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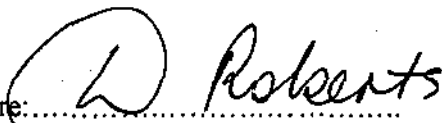
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An Exploration of Psychological Sense of Community in

Western Australian School Children

Abstract

The current exploratory study examined Psychological Sense of Community (PSOC) in 16 Western Australian school children, between the ages of seven and eight from two schools in the Perth metropolitan region. The aim was to identify whether young children understand the concept of PSOC, within their school environment. A qualitative methodology using semi-structured interviews was employed. Questions were generated based on the Neighbourhood Youth Inventory (NYI) and the Sense of Community Index (SCI), as a measure of children's PSOC in their school environment. A thematic content analysis was performed using a question ordered matrix, to compile common themes and meanings from within the descriptive data. Results indicated children in one school did possess an understanding of PSOC in their school environment. The second school did not reveal an understanding of PSOC, rather they displayed a sense of belonging to their school in relation to enrolment, and exhibited antisocial behaviours. The findings of this exploratory study suggest if PSOC can be identified and nurtured in young children, it is possible the beneficial effects of PSOC such as reciprocal friendships, belonging to a group, and prosocial behaviours may develop and continue throughout an individual's lifespan. The financial, social and psychological implications for the Western Australian Department of Justice, health care system and society are discussed.

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Supervisors: Dr. L. Cohen, and Ms. D. Darlaston-Jones

Submitted: October 2003

Declaration

I certify that this thesis does not incorporate, without acknowledgment, any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any institution of higher education and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

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Acknowledgments

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Introduction

Australian society is emerging as a unique collection of multicultural peoples, with common symbols and a shared history, two of the fundamental factors considered to be significant in building a psychological sense of community (PSOC) (Bishop & D'Rozario, 2002; Fisher & Sonn, 2002; McMillan & Chavis, 1986). These common symbol systems create and maintain a PSOC, whilst a shared history provides increased relationships between the members of a community (McMillan & Chavis). The construct of PSOC was first introduced by Sarason (1974) and defined as:

> "the perception of similarity to others, an acknowledged interdependence with others, a willingness to maintain this interdependence by giving to, or doing for others what one expects from them, the feeling that one is part of a larger dependable and stable structure".
>
> (Sarason, 1974, p. 157).

The significance of the word 'psychological' refers to the meaning of the community to the member, and their perception of, or reaction to their community (Roeser, Midgley & Urdan, 1996). Sarason suggested PSOC could be arrived at through an individual's similarity to others in a particular group, and their voluntary interdependence promotes feelings of belonging to a larger order.

A Review of Psychological Sense of Community

Prominent researchers McMillan and Chavis (1986) proposed a definition, theory and model utilised in researching PSOC. The authors suggested that it comprises four definitive components, namely: *membership, influence, integration and fulfilment of needs*, and *shared emotional connection*. The first element of *membership* refers to the member's feelings of belonging, and consists of *boundaries* allowing individuals to establish the parameters of their relationships with others. These parameters can be psychological barriers, or physical barriers such as wearing

similar clothing, exhibiting analogous behaviour, or using a particular language within the community for the specific function of establishing those who belong, as opposed to those who are excluded (McMillan & Chavis). This creates an *emotional safety* barrier to preserve group intimacy and identity, followed by a *sense of belonging* and identification that enhances an individual's self-efficacy, as well as the perception of acceptance within their community (McMillan & Chavis). The belief of *personal investment* provides a sense of worth and the feeling of *membership* in their community (McMillan & Chavis, 1986; Pretty, 1990). The final sub-element of *membership* described by McMillan and Chavis is the *shared symbol system* individuals utilise within their communities, and they are defined by the value and meaning assigned by those who belong and represent the system that connects individuals within their communities.

The second element of PSOC, *influence* is explained as the feeling that members matter to one another in a group (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). This element comprises four significant features. Firstly, members are drawn towards communities where they feel a sense of power, and secondly, a correlation exists between the community's influence on the member and their PSOC. Thirdly, intimacy is a result of the consensual agreement and influence occurring simultaneously between the members and their community. This concept is bi-directional in nature as the member's ability to influence the group, is equal to the group's influence on the members (McMillan & Chavis).

The third element of PSOC proposed by McMillan and Chavis (1986) is *integration and fulfilment of needs* described as a shared faith between members that their needs will be satisfied, as a result of their commitment to be together. It is a community's capacity for reciprocity that allows for an individual's PSOC to be

intensified through shared intimacy, and high levels of self-disclosure (McMillan &
Chavis, 1986; McMillan, 1996). To facilitate the preservation of a community's
positive sense of togetherness, the association must be rewarding for the members and
the community, and bi-directional in nature (Pretty, 1990). Reinforcement and
fulfilment of an individual's needs bind the members and their communities together,
and so communities are more cohesive if the members sense their values and ideas are
shared (Brodsky, O'Campo & Aronson, 1999; Solomon, Watson, Battistitch, Schaps
& Delucchi, 1996). This can be attributed to factors such as the status of the member
and the success of the community (McMillan & Chavis).

The final element described by McMillan and Chavis (1986) is *shared
emotional connection*, which represents the underlying mores and values of a
community, whereby "time, place, history and experiences are shared" (McMillan &
Chavis, 1986, p.9). The fundamental tenet being the increased familiarity between
individuals who see each other regularly, will result in a stronger attachment if the
relationship has been a positive influence (McMillan & Chavis). A strong community
allows its members to interact in the group, contributing to the creation of events and
the development of a spiritual bond through shared life experiences (McMillan &
Chavis). These experiences do not have to be encountered by all community members
simultaneously, to be an essential facet of the ethos of a community (Fisher & Sonn,
1999). It has been suggested that the four elements of PSOC and the factors
contributing to each of the elements described by McMillan and Chavis, combine to
engender a PSOC within individuals and their communities (Brodsky et al., 1999;
Chavis & Pretty, 1999; Obst, Zinkiewicz & Smith, 2002; Pretty, 1990; Pretty &
McCarthy, 1991; Puddifoot, 1996; Sonn, Bishop & Drew, 1999).

Communities are essential in the development of mutual collaboration and inter-reliance between individuals (Burroughs & Eby, 1998; Wiesenfeld, 1996), as a result the shared responsibilities or unique objectives are organised from within these communities. Although common elements exist such as the shared similarities of the community members (Chavis, Hogge, McMillan & Wandersman, 1986; Sarason, 1974; Wiesenfeld, 1996), they also create exclusiveness depending on the functional relationship between the community and its members (Sarason, 1974). PSOC has been explained as the connection individuals may experience towards others based on their interaction, in any number of settings (Hill, 1996). Effectively, individuals who possess or experience a PSOC are more likely to relate to other members, they consider belong to their community (Brodsky & Marx, 2001; Chavis & Wandersman, 1990; Glynn, 1986; Sarason, 1974; Wiesenfeld, 1996).

