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School Connectedness: An Analysis of Students' Relationship with Their School

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Abstract

This paper will review the research on school connectedness. More specifically how can school counselors increase their students' connection to school? What have school counselors done to improve this connection, and have they been successful? As positive change agents who work for the entire student population, school counselors are in an ideal position to improve the students' lives. It is the goal of this paper to educate readers about school counselors and school connectedness.

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School Connectedness: An Analysis of Students' Relationship to School

Introduction

A school counselor's job is to enhance the learning process for all students (ASCA, 2012). The American School Counseling Association (ASCA) standards format the school counseling program around three domains: academic, career, and personal/social development. In recent years, academic achievement has taken on a new level of importance in our society; students are striving to attend college and there has been a large push for the states to adopt the Common Core Standards. The Common Core, as it is generally referred to, is meant to be a universal set of standards to prepare all students for college, career, and life (Haskins et al., 2012). Therefore a rise has occurred in research of the factors affecting student academic achievement. One factor which gained recognition in the 1990's was school connectedness.

History of School Connectedness

In 1992, a group of psychiatric nurses developed a new mental health concept. Hagerty, Lynch-Sauer, Patusky, Bouwsema, and Collier noticed their patients' statements all sounded similar. "I don't fit in anywhere . . . I feel so unimportant to anyone . . . I'm not a part of anything," all were muttered by clients who were depressed, anxious, psychotic, or suicidal (Hagerty, et al., 1992). The nurses felt the patients' statements represented a 'sense of belonging,' and set out to empirically define this new concept. Hagerty et al. eventually defined sense of belonging as "the experience of personal involvement in a system or environment so that persons feel themselves to be an integral part of that system or environment (1992)." After the publication of the study, researchers began to link this sense of belonging to students and their schools.

Resnick et al. (1997) set out to identify risk and protective factors at the family, school, and individual levels as they relate to four domains of adolescent health. These four domains included emotional distress and suicidality, involvement in violence, substance abuse, and sexual behaviors (Resnick, et al., 1997). In reporting their results, Resnick et al. (1997) named “parent-family connectedness” and “perceived school connectedness” as being protective against every health risk behavior except for history of pregnancy. These findings were the foundation for the school connectedness construct. Researchers wanted to know more about connectedness, and subsequently more research began to surface.

Definition and Outcomes

School connectedness has been defined as the extent to which a student feels like he or she belongs at school (Waters & Cross, 2010). Goodenow more extensively defined school connectedness as “The extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others in the school social environment” (as cited in Shochet, Dadds, Ham, & Montague, 2006, p. 170). This construct has also been referred to as school engagement, school bonding, and school attachment which have many similarities and some differences (Libbey, 2004). In order to attain consistency, this paper will utilize the term school connectedness to describe the construct.

Students who feel connected to their school are less likely to engage in smoking and drinking (Waters, Cross, Runions, 2009). Waters and Cross (2010) note lower drug use and later onset of sexual activity for students who are connected to their school. Students with high feelings of connectedness also are more likely to attend school regularly and achieve higher academically (Waters et al., 2009). It is clear adolescents’ risk behavior and academics are

influenced by their sense of connection to school. However, there has been a recent emphasis on whether or not school connectedness is a risk factor for mental health issues in students.

McNeely, Nonnemaker, and Blum (2002) noted students who feel connected to school report higher levels of emotional well-being. Also in 2002, Anderman (2002) concluded that higher individual levels of connectedness were related to increased optimism and lower levels of depression. Researchers have discovered a positive correlation between school connectedness and emotional well-being. As expected, this led to the finding of negative correlations as well: as mental illness increases, school connectedness decreases. Depression and anxiety have been discovered to be inversely associated with children who are more highly connected to school (Waters & Cross, 2010). Resnick et al. (1997) also found school connectedness to be negatively correlated with emotional distress (as cited in Shocet et al., 2006). If mental health and academic success have been linked to high levels of school connectedness in individual students, can they be linked to groups of students?

In their description of school connectedness, Monahan, Oesterle, and Hawkins (2010) break school connectedness into two components. The first component, attachment, is characterized by affective relationships with others at school. Shochet et al. (2006) explained adolescents rely less on the family as part of the individuation process and as a result depend more on relationships with friends and others at school. The second component is commitment, which is described by investing in and doing well in school (Monahan et al., 2010). Through attachment and commitment a student is able to form a bond to school. This bond influences youth to establish conformation to the norms and values of the school (Catalano & Hawkins, 1996).

