

## **Enhancing Connectedness in Australian Children and Young People**

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This article looks at the importance of connectedness in the lives of children and young people and what this means for promoting both individual resilience and healthy communities. The focus is specifically on the role of education in helping students feel a sense of inclusive belonging in school and what teachers can do to enhance positive and healthy relationships. The article outlines the impetus for focusing on these issues in Australian education together with recent research that argues for an ecological framework in which authentic belonging is embedded across all parts of a school system. It gives specific examples of how connectedness is being developed in schools and educational jurisdictions across the country.

*Keywords:* school belonging; student engagement; social capital

Connectedness can be defined as a sense of belonging to a community, a feeling that you matter, that your contributions are valued and others care about you (Osterman, 2000; Solomon, Watson, Battistich, Schaps, & Delucchi, 1996). When many in a community feel

positively connected with each other, this can lead to a level of social capital in which trust and reciprocity predominate and there is a greater chance of defining and attaining shared goals (Pretty & Ward, 2001). The use of the word “community” has two definitions, one being geographical and referring to a group of people who associate within the same environment, and the second psychological, a sense of emotional connection, shared values and interdependence. In school communities, the first is a given, and the second requires proactive intervention. This goes well beyond the wearing of a school uniform and cheering on the footy team.

Feeling that you are accepted within your social group is a basic psychological need. Baumeister and Leary (1995) argue that it is so vital to our survival that it counts as one of our basic human needs along with sustenance and shelter. Being able to establish and maintain positive social connections has numerous benefits and is important to everyone. Well-functioning groups provide social and psychological support, can protect and aid in times of need, facilitate access to important resources, and provide the foundation for strong families (Duncan et al., 2007).

### **Inclusive and Exclusive Belonging**

Because belonging is so critical to well-being, we all seek ways to connect with others. Where connectedness and inclusion is actively promoted, it is likely to discourage the development of connection to more negative groups such as gangs. Positive relationships and inclusive groups inhibit aggression and violence (Wilson, 2004; Wolfe, Wekerle, & Scott, 1997).

Exclusive belonging, however, is where groups seek to maintain their sense of superiority by excluding those who don't “fit.” There is evidence that in the incidents of multiple killings in U.S. schools since 1999, there had been high levels of social stratification where some

students were seen as stars and others rejected as losers. In March 2009, the *New Scientist* reported on this study (Wike & Fraser, 2009) with the headline “Teen killers don’t come from schools that foster a sense of belonging.” The recommendations from this research include: (a) strengthening school attachment; (b) reducing social aggression; (c) breaking down codes of silence; (d) establishing screening and intervention protocols for troubled and rejected students; (e) bolstering human and physical security; and (6) increasing communication within educational facilities and between educational facilities and local resources.

People have a powerful, negative, deep-rooted reaction to being socially rejected. Social exclusion has been shown to quickly induce negative moods within most people (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Williams, 2007) and inhibit feelings of belonging, self-esteem, perceptions of control over the environment, and perceptions of leading a meaningful existence (Williams & Zadro, 2005).

Bernstein, Sacco, Young, Hugenberg, and Cook (2010) review research that supports the view that negative feelings are elicited just as strongly by being actively excluded from groups to which the individual does not have or seek a particular affiliation as by a group in which he or she seems themselves as an “in-member.” This puts a lie to the young person who says “I don’t care” when rejected and excluded by individuals or by schools. Where there are “essential” factors such as race involved, however, being accepted or being rejected by your “own” is a particularly powerful experience.

### **The Multiple Benefits of Inclusive Connectedness**

Having a sense of belonging has impacts on many aspects of individual and educational outcomes. Although these are interrelated, they are separated out here for clarity.

### ***Resilience***

Connectedness is a powerful protective factor for those at risk and raises their chance of overcoming complex early disadvantage. A major longitudinal study on risk and resilience (Werner & Smith, 1992, 2001) found that where children and young people had the opportunity to participate in on-going cooperative activities, those groups could act as a surrogate family. They provided a focus for a sense of belonging and boosted a positive sense of self for individuals otherwise at risk of negative life trajectories. This was deepened when those groups also offered a place for discussion and reflection on issues that were of concern for young people — again fulfilling the role of a well-functioning family (Benard, 2006).