An individual's concept of community is capable of being dichotomous in nature as it can be either geographical referring to a locality, or as a result of an individual's association with their community (Heller, 1989; Hunter & Riger, 1986; Nasar & Julian, 1995). Recent indications have recommended geographical locality is not necessarily indicative of a strong and interdependent community (Sonn & Fisher, 1996), thus, the conceptualisation of community is moving away from being exclusively geographical in nature, to incorporating ideas relating to the community member's sense of being (Sonn & Fisher). Community can be described as a multi-faceted collection of individuals possessing a diverse array of qualities, religions, social, and economic resources (Fisher & Sonn, 2002; Heller, 1989; Osterman, 2000; Sarason, 1974) and is socially constructed, as its existence is dependent on an individual's involvement in it (Wiesenfeld, 1996).

Recently their has been a heightened awareness concerning the loss of community, due to the decreased involvement of individuals in their communities, as a consequence of urbanisation, increased transportation, and fear of crime (Brodsky & Marx, 2001; Glynn, 1986; Heller, 1989; Hunter, 1975; Nasar & Julian, 1995). The negative cost in relation to the loss of community could be attributed to a number of psychological deficits, which ultimately impacts on an individual's psychological well-being (Dunham, 1986; Pretty, Conroy, Dugay, Fowler & Williams, 1996; Sarason, 1974; Sarason, 1986; Sergiovanni, 1994). These negative social interactions have more of an augmented influential effect on an individual's well-being, than positive social interactions appear to generate (Rook, 1984). Hence, the paradigm of PSOC has been the subject of increased attention using McMillan and Chavis's (1986) model of PSOC. This has resulted in many studies written in a variety of contexts such as urban environments (Chavis & Wandersman, 1990; Glynn, 1981; Nasar & Julian, 1995), universities (Lounsbury & DeNeui, 1996), cross-cultural groups (Sonn & Fisher, 1996) and schools (Pretty et al., 1996; Pooley, Pike, Drew & Breen, 2002; Pooley, Breen, Pike, Cohen & Drew, 2002; Solomon et al., 1996).

The concept of PSOC put forward by McMillan and Chavis (1986) offers considerable motivation for community involvement and participation (Davidson & Cotter, 1991; 1993). In this regard, a number of studies have examined PSOC as a catalyst for community development and empowerment of community members (Chavis & Wandersman, 1990; Newbrough & Chavis, 1986; Stumpers, 2002). Chavis and Wandersman found PSOC directly impacts on participation in community organisations and the social interaction between neighbours, resulting in an increased PSOC. The factors inherent in PSOC such as the feelings of belonging and shared emotional connection with others are suggested to be vital to human functioning

(McMillan & Chavis). Therefore, the absence of these feelings could result in isolation, loneliness, alienation and depression (Pretty et al., 1996) thus, if the elements of PSOC were fostered in the wider community it could function as a buffer against negative well-being in individuals (Davidson & Cotter, 1991; Perry, 1999). A significant correlation between PSOC and three components of subjective well-being (SWB), namely: *positive effects* such as happy, cheerful, and pleased, *negative effects* such as sadness worry and anger, and *perceived efficacy* referring to an individual's ability to manage their own lives was established by Davidson and Cotter. The survey indicated individuals who possessed significantly high measures of PSOC, also exhibited high levels of SWB (Davidson & Cotter). An examination of the measures utilised for SWB established that happiness demonstrated the most salient correlation with PSOC (Davidson & Cotter).

Further research concerning the development of an individual's PSOC (Davidson, Cotter & Stovall, 1991) revealed need fulfilment was significantly and positively related to PSOC in individuals. Davidson and Cotter (1989) focused on the association between an individual's PSOC and their political participation. The authors found PSOC demonstrated a significant influence on an individual's voting and community participation. They suggested PSOC could function as a vehicle for the enhancement of numerous social and psychological developments in the wider community. Davidson and Cotter (1993) explored this idea utilising a model comprising variables including PSOC, school related beliefs, and characteristics relating to the demographics of the participants. The authors found an individual's voting intention was affected by their school beliefs, and therefore, public schools that promote PSOC could produce positive effects on health and well-being (Davidson & Cotter, 1993; Perry, 1999).

Findings from research conducted on residential neighbourhoods have suggested neighbourhoods do not offer the feelings of belonging, or provide the social networks and support that individuals require (Royal & Rossi, 1996). Royal and Rossi indicated connections outside of an individual's local geographical area have replaced the deterioration of connections to family and neighbours. The focus of research is currently on communities establishing themselves on the networks of individuals interacting within formal organisations, and as members of informal groups (Royal & Rossi, 1996; Sonn & Fisher, 1996). The fundamental role schools perform for children can be analogous to the role of the workplace for adults, as individuals not only find meaning, identity, and support from within their neighbourhoods, they also find it within their friendships, schools and workplaces (Royal & Rossi).

A measure of PSOC at work (PSCW) was conceptualised and developed by Burroughs and Eby (1998). Their findings suggested PSCW functions on different levels and needs further analysis, yet PSOC is a phenomenon created in individuals and can have an influence on their happiness in the workplace. There were several underlying elements revealed in addition to those already mentioned including a sense of collectivism, neighbourliness, reflection, and an acceptance of the diversity in individuals (Burroughs & Eby). Burroughs and Eby contended these dimensions were associated with the maintenance of PSCW as they enriched an individual's *shared emotional connection*. The authors acknowledged their study provided support for McMillan and Chavis's (1986) model of PSOC and in addition to the geographical location, an individual's workplace can also be characterised in terms of the intimate and distant associations between people. If this notion is transferred to school communities, schools that promote children working together reduce the risk of low

academic achievement, if the children's social experiences have been positive (Burroughs & Eby, 1998; Perry, 1999; Royal & Rossi, 1996).

The literature discussed thus far has depicted PSOC across numerous contexts, although the elements involved in PSOC may be distinctive to specific contexts, rather than the existence of common elements that denote PSOC across all contexts (Hill, 1996). For example, participation in the natural environment may not be as important in some contexts as it is in others (Hill). This assumption supports Sarason (1974) who suggested PSOC is a characteristic of the community not the individual members. Sonn and Fisher (1996) used McMillan and Chavis's (1986) model to develop a profile of a politically constructed group, and questioned this notion. Participants were members of a minority group, who created a relational community, entrenched within a geographical location, and dominated by an alternative culture. The authors observed the strain between the need to belong and maintain a cultural identity, and the group processes involved with individuals who were classed as coloured in South Africa, and now living in Melbourne, Australia. Their results indicated individuals rejected the "imposed identity construct" (p.427) in preference for their national identity. This highlights the significance of discerning the elements involved in community attachment and identity formation, considering the influence PSOC is suggested to have on community empowerment (Chavis & Pretty, 1999). Thus, in contrast to Hill and Sarason it suggests PSOC is characteristic of individuals, not of their communities (Sonn & Fisher).

The previous research raises the question of whether an individual's attachment and identity is influenced by their PSOC, or if it is reciprocal in nature (Chavis & Pretty, 1999; McMillan, 1996). Lorian and Newbrough (1996) defined PSOC as representing a comprehensive notion of one's self. For that reason belonging

to a community and possessing a PSOC does not exclude an understanding of the multiple roles within individuals, or their communities (Brodsky & Marx, 2001; Heller, 1989; Lorian & Newbrough, 1996; Wiesenfeld, 1996).

