

[Reaction paper]

Teacher Wellness: An Important Issue in Fostering School Connectedness and Life Skills Development Among Students

Patrick S. Y. Lau

The Chinese University of Hong Kong

Queenie A. Y. Lee

Hong Kong Baptist University

Hezul Tin-Yan Ng

The Chinese University of Hong Kong

The concept of the importance of teacher wellness in fostering connectedness and life skills development among students in schools is analyzed in this reaction paper. Five articles about school connectedness and life skills development of youth in an international context, published in the current special issue of *Asian Journal of Counselling*, were reviewed. Roffey (2011) described specific initiatives practiced in Australia. Ito (2011) described the unique role of homeroom teachers in the Japanese education system and how teachers could make use of Classroom

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Climate Inventory to devise appropriate school or class activities to increase student cohesion and foster student self-worth and mental health. Chan, Lau, and Yuen (2011) discussed the importance of teacher care and its relationship to the life skills development and academic achievement of students in Hong Kong. Wu and Lang (2011) presented their findings on how circle time sessions facilitated self-awareness of the participants and their relationships with peers. Lastly, Karcher and Santos (2011) described the management of a Cross-Age Mentoring Program and discussed how such a program could benefit Asian youth to cultivate better school connectedness. These articles and other research findings together suggest that: (a) school connectedness is linked to various positive outcomes; (b) it is promoted by many pedagogical methods; and (c) it concerns the satisfaction of students' need to belong. Since teachers contribute significantly to all these aspects, the wellness of teachers becomes an indispensable factor in promoting school connectedness.

Keywords: school connectedness; life skills development; youth; teacher wellness

School connectedness is regarded as an underemphasized parameter in adolescent mental health (Shochet, Dadds, Ham, & Montague, 2006). However, researchers have reported that school connectedness is negatively related to a certain number of undesirable developmental outcomes, such as dropping out from school, smoking, substance abuse, and violent behavior (e.g., Dornbusch, Erickson, Laird, & Wong, 2001; Miltich, Hunt, & Meyers, 2004; You et al., 2008). In the current special issue of *Asian Journal of Counselling*, which focuses on school connectedness, five articles discuss how school connectedness and life skills can be promoted in different countries and various cultures. This article is written as a reaction paper to the aforementioned articles.

In this issue, Roffey (2011) described school connectedness as a construct and discussed the researched benefits that could be brought about by strengthening the connectedness in schools. Roffey also presented specific initiatives that are practiced in Australia and the positive impacts resulted from such initiatives. Ito (2011) described the role of homeroom teachers in Japan. By using the Classroom Climate Inventory, and taking a gender perspective, Ito highlighted how homeroom teachers derived ideas about the classroom atmosphere and satisfaction or frustration of male and female members of the class, which in turn informed teachers of how they could conduct class activities to increase student cohesion. Ito also described the relationships between classroom climate and students' mental health, and suggested avenues that teachers could follow to promote the psychological well-being and self-worth of students. Chan, Lau, and Yuen (2011) discussed the importance of teacher care and its relationship to the life skills development and academic achievement of students in Hong Kong. They found that teacher care is positively related to the four domains of life skills development (i.e., personal, social, academic, and career and talent development), as well as students' academic achievement in the three core subjects (Chinese, English, and Mathematics) among junior secondary school students. Wu and Lang (2011) investigated the effects of circle time practiced in a Chinese middle school. Through examining the political, social, and economic challenges China has been facing in the last decades as the country's international influence has grown, the researchers have highlighted the need for a more affective education to nurture their growing youth. In their article, Wu and Lang not only found circle time an effective pedagogy in the classroom, but also affirmed the relevance and suitability of Western practices applied in the Eastern context. Karcher and Santos (2011) outlined individualism, collectivism and relationalism, and articulated that school connectedness is best manifested in the

relational framework in Chinese societies. They also discussed conventional versus unconventional connectedness and the contribution of the Cross-Age Mentoring Program (CAMP) in building unconventional connectedness among students across different grades.