### ***Health-promoting Behavior***

Students who feel more connected at school are less likely to take risks with their health — this includes taking drugs, smoking, being careless with sexual encounters, and participating in high-risk activities such as drinking and driving (Lomas, 1998; McNeely & Falci, 2004). Conversely, adolescents who are marginalized or excluded from school are more likely to associate with peers with whom they engage in both risky and deviant behaviors in the community (Leather, 2009).

### ***Mental Health***

Student connectedness is a crucial component of mental health. Depression is a significant and persistent issue for young people across the Western world (Weisz, McCarty, & Valeri, 2006). One of the causes of depression is loneliness and a key factor is acceptance or rejection by peers at school (Baskin, Wampold, Quintana, & Enright, 2010). Without intervention, depression and loneliness can become a negative and self-perpetuating spiral.

### ***Engagement, Motivation, and Learning***

Young people are more likely to experience high levels of engagement and motivation in classrooms where there is a caring environment, supporting the need for connection; where students are given a level of autonomy where they have choice and relative freedom from external controls and where they have information on how to achieve desired outcomes, supporting the need for feeling competent (Fredricks, Alfeld, & Eccles, 2010; Goodenow, 1993). Martin and Dowson (2009) reviewed several theoretical constructs on motivation, such as attribution theory and goal theory, in the light of their impact on personal interactions and relatedness. They were able to demonstrate that the greater the connectedness on personal and emotional levels in the academic context, the greater the scope for academic motivation, engagement, and achievement.

### ***Positive Behavior***

Students are less likely to be involved in fighting, bullying, and vandalism when they feel connected to school. Unsurprisingly, they are also less likely to truant (Blum, 2005). A review of zero tolerance policies in the U.S. by the American Psychological Association (Skiba et al., 2006) found that schools that quickly excluded students not only perpetrated a “school to prison pipeline” for disadvantaged youth but that both behavioral standards and academic attainment also deteriorated rather than improved throughout the school in general. This was attributed to reduced trust and relational quality between students and staff. There is now a wealth of evidence to support the value of restorative approaches to behavior (Blood, in press; Latimer, Dowden, & Muise, 2005; Stinchcomb, Bazemore, & Riestenberg, 2006). This is where negative behaviors are perceived as imposing harm to the community and disconnects the perpetrator from others. The restorative process is intended to repair that harm and reconnect people.

## **Social Capital**

There is a symbiotic relationship between the level of social capital within a school and how connected people feel. Physical capital comprises hardware resources such as buildings and equipment; human capital comprises knowledge and skills; and social capital refers to the quality of relationships within an organization or community. For the purposes of this article, we will take Coleman's (1988) definition. He proposes that social capital has three forms: (a) level of trust, as evidenced by obligations and expectations; (b) information and communication channels; and (c) norms and sanctions that promote the common good over self-interest.

Social capital is increasingly cited as having a role to play in addressing educational and social issues. There is evidence that neighborhoods and educational communities with high levels of social capital are more likely to achieve their goals (Fukuyama, 1995; Pretty & Ward, 2001). In educational settings, social capital goes beyond policy and programs to the quality of school ethos and a focus on the whole child in all developmental domains, rather than benefits for an elite minority. Backman and Smith (2000) have argued that the characteristics of social networks — the everyday patterns of interaction between people — are crucial to the development of social capital and strong communities. These are encapsulated not only in mission statements and policies but in the expectations, conversations and levels of emotional literacy evidenced and promoted at all levels of the organization (Roffey, 2008).

Effective schools develop high levels of social capital that foster positive connections. They establish shared values regarding mission and purpose; promote pro-social behavior and connection to school traditions; and provide a caring, nurturing climate involving collegial

and trusting relationships among adults and students (Gottfredson et al., 2000).

## **The Components of School Connectedness**

Catalano, Haggerty, Oesterle, Fleming, and Hawkins (2004) define school connectedness as two interrelated components. The first is affective, supportive relationships, and the second is commitment — where school is seen as a place where students perceive themselves as doing well and have an investment in being there. It is therefore important that schools take action to provide not only a safe, caring and supportive learning environment, but also a place where student strengths are identified, and each individual sees themselves as progressing and achieving.