Psychological Sense of Community in School

The above research outlines the benefits of PSOC in the adult arena; however, there has been a substantial amount of research in regards to an adolescent's PSOC in a variety of contexts (Pretty, Andrewes & Collett, 1994; Pretty et al., 1996). An examination of how formal organisations are influenced by PSOC with relevance to adolescents of all ages, regarding their neighbourhood and school PSOC experiences of social support and loneliness was conducted by Pretty, Andrewes and Collett. Findings revealed the significance of PSOC for adolescents was similar to adults, and that McMillan and Chavis's (1986) model was successful in measuring an individual's understanding of their social milieu (Pretty et al.). The authors suggested social support mechanisms are important to an adolescent's community context. Therefore, pursuing community programs that increase the involvement of adolescents in their communities would be beneficial (Chavis & Wandersman, 1990; Davidson & Cotter, 1993: Pretty et al., 1994).

Further research conducted by Pretty et al. (1996) examined PSOC and its significance in relation to loneliness for adolescents between the ages of 13 and 18. The participants completed a questionnaire pertaining to their PSOC, social support, well-being and loneliness in the context of their school and neighbourhood. Findings demonstrated a significant correlation between a lack of PSOC and loneliness, and the emotional aspects of an individual's well-being (Pretty et al.). Statistical analysis revealed adolescents created their community frameworks, by incorporating characteristics from both their social support networks and their PSOC (Pretty et al.).

Older adolescents demonstrated a lower rating of PSOC in their neighbourhood and schools than younger adolescents; therefore, fostering the elements of PSOC in younger children's school environments might have a positive effect on their sense of well-being, and lower susceptibility to loneliness in later life. This could impact on the proliferation of adolescents becoming involved in street gangs, and the subsequent criminal and violent behaviour associated with that environment (Pretty et al.).

Adolescent's perceptions of their neighbourhoods was investigated using McMillan and Chavis's (1986) model of PSOC by Chipuer et al. (1999). The authors used discourse analysis as it captured the comprehensive framework within which an adolescent's reality is created (Punch, 2000). Chipuer et al. developed the Neighbourhood Youth Inventory (NYI), which resulted in a better understanding of adolescents' experiences of neighbouring. The scale adequately measured adolescent's PSOC in rural and urban neighbourhoods within Australia and Canada, and was the first archetype to use the verbal accounts of adolescents (Chipuer & Pretty, 1999). The authors concluded the context in which an individual interacts has a fundamental impact on their development, therefore the ability to measure adolescent's experiences of PSOC in their neighbourhood, can lead to a greater understanding of the impact on their group interactions throughout their lifespan (Chipuer & Pretty).

Solomon et al. (1996) contended a similar line of reasoning could be applied to children in their school environment. Researchers have used McMillan and Chavis's (1986) theoretical framework to further explore the phenomenon of PSOC within the school setting (Glynn, 1986; Pooley, Pike et al., 2002; Pooley, Breen et al., 2002; Pretty et al., 1996; Sonn & Fisher, 1996). One such intervention program implemented in schools to measure and promote the elements of PSOC was the Child

Development Project (CDP). The social environment within the classroom was the focus for the CDP (Schaps & Solomon, 1990; Solomon et al., 1996), and the underlying assumption was that the social environment experienced in the classroom could have a dichotomous impact on children, depending on whether the experience is positive or negative (Solomon et al.). The project attempted to promote a PSOC in children, as this could impact positively on their social and psychological development (Schaps & Solomon, 1990; Solomon et al., 1996). The effectiveness of the CDP was examined in three schools, with three alternative schools as comparison groups. The results indicated that a positive PSOC was associated with high student motivation and the strongest link with PSOC was emotional factors such as self-esteem, and liking for their school (Osterman, 2000; Schaps & Solomon, 1990; Solomon et al., 1996). Children who possessed a sense of acceptance by their communities experienced a higher PSOC than those children who did not regard themselves as a valuable member (Royal & Rossi, 1996). Children's understanding of their school community as a caring environment, of which they are an integral part, substantiates the importance of promoting the fundamental elements of PSOC in schools (Belenardo, 2001; Schaps & Solomon, 1990; Solomon et al., 1996).

Children spend a great deal of their lives at school and in a positive school context an individual's social development will prosper (Perry, 1999; Solomon et al., 1996). Providing children with a positive PSOC in their school environment promotes feelings of belonging to the school and to each other (Perry), and students who possess a positive PSOC in their classrooms are more likely to accept the norms and values of their particular community (Solomon et al.). Crissman, Hiller, Spires, Pope and Beal (2000) conducted semi-structured interviews involving teachers, students, parents and administrators, in order to examine which themes were common to

children's PSOC. The authors found the school community was vigorously in the process of generating their own community of mind as a direct result of diversity, learning, and the combined interactions of the children and teachers within the school community. Through these combined interactions Crissman et al. suggested that the school had created the conditions for a sense of human agency. That is, a personal and collective responsibility towards community building had developed where learning had become a shared vision for the entire school community. These findings concurred with Sergiovanni's (1994) line of reasoning in relation to community being a subjective phenomenon that is unique to each community, and consequently is developed from within each community. The process empowers all members to transform not only themselves but also their community (Beattie, 1995). On a psychological level this could be demonstrated in the amount of prosocial behaviours exhibited within the school environment (Greener, 2000; Onyx & Bullen, 2000).

An examination of eight to twelve year old children's peer assessments of prosocial behaviours and its association with teacher, peer, and self-assessments was conducted by Greener (2000). Results demonstrated that teachers and peer ratings of classmates' behaviours were significantly correlated and the self-ratings were also associated, although at a lower level. Children prosper in peer relationships if they are perceived as possessing prosocial attitudes and behaviours and if their peers identify them as possessing a high prosocial status, they are less likely to have experienced peer rejection (Greener, 2000; Perry, 1999). Considering the relationship between prosocial skills and social acceptance by others, it is essential that interventions consider the social context in which a child learns prosocial behaviours (Greener).

The development of prosocial behaviours in children such as sharing, helping, comforting and cooperating behaviours was investigated by Jackson and Tisak

(2001). Results indicated seven and eight year old children although they felt it was wrong not to comfort, were less likely to comfort and least disturbed by a negative self-evaluation, than when the other prosocial behaviours of helping, cooperating, and sharing were involved (Jackson & Tisak). This could be indicative of the children's inability to construct behaviours in their mind of how to comfort a friend. Therefore, children may not be able to articulate their understanding of comforting behaviours, as opposed to helping, sharing, and cooperating behaviours (Jackson & Tisak). An important methodological limitation in this study was the inability of the younger children to understand some of the questions. This could have been eliminated with a pilot study to ascertain the appropriateness of the wording for the particular age group (Garbarino & Stott, 1992). However, the research does enhance the growing body of evidence supporting an earlier introduction of the elements of PSOC within the school environment (Pooley, Pike et al., 2002), which in turn would increase positive prosocial development in children. More specifically, the promotion of the elements involved in PSOC in the school environment could effectively reduce the number of children who participate in antisocial behaviours such as violence and bullying (Beale & Scott, 2001; Jackson & Tisak, 2001; Soutter & McKenzie, 2000).

