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Factors influencing school connectedness: Chinese adolescents' perspectives

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Abstract This study explored the concept of school connectedness and the factors that may influence its development with a sample of Chinese adolescents. Six focus groups involving 52 high school students were conducted using a set of predetermined discussion topics. Results indicated that the students fully understood the notion of school connectedness and could identify a number of key influences affecting its development. These factors could be grouped under several domains including teacher care, peer relations, broader school relationships, school disciplinary policies and practices, activities within the school's guidance and counseling program, and opportunities for talent development. The students were also able to suggest practical strategies that schools might introduce to enhance and strengthen students' acquisition of connectedness to school. The implications from the

findings are discussed with particular reference to implementing comprehensive school guidance and counseling program in Hong Kong.

Keywords School connectedness · Comprehensive school guidance and counseling program · Chinese · Adolescents · High school · Positive youth

Introduction

The construct known as “school connectedness” is relatively new, but it has significant overlap with earlier notions of “school bonding”, “school climate”, “teacher support”, and “student engagement” (Blum 2005). The construct was studied empirically by the Search Institute (Benson et al. 1998) and the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Blum 2002; Blum and Rinehart 2001). Resnick et al. (1997) acknowledged the importance of studying school connectedness because this school-related variable has been found to be protective for students' health and academic outcomes. Thomas and Smith (2004) confirmed that school connectedness is an important and modifiable factor associated with students' learning and development.

Whitlock (2006) conducted research that revealed school connectedness was determined by four independent variables comprising *meaningful roles* (whether students are given the chance to be involved in the school), *safety* (students' perception as to whether the campus is safe and they feel at ease), *creative engagement* (students are able to participate in activities and subjects of interest to them and to display their talents), and *academic engagement* (students are able to perform and achieve in academic work). Whitlock (2006) discovered from her focus group analysis that four

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domains of influence emerged when the participants talked about their connectedness to school. The first domain, adult-youth relations, pertains to the students' perception that their teachers are genuinely caring and are willing to provide time and assistance to them. The second domain, institution-youth relations, refers to the students' perception that the school administrators are fair and that school rules are sensible. The third domain, academic engagement practices, refers to the students' opportunity to engage in academic tasks that can actualize their talents and bring about positive learning outcomes. Lastly, academic pressure is the students' perception of whether the mental and emotional stress resulting from study and activities such as tests is excessive. In cases where stress is excessive, this could diminish a student's feelings of connectedness to school.

McNeely et al. (2002) also discovered factors that were related to school connectedness. At the school level, connectedness was found to be greater in schools that provided a variety of extracurricular activities, had good classroom management, and lenient discipline climate. School size was only mildly associated with connectedness, while class size and teacher qualifications and experience did not seem to exert significant influences. On the individual level, younger and higher-grade-point students were found to be more connected with their schools. Research by Thompson et al. (2006) reported similar findings in which connectedness was found to be greater among younger students, students from a two-parent household, students who performed well in school, those who were active in extracurricular activities, those who had a large number of friends, and those with positive parental involvement in their school.

The benefits of connectedness are well documented. McNeely and Falci (2004) found that students who are more connected to school were less likely to initiate health-risk behaviors such as cigarette smoking, drinking to the point of intoxication, Marijuana use, suicidal ideation or attempt, sexual intercourse, and weapon-related violence. Thomas and Smith (2004) found that angry behavior and violence were more prevalent among students who were alienated from their schools or were victimized. Conversely, positive parent and school connectedness have been identified as protective factors against weapon violence in the US (Henrich et al. 2005).

To enhance school connectedness, many strategies are possible. Most of these are found within the normal daily classroom interactions between teachers and students that help them contribute to lessons and activities and feel respected, valued and successful. In addition, specific interventions can also strengthen connectedness to school. For example, research has shown that "mentoring programs" can be effective (Karcher and Lindwall 2003). Karcher (2005) found that mentoring could increase

younger mentees' self-esteem, social skills, rule compliance, and school connectedness. The Healthy Kids Mentoring Program studied by King et al. (2002) was found to increase students' overall self-esteem and their connectedness to school, peers, and family. Such findings have implications for possible benefits from including elements of mentoring in all school counseling programs. Other activities that are typically included in comprehensive guidance and counseling programs can also help. For example, students' positive attitudes toward school can be fostered by activities that enhance students' understanding of others, acknowledge students' personal achievements, and strengthen their feelings of self-worth.