The Wingspread Declaration on School Connections was developed in the U.S. in 2003 and published in the *Journal of School Health* in 2004 (Blum & Libbey, 2004). This is an important milestone in the recognition of connectedness in the educational context. The declaration is based on a review of research together with discussions among leaders in the fields of health and education. The declaration was published in the hope of establishing and developing school environments in which all students, regardless of their academic capacity, are engaged and feel part of the education endeavor. This is what the Wingspread Declaration (2004) says:

Students are more likely to succeed when they feel connected to school. School connection is the belief by students that adults in the school care about their learning as well as about them as individuals. Critical requirements for feeling connected include students' experiencing:

- High academic expectations and rigor coupled with support for learning;

- Positive adult-student relationships;
- Safety: both physical and emotional.

Increasing the number of students connected to school is likely to impact critical accountability measures, such as:

- Academic performance;
- Incidents of fighting, bullying, or vandalism;
- Absenteeism;
- School completion rates.

Strong scientific evidence demonstrates increased student connection to school promotes:

- Educational motivation;
- Classroom engagement;
- Improved school attendance.

These three factors in turn increase academic achievement. The findings apply across racial, ethnic, and income groups.

Likewise, strong evidence exists that a student who feels connected to school is less likely to exhibit:

- Disruptive behavior;
- School violence;
- Substance and tobacco use;
- Emotional distress;
- Early age of first sex.

Based on current research evidence, the most effective strategies for increasing the likelihood that students will be connected to school include:

- Implementing high standards and expectations, and providing academic support to all students.

- Applying fair and consistent disciplinary policies that are collectively agreed upon and fairly enforced.
- Creating trusting relationships among students, teachers, staff, administrators, and families.
- Hiring and supporting capable teachers skilled in content, teaching techniques, and classroom management to meet each learner's needs.
- Fostering high parent/family expectations for school performance and school completion.
- Ensuring that every student feels close to at least one supportive adult at school.

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Osterman (2000) suggests that although students' experience of acceptance influences multiple dimensions of their behavior, schools often adopt organizational practices that neglect and may actually undermine students' experience of membership in a supportive community. The following section highlights good practice within Australia at both federal and local levels.

### **The Australian Context**

There are several interrelated initiatives in Australia that have brought about a stronger focus on connectedness. These are encapsulated within broader areas of mental health promotion, student well-being, positive behavior approaches especially restorative justice, values education, school engagement, and social and emotional learning.

In December 2008, all jurisdictional ministers of education signed the Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians. This states that:

Schools play a vital role in promoting the intellectual, physical, social, emotional, moral, spiritual and aesthetic development and wellbeing of young Australians, and in ensuring the nation's ongoing economic prosperity and social cohesion. (Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs, 2008, p. 4)

All states and territories state in their policy documents that there is a link between educational achievement and social and emotional well-being, and for many this is seen as bi-directional. There are, however, differences across the nation on how proactive governments have been in promoting universal well-being.

In 2008, a scoping study on student well-being for the federal government (Noble, McGrath, Roffey, & Rowling, 2008) found that student well-being was closely linked with positive learning outcomes and seven pathways to well-being were identified by the research. Connectedness and the relational values and skills that underpin this are embedded within many of these pathways:

1. *A supportive, caring and inclusive school community* — the type of community that fosters school connectedness, positive teacher-student relationships, positive peer relationships, and parental involvement.
2. *Pro-social values* — such as respect, honesty, compassion, acceptance of difference, fairness, and responsibility, which need to be directly taught as well as indirectly encouraged.
3. *Physical and emotional safety* — via anti-bullying and anti-violence strategies, policies, procedures and programs.
4. *Social and emotional learning* — including coping skills, self-awareness, emotional regulation skills, empathy, goal achievement skills, and relationship skills.
5. *A strengths-based approach* — schools focusing on identifying and developing students' intellectual strengths and personal qualities.

6. *A sense of meaning and purpose* — through one or more of spirituality, community service, participation in clubs and teams, peer support, collaborative and authentic group projects.
7. *A healthy lifestyle* — good nutrition, exercise, avoidance of illegal drugs and alcohol.