The integral element of an individual's view of themselves can be attributed to their memberships and reciprocal relationships within their social groups (Cassidy, Aikins & Chernoff, 2003; Terry, Hogge & White, 1999). Individuals have a collective need to be associated with common ideas, mores and values, which provide a shared consequence and a sense of belonging reciprocated by others (Fisher & Sonn, 2002; Sergiovanni, 1994). An increased amount of group cohesion occurs when there is a reciprocal influence between group leaders and the members involved in the community (McMillan, 1996). However, a balance in reciprocity and power needs to

be maintained, as the social exchanges within each community can have consequences on individuals in positive and negative ways (Terry et al.). This supports the theoretical assumption PSOC is not only characterised by social support, but also by an individual's reciprocal friendships (Liang, Krause & Bennett, 2001; McMillan, 1996).

Friendships allow children to create an understanding of not only themselves but of their social world (Bukowski, Newcomb & Hartup, 1998; Piaget, 1972). In children aged seven and eight the fundamental element of their friendships is the balance between constraint and cooperation, and is invariably described in this age group as shared activities (Bukowski et al., 1998; Heiman, 2000; Piaget 1972). Heiman conducted a study to examine the effect of inclusive and non-inclusive education systems on friendship and results suggested the awareness of the significance of friendship, is not enough to produce changes in social interactions with others. This is redolent of the necessity for the promotion of policies and interventions that include all individuals, rather than alienate those who are deemed to be different (Heiman, 2000; Perry, 1999; Pretty et al., 1996).

The characteristics suggestive of children's PSOC within their school environment was considered by Osterman (2000) whose findings demonstrated PSOC was as significant for preschool children, as it was for high school children. The author explored the importance of belonging in a school environment including how schools influence a student's PSOC, and suggested a student's PSOC should be correlated with the regularity and quality of their relationships. She found PSOC was an essential aspect in relation to student behaviour and performance, and the belonging aspect of PSOC was fundamental to individual health and well-being and psychological development. Another example is the research conducted by Belenardo

(2001) who used a survey with children, parents, and teachers from nine schools to examine PSOC among all members of the school community. Results suggested PSOC was an important component in the progression of positive relationships with not only the children, but also the staff and families involved in the schools.

Individuals who interact in the school environment such as teachers and peers have the largest impact on whether the experiences are positive or negative for students (Perry, 1999; Stumpers, 2002). Stumpers explored the importance of the bi-directional nature of intimacy, influence and the shared history of peer relationships in the school context. Findings revealed both negative and positive experiences are created by a number of noteworthy aspects including social roles, school values, and the people in their school environment. Stumpers suggested children are more likely to be active participants in their school environment when they are perceived as a valued member of their community, and possess individual empowerment and influence over policy development and issues within their school environment. Therefore, children who are in schools that impede student's negative power and control over other students, have a better chance of inhibiting the alienating and antisocial behaviours (Perry, 1999; Soutter & McKenzie, 2000). The factors discussed by Stumpers support the notion that if the elements of a PSOC were incorporated in the school environment then more positive behaviours may be demonstrated (Kaplan & Owings, 2000; Stumpers, 2002; Royal & Rossi, 1996).

The understanding of PSOC in Western Australian school children aged nine to twelve years was explored by Pooley, Pike et al. (2002) within an ecological framework. Their findings revealed all children enthusiastically "seek to construct a positive sense of community" (Pooley, Pike et al., 2002, p.20) and associated their community in a relational manner primarily, and subsequently, in a geographical

manner. This suggests the individuals the children interacted with, were more significant than the location in which the interaction took place, and not only are children "cognitive, social, and moral beings" they are also "community beings" (Pooley, Pike et al., 2002, p. 19). Importantly, Pooley, Pike et al. recommended that children were able to articulate their understanding of community in concrete, rather than abstract ways.

Cognitive Development in Children

A child's cognitive development is believed to be a function of their biopsychosocial experiences, as well as the context in which the thinking is taking place (Garbarino & Stott, 1992). Recognition of the way children think is dependent on the adult's awareness of the child's ability, in a specific context, to appraise and decipher information. It is paramount adults understand that children construe situations differently to adults (Garbarino & Stott) and are less likely to consider the message as a cognitive object, and accordingly have difficulty evaluating it (Beal & Flavell, 1984). The theoretical framework offered by Piaget (1972) suggested children acquire knowledge by using their own experiences in their social environments, and then combine those experiences with what they observe (Meadows, 1996). Thus, children actively process information received through their observations of other individuals and amalgamate their own personal experiences, thereby constructing their own unique reality (Garbarino & Stott).

Piaget (1972) developed a theory suggesting children progress through various stages of cognitive development (Meadows, 1996; Piaget, 1972; Rice, 1995). The first stage is the *sensorimotor stage* whereby thought and action are effectively indistinguishable and exclusively egocentric. The second stage is the *preoperational stage* reflective of children's cognitive development from ages two to seven years,

and the third stage is the *concrete operational stage* which is considered to begin around age seven, until approximately age twelve (Piaget, 1972; Rice, 1995). Hence, children in the seven to eight year old age groups can exhibit the characteristics of the *preoperational* and the *concrete operational stages* (Meadows, 1996; Piaget, 1972). In the *preoperational stage* they begin to develop the ability to symbolise mentally rather than physically, that is, they develop the ability to imagine solutions to problems in their own mind. Children in this stage are egocentric as they have difficulty imagining reality from another person's point of view. In the *concrete operational stage* children begin to understand the notion of reversibility, in that an operation can function in two ways (Meadows, 1996; Piaget, 1972).

Piaget's theory although still recognised as the most influential theory of cognitive development, essentially neglected the impact of the social environment on cognitive development (Garbarino & Stott, 1992; Rice, 1995; Meadows, 1996). Vygotsky (1978) contended in order to understand children's cognitive development; their thinking must be examined within the context in which it is created. The social and cultural context needs to be recognised as the social extent of consciousness is the primary influence, and the individual factors are a secondary influence on cognitive development (Garbarino & Stott, 1992; Meadows, 1996; Rice, 1995). As a result children create their own environments and take steps to alter their environment, if they feel it is necessary (Piaget, 1972).

In particular, this applies to children in formal schooling, as it is central to the development of their thinking with regards to problem solving, enabling children to learn how to incorporate different perspectives and information from their social context, as they grow (Garbarino & Stott, 1992). The ability for children to articulate their understanding of the world around them develops slowly in the first seven years

of life and is ameliorated as they progress through life (Barenboim, 1981; Wartella, 1979). Flavell (1986) stated that young children have difficulty in understanding communications and often find it difficult to analyse and evaluate the meaning of language.