It is clear the construct of school connectedness is a key aspect in developing today's youth. There are many different ways to be successful in today's society, but it is widely accepted the first step to success is receiving a high school diploma. A student in the American school system progresses through their education by first attending elementary school, then middle and high school. Following are reviews of connectedness at each of the three levels.

Connectedness in Elementary School

In recent years, there has been a push for early intervention to battle mental health issues for youth everywhere. However, most research on school connectedness has been conducted on adolescent students. The research examining elementary students' connection to school has been promising. Pears, Kim, Fisher, and Yoerger (2013) set out to discover the impact school connectedness has on elementary-aged children in foster care with a history of maltreatment. The authors noticed these children are at increased risk for academic failure, placement in special education services, and school dropout (Pears, et al., 2013). Therefore it was hypothesized school connectedness would mediate the aforementioned outcomes in late elementary school.

Pears et al. (2013) discovered children in foster care had a poorer connection to school than the control group. The authors point out these results as concerning because early disengagement predicts negative long-term outcomes such as dropping out of high school. The study also revealed: "Lower levels of early affective and cognitive school engagement appear to contribute to lower academic competence and higher levels of risk behaviors in later elementary school (Pears, et al., 2013)." Fortunately in students who showed higher levels of affective and cognitive school engagement, the study linked these traits to higher levels of academic competence. Cognitive school engagement was also found to be linked to lower levels of risk behaviors such as substance use, externalizing behaviors, and deviant peer associations (Pears, et

al., 2013). The results from this study suggest an importance for cultivating school connectedness in elementary students.

Lemberger and Clemens (2012) implemented the Student Success Skills (SSS) program as an intervention for inner-city African-American elementary school students. African-American students may experience racial stereotyping which can be internalized and lead to a “disidentification” with school and academic success (Lemberger & Clemens, 2012, p. 451). “The SSS program is defined by a series of philosophic precepts that can be reduced to two categories, namely, skills that support feelings of school connectedness and how the student regulates learning and social behaviors in school and beyond (Villares et al., 2011).”

The SSS program was used in a small group format over eight sessions. Classroom teachers identified students with low academic performance and disruptive classroom behavior. This group of students was then randomly distributed to treatment and control groups. Each small group consisted of five students and data was collected from the students who attended at least six of the eight sessions.

The results of the study supported the hypothesis that a small group offering of the SSS program can lead to elevated levels of connectedness to school. Teachers also reported changes in executive functioning behaviors as a result of the intervention. The authors report one of the most significant findings as the teachers’ perspectives of student organization of materials. According to Lemberger and Clemens (2012) this is an essential skill in preparing students for successful transition to middle school.

Connectedness in Middle and High School

An extensive foray into the research on school connectedness in middle and high schools returned a multitude of studies. It was clear that adolescent and teen connectedness to school has

been researched immensely, but it was difficult to clearly separate based on level of school. Therefore the following section will review the research on school connectedness in early to late adolescence: the developmental stage which takes place throughout the middle and high school years.

The years spanning early adolescence (ages 10-15) are generally understood to represent a critical stage of adolescence development. The physical, cognitive, and social changes which occur at this age as well as increased expectations at school have potential for overloading the adjustment ability of a young student. Research has pointed to these years as having the highest rates of disengagement, boredom, alienation, disruptive behavior, and disenchantment of students (Frydenberg, Care, Freeman, & Chan, 2009). Therefore understanding the factors relating to school connectedness in adolescence may help to improve school environments and plant the seeds for future success. These results clearly indicate the importance of cultivating a connection during middle school, but what influences students to connect with their school?

Frydenberg et al. (2009) investigated two factors associated with adaptation in early adolescence and their relation to school connectedness. The first factor, coping, is necessary for individuals to adequately deal with stress and problems. Middle school students are likely to encounter stressors relating to family, school, and peers in their lives. Frydenberg et al. (2009) report when an adolescent is faced with a stressful situation which is changeable, problem-solving strategies are more likely to be used. If the situation is attributed as unchangeable, emotion-related strategies are more likely to be used. These include worrying or self-blaming of the individual (Frydenberg et al., (2009).

