

Building School Connectedness

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Abstract: This study examines school connectedness as a multidimensional construct influencing student engagement, academic performance, and well-being. Through a synthesis of existing research, the paper identifies key strategies for fostering connectedness, including whole-school approaches, relational support systems, and inclusive policies. Drawing on evidence from various theoretical models—such as the Health-Promoting School framework and the Index for Inclusion—the study highlights the importance of student-teacher relationships, participatory decision-making, and peer support in creating a positive school climate. The findings suggest that while interventions promoting school connectedness have shown promise, further research is needed to evaluate their long-term impact and adaptability across diverse school contexts. This paper underscores the necessity of sustained, evidence-based strategies to enhance students' sense of belonging and prevent disengagement.

Keywords: School connectedness, student engagement, whole-school approach, inclusive education, student well-being, peer relationships, teacher support, school climate, academic success.

1. Introduction

School connectedness is a multidimensional concept that has recently become significant in educational research and practice, relating to a feeling of students' connectedness or sense of belonging in the school setting [5]. They also defined school connectedness as a global experience regarding emotional, social, and academic support from peers, teachers, and the wider school community. This bond is also closely associated with a host of positive outcomes, such as higher academic achievement, lower rates of involvement with risky behaviours, and better mental health [3]. Theoretically, it tends to be conceptualized in company with other closely related terms such as school bonding, school attachment, school climate, and school engagement; these are terms capturing different nuances in the students' associations with their schools. These differences are important to recognize, as they reflect the multidimensionality of school connectedness and have ramifications for intervention strategies that are designed to improve student outcomes.

Whitlock added weight to the view that school connectedness involves emotional connection and participation in school and, when present, is linked with positive school completion and social-behavioural outcomes [10]. It relates to the concept of school bonding, which is described as emotional ties and identification with the culture in school, but it puts further emphasis on emotional depth and the intensity of attachment of students to values and culture at school [10]. She defines school bonding primarily as an emotional attachment and active participation in academic and extracurricular activities. But the definition of school engagement cuts across both behavioural and emotional dimensions, thus encompassing feelings in addition to the behaviours and involvements of students at school [3]. Importantly, this dual focus on behaviour and emotions distinguished engagement from bonding—which is primarily concerned with emotional attachment [3].

In a related manner, school attachment involves the emotional commitment and devotion that a student feels towards his or her school; however, school climate in general refers to the general social and academic environment that influences how welcome and valued students feel [10]. She

further defines how school climate refers to the inter-relationships of students, staff, and the greater school community, therefore, affecting connectedness through an inclusive and accepting atmosphere.

Definitions like these reflect the complexity of school connectedness and other similar terms, which look at various aspects of students' relationships with schools. Being sensitive to this nuance enables intervention better to meet the emotional and behavioural needs of all students in creating supportive and inclusive school environments.

2. Approaches to Build School Connectedness

Rowe et al provided a more complete framework on the promotion of school connectedness through the Health-Promoting School (HPS) approach [8]. The authors maintain that connectedness is critical to students' mental and emotional performance and academic performance and support their argument with evidence coming from multiple disciplines. Programs mentioned in article like inclusion and democratic participation policies tried in schools for the purpose of prevention have been able to develop positive behaviour and engagement from students. Such approaches as cooperative learning and peer tutoring, along with experiential activities, have been successfully applied in order to enhance supportive social relationships, prevent bullying, and ensure a good school climate. Whereas these strategies are supported by various pieces of evidence to build school connectedness, one of the limitations in research is regarding the fact that no 'direct' evidence has been found to link the HPS model with school connectedness. The article emphasizes that more focused research should be conducted to validate such a link and explore the challenges of implementing such strategies within various school settings. However, in this article, strong rationale for the HPS model being 'well placed' to provide an effective tool for school-based prevention efforts because it can create connectedness through processes that ensure inclusiveness, participation, and cooperation.

Article by Carrington et al describes the whole-school approach for enhancing school connectedness, utilizing the

Index for Inclusion as a guide in fostering a feeling of belonging and acceptance [4]. The project used participatory action research method. They partnered with one secondary school over a one-year period, focusing on relationship building and student leadership. The five phases of the Index for Inclusion provided guidelines on review, development, and action for the school community—to enhance connectedness through inclusive policy and practice—involving students, teachers, and staff. Authors stresses the effectiveness of schoolwide preventive approaches, including creating supportive adult-student relationships, facilitating student voice, and developing inclusive school culture. Carrington et al also showed that the effective construction of a supportive school required the inclusion of student voice in decision-making processes, along with the provision for opportunities for the development of student leadership [4]. Evidence from this study underlines the fact that relational methods, such as trusting relationships and open communication between staff and students, are at the core of effective preventive work. It also shows that whole-school approaches can, along with other tools such as the Index for Inclusion, offer sustainable school cultural changes which encourage connectedness. The study enlightens the process through powerful qualitative insights, while covering that further research will be needed regarding further evaluation of long-term impacts of such interventions on the wellbeing and engagement of students at school.

