STUDENTS’ AND EDUCATORS’ PERSPECTIVES ON STUDENT CONNECTEDNESS TO SCHOOL: SOCIAL SUPPORT, ENGAGEMENT, & BELONGING

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Abstract

The school is a community defined by both concrete and abstract constituent parts: students, teachers, administrators, counselors, and support staff. A student's level of connectedness to their school community can have a number of short- and long-term, positive impacts on their well-being. However, not all students appear to be connected to or belong to their school as others do. A mixed-method parallel research design was selected in order to understand the phenomenon of school connectedness from the viewpoints of both students and educators.

The purpose is to gain a deeper understanding of students' and educators' perspectives regarding student connectedness to school. This study is also concerned with the relationship to social support, engagement, and belonging.

Research Questions

1. How much of the variance in student-educator connectedness can be explained by students' perspectives on social support, engagement (affective, emotional, behavioral, and cognitive) and feelings of belonging? Which of these variables is the best predictor of student-educator connectedness?
2. Is there a significant mean difference between grade level (9, 10, 11, and 12) and student-educator connectedness?
3. Is there a significant mean difference between secondary students that can identify at least one educator with whom they can talk to if they have a problem and students' perspectives on social support, engagement, and feelings of belonging? Which, if any of these variables are most impacted by students that can identify at least one educator and those that cannot?
4. What do educators of secondary students understand about student connectedness and its relationship to areas of social support, engagement, and belonging?

Rationale

• Public schools—perhaps more than ever—are being tasked with supporting students both academically and socially-emotionally.
• School connectedness and the related constructs of social support, engagement, and feelings of belonging, has been found to provide students with many benefits—both within the context of the school (e.g., academic outcomes) and beyond the school (e.g., ACEs).
• More could be understood about the relationship between student connectedness to school, student-educator connectedness, social-support, engagement, and feelings of belonging.

Theoretical Framework

• School connectedness has been found to be less prevalent among adolescents in contrast to their elementary counterparts across countries. (García-Moya et al, 2015)
• Through the lens of educational leadership, an increased understanding of the impact of student connectedness to school may offer insights into how best to allocate resources to improve student connectedness and in turn, school climate.
• Educators' and educators' leadership understanding of school connectedness could be more granular. This topic may help to further connect more students to their school community.

Key Terms

Belonging Feeling respected, welcomed, and wanted by others within their community. (St-Amant, Girard, & Smith, 2017)
Educators People whom students learn from within the confines of the school. (Oxford University Press, n.d.)
Engagement A multi-faceted meta-construct that consists of behavioral, cognitive, and affective or emotional components. (Finn, 1993; Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004; Fredricks & McCollum, 2012)
Social Support The extent to which one experiences and perceives support by others within their community. (Taylor, 2011)
Student Connectedness to School The extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included, cared for, close, and supported by others in the school environment. School connectedness has been associated with the following: A sense of belonging, social support, and engagement. (McNeely & Folco, 2004)
Student- Educator Connectedness The belief held by students that adults in the school care about both their learning and them as individuals. (American Psychological Association, 2014)

Theoretical Framework

Psychological Sense of Community Theory
• First proposed by Seymour Bernard Sarason (1974), attempts to describe the impact of the perception of being a part of a community on the behavior and actions of individuals.
• Social Support
• Social support is the extent to which one experiences and perceives support by others within their community. (Taylor, 2011)
• Engagement
• Also a component of School Connectedness—manifests in multiple forms: Behavioral Engagement, Affective Engagement, Cognitive Engagement. (García-Moya, 2020)
• Belonging
• On a broad scale—includes feeling respected, welcomed, and wanted by others within their community. (St-Amant, Girard, & Smith, 2017)

Methodology & Research Design

Quantitative Data Analysis
• The research will take place in a suburban school district located in the southwest region of Connecticut. The school district will be referred to as “Springgrest Public Schools.”
• Approximately 92% of the households in the district have access to the Internet.
• As of the 2018-19 academic year, approximately 30% of students within Springfield School district were eligible for free or reduced-price meals.
• This research will take place at the high school within the Springgrest Public School district. For purposes of confidentiality, the school will be referred to as “Heather Hills High School.”
• A mixed-methods design will be used to better understand the complexities of the dynamics that exist between student-educator connectedness, social support, engagement, and feelings of belonging. This research design approach allows for the simultaneous collection and analysis of data. (Toddle & Tashakkori, 2009)
• A convergent parallel design entails that the researcher concurrently conducts the quantitative and qualitative elements in the same phase of the research process, weighs the methods equally, analyses the two components independently, and interprets the results together. (Creswell & Pablo-Clark, 2017)

Limitations
• Only one site in the Northeast is being researched.
• The study is limited by the nature of the instrument – This instrument was designed by members of the school in which the research is taking place. It has not undergone rigorous validity studies by scholars in the field.
• This study takes place during the Covid-19 Pandemic and participation may be limited.
• The nature of teaching during a time of collective trauma with the pandemic may alter the ways that participants understand the topic under study.

Data Analysis

How much of the variance in student-educator connectedness can be explained by students' thoughts on social support, engagement (affective/emotional, behavioral, and cognitive), and feelings of belonging? Which of these variables is the best predictor of student-educator connectedness? ANOVA

Is there a significant mean difference between grade level (9, 10, 11, and 12) and student-educator connectedness? ANOVA

Is there a significant mean difference between secondary students that can identify at least one educator with whom they can talk to if they have a problem and students’ perspectives on social support, engagement (affective/emotional, behavioral, and cognitive), and feelings of belonging? Which, if any of these variables are most impacted by students that can identify at least one educator and those that cannot? ONE WAY MANOVA

Qualitative Research Question
What do educators of secondary students understand about student connectedness and its relationship to areas of social support, engagement, and belonging? Qualitative, Thematic Coding