[Special Issue: *International Perspectives on Connectedness
in Children and Adolescents*]

Fostering Connectedness and Life Skills Development in Children and Youth: International Perspectives

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This article first summarizes relevant literature from the U.S. and
Hong Kong that informs our understanding of connectedness and
life skills development in children and youth. It then introduces
invited papers from Australia, Japan, Hong Kong, the Chinese
mainland and the U.S., and also the reflection paper presented
in this special issue. Finally, the concluding thoughts highlight
some conceptual advances and useful practices for educators and
guidance professionals in fostering connectedness and life skills
development.

Keywords: children; connectedness; life skills development;
youth; Australia; China; Hong Kong; Japan; United
States

In this special issue of the *Asian Journal of Counselling*, we present
articles from Australia, Japan, Hong Kong, the Chinese mainland and

the United States (U.S.), addressing the theme of connectedness and life skills development in children and adolescents. It is appropriate first to set the stage for this theme by briefly reviewing some of the research literature pertinent to connectedness and life skills development.

Connectedness

"Connectedness" can be best described as an individual's positive perceptions that cause him or her to feel genuinely accepted, comfortable, valued and free to contribute in a given environment or relationship. According to Smith and Mackie (2007), people actively seek such connectedness in that they attempt to create and maintain feelings of mutual support, liking and acceptance from those they care about and value. Feelings of connectedness relate to specific contexts, such as within the family unit, the peer group, other social groups like teams or clubs, and in school or work environments.

Researchers in the U.S. suggest that the development of connectedness in children appears to be directly influenced by such factors as parental closeness, communication, concern, empathy, support and respect (Frank, Avery, & Laman, 1988). Studies have identified a link between positive parental connectedness and the reduction of adolescent risk behaviors (Blum, 2002; Lezin, Rolleri, Bean, & Taylor, 2004; Miller, Benson, & Galbraith, 2001).

In recent years, the specific domain of "school connectedness" has become an area of great interest for researchers, educators and counselors (Goodenow, 1993; Libbey, 2004). According to Blum (2005), "Students who experience school connectedness like school, feel that they belong, believe teachers care about them and their learning, believe that education matters, have friends at school, believe that discipline is fair, and have opportunities to participate in extracurricular activities" (p. 16). In Hong Kong, researchers have conceptualized school connectedness as

"attachment, personal acceptance, respect, engagement, and support that students perceive in the school social environment" (Yuen, Fong, et al., 2008, p. 5).

Other studies in the U.S. have linked students' school connectedness to student engagement, achievement, and social development (Blum, 2005; Catalano, Haggerty, Oesterle, Fleming, & Hawkins, 2004; Karcher & Lindwall, 2003; Thompson, Iachan, Overpeck, Ross, & Gross, 2006), whereas students' school disconnectedness was linked to at-risk behavior (Blum & Ireland, 2004). In the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Resnick et al., 1997), nine related themes were evident in measures of school connectedness, namely academic engagement, belonging, discipline and fairness, liking school, student voices, extracurricular activities, peer relations, safety, and teacher support (Libbey, 2004). Research in Hong Kong shows that there appears to be a reciprocal association between connectedness and the acquisition of effective life skills (Yuen, Fong, et al., 2008). Research has indicated that connectedness to teachers and to other secondary students is associated significantly with students' self-efficacy in applying life skills in all areas. For healthy life skills development, students perceived that they need to connect with teachers and peers in their schools (Yuen, Chan, Gysbers, et al., 2010).

Life Skills

Life skills can be defined as the competencies necessary for operating effectively in personal, social, and academic domains, and for career planning and development (American School Counseling Association, 2003; Yuen, Lau, et al., 2003). Students need to be equipped with self-knowledge, social and emotional skills, study skills, decision-making and problem-solving skills, time management skills, and career-planning skills to cope with rapidly changing social conditions (Gysbers, 2000; Gysbers & Henderson, 2006; Shea et al., 2005; Yuen, Lau, et al., 2003).

Researchers have examined the life skills development of children and adolescents, and the environmental and contextual factors that influence this development. From the perspective of mental health counseling, one line of research has been developed by Gazda and his associates at the University of Georgia. Gazda and Brooks (1985) suggested that life skills are essential in four life domains, namely family, school, community, and career. There is a positive relationship between life functioning and emotional adjustment (Darden, Ginter, & Gazda, 1996). Empirical evidence suggests that deficits in life skills can contribute to delinquent behavior (Gazda, Ginter, & Horne, 2001).

Concern has been growing both locally and internationally over inadequate connectedness and life skills development among school students (e.g., Hong Kong Education Commission, 2000; McNeely & Falci, 2004). From the school health perspective, there has been a move by practitioners to understand and enhance school connectedness and life skills among students. For example, it is suggested that improvement in students' connectedness to parents, peers and teachers can be achieved through providing experiences such as mentorship programs and participation in a life skills guidance curriculum that enhance students' self-esteem and social skills (Karcher, 2005; King, Vidourek, Davis, & McClellan, 2002).

