  - Head of House
  - Pastoral Development Leader (upskilling staff in Pos Ed, restorative practice and behaviour management; discipline/engagement strategy development; writing wellbeing curriculum)
- St Margaret’s Berwick Grammar
  - Head of Science & Learning Analytics
  - Multi-campus secondary school – ELC, junior, boys 7-10 and girls 7-10
- PhD (Education) – 7 years
INTEREST IN THE ‘HOUSE SYSTEM’?

- Enjoyed a keen sense of inter-house rivalry as a student
- Early interest (during teaching course) in the mechanisms of students’ sense of connectedness to their school, and their level of engagement in the school community.

Key Questions:

- **Why** do some students *really enjoy* their school experience, while others don’t?
- **What** do schools offer for students to feel a sense of **belonging, community** and **school connectedness**?
- **How** can schools **enhance** these outcomes?

- The house system is an interesting and unique aspect of schools that has the capacity to address some of these questions, yet it is done differently in every school (or even not at all).
- Also, big HP fan (go Slytherin!)
Social Identification

A sense of group solidarity and belonging, focusing on the ‘group in the individual’ rather than the ‘individual in the group’. Group members conform to a collective concept of behaviour, and draw from the group their sense of self-identity including:

- their sense of who they are
- what type of person they are
- how they relate to others inside and outside of their group
- It also dictates how they interact with others within/outside their group.

(Abrams & Hogg, 2006)
Social Identification

Social identification can play an important role in motivating individuals (Ellemers & Rink, 2005) and enhancing self-esteem (Benish-Wesiman et al., 2015).

Social identification is accumulative: the sheer number of social identifications is a crucial factor in affecting self-esteem (Benish-Wesiman et al., 2015).

More groups = greater self-esteem and self-esteem fortification.
How many groups/what groups would a typical student say that they are a ‘member’ of in your school?
Dunbar’s Number

Dunbar (1992) suggests that, from a biological/cognitive perceptive, the maximum size of a community that allows for effective relationships is 150 individuals.

Of those student groups you previously identified, which ones have under 150 individuals?
Teamwork

A strong sense of teamwork in the school context can enhance students’ sense of identity. Criss (2010) investigated this in the context of music ensembles, and suggests **6 key transferable strategies to enhance teamwork**:

1. Ownership of goals
2. Encouraging commitment
3. Effective communication
4. Leadership & role identification
5. Inclusion and support
6. Creating team identity

Teamwork and group membership are particularly important in adolescents, since being part of a social group has been described as an essential component of modern adolescent life (Leets & Sunwolf, 2005).
Loneliness
Twenge et al., (2021)

- Between 2012–2018, ‘loneliness’ in schools increased in 36 out of 37 countries.
- Worldwide, there were nearly twice as many adolescents in 2018 compared to 2012 having high levels of school loneliness.
- School loneliness was high when smartphone access and internet use were high.
- School loneliness was positively correlated with negative affect and negatively correlated with positive affect and life satisfaction.
Loneliness

Goosby et al., (2013)

- Loneliness during adolescence is associated with diagnosed depression, poorer adult self-rated health, and metabolic risk factors related to cardiovascular disease.
METHODS OF ORGANISING STUDENTS

- Studies have consistently shown that students in schools with smaller populations (approximately 400–800 students; Cotton, 1996; Cushman, 1999) experience:
  - better attendance and retention (Raywid, 1996)
  - increased personalisation of education (Cushman, 1999)
  - greater engagement in extracurricular activities (Cotton, 1996; 2001)
  - enhanced academic achievement
  - greater problem-solving efficiency (Stewart, 2009).

- As compensation for larger schools, research has found that dividing the whole student population into smaller subpopulations leads to effects similar to those found in small schools.
METHODS OF ORGANISING STUDENTS

Small Learning Communities (SLCs)

- Students divided into separate communities
- Each community is assigned a team of teachers
- Some SLCs are assigned a curriculum focus

- Difficult for established schools to transition to (physical limitations)
- High demand on resources, space and staff
- Students and staff segregated
METHODS OF ORGANISING STUDENTS

Horizontal System

- Students managed according to year level
- Teaching staff work as year level teams
- Overseen by head of year
- Year levels divided into forms with form tutors

- Students more likely to perceive as being in a homogenous group
- Does not facilitate cross-age interactions
- Consistency issues with different head of year each year
METHODS OF ORGANISING STUDENTS

- Students allocated to small groups of mixed year levels overseen by heads of house
- Houses divided into smaller mixed-age groups called tutor/care/mentor/form groups
- Teaching staff allocated to houses but not exclusively
- Extracurricular activities involve students and staff
- Opportunities for house leadership

- Some tutors feel inadequately trained
- Staff can feel restricted in capacity to interact with other students outside of house
- Potential for inconsistencies between heads of house
KEY ADVANTAGES OF THE HOUSE SYSTEM

✓ Its ability to facilitate friendly competition between students through extracurricular activities and to utilise a house points system, both of which have the capacity to enhance students’ school engagement and behaviour (Coughlan, 2004; Green, 2006; Nixon, Launay-Falasse & Watts, 2010).