In a study exploring the establishment of emotional literacy in six Australian schools (Roffey, 2008), it became clear that developing well-being and the quality of relationships in school environments requires an ecological approach in which all aspects of a school are addressed, from basic principles to policy to everyday practice. A sense of belonging is not just about improved teacher-student or peer relationships but generated by this whole school focus. The role of the school leader and their vision for their school is critical (Roffey, 2007). Principals who are determined that their school should be a caring and positive institution, with high expectations for all and whose efforts are directed at the well-being of the whole child can drive change in school culture over time. This culture influences how everyone relates to and supports everyone else and how positively connected each person feels, including teachers:

The teachers here really feel supported, cared about, looked after and valued, and that translates over into the classroom ... I'm just blown away by how kind the teachers are to students here ... that's just a follow-on of the whole culture ... everyone on the same side — the staff are supportive of each other, and that carries across into the classroom ... I used to hate doing yard duty, because ... there would really be open antipathy ... So this year — when I'm out there I smile, well, usually, you never got a smile back, always now, I get a smile back. (A teacher returning to the same school after an absence of several years)

Rowe, Stewart, and Patterson (2007) in a review of health-promoting schools research confirmed the validity of such an ecological

framework. They found that school connectedness has the potential to be built through two major mechanisms:

- inclusive processes that involve all the different members that make up a community; the active participation of those community members and equal partnerships between them;
- supportive structures (school policies, organizational structures and physical environment) that reflect the values of participation, democracy, and inclusiveness.

### **Specific Initiatives to Increase Connectedness in Australia**

This section of the article summarizes case studies of practice, providing a demonstration of ways in which connectedness might be addressed and promoted. There are many excellent initiatives across all states and territories: the ones identified here are those where the author has been directly involved with or knows well.

#### ***KidsMatter and MindMatters***

The federally funded KidsMatter (primary sector) and MindMatters (secondary sector) mental health programs adopt a whole-child, whole-school approach to prevention and early intervention. There are several interrelated platforms to this work: a positive school community which promotes inclusion and belonging alongside family friendly environments, social and emotional learning for students, parenting support and education, and early intervention for students experiencing mental health difficulties.

An evaluation of the effectiveness of the KidsMatter initiative in 100 schools indicated that there were significant and positive changes in the schools, teachers, parents/caregivers, and students over the two-year trial. In particular, there were statistically and practically significant improvement in students' measured mental health in terms of both

reduced mental health difficulties and increased mental health strengths. The impact of KidsMatter was especially apparent for students who were rated as having higher levels of mental health difficulties at the start of the trial (Slee et al., 2009).

### ***KiDS CAN***

The KiDS CAN program was developed under the auspices of the National Association for Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect (NAPCAN). It is intended to provide opportunities for young people to develop projects that are of benefit to their community in some way. It is based on the evidence that families most connected to their communities are less likely to harm their children, that positive relationships inhibit violence (Wolfe et al., 1997), and that resilience for children is promoted by active participation. The most recent example of KiDS CAN is in the Dubbo region of New South Wales where 14 young Aboriginal women between the ages of 12 and 16 met for a three-day workshop to explore both personal and community strengths, have fun together, and decide on a project to help themselves and their community. One aim was to develop a sense of connectedness both between members of the group and between the girls and the adults supporting them. The project they decided to embark upon is to explore their own local culture and heritage, document this and take their findings to another Aboriginal community in Cape York. They want to promote “good stories” about indigenous youth to counter the negative media focus, they feel, fostering animosity toward Aboriginal young people.

This is a work in progress, so no formal evaluation of this initiative has yet taken place. The following, however, is a section of an unsolicited statement given to the workshop facilitators by the girls at the end of the three days. The capitals are their emphasis:

By doing this program we formed new friendships and a wonderful GROUP. The workshops we participated in helped us girls to FEEL GREAT about ourselves. We got to open up more to the group and talk about the different OPTIONS in life.

We realized that EVERYONE is important and has different things to share with the group. We now know that YOUNG people can have a chance to speak up and have a say within their community.

We got to make a list of positive and important things we would like to see in our future. We now all show more RESPECT and in order to get respect you have to give respect. We all feel that you people are our HELPING HANDS.

We all had a great time at the workshops. We had loads of FUN playing games and meeting new people.