Essentially, although children may possess an understanding or feeling about their world, they may not be able to articulate their understanding of it (Barenboim, 1981; Garbarino & Stott, 1992). However, between the ages of six to eight years, children increase their use of behavioural comparisons in describing things (Barenboim). This notion suggests children aged seven to eight years may not be able to understand the meaning of community, however, they can describe the various factors in relation to their community (Pooley, Pike et al., 2002). PSOC in children has been linked to the development of positive and valuable skills such as pro-social motivation, sense of belonging, altruistic behaviours, academic success and positive interpersonal behaviours in later life (Schaps & Lewis, 1999). Therefore, although children in this age range may have difficulty in articulating their understanding of PSOC, they may use other words indicating they do possess a PSOC (Barenboim, 1981; Pooley, Pike et al., 2002). Children do identify their schools as a place of belonging, however, children who experience their school as a community, display a formidable opposition to alienating and antisocial behaviours (Battistitch & Hom, 1997).

PSOC as a Mediator for Antisocial Behaviour

The leading cause of death among young people in America is reported to be teenage suicide, and a large number of those deaths have been related to problems initiated in the school environment (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). It has been suggested that being part of a community lacking in the capacity to inspire a PSOC would not

only be problematic for socially well-adjusted individuals, but could foster antisocial behaviours in individuals who are not socially well-adjusted (Battistitch & Hom, 1997; Pretty et al., 1996). The relationship between antisocial behaviour and rejection from peer groups has been extensively researched, resulting in the current belief that low academic attainment and peer rejection are part of the aetiology of antisocial behaviours, rather than the consequence (Patterson, DeBaryshe & Ramsey, 1989). Individuals who are deficient in positive prosocial values are said to be more likely to engage in antisocial behaviour and associate with delinquent peers (Patterson et al.). Patterson et al. found a correlation between negative prosocial values and problematic behaviours at school such as substance use, fighting, bullying, and depressive symptomology. (Baker, Terry, Bridger & Winsor, 1997; Goff & Goddard, 1999; Soutter & McKenzie, 2000).

A study conducted by Battistich and Hom (1997) suggested students who possessed a high-level of PSOC also exhibited a decreased level of antisocial behaviour, and an increased level of academic ability. The authors examined the association between PSOC in fifth and sixth grade children and the frequency of problematic behaviours. Results demonstrated a correlation between lower levels of problematic behaviours such as drug use and antisocial behaviour, and higher levels of PSOC (Battistitch & Hom). Battistitch and Hom concluded their school environment can affect children's attitudes and behaviours and this could have a considerable impact on their psychosocial development. Although the data was cross-sectional and may not provide discernible confirmation of the correlation, the authors do suggest future research is necessary to understand the impact of PSOC on the developmental processes of children, within the school environment.

A longitudinal study by Scott, Knapp, Henderson and Maughan (2001) examined the correlation between childhood antisocial behaviours and their development across the lifespan. They defined antisocial behaviour as 'conduct disorder' and divided 142 participants into three groups in childhood; namely, no problems, conduct problems, and conduct disorders (Scott et al.). Characteristic behaviours included tantrums, disobedience, fighting, lying and stealing, as these behaviours demonstrated a relationship with disadvantages in educational and social domains (Scott et al.). Results of their study established the cost of public service usage by individuals at the age of 28, was predicted by their antisocial behaviour at age 10, the costs increased over three times the amount with conduct problems and 10 times with conduct disorder (Scott et al.). Importantly, the authors claimed children exhibiting extensive antisocial behaviour demonstrated poor social functioning in adulthood, and were at an increased risk of being socially isolated (Scott et al.). Therefore, the relevance of introducing interventions such as PSOC into primary schools may be a strategy for diminishing the probability of young children's lack of prosocial behaviours, resulting in a decrease in antisocial and deviant behaviours in later life (Battistitch & Hom, 1997; Goff & Goddard, 1999; Perry, 1999; Pretty et al., 1996).

The degree to which children feel they are accepted and included in their school social environment can ultimately impact on their feelings of belonging (Baker et al., 1997; Cassidy et al., 2003). Importantly, children experiencing a lack of 'school membership' have been recognised as children at-risk, and the lack of 'school membership' has been identified as an element underlying children's feelings of alienation (Goodenow, 1992; 1993b). Those children who do not experience a feeling of belonging in their school environment are at an increased risk of numerous

psychological problems including loneliness, violence, drug use, eating disorders and depression (Goodenow, 1992; 1993b; Pretty et al.). It has been further suggested these children might seek this membership from alternate sources such as antisocial groups (Baker et al., 1997; Goff & Goddard, 1999; Pretty et al., 1996). The loneliness experienced by children in a school environment may not be the individual's inability to participate in their community, rather it could be a failure in the structure of the school community (Pretty et al.). Research has indicated individuals who exhibit antisocial behaviours are those children who experience condemnation and inferior associations with their peers and teachers (Battistitch & Hom, 1997). Conversely, children who feel respected, competent, and experience feelings of safety are less likely to act aggressively towards others (Kaplan & Owings, 2000).

Utilising a social ecological perspective as it incorporates the overlap of school, community and family, the relationship between school environment and problem behaviours in adolescence was examined by Offord, Wright, Shain, and Dewit (2000). Results of a survey from 1000-year nine students demonstrated that an association existed between self-reported behavioural problems and negative school culture. The authors suggested intervention programs should be implemented in order to modify school environments and encourage behavioural well-being in children. Therefore, the promotion of PSOC within schools has become a popular concept due to the loss of PSOC in contemporary society (Sarason, 1974; Sergiovanni, 1994; Schaps & Solomon, 1990). The experience and understanding of group process and the sense of relatedness to the larger world community that young people gain from possessing a PSOC, could be promoted by establishing common goals and values, and then providing the infrastructure to support these elements in the school environment (Berman, 1990).

Objectives and Research Questions

PSOC has been recognised as a critical influence in directing the social, psychological and emotional development of individuals (Wilson & Baldassare, 1996). Research has suggested a positive correlation exists between PSOC and positive psychological well-being in individuals, and that a negative correlation exists between PSOC and damaging psychosocial behaviours (McMillan & Chavis, 1986; Pretty et al., 1996; Royal & Rossi, 1996). The previous literature highlighted the limited research in relation to young children's perception of PSOC within the school environment. Research has documented the positive benefits of PSOC for adolescents and adults, perhaps the earlier PSOC is identified and nurtured, the greater the potential benefits for individuals across their lifespan. The current exploratory study attempts to enhance the understanding of whether children aged seven and eight years are able to articulate their conception of the term community, and if so whether primary school aged children do experience a PSOC within their school environment. The following research examined whether PSOC for young children is comparable to that of adolescents and adults. There are two research questions for the current exploratory study:

1.   Can children in this age group articulate their understanding of community?

2.   Do young children experience a PSOC within their school environment?

Method

Research Design

The current exploratory study used a conceptual framework based on McMillan and Chavis's (1986) theory of PSOC, to explore whether young children experience a PSOC in their school environment. A qualitative approach was employed to analyse the experiences of each participant, in an attempt to compile common themes and meanings within the descriptive data (Banyard & Miller, 1998; Creswell, 1994; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Patton, 1990; Punch, 2000), as qualitative research is a naturalistic methodology and offered the researcher a holistic overview (Abrams & Gibbs, 2000; Punch, 2000). It is recognised that qualitative research is inherently a human process and any notion of validity must concern itself with not only what is known, but also take into consideration that the phenomenon being observed is both independent of, and independent on the researcher (Patton). There is a continuous interplay between the researcher's bias and anticipation of the outcomes of any research, and the characteristics of the environment must also be recognised (Patton, 1990; Punch, 2000). Hence, the partnership of the discovery and interpretation of the findings between the researcher and the phenomenon being studied was acknowledged by the researcher prior to commencement of the study.