Through the implementation of comprehensive guidance and counseling programs, school personnel can provide an effective support system for their students' personal growth (Hui 2000; Sun and Hui 2007; Yuen et al. 2002). While many aspects of such guidance programs have been thoroughly evaluated already, few if any studies have elaborated on students' own perceptions of school connectedness and how development of connectedness might relate to the various forms of support they have received from their school. In particular, no studies have been conducted with Chinese students in the adolescent age range. This study aimed to fill that gap by obtaining data from high school adolescents in Hong Kong.

Research questions

The purpose of the focus group study was to explore the following questions:

1. What are adolescent students' perceptions of "school connectedness"?
2. From the adolescents' perspective, how effectively do their teachers, the school community as a whole, and the school guidance and counseling program in particular enhance their feelings of belonging to the school community?

Method

The study involved 52 Hong Kong high school adolescents in six focus groups (boys = 23, girls = 29; Grade 10 students = 18, Grade 12 students = 34). These students came from 6 schools in different parts of the territory, with student intakes of different levels of academic aptitude. There were about 1,000 students in each school. The typical class size was between 35–40 students. The schools were managed by sponsoring bodies including the Catholic Church, protestant church, and non-government organizations.

Table 1 Demographics of the students in the focus groups (n = 52)

Group	1	2	3	4	5	6	Total
Grade	Grade 12 = 8	Grade 12 = 9	Grade 10 = 9	Grade 10 = 9	Grade 12 = 8	Grade 12 = 9	Grade 10 = 18 Grade 12 = 34
Gender	Female = 5 Male = 3	Female = 5 Male = 4	Female = 5 Male = 4	Female = 5 Male = 4	Female = 3 Male = 5	Female = 6 Male = 3	Female = 29 Male = 23
Leadership roles	Prefects = 3 Student union leaders = 1 Club/team leaders = 4	Prefects = 2 Student union leaders = 1 Club/team leaders = 6	Prefects = 3 Club/team leaders = 1 Peer helpers = 5	Prefects = 3 Club/team Leaders = 2 Peer helpers = 4	Prefects = 3 Student union leaders = 1 Club/team leaders = 3 Peer helpers = 1	Prefects = 2 Student union leaders = 2 Club/team leaders = 3 Peer helpers = 2	Prefects = 16 Student union leaders = 5 Club/team leaders = 19 Peer helpers = 12

These schools were funded by the government. Students were prepared for competitive public examinations in Grade 10 and Grade 12. All participants were nominated by their guidance teachers, and they volunteered to share their high school experiences. They were all student leaders or students who were active in extra-curricular activities. Students who were *not* well connected to the school were not selected to participate in this particular study as it was not easy for the researchers to gain the consent of parents, schools, and students themselves for participation in the interviews (Table 1).

The researcher and an experienced guidance teacher acted as moderators for the focus group discussions, following the procedures outlined by Morgan (1988). The groups were conducted in the students' schools. Cantonese was used in all discussions because it is the most commonly used oral Chinese language in Hong Kong. The participants were asked to explain their understanding of the term "school connectedness" and to describe examples of from their own experience as high school students. In particular, they were also asked to describe how aspects of the school life and the guidance and counseling program might have enhanced their development of connectedness to school. (See "Appendix" for the semi-structured discussion guide for the focus groups). A research assistant helped to record the sessions on tape, made running notes, and later transcribed the tapes into Chinese language. The data were analyzed following the procedures of data reduction, data display, interpretation, and drawing conclusions (Miles and Huberman 1994). Preliminary coding labels were used to code transcripts of focus groups. The researcher and moderator read the transcripts several times and discussed the categories that emerged naturally from the data. Each meaningful unit in the transcript was underlined, classified, and labeled with an appropriate category. In addition, an experienced school guidance teacher was invited to act as an independent reviewer to check the categories that the researcher developed. Comparing the independent reviewer's and the researcher's categories and subcategories

of all the protocols, the inter-rater reliability of the categories and subcategories was .92. Some minor adjustments in the labeling and grouping of categories and subcategories were made after thorough discussion among the independent reviewer and the researchers.