A meeting with school staff three weeks later indicated that there had been continuing positive changes in the girls in their attitudes to themselves and their interactions with others. Some of this has been evidenced by the absence of referral for behavioral issues in school since the workshop. Longer-term outcomes will be reported at a future date.

### ***Circle Time Solutions***

The workshop above was facilitated throughout using a Circle Time Solutions (CTS) framework for group interaction (Roffey, 2006). This is based on the principles of inclusion, democracy, safety and respect. Everyone has a turn in all activities; when one person is speaking everyone else listens; no one has to speak if they choose not to and there are no put-downs. Mix-up activities are a feature of CTS. These ensure that participants interact with each other and do not stay with the same friendship groups. Activities are a blend of whole-group, small-group

and paired interactions with a focus on the strengths and solutions. Most of these activities are presented as non-competitive games. Games promote a playfulness in which people are not being judged or tested; they are particularly useful in the development of social and emotional learning. Having fun together is a deliberate strategy as healthy shared laughter is infectious, promotes warmth and fosters cooperation (Hromek & Roffey, 2009). CTS are not intended to problem-solve directly and do not target individual behavior but focus on an ideal future for the community — including a whole class.

The efficacy of CTS to promote connectedness between students in school was demonstrated in a service-learning project where 18 undergraduate students supported the intervention in 8 Greater Western Sydney primary schools. Their portfolios documenting their experiences and observations were qualitatively analyzed, with their permission, following the project and after these had been marked. A report was prepared for the New South Wales Department of Education (McCarthy, 2009). In the ten weeks of the project, where students took part in weekly or bi-weekly Circle sessions, there was evidence of culture change within classrooms. Student behavior toward others improved; students were more willing to work together; there was more mixing across friendship and gender groups, and more attention and concern were paid to other students. Other changes noticed by classroom teachers were that teasing and name-calling between children on the playground significantly reduced. Two children who used to call each other names told their Circle facilitators that:

Circle Time taught us that calling each other nasty names isn't a nice thing. It hurts people's feelings. So we decided to stop and be good friends. It's a nice feeling to be caring and kind.

While this first occurred mainly within the context of CTS, over the course of the ten weeks in which Circle sessions were held, these kinds

of behaviors increasingly carried over into the general classroom environment. These changes were, however, only sustainable outside the classroom if the class teacher was actively involved. One CTS facilitator commented that where the effort was made to link CTS elements to school values, the students saw the connection between what they learned in CTS and its relevance to the larger school community. These findings are supported by anecdotal evidence in many schools around Australia. Circles are an effective pedagogy for engaging young people and increasing positive connections between them, but only if they are facilitated by teachers who believe that building healthy relationships are important, participate fully in all activities and run Circles in line with the basic principles. Too much teacher control undermines outcomes.

### ***Social and Emotional Learning***

Positive connections between students do not happen by chance or by osmosis. They require relational values, knowledge, skills, practice and reinforcement. Social and emotional learning (SEL) is becoming high profile in many countries, including Australia, as there is increasing recognition of the relevance not only to life skills but also to academic outcomes (Zins, Weissberg, Wang, & Walberg, 2004). SEL comprises a complex set of competences that require a congruent learning environment (Roffey, 2010). Although there are multiple programs that address these abilities, the research highlights issues of implementation as crucial to effectiveness (Payton et al., 2000). Across Australia, educational jurisdictions are taking this seriously. Both the Cairns and Melbourne Catholic Education Offices have taken a similar approach in establishing SEL. The first stage explores readiness (getting commitment from the school), the second involves planning (establishing structures and support), the third is implementation and consolidation, and the fourth monitoring, review, integration with

policies and practices, and embedding across the whole school community (Bird & Sultmann, 2010; Cahir, 2009). The Catholic Education Office in Melbourne has a Student Wellbeing Action Partnership (SWAP) with Melbourne University that ensures evaluation of well-being initiatives is on-going. The Website for SWAP, which publishes a range of relevant research studies, is at the end of this article.

Personal and social competences will be incorporated into the new Australian National Curriculum as part of “General Capabilities.” Actual delivery will be left to individual educational jurisdictions.