Putting these together, we can see that school connectedness is a multi-faceted construct that involves students, teachers, and the larger school and society. Across different cultural backgrounds and different methods of enhancing school connectedness, teachers seem to be the key contributor in all cases. Whereas teacher-student relationships and student-student relationships are most widely studied, the underlying factors that result in positive relationships and interactions among different parties are not well addressed. We support a position that the wellness of teachers is most critical in cultivating school connectedness. In this reaction paper, a brief review of the five articles is presented. This is followed by key syntheses and a discussion of the importance of teacher wellness in fostering connectedness in schools.

Enhancing Connectedness in Australia

Roffey (2011) adopted the definition of connectedness from past researches (Osterman, 2000; Solomon, Watson, Battistich, Schaps, & Delucchi, 1996), which defined the construct broadly as a sense of belonging to a community and the feeling that one is important and that contributions are valued. When individuals feel accepted by a social group, benefits yielded include social/psychological support, aid received in times of need, access to resources, and a good foundation for strong families (Duncan et al., 2007). In terms of individual and educational outcomes, connectedness is found to boost resilience, health-promoting behavior, mental health, academic motivation and achievement, and positive social behavior. In a school context, connectedness comprises two interrelated components: (1) affective,

supportive relationships; and (2) individuals' commitment to progress and achievement (Catalano, Haggerty, Oesterle, Fleming, & Hawkins, 2004). Specifically, schools that show strong connectedness are those that implement high standards and expectations, apply fair disciplinary policies, create trusting relationships among all members, hire and support capable teachers, foster high parental expectations, and encourage students to feel close to a supportive adult in school (Roffey, 2011). In accordance with such features, schools in Australia have tried out different initiatives or programs aiming at increasing connectedness. These include *KidsMatter*, *MindMatters* and *KiDS CAN*, which promote the psychological well-being of students, *Circle Time Solutions* to enhance self-worth and respect for others, as well as peer support and restorative approaches to bring students closer to one another.

In sum, schools in Australia have developed multiple initiatives to facilitate a sense of belonging and connectedness. The versatility and deliberate planning and implementation of the programs show the country's priority for an all-round, affective education that benefits long-term youth development. This has positive implications for Asian societies such as China and Hong Kong, which are beginning to recognize the importance of affective education.

Enhancing Connectedness in Japan

Unlike Australia, where state-wide initiatives to enhance connectedness are implemented, the mission in Japan is placed in the hands of homeroom teachers whose role is unique in the international education arena. In Japanese schools, students stay in the same classroom and occupy the same seat for the whole day with the same homeroom teacher, except for special lessons, music, art, and physical education. The result of this system is that students spend the majority of time with the homeroom teacher. As the teachers are expected to guide students in their academic, personal, social, and career

development, they are called upon to develop a number of skills to handle the job well. The research of Ito (2011) described the classroom climate and explored how to devise activities to mitigate frustration and tension among the students. It is encouraging to observe that not only classroom climate has improved over the research period, but also student mental health has been promoted through the planning of class or school activities by homeroom teachers. A significant observation from this study is that the teacher is an important agent in facilitating a positive classroom atmosphere. Moreover, teachers were able to benefit from these measures and were inspired by their subsequent consultation with the researcher on how they could decrease negative forces or feelings in a class while, at the same time, increasing individuals' satisfaction and student connectedness as a whole. This affirms the direction of involving teachers in education research, where they play the dual roles of participants and researchers, whose research output may make a difference to education outcomes.

Teacher Care as a Determining Factor in Students' Life Skills Development and Academic Achievement in Hong Kong

Compared with Japan, Hong Kong has taken a larger step in implementing guidance programs across the region. Almost a decade after the "Comprehensive Guidance Program" was launched in the territory from 2002 (Lee, 2003), researchers are interested in determining not only the effectiveness of the program but also its relation to other constructs. Chan et al. (2011) looked specifically at the construct of "teacher care" and examined its relation to the life skills development and academic achievement of junior secondary school students in Hong Kong. The researchers drew on the definition of Bulach, Brown, and Potter (1998), who outlined teachers' caring behaviors as including teacher-student eye contact, teaching at students' ability levels, creating an environment in which students could feel safe,

addressing students by their names, and greeting them when entering the classroom. Based on these descriptions, Chan et al. (2011) derived a four-item inventory to measure teacher care with good internal consistency.