The second factor investigated by Frydenberg et al. (2009) is wellbeing. In order for early adolescents to adapt to physical, intellectual, and social changes, a positive state of wellbeing is

necessary. Frydenberg et al. (2009) outlined that an individual with positive wellbeing has health, resilience, self-concept, self-efficacy, and achievement. Indicators of wellbeing may include being able to express a point of view, having friends to talk to who can be trusted, being valued by others, and feeling safe from harm (Frydenberg et al., 2009). If students are able to attain these indicators, then it may be possible for them to develop a connection to their school.

The authors' results showed students who use more productive coping strategies had a better sense of wellbeing and reported greater connectedness with their school (Frydenberg et al., 2009). The opposite was also found to be related. Students who utilized non-productive coping strategies had a lower sense of wellbeing and school connectedness (Frydenberg et al., 2009). This research points to the need to teach positive coping skills to students. These skills can help students solve problems thereby increasing wellbeing and strengthening their connection to school.

In their study, Shochet, Dadds, Ham, and Montague (2006) surveyed over 2,500 eighth graders to see if school connectedness predicted future mental health issues. They hypothesized that school connectedness would correlate negatively with concurrent and future self-report symptoms of depression and anxiety (Shochet et al., 2006). They also predicted school connectedness would relate to depressive and anxiety symptoms one year later. The findings strongly supported the hypotheses with school connectedness strongly correlating with concurrent and future depression. According to Shochet et al. (2006), the sizes of the correlations suggest that school connectedness is an underemphasized parameter in combating adolescent depression.

Research has shown the importance of gaining a connection at the middle school level. Bond et al. (2007) set out to determine whether or not connectedness in middle school is a

predictor of substance use and mental health status two years later, and educational achievement four years later. The authors administered surveys to students during eighth grade and again later in tenth grade. Bond et al. (2007) collected mental health statuses via a computerized version of the Clinical Interview Schedule-Revised (Lewis et al., 1988). The students self-reported how many days out of the past seven they engaged in substance abuse. Completion of 12th grade and the university entrance score were used as indicators of academic outcomes (Bond et al., 2007). The authors also measured school connectedness by implementing The Communities That Care Youth Survey, developed by Arthur et al. (2002).

After gathering results, Bond et al. (2007) discovered students are more likely to have mental health problems and use substances later in school if they report low school connectedness in late middle school. The results also demonstrate that low school connectedness in early adolescence is a predictor of poor academic achievement later on (Bond et al., 2007). It was also discovered that students with low connection to school were more likely to become regular smokers and use marijuana than their connected counterparts (Bond et al., 2007). Later drinking was also associated with a low level of school connectedness (Bond et al., 2007). These results are similar to those found by Shochet et al. in 2006.

School climate has also been linked to school connectedness in early adolescence. “Researchers suggest that good quality school climates cultivate a connection to the school, and in this way protect youth from negative outcomes (Loukas, Suzuki, & Horton, 2006, p. 492). In their study, the authors sought to discover the mediating effects of school connectedness on four aspects of school climate (friction, cohesion, competition among students, and overall satisfaction with classes) and the subsequent conduct problems and depressive symptoms in the sample.

Friction and cohesion represent the interpersonal dimension of school climate. Early adolescents display a need for relationships with others; therefore these two aspects are likely to affect a connection to school (Loukas, Suzuki, & Horton, 2006). Middle school students also show increasing levels of self-consciousness and social comparison. Therefore perceptions of competition, the third aspect, may decrease school connectedness. Students who are satisfied with their classes make up the fourth aspect of school climate. These students are likely to view school as friendly and supportive (Loukas, Suzuki, & Horton, 2006).

The authors were able to find that students who were more connected to school reported fewer conduct problems one year later. The 10-14 year olds participating in the study who reported more cohesion, less friction, and more satisfaction with their classes felt more connected to their schools (Loukas, Suzuke, & Horton, 2006). Despite their findings however, the authors call for more research into other aspects of school climate. Student-teacher relationships, order, and discipline are factors which may affect school connectedness and climate.

The previous studies on adolescent student connectedness reveal the need for further research. Students at this age are faced with a variety of changes. They are usually required to attend a different building, have a different set of teachers, experience puberty, and an ever growing need to fit in with others. If a connection to school is fostered during this time of change, the students will have a sturdy support system beneath them as they move on to the next step of their lives.