Studies by Whitlock and Gowing and Jackson provide an understanding of how school-based prevention efforts can improve school connectedness through mainly relational and academic opportunities that provide a sense of fitting in [5,10]. The methods applied in these studies include mixed-methods designs, which incorporate survey and qualitative data in testing factors that may contribute to connectedness, as well as the efficacy of different prevention strategies.

As Whitlock mentioned that "meaningful opportunities for participation—for example, taking students' ideas seriously, encouraging creative involvement, and providing a safe and welcoming school environment—have the greatest potential to enhance school connectedness [10]." In the following paper, focus group discussions have been randomly selected to illustrate the quality relationship of young adults with the significant people around them. Such relationships are built on offering continuous support and building mutual trust which should make students feel valued at least in the school environment. It suggests that when students feel that adults care about their well-being and respect their input, their sense of connection to school goes up, helping to inhibit disengagement and problem behaviour. Similarly, Gowing and Jackson cited that some prevention strategies involve the formation of supportive peer and teacher relationships, engaging students in participatory teaching methods, while at least a part of the student's life at school should turn out well [5]. This study by Gowing and Jackson further highlights that peer friendships and extracurricular activities are relational experiences involving inhibition in the development of student disengagement [5].

Interaction or cooperation between relational supports could be expected to have a positive influence on the benefits achieved from academic engagement. Whitlock reported that younger students reported higher levels of connectedness, thus implying a need for schools to modify their strategies as a function of the age of the students [10]. Gowing and Jackson similarly found that year level, cigarette use and the student's

choice in attending the school influence an individual student's level of connectedness, emphasizing principles of individualized approaches [5]. Yet, even as the weight of their evidence overwhelmingly supports such strategies, both studies conclude by calling for further research into long-term impacts of these prevention efforts to improve students' perceived connectedness and overall well-being.

The study by Biag and Nasir et al targeted their work on school connectedness within urban low-income schools [2,7]. Biag indicates three clear points as to how this prevention might be realistically facilitated: supportive adults, safe schools, and high academic expectations [2]. This study seems to point out that the relationships among students and staff care, with teachers having an open-door policy and providing emotional support, are important in constructing school connectedness. These strategies have been documented to be workable in lessening disruptive behaviour and therefore increasing engagement when combined with severe policy on safety and promotion of a culture of going to college. On the other hand, Biag reminds that the application of these policies is inconsistent, which would imply that such inconsistencies have an adverse effect on overall effectiveness in such prevention efforts [2]. Similarly, Nasir et al also contribute in terms of the emphasis on connectedness but go further to explicate the dual dimensions of interpersonal and institutional connectedness [7]. Results show that students who were connected both interpersonally and institutionally had the highest academic achievement. The next best were students who were institutionally connected but less strongly interpersonally, whereas students with low levels on both dimensions were at the greatest risk of failing academically. Importantly, the study suggests that, in fact, institutional and interpersonal connectedness may not be related to one another and may function differently in low-income urban school contexts. Both studies also point to larger structural obstacles that students confront in these contexts—inconsistent expectations for academic performance, scarcity of college-preparatory resources, and concerns about safety—that can undermine their ability to feel connected to school. Evidence on both articles would prove the point that prevention efforts in schools should be wheeled around the formation of positive relationships between adults and students and should also focus on the consistent, fair policies implying high academic standards to yield institutional engagement. As Nasir et al. emphasize, failure to attend to both interpersonal and institutional dimensions of connectedness will surely lead students to disengage, which factors into lower academic performance and higher dropout rates [7]. The synthesis of these studies yields the following: a broad-based preventive approach for low-income schools is needed that would integrate relational support, safe and inclusive environments, and high academic expectations. These approaches have been found to promote a greater sense of student bonding to school, with associated reduced intent and engagement in risky behaviours, while improving simultaneously academic and emotional functioning.

The studies by Vidourek et al and Bower et al investigate the role that school-based prevention strategies may play in promoting students' school connectedness through relational, community, and classroom practices [3, 9]. As Vidourek et al explain, some specific strategies from teachers, such as acting as positive role models, using first names, and maintaining respect in interactions indeed prove to be significant in helping them connect with their students [9]. In fact, their

findings indicate that schools valuing this and providing for teachers' professional training focused on promoting connectedness are more likely to use related strategies. It helps in minimizing students' risk-taking behaviors as a way of showing appreciation and gaining support from adults at school.