Chan et al. (2011) found teacher care to have a significant effect on the personal, social, academic, and career or talent development of students. The researchers also noted that the effects of the overall life skills development were more significant in female than in male students. More specifically, teacher care could influence students' ability to respect and accept others, cope with bullying, avoid substance (including tobacco) and alcohol abuse, and promote increased learning. The findings of the study by Chan et al. provide useful precepts to assist school guidance teams in understanding and handling some of the problem areas that schools are facing today, including problems with academic performance and substance abuse. At the school level, teachers' caring attitude could be highlighted, rather than focusing exclusively on the more conventional prevention programs targeting pathologies or risky behaviors. At the policy level, teacher education institutions could increase their coverage of the "caring teacher" concept in their training programs. In sum, the role and caring attitude of teachers are indispensable to cultivating a positive school atmosphere, in which the intellectual and psychological growth of the students is facilitated.

Circle Time Pedagogy as Practiced on the Chinese Mainland

Wu and Lang (2011) agree with the European Affective Education Network's definition of "affective education." This definition emphasizes the attitudes, feelings, beliefs and emotions of students, their personal and social development, and their interpersonal relationships. Despite the positive outcomes that affective education may yield, Wu and Lang described the constraints on such education on the Chinese mainland.

These include the traditional Chinese aversion to public displays of affection and the lack of such a perspective under the current “moral education” implemented on the mainland. Considering the changes in modern China, where individuality is becoming more articulated, however, the researchers acknowledged a pressing need for the nation to incorporate systemic affective education in their curriculum.

It was under these conditions that Wu and Lang (2011) attempted circle time, a pedagogy that allows children to understand and express themselves while at the same time learning to respect others. Through their use of circle time with a group of students in a foreign language school in China, the researchers observed significant changes in both teacher and student participants. Many student participants commented that they felt relaxed in circle time and learned how to express themselves, solve problems, and communicate with other students. The teacher participants reported three main benefits of the practice: they had come to a better understanding of students’ problems; they recognized students’ strengths whereas previously they had focused on students’ shortcomings; and they became less controlling of the class. Although the sessions were run over a short time span and on a small, selected group only, the importance of the research lies in the finding that good Western pedagogies could be applied to Asian societies. Moreover, an emphasis on the affective part of education has become timely in modern China when humanity values are thriving and being sought after.

Promoting Connectedness Through a Youth Mentoring Program in Asia

Similar to the previous research, Karcher and Santos (2011) investigated the applicability of a Western developmental mentoring program, Cross-Age Mentoring Program (CAMP), in Asian societies.

In their article, characteristics of individualism, collectivism, and relationalism are described respectively. In examining the tradition and people's interaction in Asian societies, relationalism, which favors interdependence, reciprocity, and self-reliance, appears to be best epitomized.

Karcher and Santos (2011) defined connectedness as a product of both action and affect, meaning that individuals who show a sense of belonging to a group or community would actively participate in and express care about the group. Adolescents, who are going through a major physical, emotional, and social development phase and in search of their identity, may involve themselves in conventional or unconventional connectedness. Conventional connectedness involves traditional, socially approved activities, such as church attendance whereas the latter refers to emotional or physical engagements governed by the youth themselves that may link to risky behaviors. Karcher and Santos argued that if teenagers fail to establish conventional connectedness, they may resort to unconventional connectedness as compensation. Therefore, it is important that schools play a role in building conventional connectedness through theory-grounded and structured intervention programs to help the development and connectedness of developing adolescents. Among the many models, CAMP is advocated.