Participants

A convenience sample of 16 participants was selected from two primary schools in the Joondalup Education District, Western Australia after consultation with the Director of the Joondalup Education Office, and the principals of two primary schools. Participants were children seven and eight years of age and gender distribution was equal in both age groups (four males aged seven, four males aged

eight, four females aged seven, and four females aged eight). Neither the schools, nor

the participants were rewarded for participating in this study.

Instruments

Prior to the commencement of the current exploratory study a list of semi-

structured questions was generated based on the Neighbourhood Youth Inventory

(NYI) (Chipuer et al., 1999) and the Sense of Community Index (SCI) (Chavis et al.,

1986), as a measure of children's PSOC in their school environment. A pilot test was

conducted with four children to ascertain the reliability of the measure, and to verify

the appropriateness of the language for this age group (Burgess-Limerick & Burgess-

Limerick, 1998; Garbarino & Stott, 1992). The wording of the questions was changed

where necessary and the semi-structured interview schedule was developed from the

pilot test, and used in the interviews with the children (Appendix A). Examples

included:

1.   *Tell me about the people in your school?*

2.   *Do you know what the word community means?*

3.   *What does your school mean to you?*

The semi-structured interview allowed the researcher to develop a rapport with

the children, and facilitated the flexibility needed to elicit richer data from the

children (Smith, Hare & Van Langenhove, 1995). The imbalance of power created

between children and adults was recognised, therefore the interviews were conducted

in a conversational manner to empower the children to participate in the process, at

their own pace (Banyard & Miller, 1998; Burgess-Limerick & Burgess-Limerick,

1998; Rapley & Pretty, 1999; Smith et al., 1995). Information letters and consent

forms were developed in order to obtain written consent from all parties concerned

(Appendices B to F). Demographic information was collected including the children's

age, gender and grade levels. All interviews took place in a specially allocated room

in the school library. An audiotape recorder was utilised to record the children's

verbal responses, and the children's non-verbal responses such as body language and

behaviour were recorded in writing, including any thoughts or biases of the

researcher.

Procedure

Information letters (Appendix A) were sent to two schools from different

suburbs in the Joondalup Education District, inviting them to participate in the study.

Once permission was granted by the principals, for the research to proceed in these

two schools then the parent, guardian, and children's information and permission slips

were sent home with all of the children aged seven to eight years old. These letters

provided information on the rationale behind the study, the nature and aim of the

study. Written permission was requested from both the parents and the children with

regards to participation in the study. Complete confidentiality of all of the data

collected from the interviews was assured. Students returned their consent forms and

the researcher arranged a time with teachers to attend their classrooms and assist the

teacher for an hour prior to the interviews. This increased the participant's familiarity

with the researcher. The children were then taken to the library by the researcher

where the purpose of the study and interviews was explained. They were also

informed about the confidentiality of their responses, and that there were no right or

wrong answers.

Each interview lasted about 20 minutes and was tape-recorded. The semi-

structured interview questions were asked in conjunction with other prompting

questions, in a conversational manner, (Burgess-Limerick & Burgess- Limerick,

1998) to facilitate richer levels of information from the children (Creswell, 1994;

Garbarino & Stott, 1992; Smith et al., 1995). When no further information pertaining to the study was forthcoming, the children were thanked for their participation and escorted back to their classroom by the researcher.

Data Analysis

The interviews were transcribed verbatim to maintain the accuracy of the children's responses, and each child was assigned an associated symbol to ensure their confidentiality, the audiotapes were then destroyed. The information regarding body language, non-verbal responses of the children, and the personal biases of the researcher were recorded throughout the interviewing process and added to the transcripts. Common themes and words were highlighted on the transcripts and a question ordered matrix (Appendix G) was used as a management tool, to organise the information in a methodical and coherent mode for analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The matrix consisted of the participants organised in rows by their associated symbols, with the questions and relevant responses corresponding to each participant in columns (Appendix G). A thematic content analysis was then conducted to discern the recurring positive and negative themes from within the descriptive data (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Patton, 1990).

Clustering common themes together condensed the information further, which revealed main themes comprising a number of sub-themes (Patton, 1990). Importantly, the responses were not reduced significantly, as it is the richness of the responses that elicits the understanding of the phenomenon under investigation (Creswell, 1994; Miles & Huberman, 1994). The credibility and relevance of the research was enhanced by the use of feedback loops with co-researchers, at every step of the analysis process, and repetition of the research cycle was applied until

theoretical saturation was reached (Punch, 2000). This ensured the clarity, accuracy, and precision of the findings (Chenail, 1992; Creswell, 1994; Patton, 1990).

Qualitative researchers have a tendency to focus on what is familiar and central to a study, and have a propensity to focus on central tendencies and pre-study variables (Chenail, 1992). Therefore, in the current study the researcher acknowledged any personal bias and expanded the margins of the research, to allow for a more comprehensive analysis of the descriptive data. This created opportunity for discoveries which otherwise would not have been revealed, other than by chance (Chenail). If the notions of validity, reliability, and objectivity are applied to qualitative research methodologies, it jeopardises undermining the potential benefits qualitative methodologies can provide (Punch, 2000). Therefore, the consistency and soundness of the findings in the current study were achieved with the method of analyst triangulation with two co-researchers, who conducted a thematic content analysis on the descriptive data (Punch). Following this process, the subsequent analyses were compared to the original analysis, to ensure confirmability of the findings. This reduced the potential bias that could have occurred from a single researcher (Patton, 1990; Punch, 2000) and the possibility the descriptive data was collected by chance, or circumstances (Chenail).

Findings and Interpretations

The current exploratory study was conducted in order to examine whether seven to eight year old children possess a PSOC within their school environment. A thematic content analysis was performed on the descriptive data with the aim of answering the following two research questions:

1. Can children in this age group articulate their understanding of community?

2. Do young children experience a PSOC within their school environment?

The children in the current study indicated they were able to articulate their understanding of community with numerous responses. Some examples were:

It's people together and doing things to help each other...like the people in our school.

Part of the community is like the school.

These responses supported the findings of Pooley, Pike et al. (2002) in that the children were able to express their ideas verbally. This was evident with responses to the question of whether the children thought their school was a community. One example was:

Yes, it's a community for kids.

Additionally the children in the current study described their school community in behavioural terms as suggested by Barenboim (1981) with language such as:

Helping each other, working together, learning stuff and playing with my friends.

A number of positive themes were identified in the analysis, which concurred with McMillan and Chavis's (1986) model of PSOC. However, these themes were

predominantly revealed in the children from the first school, as opposed to the second school where the children revealed themes relating to *antisocial behaviours*.

