

Connectedness to School: A Mental Health Resource for Young People

Annie Gowing¹

¹ The University of Melbourne

Objectives: School Connectedness (SC) is regarded within both education and health research and policy as a factor through which health and learning outcomes can be influenced. The objective of the current study was to explore student and staff understandings of the factors that shape young people's connectedness to school in order to better inform policy and practice at both a jurisdictional and school level.

Methods: This research was conducted in a secondary school in outer-metropolitan Melbourne, Australia. The study used a qualitatively driven mixed methods approach to explore the meanings of being connected to school, how this process was understood by students and staff and shaped by school and individual factors. Data collection involved a 109-item questionnaire administered to a sample of 206 students, 12 focus groups with 118 students, 10 focus groups with 71 staff, and 12 student journals.

Results: Findings indicated that students understood their connectedness to school through the experiences of a dynamic and complex crosshatching of opportunities within the relational, learning and extracurricular spheres of school life. At the individual level, significant predictors of SC were extracurricular participation, student voice, academic engagement, and cigarette use.

Conclusion: It is a challenging time to be working in schools with increasing rates of psychological fragility among many young people continuing to cause concern. In the wake of the disconnection that the pandemic generated and with ruptures to the relational climate in schools continuing to be experienced in many parts of the world, connecting and holding young people in a relational bond with their school has become both more urgent and more challenging. Policy frameworks that privilege high stakes testing regimes impose further demands. SC offers a mental health resource and a form of wellbeing capital in a site which most young people attend. It is hoped that the findings from this study can be used to frame effective risk reduction or protection enhancing interventions and energize and guide schools in addressing this key protective factor as a priority within their school improvement agendas.