CAMP is a well-thought-out and implemented mentoring program that spans the development levels of adolescence. At the bottom level, younger students are mentees, who are guided by older mentees or protégés, and in turn, become mentors themselves, moving upwards through the tiers as they gain experience and seniority, helping the lead mentor to guide the new mentees. Karcher and Santos (2011) reasoned that the role advancement helps the participants to both acquire the necessary skills to manage the role at each level, and strengthen their

self-esteem and positive identity. In Asia, where relationships and reciprocal interactions are emphasized, the researchers anticipated that such a mentoring program model would fit and benefit the youth.

Some Key Syntheses of School Connectedness and Life Skills Development Research in an International Context

The five articles on school connectedness and life skills development of children and youth in different regions give us new insight into the development of school connectedness in an international context, including: (1) the positive outcomes associated with strong school connectedness; (2) the different ways to facilitate school connectedness; and (3) the satisfaction of students' need to belong. These insights are elaborated in the following sections.

The Positive Outcomes of School Connectedness

Irrespective of the geographical and cultural differences, school connectedness has been promoted in areas as diverse as Australia, China, and Hong Kong because the construct is found to be associated with many positive youth outcomes. As stipulated in the Wingspread Declaration on School Connectedness published in the *Journal of School Health* in 2004 (Blum & Libbey, 2004), school connectedness is linked to academic success, positive adult-student relationships, and feelings of safety. School connectedness is also found to be a protective factor against risky behaviors, such as violence, substance abuse, emotional distress, and early age of first sexual relations (Roffey, 2011). From such findings, it has become clear that school connectedness is worth being promoted and researched as it contributes to the different facets of the adolescents' well-being, ranging from self-esteem to academic performance and interpersonal relationships. In an era when quality education is advocated in many parts of the world, perhaps affective education should be promoted alongside an effective pedagogy

and curriculum if we are to produce quality world citizens capable of handling both intellectual endeavors and reciprocal emotional interchanges.

The Many Ways to Facilitate School Connectedness

Since school connectedness yields positive outcomes among students, it is in our interest to look into ways to promote it. From the five articles reviewed here, we can see that in different regions, researchers or educators have tried to promote school connectedness through different means, including programs such as KidsMatter in Australia, circle time on the Chinese mainland, the CAMP mentoring program, and the use of an inventory to measure connectedness and inform teaching, as described by Ito (2011) about homeroom teachers in Japan. Although the programs varied, one conclusion we can draw is that school connectedness can be strengthened as long as the implemented program is well-planned and supported by theory and research.

When we analyze the nature of school connectedness itself, we can see that it is actually a multi-faceted construct that involves a number of components, including teachers, students, programs, and educational policies at large. These components can be broken down further into smaller factors. For example, the “teachers” category could be divided into sub-categories of leadership from school heads, teacher care, wellness, and interaction and relationships with students. Each of these could make a difference to school connectedness and they are all researchable. The “teachers” domain will be further elaborated in the following sections. However, we would like to reiterate that school connectedness is a large, multi-faceted construct that can be studied in different research domains. Considering the distinctive culture, social/economic phenomena and government/education policies at large, researchers of different regions can go on to develop research work that

uncovers facets of school connectedness unique to their own culture or region.

Satisfying Students' Need to Belong

The third observation from the five articles is related to students' need to belong, which is commonly found among adolescents. Students would seek to bond with peers or teachers in schools through various means. In order to be accepted by peers, to have a sense of belonging with them and to satisfy the need to belong, students will adopt various behaviors, both traditionally acceptable and the less acceptable, anti-social behaviors, such as smoking (Baillie, Lovato, Johnson, & Kalaw, 2005) or bullying (Olthof & Goossens, 2008). In addition, the positive relationship between satisfying students' need to belong and school connectedness has been well documented (e.g., Libbey, 2004; Waters, Cross, & Shaw, 2010).