Along these lines, Bower et al outlines the need for school-wide and class-level practices when approaching the social connectedness of their students in schools within Australia [3]. In their study, based on interviews with teachers, they identify the value of pastoral care programs, community partnerships, and differentiated instruction in tending an inclusive environment. It is focused on engaging the wider community through cultural events and collaboration with external agencies to further enhance students' sense of belonging. Teachers in this study further stress that such professional development should be continuous to keep pace with the social-emotional needs of the students themselves in reinforcing the claim of Vidourek et al on the presence of trained and supportive teachers [9].

Both studies emphasize that the development of positive relations between students and adults, along with opportunities for meaningful engagement, forms the critical ingredients in school-based prevention. While Vidourek et al focus more on individual teacher strategies, Bower et al take a broader view of community involvement and whole-school practices [3, 9]. Despite the difference in foci, both suggest an integrated strategy—relational support, community ties, and inclusive classroom practice—that promotes connectedness and reduces engagement in risky behaviours among students. Both, however, emphasize that further research is needed in order to investigate long-term impacts on students' outcomes of this kind of strategy.

3. Recommendations

3.1. Implementation of the Health-Promoting School (HPS) Model

The implementation of the Health-Promoting School (HPS) model emphasizes fostering a positive school climate through inclusive practices, such as student participation in decision-making and supportive relationships between staff and students [6]. Even though no direct evidence has been provided to explicitly link the HPS model with school connectedness, the emphasis of this model on creating a positive school climate based on inclusive practices has been theoretically demonstrated by Rowe et al to have the potential to improve students' sense of engagement and behaviours [8]. Whitlock further advise schools to incorporate various activities of cooperative learning and peer tutoring into school daily routines, as these practices may be able to build supportive environments for improving students' sense of school connectedness [10]. Experiential programs involving community projects and cooperative group work may also provide opportunities for students to enhance their social networks [5].

3.2. Prioritize inclusive policy and practice

As Carrington et al mentioned that "The Index for Inclusion is a tool which can be used to help further the development of connectivity-level schools using a whole-school approach" [4]. This tool addresses the process of reviewing, developing, and implementing inclusive policies in collaboration with students, teachers, and other personnel in a systematic manner.

Schools should be demonstrably keen to acknowledge and recognize the student voice through active participation in decision-making mechanisms [3]. Building an inclusive culture also means giving places to students where they feel heard and respected by their peers and teachers and where a climate of trust and mutual respect is fostered [9]. This recommendation underlines relational methods such as developing supportive adult relationships and establishing channels for open communication throughout the school.

3.3. Positive Relationship between Students and Teachers

In this respect, the studies by Gowing and Jackson have focused on supportive interactions between students and adults at school. Schools shall focus on Professional Development Programs, which shall train teachers to establish good rapport with the students by calling their names, having an open-door policy, and valuing their contributions in class discussions [5, 10]. This helps in establishing a setting where children feel loved and appreciated, hence developing more connectedness to their schools [10]. Moreover, teachers should be equipped with competencies that would allow them to identify and handle various emotional needs of the students such as the process of transition to high school mentioned by Carrington et al [4].

3.4. Conduct Long-term Evaluations of School Connectedness Programs

The basis for sustainability and effectiveness in school-based programs for the promotion of connectedness requires long-term evaluation [1]. In fact, Carrington et al have identified how the call for additional research on long-term effects of strategies of school connectedness cannot be overemphasized [4]. The schools' prevention programs should have monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to provide a series of records over time. This may include monitoring student engagement in school, well-being, and academic performance, and regular questionnaires that measure the level of school connectedness among students [7].

Moreover, from my own experience, such appraisals are bound to yield useful lessons on which strategies work best within various school contexts—a fact which would enable schools to borrow best practices from their peers. It is also a continuous cycle of improvement whereby interventions will be relevant and effective to achieve maximum potential in improving school connectedness in the long term.

4. Conclusion

In summary, school connectedness is a fundamental building block in developing student well-being, academic achievement, and good behaviour. Other whole-school strategies may include the model of the Health-Promoting School, inclusive policies, and relationships between students and their teachers that help build supportive environments that engage and make pupils feel connected. Evidence from these diverse studies underlines the relational support, inclusive practices, and participation of students in decision-making processes. While this is valued, there is still more work to be done because the strategies will need continuous evaluation to help adapt to different contexts of schools and changing students' needs if the initiatives are to succeed in the longer term.

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