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# Building social connectedness in schools: Australian teachers' perspectives



J.M. Bower\*, C. van Kraayenoord, A. Carroll

*The University of Queensland, School of Education, St Lucia Campus, Brisbane, Queensland 4072, Australia*

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## ABSTRACT

This paper presents the findings of Phase 1 of a larger study examining social connectedness in schools.

A semi-structured interview was conducted with 14 teachers to ascertain perceptions of social connectedness across three high schools in a city in Queensland, Australia. The interview examined how teachers perceived four broad strategy levels for building social connectedness: (i) at a school level; (ii) linking to the broader community; (iii) at a classroom level; and (iv) helping individuals to connect.

All schools employed school-wide practices to involve the community in the education process, recognizing the importance of cultural and background knowledge, civic participation, and school–community interactions. The three areas identified to improve connectedness within the school communities were to recognize and embrace the important role of technology for community building, to allow time within the curriculum for teachers to work on the social and emotional well-being of their students, and to reinforce efforts to develop a shared language for staff around pedagogical practices.

Teachers gave strong support to the need for ongoing professional learning, peer collaboration, and administrative support, and sufficient quality time to achieve these outcomes.

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## 1. Introduction

A sense of connection to others provides students with an important base for developing the personal capabilities needed to create respectful, healthy relationships, engage meaningfully in society, and become caring, compassionate individuals (Bottrel & Goodwin, 2011; Greenberg et al., 2003). As such, creating and maintaining quality, connected relationships are essential to achieving positive mental well-being (Jose, Ryan, & Pryor, 2012). Indeed as well as core family connections, acceptance and integration amongst peers (Corsano, Majorano, & Champretavy, 2006) and quality teacher–student relationships are key determinants of social emotional well-being during early adolescence (see Hattie, 2012; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009).

## 2. Theory

### 2.1. Social connectedness in schools

Social connectedness has been described as a sense of closeness to others that is important to one's sense of belonging and is based on experiences of relationships with others (Lee & Robbins, 2000). Two main elements of social connectedness are: a

\* Corresponding author. Tel.: +61 7 3365 6520; fax: +61 7 3365 8553.

E-mail addresses: [j.bower@uq.edu.au](mailto:j.bower@uq.edu.au) (J.M. Bower), [c.vankraayenoord@uq.edu.au](mailto:c.vankraayenoord@uq.edu.au) (C. van Kraayenoord), [a.carroll@uq.edu.au](mailto:a.carroll@uq.edu.au) (A. Carroll).

*relational component* that supposes a connection or bond to others and an *autonomy component* that refers to how individuals feel when they are valued within a relationship (Barber & Schluterman, 2008).

Schools play an important role in promoting student well-being through social emotional learning (SEL) (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011; Jose et al., 2012). SEL involves the development of self-awareness, social awareness, self-management and social management (see ACARA, 2013). Socially and emotionally competent students are able to form strong and healthy relationships with others (Barber & Schluterman, 2008). Further, social connectedness at school has been linked to various positive academic outcomes, including student engagement, academic achievement, and success expectations (Woolley, Kol, & Bowen, 2009; Zins, Bloodworth, Weissberg, & Walberg, 2004).

Within the school context, there are multiple players and practices involved in the development of social connectedness. School-wide practices, links to community, classroom practices and interpersonal relationships can all influence experiences of connectedness in both positive and negative ways.

## 2.2. School-wide approaches

School-wide approaches to behavior management and learning, shared pedagogical frameworks, and a shared language around school practices create a common ethos and sense of community. Positive school communities have the potential to reduce problem behavior and increase positive outcomes. For example, Catalano, Oesterle, Fleming, and Hawkins (2004) found that students form strong bonds to others in situations where teachers have a high regard for students, structures are well organized, and peers respect academic success. These researchers have demonstrated that school bonding reduces delinquency and academic problems and social skills and academic achievement can be increased.

A caring school environment that recognizes the relational nature of learning and enables social emotional skill development benefits student well-being (Elias & Weissberg, 2000). Making pupil well-being a priority in schools, providing clear behavioral expectations, and explicitly teaching social skills can facilitate strong peer relationships (McGrath & Noble, 2010).

## 2.3. Teacher perceptions

Multiple players in schools including teachers and students promote the development of social connectedness. The focus of this study was teacher perceptions. International research about teacher effectiveness indicates that high levels of teacher self-efficacy, life satisfaction, and overall well-being are positively linked to successful student outcomes (Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger, & Vohs, 2003). Teacher self-efficacy is reduced when the school environment and schedules prevent teachers prioritizing the social emotional health of students alongside the curriculum (Durlak et al., 2011). Conversely, high levels of life satisfaction and overall contentment have been linked to superior teacher and student performance in both teachers and students.

Students tend to be more engaged by a positive classroom mood and teacher attitude (Bower, Carroll, & Ashman, 2012; Duckworth, Quinn, & Seligman, 2009). Therefore teacher well-being has a positive affect on student achievement. Learning, experienced in a safe and positive environment, is more likely to develop skills such as focusing attention and problem-solving (OECD, 2007). So, teachers who can successfully manage a classroom, have well-structured lessons, and effective social skills are crucial to effective student learning and well-being (Jensen, Hunter, Sonnemann, & Burns, 2012).

The research thus shows that teachers are especially important in promoting social connectedness because they are responsible for ensuring students learn effectively and develop appropriate social skills. It is therefore valuable to obtain their perceptions of social connectedness. Identifying similarities and differences in teacher perceptions will clarify those matters that enable and/or inhibit social connectedness.

This article describes the findings of Phase 1 of a larger study entitled *Investing in our Disadvantaged Youth: New School-Wide Approaches to Understanding and Improving School Engagement and Social Connectedness* (see Fig. 1).

The purpose of Phase 1 was to take a baseline measure of how social connectedness was promoted in three schools that partnered with the researchers in a 3-year project. The measure was taken prior to a scan of student social connectedness and social emotional well-being in each school (Phase 2) and prior to working to build and enhance social connectedness and engagement using school-wide approaches (Phases 3 and 4) (see Fig. 1).

## 3. Method

This study (Phase 1) used an exploratory qualitative research design involving a semi-structured interview to gain teacher perspectives about strategies being used in each school to build and enhance social connectedness and to examine each school's school–community networks. Specifically, participants' attitudes, concerns, and experiences of building social connectedness were explored and descriptions of school–community networks were obtained.

### 3.1. Participants

The setting for the study was a city in Queensland, Australia, with a population of approximately 281,000 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2012). This high-growth area is a transport hub and its population comprises a range of socio-economic

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