Results

Analysis of transcripts helped to identify students' awareness of what is meant by the term "school connectedness", and how their experiences in school may strengthen or weaken their feelings of belonging. The data also established a relationship between students' school connectedness and aspects of the school guidance and counseling program. In reporting these findings, verbatim comments from selected students (translated here into English) are used to illustrate some of their typical ideas and opinions. Table 2 shows the key themes that emerged from the group discussions.

Chinese students' perceptions of connectedness to school

School is one very important place that both educates and socializes adolescents. How they perceive their school is influential to their development. School connectedness refers to how students feel generally about their school and how they connect positively with peers, teachers, and other adults in the school community.

In the focus groups discussions, participants reviewed their school experiences and their interactions with different members of the school community. In doing so, it was possible to ascertain their degrees of genuine connection with their schools in areas such as teacher care, peer relations, school relations, and opportunities for achievement and leadership.

Table 2 Themes that emerged from focus groups

Themes

Research Question 1. What are adolescent students' perceptions of "school connectedness"?

Teacher care

Peer relations

Broader school relations: principals and significant adults

Opportunities for achievement and leadership

Research Question 2. From the adolescents' perspective, how effectively do their teachers, the school community as a whole, and the school guidance and counseling program in particular enhance their feelings of belonging to the school community?

Discipline policies and practices: often ineffective in enhancing students' feelings of belonging

Talent development opportunities: involving students in competitions and in decision making help in building connectedness in the school community

Guidance and counseling programs: effective in enhancing relations among teacher and peers

Teacher care

Many participants emphasized that most of their teachers do spend time and effort in providing them with care and support and do communicate in a caring manner with their students. One Grade 12 boy (S05) stated, "The help from teachers plays a major role in enhancing student's sense of belonging to the school. Other than your fellow classmates, teachers are the people who you will spend most of your time with. Besides teaching in class, teachers also participate in other activities. Sometimes we even have lunch together and we will have a chat. The teachers care about us and they will take initiative to see if we are facing any problems recently. This makes us feel we belong to this school." Another Grade 12 boy (S12) stated, "Being a teacher means you need to care about students. In this way both the connection between the students and the school, and the student's sense of belonging to the school will be improved. Students will be more willing to come to school. At least they will feel happy when they see the teacher." One Grade 10 girl (S23) reported, "Our teachers are really good. We can ask them any questions after school and they do not mind teaching extra lessons. Also teachers give us support no matter what we plan to do. I feel very happy in class and we always like to stay at school. I wish to go back to the school and hang out there even in holidays." A Grade 12 boy (S42) reported, "Teachers in this school are more like friends. They take care of students even outside the classroom. They are much more caring than a typical teacher." Another Grade 10 girl (S51) commented, "Some teachers of my earlier classes still care about me and ask about my recent situation." One Grade 10 boy (S54) commented, "Class teachers have to do more than teaching. They should care about us and support us in extracurricular activities".

Regarding teacher-student relations, many participants emphasized the communication skills of their teachers. A Grade 12 student (S12) reported, "When I know that a

teacher like this [genuinely caring] exists in this school, I feel relaxed to talk with him. I would feel relieved and calm after the talk." Another Grade 12 student (S42) reported, "Students do not hesitate to discuss with teachers what they don't like about the teaching." One Grade 10 student (S54) commented, "They [teachers] must have encountered similar situations when they were studying, therefore they can understand us better. We can have more in-depth discussion." A Grade 12 girl (S07) stated emphatically, "Communication between teachers and students is essential for the development of a sense of connectedness." This view was supported by a Grade 10 girl (S51) who stated, "We sometimes have extra classes after school. Besides teaching, teachers also tell us jokes which give me a feeling of friendliness. When I was helpless, they give me a helping hand and offer me lots of their opinions." Similarly, a Grade 12 boy (S12) reported, "A teacher had chatted with me for almost 2 h. We talked about many things and he teaches me things about everyday life. I feel very lucky to meet teachers like him, and I treasure the relationship with them." Another Grade 12 girl (S61) stated, "I know there are many teachers who chat with their students outside class. For example, my class teacher arranges time to have individual meeting with us after school."