### ***Peer Support***

Peer Support Australia has been working in schools around the country since the 1970s with the aim of promoting positive peer connections. They have four principles within which they work: sense of self, resilience, connectedness, and sense of possibility. The aim is to empower young people to support each other and contribute positively to their communities. After a two-day workshop to develop leadership skills, trained peer leaders work with 8–10 younger students. This is particularly valuable in helping students with challenges at transition periods, reducing bullying and developing resilience. An independent evaluation has just been carried out for the Department of Health and Ageing. The (as yet unpublished) results suggest that the Peer Support program promotes mental well-being, resilience and social connectedness.

### ***Restorative Approaches***

Restorative approaches are increasingly in evidence around Australia and have been taken up with enthusiasm in some educational jurisdictions and individual schools.

In both public education in the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) and Catholic Education in Victoria, restorative practices are seen as congruent with values education. In South Australia, they are embedded within the Learning Wellbeing Framework.

Following an enquiry and report into restorative practices, the ACT made strong recommendations for the adoption of restorative principles across the territory (Standing Committee on Education, Training and Young People, 2008).

The aim of restorative approaches is not to stigmatize offenders and place them outside the community, but to facilitate their connection with those who have been harmed so that offenders can experience the impact of their behavior and offer ways to “restore” an equilibrium. Wrongdoing is not condoned but actively addressed as an interpersonal and community issue:

Through taking responsibility for the wrongdoing and making amends ... our feeling of connectedness to the community affected by our wrongdoing remains intact. (Morrison, 2002, p. 2)

One school that has adopted a whole school approach to restorative practices has found evidence of a change in school culture (Doppler, 2008):

A respectful, listening climate has been cultivated. As a result personal accountability for actions has occurred and students have been empowered to “make things right” both academically and socially.

Data indicates a more motivated, engaged and connected student population, a dramatic reduction of behavioral referrals over time, improved attendance particularly with indigenous students, and a higher participation in events such as swimming carnivals.

## **Summary**

It is increasingly clear that connectedness cannot be considered an extra in the learning environment; it is an essential component of resilience, achievement and well-being. Although important for all children and young people, it is particularly relevant for those who are the most vulnerable, students whose experiences have left them feeling untrusting of others. Their behavior often reflects these feelings and can be challenging. In order to manage such behavior, schools may increase sanctions until there is nothing left but exclusion, perpetuating a cycle of social exclusion. The reality for disconnected youth is a disconnected future — and the perpetuation of a cycle of disadvantage. What these students need is more connection to school, not less. Where else will some of our young people learn what is involved in positive relationships or experience inclusive belonging and a positive sense of self if this does not happen in the school environment? As we can see from the examples given here, it is possible to do things that make a difference for students now which will hopefully exert impact on communities in the future. It is in everyone's interests for connectedness to be high on the educational agenda everywhere. Further information on the initiatives described here can be found on the websites below.

### ***Information of Useful Resources***

- *KidsMatter*  
(<http://www.kidsmatter.edu.au>)
- *MindMatters*  
(<http://www.mindmatters.edu.au/default.asp>)
- *Circle Solutions Network*  
(<http://www.circlesolutionsnetwork.com/csn>)
- *National Association for Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect*  
(<http://www.napcan.org.au>)

- *Peer Support Australia*  
(<http://www.peersupport.edu.au>)
- *Student Wellbeing Action Partnership*  
(<http://www.edfac.unimelb.edu.au/swap>)
- *Wellbeing Australia*  
(<http://www.wellbeingaustralia.com.au/wba>)
- *Restorative Practices International*  
(<http://restorativepracticesinternational.org>)

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### 提升澳洲兒童和青年人的聯繫感

本文探討聯繫感對兒童和青年人生活的重要性，以及它對促進個人抗逆力和社區健康的意義。文章集中討論在學校裏，為了促進學生的歸屬感，教育可以擔當甚麼角色，以及教師如何促進正向和健康的關係。本文亦會概述推動澳洲教育界重視這些議題的動力，並綜合一些近期研究，這些研究均提出能讓學校制度中每個環節都融入真正歸屬感的生態環境。最後，本文亦會舉例說明如何在學校裏和全國的教育管轄區內發展聯繫感。

關鍵詞：學校歸屬感；學生參與；社會資本