The children's transcripts revealed four main positive themes of *membership, influence, integration and fulfilment of needs, and shared emotional connection*. Additionally, the sub-themes of *belonging, shared symbols, safety, cooperation, prosocial behaviours, reciprocity,* and *friendships* were revealed. The main negative theme of *antisocial behaviours* revealed the three sub-themes of *alienation, fighting* and *bullying* from within the descriptive data. Importantly, these negative themes were demonstrated predominantly from the second school. The various themes that emerged from the analysis are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Main Themes and Sub-themes Relating to PSOC in Children

Main Themes	Sub-themes
Membership	Belonging
	Shared symbols
	Safety
Influence	Cooperation
Integration and Fulfilment of needs	Prosocial behaviours
	Reciprocity
Shared Emotional Connection	Friendships
Antisocial Behaviours	Alienation
	Fighting
	Bullying

Membership

The first main theme extrapolated from the descriptive data was McMillan and Chavis's (1986) element of *membership*, more specifically; the sub-themes of *belonging, shared symbols* and *safety* were indicated.

Belonging

Children displaying a PSOC possess an awareness of being a member of a group (Belenardo, 2001; McMillan & Chavis, 1986; Pretty et al., 1996). School programs that promote a feeling of *belonging* acknowledge positive experiences and connect all members of the school community (Battistitch & Hom, 1997; Beck & Malley, 1998; McMillan & Chavis, 1986). The notion of belonging to a group and the security it inculcates in children aged seven and eight years was evident in the analysis of the children's descriptive data. One example indicative of the feelings of *belonging* expressed by the children when asked if they knew what the word community meant was:

Yes. The whole entire world.

When asked if their school was a community the children responded similarly:

Yes, because it's fun to work and working is part of the community.

McMillan and Chavis (1986) described belonging as the belief of any member of a community that they "fit in" (p. 10) and are accepted by their community. This was demonstrated in the following response to questions concerning friends, and how the children felt about their friends:

That I fit in with them.

A further aspect of the sub-element of *belonging* is the enthusiasm of the member to surrender themselves for the benefit of the community (McMillan & Chavis). This aspect was confirmed in the children in the current study when one child remarked:

I had to tell the truth or the whole class would be punished, so I had to do it

because I didn't want the class to get punished.

The feelings of belonging children experience in their schools are produced

when they are included into the school community regardless of age, gender, culture,

religion, or the numerous nationalities included in our multi-cultural society

(Belenardo, 2001; Sergiovanni, 1994). This was evidenced in the various responses

from the children such as:

We have different special people...that are all important.

Schools that create environments, which develop the student's feelings of group

consciousness, affirm their accomplishments and that of the community, and develop

a positive PSOC do facilitate a positive PSOC within their students (Berman Schaps

& Solomon, 1990; Solomon et al., 1996).

A further characteristic, which appears to cultivate feelings of belonging, is an

acknowledgment of the individual accomplishments of children (Beck & Malley,

1998). This element of membership incorporates the feelings of belonging and

personal investment of students in activities, within their respective schools (Sonn,

Bishop & Drew, 1999). The children in the current study articulated these elements

when they were asked to talk about their school:

Whoever keeps the sports equipment nice...gets the sports bag award...

tidiest room gets the bug award.

You get picks for when you finish your work, ... something you would like to

do, ... like play on the computer.

The previous responses supported the sub-element of *belonging* as described by

McMillan and Chavis (1986).

Shared Symbols

The second sub-theme of *shared symbols* refers to how the children defined their social world and the importance of shared activities for the children (Belenardo, 2001; Pretty, 1990; Solomon et al., 1996; Schaps & Solomon, 1990). This concept was substantiated with responses such as:

Some are having fun activities...sometimes sports...and sport's days 'cause they are fun.

Sport...soccer...football ...chasey.

These responses provided support for the notion that children describe their friendships in relation to the shared activities they experience (Bukowski et al., 1998). Further evidence of the shared symbol systems that promote a feeling of *m ibership* as suggested by McMillan and Chavis (1986), was expressed by a number of children who stated:

School rules...get your name in the red book when you are naughty.

Winning the bug award...getting awards.

Participation in the shared symbol systems of *'awards'* and *'red books'* by the children in the current study, is indicative of the creation of bonds and a commitment to their school. This finding supports previous research suggesting children are inclined to follow the norms and values of their particular school, and subsequently, individual needs are fulfilled (Battistitch et al., 1997; McMillan & Chavis, 1986; Stumpers, 2002).

Safety

The sub-theme of *safety* revealed by the children included their emotional and physical *safety*, which is an integral factor in the element of *membership* (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Children need to feel safe and secure in their school environment and

this includes their physical and emotional safety (Kaplan & Owings, 2000; Larrivee, 2000). McMillan and Chavis refer to emotional safety as being a component of security and comprises of boundaries that create structures, and subsequently emotional safety for community members. The role of boundaries in the school context is explained in the spatial patterns created, which delineate where each of the members of the school community feel they belong (McMillan & Chavis). In effect, the children in the current study indicated they were aware of this notion with responses such as:

Children have playgrounds and stuff...staff rooms are for the teachers.

Further evidence of the importance of their emotional and physical safety was demonstrated from within the descriptive data with responses such as:

Means a lot to me...good place to be.

It's a safety house...keeps me safe from mean people ... criminals.

A recurring theme established in the thematic content analysis was the constant reference to their teachers and friends keeping them physically safe. It has been suggested that children who feel respected, competent and experience feelings of safety, are less likely to behave aggressively towards others (Kaplan & Owings, 2000). Responses to questions in relation to who the children would approach if there were a problem in their school were:

Tell the duty teacher if someone is trying to hurt you...go and tell the teacher...they sort them out.

He's my closest friend and he protects me.

The previous responses supported McMillan and Chavis's (1986) element of *membership*, in that, *belonging* to a community incorporates not only the confidence an individual belongs to the group, but also the expectation of *safety* and security that

belonging implies. This element was clearly demonstrated in a quote from one of the children:

> *School makes me feel like I'm a little chick, and my mothers making*
>
> *me go on her back, and teaching me how to swim and stuff.*

This response is indicative of the statement by Arbor and Allen (2000) who suggested those schools who have established an atmosphere of 'community' in their classrooms, allow the children to experience emotional and physical *safety*, which fosters the learning processes (Kaplan & Owings, 2000). This empowers children to share their thoughts, collectively problem solve, and provides a non-judgemental feeling that will last a lifetime (Arbor & Allen).

Influence

The second main theme identified was the element of *influence* (McMillan & Chavis, 1986) described as bi-directional in nature. This is attributable to individuals being drawn towards communities on which they feel they have an effect, and conversely, the community has an effect on the members. McMillan and Chavis stated conformity and cohesion are essential to the element of *influence* and they occur concurrently. As a result the relationship between a community and its members is demonstrated in the amount of conformity and compliance exhibited by the members (McMillan & Chavis). The sub-theme indicated by the analysis in relation to the element of *influence* was *cooperation*.

Cooperation

A positive PSOC in schools could create a caring and supportive environment for children who experience a feeling of being similar with other members (Davidson & Cotter, 1991; McMillan & Chavis, 1986). This was indicated in the first school with numerous responses such as:

It means, it's things all around us in Australia.

Additionally, the bi-directional nature of the relationship between the children and

their school was confirmed with responses such as:

It's workplaces and it's community to help it and stuff...because other people

go to school, and it's like a community working thing.