Some participants pointed to the actual help the teachers provide to students. A Grade 12 student (S05) reported, "When my mother passed away many teachers came and comforted me. I felt the school was supportive to me. This enhanced my connection to school and added to my sense of belonging." Another girl in Grade 10 (S14) observed, "One of my classmates and I had questions to ask our teacher. To our surprise, he stayed after school and explained to us thoroughly for almost an hour. We both felt very happy about this".

A Grade 12 boy (S02) identified his sources of connectedness in these terms: "Obviously the sense of belonging is brought to me mainly by teachers. A small part of it comes from schoolmates and the school environment."

Peer relations

Peer relations are among the most important components of students' school connectedness. Adolescents interact with peers frequently in school. They gather in peer groups before classes start, in class, during recess and at lunch, and even after class. Peers share together their happiness and sadness, they organize or take part in various activities together, and they have a mutual understanding of one another. A Grade 12 girl (S08) stated, "For me, the source of feeling connection to the school does not come from the teacher but from the students. This is because we spend most of our time with classmates, and we can only talk with teachers after school. For most of our school time, like studying, during recess, during lunchtime and after school we have to live with other students. If you have argued with your classmates or have a bad relationship with them, you would not want to go to school." A Grade 12 boy (S11) commented, "More communication with other students and being active in school helps develop a relationship with others, and enhances my willingness to go to school." A Grade 12 boy (S17) added, "Good peer relationships can help you build self-confidence. This is a two-way relationship. School connectedness allows you to apply your social skills in school." Another Grade 12 girl (S07) stated, "It is good to have the sense of belonging with peers and teachers in school as it will help you build up your self-confidence. If you have good interpersonal relationships and confidence you will be more active to initiate conversations, seek help and make friends." One Grade 12 girl (S13) summarized this aspect by saying, "Build up a connection. Having connectedness equals having confidence, and that equals having life skills."

Social skills were certainly seen to be important for students to feel truly connected within the school community. One Grade 12 girl (S16) stated, "Social skills and school connectedness can be related. School connectedness is composed of peer relationships. When one has good social skills he or she has more friends and becomes more popular in school. Thus, the person is happier and has greater school connectedness." One Grade 12 girl (S03) suggested, "I think you have to start with your own class. When you start liking your own class, you will then start to like the whole school."

Broader school relations

The concept of "school relations" here refers to how adolescents relate to other adults in the school, such as the principal, social workers, paraprofessionals, clerical staff, and janitors. The concept also includes the feelings or emotions that adolescents have about their school as a

whole and their perceptions of being real members of the school community. Emotional responses to school—school environment, school ethos, school reputation, relationship to the principal, and students' opportunity to contribute to school—were all suggested as important influences on students' reactions to the school in general. One Grade 12 girl (S07) pointed out her emotional reactions to the school with this example: "In addition to teachers, we are familiar with other people in the school, such as janitors. They will ask if we have our lunch yet, and say goodbye to us when leaving. Relationship between school and everyone in it is good. This makes the student feel warm and belonging to the school as it is like another home." A girl in Grade 10 (S27) reported, "I spend more time at the school than at my own home. It is natural to develop affection for this school and a sense of belonging." One Grade 12 girl (S07) pointed out, "Whether the principal knows the students, and students' familiarity with the principal, plays a significant role in developing the sense of belonging to school."

Some students are concerned about the school reputation. For example, a Grade 12 girl (S13) commented, "You will protect the interest and reputation of your school because you feel that you are part of the school. If you feel connected to the school, you do not want it to appear bad in front of others." Similarly, a Grade 10 boy (S29) stated, "I have to tell them [outside people criticizing the school] that I like this school and I do not allow them to spread rumours to damage the reputation of my school."