Increasing School Connectedness

The Center for Disease Control (CDC) published a report on school connectedness in 2009. The report outlined several factors that can increase school connectedness. The first is

adult support (CDC, 2009). Students interact with several school staff members throughout the day. These staff members can provide their time, interest, attention, and emotional support to students (CDC, 2009). According to Croninger and Lee (2001), children and adolescents who feel supported by important adults in their lives are more likely to be engaged in school and learning. The next factor outlined by the report is belonging to a positive peer group (CDC, 2009). If students have a stable network of peers, then perceptions of school may improve. Furlong et al. (2003) also mention students' educational outcomes are influenced by whether or not their peer group supports pro-social behavior such as engaging in school activities, completing homework, and helping others.

The third factor that can increase school connectedness is commitment to education (CDC, 2009). Believing school is important to the future and having the perception that the adults in the school are invested in their education are necessary for students to engage in their own learning. Adults who are committed engage students in learning, create mutual respect and caring, and meet the learning needs of each student (Blum, McNeely, & Rinehart, 2002). The final protective factor outlined by the CDC (2009) is school climate. "The physical environment and psychosocial climate can set the stage for positive student perceptions of school (CDC, 2009, p. 5)." One major factor contributing to school environment is classroom management. Blum, McNeely, and Rinehart (2002) report when classrooms are well managed relationships among students and between teachers and students tend to be more positive. These relationships then lead students to be more engaged in learning and completing homework assignments.

These four factors work together to improve school connectedness, but how can schools and communities specifically target each area? Anderson-Butcher (2010) studied the effects of 21 different afterschool programs in central Ohio. The programs were managed by several

different organizations which included the City Parks and Recreation Department, community centers, Communities in Schools, a faith-based organization, and local YMCAs. The students involved in the programs ranged from elementary to middle school aged. After evaluating the programs, Anderson-Butcher (2010) delineated key design features and qualities which contribute to school connectedness.

The youth reported the top reason for attending the programs was due to the relationships they had with adults there. Students and parents/guardians also reported they would “go to a program staff member for help if they need it (Anderson-Butcher, 2010, p. 12).” These findings align with the first protective factor the CDC defined for fostering connections to school. The afterschool programs also engaged the parents/guardians of the students. Anderson-Butcher (2010) found 50% of parents/guardians reported attending activities provided by the afterschool programs at the schools.

A crucial element of school connectedness is students’ relationships with their teachers. Anderson-Butcher (2010) discovered relationships between youth and their teachers strengthened as a result of participation in the afterschool program. The programs hired teachers and other school staff to work directly with the youth, tutor, serve as liaisons between the afterschool program and the school, and to be coaches. According to Anderson-Butcher et al. (2006), employing teachers and other school staff to work within the afterschool program is a strategy known to enhance school connectedness.

The afterschool programs served as protective environments for students. Over 93% of students and 99% of parents/guardians reported feeling safe at the programs (Anderson-Butcher, 2010). An astonishing amount compared to the 40% of youth who reported feeling safe in their neighborhoods (Anderson-Butcher, 2010). If the programs which are based within the school

provide a safe environment, then students are likely to feel safe at school during the day. Safety is a key aspect of positive school climate, a protective factor for school connectedness. Also contributing to safety within the school was the adoption of school rules and policies by the afterschool programs. Students in the afterschool programs were held to the same behavioral expectations as they are during the school day. This approach led to 72-74% of students reporting they fight less and are not in trouble as much because of the afterschool program.

Not only do these programs use identical rules and policies to school, they hold high expectations for attendance and learning. Many of the programs enforced a rule where students were not allowed to attend the afterschool program if they did not attend school that day (Anderson-Butcher, 2010). Some programs monitored school attendance and provided support and problem solving to promote student attendance. Anderson-Butcher (2010) found middle school participants in the afterschool programs had significantly less school absenteeism than those who did not attend the programs. Thus showcasing the importance of these afterschool programs to the connections the participants have with their schools.

One design feature of the programs noticed by Anderson-Butcher was the alignment of activities afterschool to supplement those during school. Many learning activities were directly linked to the classroom curriculum, and were provided in fun and engaging settings (Anderson-Butcher, 2010). Several of the programs created a basketball league, and competed against other afterschool programs. The games rotated between the participating schools, and allowed youth, parents/guardians, and the community to feel connected to the programs and schools. One of the agencies was actually integrated directly into the school, with a resource coordinator supporting students with individual and group interventions (Anderson-Butcher, 2010). This resource coordinator also provided case management and outreach to families.