Assessing Connectedness and Life Skills

In order to improve connectedness and life skills in a systematic manner, it is necessary first to appraise students' current status in these areas. For intervention purposes, it is believed that life skills can be measured and developed through well-designed education and training (Darden et al., 1996; Hazel, Schumaker, Sherman, & Sheldon, 1982). For this reason, in some countries, assessment and evaluation have become issues of interest and research (e.g., Libbey, 2004; Waters & Cross, 2010). This is certainly true in Hong Kong, where a reliable and valid Chinese

school connectedness scale for senior secondary students has been developed, together with a set of self-efficacy inventories measuring career, academic, and personal-social development. Validation studies have shown that the construct validities and internal consistencies of these measures are adequate (Yuen, Gysbers, Chan, Lau, Leung, et al., 2005; Yuen, Gysbers, Chan, Lau, & Shea, 2010; Yuen, Gysbers, Hui, et al., 2004; Yuen, Hui, et al., 2006). Future developments in this area are likely to be strategies for evaluating the effectiveness of intervention methods for increasing students' connectedness and life skills development.

Special Issue

This special issue offers a concise picture of useful practices in enhancing connectedness in Australia, Japan, Hong Kong, the Chinese mainland, and the U.S. that could be of value in stimulating reflection on converging themes within the currently existing different systems and cultural contexts. The articles focus on an ecological framework in a school system, positive class climate, teacher's caring role, circle time, mentoring programs, and teacher wellness.

The lead article by Sue Roffey reviews the importance of connectedness in the lives of children and young people, and argues for a framework in which authentic belonging is embedded across all parts of a school system. Examples of useful practices in Australian schools are highlighted. The second article by Ayako Ito briefly reviews school connectedness research in Japan, focusing on the relationship between school bonding (based on Hirschi's theory) and non-attendance or antisocial behavior at school among Japanese students. A case example is provided in the Japanese homeroom teacher's role in enhancing children's connectedness through a positive class climate in elementary school. Raymond Chan, Patrick Lau, and Mantak Yuen in the third article report a cross-section survey of Hong Kong primary and secondary students, showing teachers' caring attitude contributing to students' life

skills development and academic achievement. The fourth article, by Ling Wu and Peter Lang, reports the use of an experiential pedagogy, "circle time," which was first developed in a Western context, in a school on the Chinese mainland. In the next article, Michael Karcher and KristiAnna Santos describe the Cross-Age Mentoring Program (CAMP), a developmental mentoring program for adolescents and youth in the U.S., and report the changes in adolescent connectedness among participating mentees and mentors. They challenge us to consider whether the changes CAMP fosters in conventional connectedness would occur in more collectivistic societies and whether such changes would be the most useful primary outcomes of CAMPs implemented in Asian countries. The final reaction paper by Patrick Lau explores the teacher's role in enhancing connectedness among students and teachers, and considers the wellness of teachers as critical in determining the quality of teacher-student relationships.

Concluding Thoughts

As I look back on the recent international literature on connectedness and the articles in this special issue, I would like to highlight some conceptual advances and useful practices in fostering connectedness and life skills development in children and youth for educators and guidance professionals.

First, it is essential to recognize that connectedness, self-development, cognitive development, and life skills development are interdependent. Achievement of connectedness is dependent on the social skills and perspective-taking skills of the individuals in specific contexts (Karcher, 2004).

Second, empirical evidence supports a protective association with health outcomes for family, peer, and school connectedness (Markham et al., 2010). Significant numbers of young people in transition who feel

disconnected from their family, peer and school tend to maintain concerning levels of anxiety, depression and stress in their new environment (McGraw, Moore, Fuller, & Bates, 2008).

Third, empirical evidence suggests that well-designed programs and positive climate in schools are conducive to students' academic achievement and social-emotive learning (Ellis, Marsh, & Craven, 2009; Konishi, Hymel, Zumbo, & Li, 2010; Shek, Ma, & Merrick, 2007). Resilience-based youth development approach is a promising strategy in improving holistic health and well-being among children and youth, in particular for those facing adversity (Blum, 2003; Lee, Kwong, Cheung, Ungar, & Cheung, 2010). Relationship-based programs such as mentoring and apprenticeship may provide opportunities for young people to connect to caring non-parent adults who serve as role models, instructors, listeners, and career advisors (Rhodes & Roffman, 2003).

Fourth, fostering connectedness is often considered as an important outcome from youth development programs, and such outcomes should be measurable. Reliable and valid measures of multiple domains of connectedness have now been developed for assessment and evaluation purposes (e.g., Karcher & Sass, 2010; Townsend & McWhirter, 2005; Waters & Cross, 2010; Yuen, Gysbers, Lau, Chan, & Shea, 2009).

Fifth, promoting connectedness though whole-school approaches goes beyond implementing specific social-emotional programs. The key is in collaboration and partnership among all teachers, administrators and guidance personnel to implement school guidance strategies with a focus on upholding values, voicing expectations, and building capacity to care for students (Roffey, 2008; Rowe, Stewart, & Patterson, 2007; Waters, Cross, & Shaw, 2010; Yuen, Chan, Lau, Gysbers, & Shea, 2007). These points may help readers to reflect on the articles in this special issue.

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促進兒童和青少年聯繫感及生活技能發展的國際視角

本文首先概述本地和美國有關兒童和青少年聯繫感及生活技能發展的文獻，接着簡介本專輯中來自澳洲、日本、香港、中國內地及美國的特邀文章，以及一篇回應文章。最後，本文總結出一些嶄新的概念和有用的實踐，以助教育工作者和輔導專業人士促進兒童和青少年的聯繫感及生活技能發展。

關鍵詞：兒童；聯繫感；生活技能發展；青少年；澳洲；中國內地；
　　　　香港；日本；美國