Opportunities for achievement and leadership

Some students stressed the importance to them of their own contribution to school. One Grade 10 student (S18) stated, "I think the connection between school and yourself means how much you contribute to the school. We have to contribute before we develop a sense of connection." Many participants considered achievement, leadership, participation, and being school representatives were important opportunities for students to connect more strongly with the school. To these adolescents such opportunities reflect whether they can act as real members of the school, to exercise their rights and fulfill their roles. Some participants reported that opportunities for achievement enhanced their sense of belonging. One Grade 10 boy (S04) stated, "I have taken on different responsibilities after I came here. I have been involved in activities such as the Student Association, drama club and singing competition. The sense of achievement I get from this place enhances my sense of belonging." Another Grade 10 girl (S18) said, "[When you take on responsibilities] you find out that your effort is not just one-way; in return, you would receive other's appreciation. When you feel that you have achieved something

successfully your self-confidence will get stronger.” A Grade 12 boy (S62) stated, “Since I have become the president of Student Union I have more frequent contacts with the school and therefore I feel more connected to the school.” Another Grade 10 girl (S27) stated, “Our school is relatively new compared to other schools. We have started a lot of things in this school with tremendous hard work. We are now in the stage of keeping up with what we have started. This makes us have a greater sense of belonging to this school than we might have to another school with a past history.”

Some participants further pointed out the importance of opportunities for leadership. One Grade 12 girl (S08) stated, “As long as you wanted to, and are willing to do, teachers in this school always give us a chance to have a go with different posts [of responsibility]. This is why I think we feel we belong to this school.” Another Grade 10 girl (S27) report, “I spend a lot of time serving the school. I show up in school events. I have been MC, and also involved backstage. I have spent more time in the school than at home. This naturally creates a connection between me and the school.”

Overall, the discussions around the topic of the first research question suggest that school connectedness can be multidimensional, with facets that include teacher relations, peer relations, and broader school relations, together with opportunities for achievement and leadership. All of these components are important as they influence how adolescents perceive their schools and their willingness to get personally involved in school.

The development of school connectedness does not occur automatically. Various contextual factors such as school policies, school guidance and counseling activities, and opportunities within school to develop their interests and talents can affect how school connectedness is established, enhanced, or diminished. These factors are discussed in more detail below.

Contextual factors influencing school connectedness

Contextual factors are the different elements in the surroundings of an adolescent which may influence the development of school connectedness. The second aim of the study was to explore adolescents’ perspectives on how their schools seek to promote and enhance students’ feelings of belonging. In focus groups discussions, participants talked about factors such as school disciplinary policies and practices, school guidance and counseling program, and talent development opportunities.

School disciplinary policies and practices

A school is a small community that includes a few hundred to a thousand students. Each school has its own disciplinary policies and practices that regulate students’ behaviors.

These policies and practices may be written in the student handbook as school rules or may simply be tacitly understood as school routines. Different schools have different disciplinary policies and practices, mostly decided by teachers and implemented by teachers and prefects. Some policies are welcomed by students, whereas others are disliked. The way that students regard school policies, positively or negatively, can influence their school connectedness. For example, if policies and practices are perceived to be unduly authoritarian, unreasonable, or inconsistent, the students are unlikely to have positive feelings toward the school. A Grade 12 girl (S48) stated, “School tends to establish policies to counteract students’ responses. For example, when students are not willing to do certain things voluntarily, school makes such things compulsory.” In regard to the role of discipline in strengthening students’ feelings of belonging, a Grade 12 boy (S42) stated simply, “A strict policy may be counterproductive.” Inconsistencies in policies are easily detected by students, as this observation from a Grade 12 girl (S06) indicates: “Our school is very strict with the uniform rules for junior students. However for seniors, when boys have longer hair than allowed, they will only be asked to have a haircut. In the same situation for junior students, their names would be marked in the disciplinary record.”

School guidance and counseling program

At the present time, most schools have developed a school-based guidance and counseling curriculum. In this curriculum, teachers develop tailor-made guidance and counseling activities to promote “whole person” growth and to provide students with support. Some of the activities are designed for all students while some are for target groups or individuals in need.