Although satisfying students' need to belong is not explicitly highlighted in the five newly published articles, it is a major theme embedded within the text. Roffey (2011) advocated the importance of satisfying students' needs to belong by summarizing the work of Wike and Fraser (2009). Although the level of satisfaction in fulfilling the need to belong was found to vary among students, successfully meeting this need was reported to be one of the components in reducing violent behavior. Roffey further emphasized that belongingness should be a key element stressed in different pedagogical approaches, like circle time, KidsMatter and MindMatters, to enhancing school connectedness. Ito (2011) pointed out that the development of students' sense of community could enhance their connectedness in schools and that homeroom teachers were in an eminently suitable position to pay attention to it. The satisfaction derived from attending a homeroom class run by the homeroom teacher is a subscale of the Classroom Climate Inventory, a measurement tool adopted by Ito that measured connectedness in her

study. These two issues (students' sense of community and satisfaction with the homeroom class) are largely related to students' satisfaction of their need to belong. Additionally, in the study by Chan et al. (2011), teacher care was found to be specifically related to students' life skills development on respecting and accepting others, avoidance of anti-social behaviors (such as drug abuse), and involvement in learning. These three elements of students' life skills are all closely linked to their need to belong. In addition, Wu and Lang (2011) noted that although affective education was not a salient concept in the Chinese tradition, circle time could be an alternative and indirect form of affective education for Chinese students. After taking part in circle time, students reported good participation in the activities and greater respect for others within the group. This may be a reflection of students' level of satisfaction with their need to belong. Likewise, Karcher and Santos (2011) reported that the CAMP mentoring program contains an affective component about the positive linkage to people, indicating that satisfying students' need to belong could enhance their participation and learning throughout the whole mentoring program. In all these activities, teachers play an important role in facilitating students' progress and success.

The need to belong, therefore, seems to be common within the student population. Attention should be paid to satisfying this need because of its positive relationship to the enhancement of connectedness among students, and between students and their teachers as well as the school body as a whole.

The Important Role of Teachers and Their Wellness in Promoting School Connectedness

From the above syntheses, a common theme related to teachers has emerged. The role of teachers and their wellness seem to be one of the determining factors in promoting school connectedness among students. Roffey (2011) listed "students feeling close to at least one supportive

adult” as one of the most effective strategies for increasing school connectedness. Similarly, Ito (2011) presented clearly the important role of homeroom teachers in the Japanese education system. Chan et al. (2011) highlighted the close relationship between teacher care, students’ life skills development and academic achievement. Wu and Lang (2011) showed how teachers could facilitate the self-awareness of students and their acceptance and respect of their peers in well-conducted circle time sessions. Likewise, Karcher and Santos (2011) emphasized the important role of teachers in building up conventional connectedness among students through a theory-grounded and structured curriculum in the mentoring training program. All the above practices demonstrate the significant ability of teachers to affect the level of school connectedness.

In her earlier research, Roffey (2007) analyzed how the role of the school leader and his/her vision could impact the caring culture of the school as well as the connectedness of its members, including both teachers and students. The essence of all these findings is that the school personnel, in this case the teachers, are key to facilitating a positive school atmosphere as they are the frontline staff working directly with students and they are the people executing school policies that aim to support connectedness.

“Wellness” was recognized as an important issue by the World Health Organization (WHO) as early as 1947, which defined “wellness” as “physical, mental, and social well-being, not merely the absence of disease” (WHO, 1958, p. 1). In line with this definition, Lau, Chan, Yuen, Myers, and Lee (2008) have affirmed the importance of the wellness of teachers in the educational arena. In the past decade, in viewing adolescent problems, there has been a shift from a deficit-based model that looked at risks and health-compromising behaviors to an asset-based model that looked more toward individual strengths and developmental assets (Benson, 1997).

Since teacher wellness was not clearly defined in the literature, Lau et al. (2008) therefore adopted a comprehensive “Wheel of Wellness” model as proposed by Witmer and Sweeney (1992) and the related tools to start to construct and study teacher wellness. The Wheel of Wellness model is based on Adler’s Individual Psychology and other empirical evidence collected from social science disciplines. The model comprises five interrelated life tasks of spirituality, work and leisure, friendship, love, and self-direction (Myers, Sweeney, & Witmer, 2000). Based on the model, Myers and Sweeney (2004) developed the Wellness Evaluation of Lifestyle (WEL) to assess an individual’s wellness in 17 proposed areas.

