



# Parent–child connectedness for schooling and students' performance and aspirations: An exploratory investigation



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## ABSTRACT

Student-school connectedness and parent–child connectedness have been identified as important factors in predicting students' level of educational progress, aspirations and psychosocial wellbeing, but much of this research has been conducted from the students' perspective and not their parents' perspective. A 50 item schooling survey was designed for parents, with parent–child connectedness measured using the frequency of conversations between the parent and the child about education. Based on a sample of 53 parents across 25 schools, significant differences were identified by level of parent–child connectedness about schooling across the three factors of students' general educational experience; students' school ability/performance; and students' educational goals/aspirations. Low parent–child connectedness about schooling was also linked with expectations of students' early school leaving. Parent–child connectedness about schooling was found to be a stronger differential factor than Socio Economic Status in the parents' responses. This study supports the notion that parent–child relationships directly and indirectly influence students' school progress. Implications for educational practice are discussed in the paper.

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## 1. Introduction

Researchers, educators and parent organizations have for a long time reported the benefits of developing stronger home-school partnerships (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; National School Public Relations Association, 2006; Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills, 2009; Patrikakou, Weissberg, Redding, & Walberg, 2005). For example, researchers have reported that greater parental involvement in students' education encouraged within students more positive attitudes towards school, improved homework habits, reduced absenteeism and enhanced academic achievement (Buttler, 2010; Epstein, Coates, Salinas, Sanders, & Simon, 1997). This relevance of a home-school partnership is not a new concept with Bronfenbrenner (1979) theorizing that children and their parents/caregivers needed to be at the center of the learning process and families, schools and the community needed to be connected. This view is also supported by Vygotsky's (1978) socio-cultural theory of human development that highlighted the importance of parents and teachers in students' ongoing learning and education. Even so, poor handling of parental concerns and complaints by school authorities, a lack of trust, and

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inadequate communication with parents are also considered to be major contributors to a disconnection between the home and school (Blackmore & Hutchinson, 2010; Hornby & Lafaele, 2011).

## 2. Parental aspirations

The home and the family are considered to be the most important developmental contexts for forming students' educational aspirations, expectations and plans (Behnke, Piercy, & Diversi, 2004) and are highly influential in advancing students' educational aspirations and in helping students maintain their social and psychological well-being (Goodenow, 1993; Hay & Ashman, 2003, 2012; Shochet, Smyth, & Homel, 2007). Parents have been shown to influence their children's ongoing educational choices, subject selection in high school, and career aspirations (Schnabel, Alfeld, Eccles, Koller, & Baumert, 2002). Students' aspirations that are influenced by parental aspirations for their children are important in education because parents direct and focus students' educational and occupational trajectories (Nurmi, 2004; Rimkute, Hirvonen, Tolvanen, Aunola, & Nurmi, 2012). The evidence is that, over time, parental beliefs and those of their children converge and this convergence generates similar educational expectations and aspirations in students to those of their parents (Nurmi, 2004). Critically, students' educational aspirations are closely associated with the students' eventual educational achievement and attainment (Beal & Crockett, 2010; Marjoribanks, 2003). This linkage between parental aspirations for their children's education and their children's eventual educational attainment and careers is of interest to the researchers in this study.

This interest was generated because previous research by Beswick, Hay, Cranston, Watson, and Allen (2012) noted that educational aspirational uncertainty was apparent when students were asked if their parents or guardians wanted them to stay at school after year 10 and continuing education past year 12. These data suggested that for some students there was little discussion with their parents about future educational pathways and/or their parents did not hold strong views about their children continuing on with their education. Cranston, Allen, Watson, Hay, and Beswick (2012) hypothesised that parents may be communicating to their children the message of low aspirational goals about their children's educational future, and so exploring this hypothesis was a core aim of the planned research.

One reason put forward for this hypothesized influence of parents on students' educational development is related to the level of social and communicative connectedness between the parents and their children. The claim is that, along with family support (Oberle, Schonert-Reichl, & Zumbo, 2011), a more open communication pattern between the child and the parent has a positive influence on the students' cognitive and psychological development (Lam, McHale, & Crouter, 2012). In addition, the assertion is, that when home and school are connected, when they share common values, when they mutually support each other, and importantly when the students are connected both to the home and to the school, then there is a greater likelihood of a long-term positive educational and social and psychological outcome for the students (Wilkinson-Lee, Zhang, Nuno, & Wilhelm, 2011).

## 3. School connectedness

The construct, identified as school connectedness, has emerged as a potential predictor of school performance and educational aspirations (McNeely, Nonnemaker, & Blum, 2002). Student-school connectedness was defined by Goodenow (1993, p. 80) "as the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others in the school and its social environment." The indications are that a failure of students to connect with their school curriculum (McWilliam, 2008) or to build satisfactory teacher-student relationships (Hyde & Durik, 2005) has a negative impact on students' learning and staying on at school. Attendance data provides one measure of school connectedness and students with higher rates of absenteeism are associated with higher rates of school failure and lower levels of school connectedness (McNeely et al., 2002). High levels of school disconnectedness with adolescent students are also associated with higher levels of student psychosocial difficulties, especially depression (Shochet, Homel, Cockshaw, & Montgomery, 2008). Based on student survey responses, Shochet et al. (2007) argued that parent-student attachment (connectedness) influenced the students' level of school connectedness via five school experience factors: (1) students' involvement in school activities; (2) students' perceptions of the classroom environment; (3) students' perceptions of the school support services; (4) students' attachment to the class peer group; and (5) students' perceptions about the likability of teachers. To date, school connectedness research has focussed mainly on students' survey research (e.g., Goodenow, 1993; Hyde & Durik, 2005; McNeely et al., 2002; Shochet, Dadds, Ham, & Montague, 2006). In addition, as Hay and Winn (2005) have noted in their school-based research, students, their parents, and their teachers can have very different perceptions of the same school related topic and, hence, topics such as school connectedness need to be considered from more than just the students' perspectives.

## 4. Measuring parent-child connectedness about schooling

Given the claimed importance of the role of parent-child connectedness on the child's psychosocial development and education by Shochet et al. (2007), a critical question is then, how to measure parent-child connectedness. One measure that has been used is the *Parental Attachment Questionnaire* (Kennedy, 1987) that asked the child to respond to questions related to the frequency of conversations and communication between the child and his/her parent. The problem is that this

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