Students in the discussion groups acknowledge the value of activities within the guidance curriculum by highlighting some of their benefits, such as increasing students’ feelings of self-worth or creating a stronger group spirit. For example, one Grade 12 girl (S07) stated, “Our school has implemented a scheme called ‘Big Brother, Big Sister’. When I was in Form 1, we were assigned to a group of four students. One student from Form 6 will become the leader of a group. Once a week, we sit down as a group and have a chat during lunchtime or recess for about 10 min.” A Grade 12 boy (S12) reported, “The peer-counselor scheme is most beneficial. It is the most direct way to keep in touch with senior students and learn from them. Students from junior forms can observe the way the seniors behave and their special qualities. Junior students can hence learn from the seniors.” Another Grade 12 girl (S44) mentioned the value of activities that deal with attitudes and behavior toward others. She observed, “We have certain activities

each month. For instance, this month is the ‘courtesy month,’ next month is the ‘gratitude month.’” Another Grade 6 boy (S45) reported how a teacher organized the class to support another student: “I remember once when a classmate’s home was destroyed by fire, our teacher started a charity campaign to help raise money for that classmate. We also made some food for the classmate and gave him all the money we raised. I think this is a kind of learning.”

A Grade 10 girl (S14) remarked, “We are not here just to do peer counseling or to act as a big brother or big sister. In fact we really want to help them [younger students or new arrivals] as a friend to become part of this school, and enhance their sense of belonging. In return, we feel a stronger connection between the school and us.”

In the focus group discussion, participants also expressed their views about the relationship between the school guidance program, self-confidence, and school connectedness. They believed that some guidance activities can and do strengthen students’ self-confidence and self-esteem, encourage caring attitudes, and foster team spirit. They felt that having confidence and a positive attitude are essential components of feeling secure and connected to school. Some students emphasized this positive relationship between confidence and school connectedness. For example, a Grade 12 boy (S04) stated, “I think it is because of greater self-confidence and better interpersonal relationships that I developed school connectedness. When I have stronger self-confidence at school, become more popular, and have better interpersonal relationships, I will like my school better and go to school willingly every day. Thus I will have greater feelings of school belonging.” A Grade 10 girl (S14) stated, “When one has self-confidence and knows how to use social skills, that person can make friends easily and build up connectedness.”

Talent development opportunities

Talent development opportunities should, of course, be present in all curriculum areas and within all lessons; but in addition, most schools organize activities or events that provide adolescents with more chances to display their abilities and achieve their potential. Such opportunities include extra-curricular activities and competitions. Adolescents who take part in these activities gain real experiences that enhance their positive feelings toward their school. Some students in this study emphasized benefits that can come from competitions, for example, in supporting and encouraging each other at events such as a speech competition (Grade 10 girl: S27). In addition, the opportunity to represent the school in inter-school activities was perceived to strengthen connectedness. A Grade 12 girl (S01) stated, “When we represented our school in competitions or participated in inter-schools activities, our sense of belonging was enhanced automatically.”

Overall, students’ comments revealed some important contextual influences that they believed affect school connectedness in adolescents. These contextual factors should be taken into account when we try to understand high school adolescents’ perceptions of school connectedness and when we attempt to plan activities to strengthen their feelings of belonging to a community of learners.

Enhancing students’ school connectedness

Schools already organize many different activities to promote growth and development of their students. However, the reactions of students vary depending on the nature of the activities, their intrinsic interest level and relevance, and how well the activities are organized and delivered. In the focus group interview, participants expressed their ideas about ways in which schools can take the initiative to provide activities to further enhance students’ school connectedness. They suggested a variety of programs and activities which they wished their schools would consider. They proposed, for example, the introduction of more school camps to enhance personal-social life skills development and to build up team spirit. A Grade 12 girl (S13) commented, “When we live together in a camp, the student–teacher relationship is improved.” A Grade 10 boy (S52) remarked, “More day camps and camping activities can be organized so that students can learn about teamwork when doing a group task in the camp.” One Grade 10 girl (S24) stated, “When we attend the camp our relationship no longer works in a teacher–student manner but in a more balanced way like friends. In a leisure camp, we can learn more about real life, beyond the knowledge we learn in classes at school.” Another Grade 10 girl (S54) stated, “School can encourage us to participate in more competitions. Competitions can train up our team spirit or different skills, such as emotional control.” One Grade 12 girl (S61) added, “If we have won a competition as a team, this memory of school life will boost our sense of connectedness to the school.”