✓ Suggested to enhance staff–student relationships through house staff being involved in these activities, and heads of house and tutors playing key roles in building relationships/providing individualised attention (Green, 2006; Oxley, 1990).

✓ The ability for students to form positive relationships with their peers and students from other year levels through the vertical nature of the system (Fincham, 1991).
PURPOSE OF MY STUDY

❖ **Objective 1:**
To investigate, through the development and use of a **quantitative** questionnaire, the degree to which students feel a sense of **connectedness**, **engagement** and **positive relationships with staff** both within their house and in their school in general.

❖ **Objective 2:**
To use **qualitative** data from **staff surveys** to complement the results obtained through the student surveys and to gain an indication of the staff culture regarding the house system within each school.

Previous research into the house system has largely only been **anecdotal**.
STUDY METHODOLOGY

Concurrent triangulation mixed-methods design
QUANTITATIVE PHASE (STUDENTS)

METHODOLOGY

- Developed and pilot-tested a questionnaire called the House System Assessment Survey (HSAS).
- Informed by previous research and similar questionnaires.
- Found to have high validity and reliability.
- Used in 2 schools: one Catholic and one independent.
- Incorporated 5 key constructs, each with 4-5 items each:
  - School Engagement
  - School Community (connectedness + staff-student r/ships combined)
  - House Engagement
  - House Connectedness
  - House Staff-Student Relationships
Students with **leadership ambition** demonstrated **higher levels of all 5 constructs** - the 3 house constructs and the 2 school constructs - than students with no leadership and no desire for it.
QUALITATIVE PHASE (STAFF)

METHODOLOGY

- Invited a random selection of Heads of House and Tutors within participating schools to complete an online survey
- 15 staff in total participated
- Average years of experience in their role was 6 years
- Survey consisted of 10 open-ended questions
- Responses were analysed and coded
An overarching goal of the system is to ‘[build] strong family partnerships between students, parents and teachers during a students [sic] time at the College’

The house system is a means of ‘reassuring] the individual student of their importance [and providing] a structure where students feel that their learning journey matters to someone outside the family unit’

‘The time and opportunities to ensure we can achieve the goals have been eroded over time. The house carnivals [that] were designed, and are said to still, foster house spirit, engagement and staff—student relationships no longer achieve these goals due in part to constraints placed on them’

‘welcoming a student in year 7 and building up a strong support network over the next 6 years is a strength of the house system’

‘time is quite rushed to achieve [pastoral care and peer relationships]—we only have tutor groups and there are only rare chances for us to have extended time to achieve our goals’
‘in general it can produce a core group of people who really know and care for each individual and give every student the opportunity to belong’.

A strength of the house system is ‘the breaking down of the large school cohort into smaller and more manageable units, allowing ‘connection to a small cohort of staff and students’.

Having more dedicated time would assist in helping build ‘cohesiveness’, ‘family’ and ‘connection to the house’.

increased opportunities for engagement in activities are required ‘outside the confines of sporting arenas’.
the provision of ‘guidance and support’, ‘a person they can trust and turn to’ and for them to assist in helping students’ ‘creating a sense of belonging and identifying to/with something more than just yourself’.

‘time limitations means administrative tasks dominate time with the students’.

‘there are many extra things we are given to do instead of focusing on our goal’.
QUALITATIVE PHASE (STAFF)

KEY FINDINGS

• **Highlights** in the role of being a Tutor/Head of House:
  • Interacting with students
  • Being a part of a student's journey
  • Working in a house team
  • Forming house community
  • Sharing/celebrating successes
  • Building relationships

• **Initiatives** that assist in building *student engagement* in the house:
  • Intra-house activities
  • Inter-house competitions
  • Providing support/celebrating success
  • Peer mentoring/buddy system
  • Fundraising/community service
QUALITATIVE PHASE (STAFF)

KEY FINDINGS

- **Initiatives** that assist in building **student connectedness** in the house:
  - Communal activities (house games, barbecues, pizza lunches, working together on fundraising, worship)
  - Building house identity (house logo/branding, origin of house name)
  - Providing encouragement
  - Individualised attention

- **Initiatives** that assist in promoting **positive staff-student relationships** in the house:
  - Having discussions/showing interest (chats about their weekends, interests)
  - Mentoring (having genuine discussions about students’ progress and gently steering them towards action to address weaknesses)
  - Making students feel heard (types of concerns: academic, transition, pathway, wellbeing)
SUMMARY

Social Psychology

- **Social Identification**: More groups = great self-esteem + fortification
- **Dunbar’s Number**: 150 for effective relationships
- **Teamwork**: essential component of adolescent life
- **Loneliness**: high levels doubled in 2012-2018

Organising Students

- **School Size/Sub-Units**: potential to achieve similar outcomes to small school size
- **Systems**: SLCs, Horizontal, House
- ✓ **House**: Extracurricular activities, staff-student relationships, peer/cross-age relationships

Results

- **Students**
  - School community and school engagement are closely linked
  - House engagement → school engagement
  - House staff-student r/ships + house connectedness → school community
  - Leadership ambition
- **Staff**
  - House system is effective in building community, belonging and relationships
  - Need adequate time
REFERENCES


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