Myers and Sweeney (2004) gathered more empirical evidence and posited that the model of wellness should comprise a higher-order factor of wellness that relates to five second-order factors (5F-Wel), namely Essential Self, Creative Self, Coping Self, Social Self, and Physical Self. So teacher wellness could be generally defined as the wellness attained by teachers reflected by their collective performance in Essential Self, Creative Self, Coping Self, Social Self, and Physical Self. However, this wellness model was developed for the general population and needs refining to best fit into specific population groups, such as the teacher community. In the model, holism is crucial to understanding human behavior and well-being, and individuals are driven by conscious purposiveness rather than by irrational instincts or forces. The instrument developed by this model, the 5F-Wel, offers us a useful measuring tool for studying the wellness of teachers (Lau et al., 2008).

If one looks at the extensive research literature on the negative impact of teacher burnout, one will see that teacher burnout can significantly affect school connectedness. For example, after reviewing the related literature, Lau (2002) pointed out that prolonged teacher burnout not only results in exhaustion, absence from work, and

unexpected work-related errors, but may also have a negative effect on interpersonal relationships with students and colleagues. This definitely reduces the connectedness in school. In a recent study in Macau, a negative relationship was found between teacher burnout and the self-perceived achievement of teachers (Luk, Chan, Cheong, & Ko, 2010). Furthermore, teachers' subjective well-being was found to be negatively predicted by their burnout level (Cenkseven-Önder & Sari, 2009). Therefore, when teachers "burn out," they may not even be able to perform their basic duties up to the required standard; under such circumstances, their ability to build up good relationships with students and to foster connectedness in schools would be extremely doubtful. Therefore, if we take teacher burnout and teacher wellness as two sides of the same coin, it is reasonable for us to take into special account the influence of teacher wellness on enhancing student development.

Returning to the theme of school connectedness, it is found to be associated with many positive outcomes, such as an increase in students' academic success, positive adult-student relationships and feelings of safety (Blum & Libbey, 2004), and a decrease in school violence, substance abuse, emotional distress and early age of first sexual experience (Roffey, 2011). Therefore, in addition to having a caring attitude, teachers should focus on designing relevant guidance programs to meet students' need to belong and adopt or develop appropriate pedagogical strategies to enhance school connectedness among students. However, teachers should also pay special attention to their own wellness state in order to maintain a positive impact on their students and to help students build up high-quality relationships with others in schools.

The implication of existing wellness research is that teachers who are both physically and mentally fit can bring about the better education outcomes for students. Although teacher wellness is viewed as a

neglected issue in teacher development (Lau et al., 2008), it is encouraging to observe that further research could shed light on the undeniable role of teacher wellness. Future research may investigate teachers' state of wellness, what contributes to their healthy being, and the link of teacher wellness with student learning and development.

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教師身心康寧：培養學生學校聯繫感 和生活技能發展的一項重要議題

本文回應本期《亞洲輔導學報》的五篇文章，指出教師身心康寧在促進學校聯繫感及學生生活技能發展的重要性。Roffey (2011) 描述了澳洲的實踐情況，而 Ito (2011) 則論述了日本教育系統特有的班主任 (homeroom teacher) 制度，以及如何利用課堂氣氛量表 (Classroom Climate Inventory) 設計合適的學校及班級活動，團結學生，提升他們的自我價值及精神健康。Chan, Lau, & Yuen (2011) 討論了教師關懷與生活技能發展的關係。Wu & Lang (2011) 則展示了「圍圈活動」 (circle time) 如何促進參加者自我了解，並增進他們的同儕關係。最後，Karcher & Santos (2011) 勾畫了跨年齡導師計劃 (Cross-Age Mentoring Program) 的運作，以及這個計劃如何令亞洲青少年有更強的學校聯繫感。總結五篇文章並結合過去一些研究可知：(1) 學校聯繫感和許多正面效果有關；(2) 它能以多種方式推行；及 (3) 它要考慮滿足學生從屬的需要。由於老師在上述各領域均可有重要貢獻，故此在促進學校聯繫感時，教師身心康寧不可忽視。

關鍵詞：學校聯繫感；生活技能發展；青少年；教師身心康寧