School Exchange programs were also suggested as one way of helping students view their own school from a different perspective and thus increase their understanding and appreciation of their school. For example, one Grade 12 student (S17) stated, “My friends who study in a girls-only school told me that their school has a student exchange program and there were boys from a boys-only school being exchanged to their school. Different schools have different cultures, and through this program, they gained understanding of the teaching methods and environment of another schools by observation and reflection. When they came back to their own school they recognized the strengths and weaknesses of their own school. I think this enhanced their school connectedness.”

The opportunity to participate in decision making, if only in a small way, may help students feel more connected to their schools. For example, a Grade 12 girl (S61) suggested, “If students have the autonomy to make certain decisions, such as the location of class picnic, it helps to promote the sense of belonging already.”

In general, the adolescents in this study were able to suggest appropriate activities for their schools to organize that would enhance school connectedness. Their suggestions were sensible, relevant, and feasible.

Discussion and implications

The aims of the present study were to explore the concept of school connectedness and the factors that may influence its development in Chinese high school adolescents. The main findings were that the students fully understood the notion of school connectedness, and they could identify a number of key influences affecting its development. These influences could be grouped under several domains including teacher care, peer relations, broader school relationships, school disciplinary policies and practices, activities within the school’s guidance and counseling program, and opportunities for talent development.

To some degree the findings in this study confirm those of Whitlock (2006), particularly in regard to the positive influences of adult-youth relations, meaningful roles, opportunities for creative engagement, and academic achievement. Beyond leadership roles and talent development opportunities, the Chinese high school students in Hong Kong considered teacher care and peer relations very important to them. They treasured teachers’ support in tutoring their academic study and their involvement in extra-curricular activities. This vital role of “caring for your students” is, perhaps, insufficiently emphasized in many preservice teacher education courses. The implications are that this role should be given greater prominence.

Many students emphasized the benefits of peer mentoring or peer counseling in school. This is consistent with the western literature on the benefits of mentoring (Karcher and Lindwall 2003; Karcher 2005; King et al. 2002). In this regard, teachers and senior students could, in future, become even more involved as facilitators and mentors in the delivery of guidance curriculum, individual planning and peer support activities (Shek et al. 2007).

Students in this study identified the discipline policy in school as exerting an influence on how they felt about their schools. They clearly expressed a negative view of inconsistent and/or overly strict school discipline policies and practices. The implications here are that there could perhaps be better collaboration among teachers, guidance professionals, and administrators when first formulating student

behavior policies (Day-Vines and Terriquez 2008). Better still, students themselves should also be involved in the process of creating or refining the school discipline policy, as happens in many schools in the west (e.g., Rogers 2004).

Overall, the factors that students identified as influential in their development of school connectedness—teacher care, peer relations, school relationships, disciplinary policies and practices, guidance and counseling program, and opportunities for talent development—should be discussed fully with beginning teachers. Every one of these factors represents an area where, with positive intentions, teachers and principals can bring about some very significant improvements.

Limitations

The students were a selected sample comprising those who were already actively involved in extra-curricular activities and leadership roles in their schools. Their perceptions might differ from those of students who are less involved or are less successful. These selected students were also senior students in Grades 10 to 12. It cannot be assumed that younger students, with less experience in the secondary school, would necessarily have the same views. Future studies could investigate age level differences in students’ understanding and appreciation of school connectedness. In future studies, it would also be interesting to triangulate the present findings with focus group data from school teachers (Shek et al. 2009) and to explore adolescents’ connectedness not only to school, but also to family and community (Karcher and Lee 2002). Future studies must also involve gathering data from students who are *not* well connected with their schools in order to explore their perceptions of factors that are hindering their willingness to connect.

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Appendix: focus group discussion topics

What does term “connectedness to school” mean to you? Can you provide some concrete examples? Tell us your own stories of connectedness to teachers, peers, and the school.

What guidance activities at school do you find most useful to develop and strengthen your connectedness to school? What activities do you think are less useful?

What do teachers do that has a positive influence on your connectedness to school? What more could teachers do?

What activities do you suggest the school should introduce that would help you develop connectedness to school?

How does your connectedness to school influence your self-confidence and personal growth?

Any additional comments or suggestions?

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