It is clear the afterschool programs in the study provided many benefits to participating students, parents/guardians, the schools, and the surrounding community. They promoted positive behavior, trusting relationships with teachers, and a safe school environment. All of these are protective factors for increasing school connectedness. The afterschool programs were successful in fostering greater connections to schools, but what can schools do to increase their students' connection?

Mentoring programs have increased in popularity throughout the nation in several different organizations. According to Karcher et al. (2006), approximately 70% of site-based mentoring programs are found in schools. These school-based mentoring programs take place on school grounds, usually during the school day for one hour a week (Karcher, et al., 2006). According to Jucovy (2000), school-based mentoring programs typically have four main characteristics: school personnel refer students for mentoring; an adult mentor meets with a student for one hour per week during the school year; mentors meet with their mentees on school grounds during the school day; and mentors and mentees engage in academic and social activities. One style of mentoring program in the literature seems extremely useful in schools.

Cross-age peer mentoring programs involve older mentors and younger mentees. Typically the older youth is high school aged, and paired with an elementary or middle school aged child (Noll, 1997). The relationship formed between mentor and mentee is usually viewed as strengthening an individual through a personal relationship with a caring and experienced person (Gordon, Downey, & Bangert, 2013). Karcher et al. (2006) iterate this relationship has become an intervention for promoting psychosocial development among mentors and a way to reach underachieving, isolated, or troubled children.

In 2010, Karcher set out to study the impact of serving as a cross-age peer mentor on adolescents' academic connectedness, self-esteem, and family attachment over the course of a school year. The study included 46 high school aged mentors who participated in eight hours of training and two hours of monthly supervision (Karcher, 2010). The mentees consisted of 45 fourth and fifth grade students, 28 of whom were referred to by their teachers for having social, behavioral, or family risk factors (Karcher, 2010). The mentors then followed a previously designed program which focused on facilitating strong mentor-mentee relationships.

Karcher (2010) discovered larger gains in school connectedness and self-esteem in the mentors than in a comparison group of students who did not participate in the mentoring program. No effects were observed on family related outcomes as a result of the mentoring program (Karcher, 2010). There was no evidence found that serving as a mentor to a young child is developmentally inappropriate for teens. Karcher (2010) observed no negative effects of serving as a mentor, such as declines in connection to school. The author concludes the publication by advocating for the use of cross-age peer mentoring programs by school counselors.

Implications for School Counselors

A school counselor's main goal is to positively affect the lives of all students (ASCA, 2012). The counselor is there to make sure students are in the right classes, and work with them as issues arise. The counselor works to build relationships with each student in order to create a healthy and safe environment. It seems as though school counselors should be the driving force behind students' connection to school, however there is a severe lack of literature on school counselors' effect on school connectedness.

School counselors should consider addressing school connectedness as part of their role in the school context. The protective factors for school connectedness this paper has identified may fall under the realm of school counselor duties. They are in a unique position and can influence the school at many different levels by developing relationships with students, facilitating a mentor program, and identifying mental health issues in the school. Counselors also have the skills to work with teachers, parents, administrators, and other school staff. Although they have limited time and resources, increasing student connectedness to their schools will have an enormous effect on students' personal, social, career, and academic lives.

Conclusion

By the time a student in the United States reaches ninth grade, it is likely that this student has spent at least 10,000 waking hours in school (Eccles & Roeser, 2010). This statistic alone is able to illustrate the immense importance of fostering healthy development for students in our society. More research must be done in order to determine school counselors' impact on school connectedness. Is the presence of a school counselor enough to feel connected, or is it what the counselor does that allows students' connections to grow?

The literature which is currently available shows many benefits of a strong connection to school. Students who develop this bond display better academic performance, less mental health issues, and fewer delinquent behaviors. It seems impossible for students to not be connected to their schools after spending most of their lives in them. An enormous amount of students are failing classes, truant, living with mental health issues, or breaking the law. School counselors are already at the frontlines combating these issues in the schools, but school connectedness should be utilized to further improve the wellbeing of all students.

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