Research has expressed this with reference to adult and adolescent populations in

many contexts such as the study conducted by Chavis and Wandersman (1990), which

examined whether PSOC influences participation in an urban community. Findings

indicated PSOC is essential for neighbourhood development due to the effect it has on

individual and group empowerment, which assists neighbours to behave in a manner

conducive to shared needs. The following response suggested the children in the first

school, displayed behaviours that met their shared needs:

It's lots of fun when it's lunch and recess time, we get to play with people in

other classes, and we get to know people from other classes.

When individuals possess a strong PSOC they are better able to arbitrate the

negative effects of experiences, over which they appear to have no control (Chavis &

Wandersman). Chavis and Wandersman (1990) suggested future research should take

into account the underlying structures of our human environments such as schools

(Chavis & Wandersman) as PSOC becomes the inspiration that can bind a community

together. The children from the first school supported this notion with responses such

as:

Umm ...people working together and not even, not, don't even fight they just

keep together...and helping poor sick boys and girls...they support me, and

make me feel like they will help me, when I don't know something.

This response supports the notion that a strong community enables not only the individual, but also the community to develop and achieve their potential, within their school environment (Chavis & Newbrough, 1986).

Learning and the education process is primarily an interpersonal and social system, concerning group dynamics involving reciprocity, group norms and roles (Goodenow, 1992; Cassidy et al., 2003). This was highlighted with examples such as:

I would feel comfortable talking to all of them (teachers and friends) *my friends always look after me... it means I can be with my friends, and my work and my teachers.*

It's a very clean school, and it's very friendly...lots of people to talk to...play with, and if you want help, you can go to the teachers, or the year sevens.

These responses suggested elements of PSOC have been established in the first school, wherein the children have become part of a school where individuals care for each other, assist one another in times of need, and have committed themselves to the learning process (York-Barr, 1997). A further example was:

Some are clever at some things, and some of us are clever at other things, and that we're different, and have different opinions.

The above responses are clearly indicative of the sub-element of *cooperation*, which is representative of the bi-directional element of *influence* as portrayed by McMillan and Chavis's (1986) model of PSOC.

Integration and Fulfilment of Needs

The third main theme revealed was *integration and fulfilment of needs* explained as reinforcements provided within the community to motivate involvement in the group. Essentially, for any reinforcement to maintain a positive intimacy, the relationship between the individual and the group must be worthwhile (McMillan &

Chavis, 1986; Royal & Rossi, 1996). Two sub-themes of *prosocial behaviours* and *reciprocity* among the children were determined.

Prosocial Behaviours

Prosocial behaviours such as sharing, helping, volunteering, and altruistic behaviours are broadly classified as intended behaviours benefiting individuals carried out voluntarily by another (Eisenberg & Miller, 1987; Greener, 2000; Jackson & Tisak, 2001). *Prosocial* or helping behaviours are thought to increase when individuals sense of themselves as belonging to a group (McMillan & Chavis, 1986; Baumeister & Leary, 1995). The children in the current study expressed their participation in *prosocial behaviours* with responses such as:

Helping each other, sharing, being friendly, supporting and working together.

Telling the teacher when someone needed help, or was hurt.

Students who possess a PSOC in their schools display a decreased amount of antisocial behaviours and an increased amount of *prosocial behaviours* (Greener). This supports the notion that the earlier children's PSOC is developed; the more prosocial behaviours would be displayed (Jackson & Tisak).

Although the children may not be able articulate their understanding of the words '*prosocial behaviours*' (Barenboim, 1981; Garbarino & Stott, 1992), their dialogue revealed they were partaking in *prosocial behaviours* within their school environment. Responses included:

I like playing around with my friends ... because my friends are nice, and they

help me sometimes ...cause I like them and they like me.

These are indicative of a large number of responses given by the children and support the previous research by Jackson & Tisak (2001) who suggested that prosocial behaviours are linked to positive outcomes such as achieving academic success,

personal satisfaction and social competence with others. A further example of these types of *prosocial behaviours* demonstrated by the children in the current study was:

> *They are fun to play with, and I never get lonely, and if I need some help, I go and ask one of my friends.*

The aforementioned responses represent the bi-directional element of *integration and fulfilment of needs* as described by McMillan and Chavis (1986).

Reciprocity

The second sub-theme of *integration and fulfilment of needs* revealed was *reciprocity*. There are a number of definitions of *reciprocity* such as the assistance provided by individuals benefiting others, with the prospect that the kindness will be reciprocated at an indeterminate point in time (Onyx & Bullen, 2000). Additionally, reciprocity is described as a reaction to friendly behaviours and is essentially dissimilar from altruistic or cooperative behaviours (Fehr & Gachter, 2000). First grade relationships developed in school environments are referred to as durable friendships, with regular presentation of reciprocal helping and sharing (Rizzo & Corsaro, 1995). This was demonstrated with responses to questions relating to what the children thought a community was:

> *It's when lots of people help each other.*

> *Learning stuff and playing with my friends...teachers helping us learn stuff.*

Therefore, an understanding of student's PSOC can increase perceptions of how positive environments can promote better learning and motivation, and positive psychological wellbeing (Liang et al., 2001; Jackson & Tisak, 2001). Reciprocity is an essential interpersonal factor in the social process of education and although social and learning goals are researched as different concepts, they are entwined in our

social worlds (Cassidy et al; 2003; Goodenow, 1992). *Reciprocity* was demonstrated in the current study when one of the children replied:

> *I like to help other kids when they are sad, when they have no one to play*
>
> *with...and I tell the teacher if they get picked on...and then the teacher tells*
>
> *the other kids off, and then my friends are happy, and we all play together.*

This type of reciprocal behaviour is embedded in adult relationships, that is, they are in-kind behaviours that do not expect an immediate, or material gain (Fehr & Gachter, 2000). These responses represent the notion of reciprocity and were further supported in the current study with numerous responses from the children. For example:

> *Part of the community is like the school ...because the school is running a*
>
> *business, and they're having lots of stalls and everything, because they're*
>
> *going to put air conditioning in our school. So our school is a very big*
>
> *business-company.*

This response concurs with Piaget's (1972) theory of young children who view *reciprocity* as a simple exchange of activities, and invariably with young children this type of behaviour is exhibited in their friendships (Berndt, 1982). The two sub-themes of *prosocial behaviours* and *reciprocity* exhibited by the children highlight the bi-directional nature of main theme of *influence* being displayed in the children's thoughts and behaviours.

Shared Emotional Connection

The fourth main theme revealed in the analysis was McMillan and Chavis's (1986) element of *shared emotional connection* and the sub-theme of *friendships* was identified.

Friendships

The most significant relationships the children had developed within their school environment were friends. This supported Heiman (2000) who stated friendships ensue throughout an individual's life and consequential friendships for children involve affection, loyalty, disclosure and intimacy. Friendship is defined as a functional and reciprocal relationship between two or more individuals, with boundaries that incrementally change as the friendship develops and the children mature (Burk, 1996; Bukowski et al., 1998). The children defined their friendships with responses such as:

Whenever I am sad they help me, and they let me join in their games.

Findings from research conducted by Hays (1985) revealed a correlation with the intensity of the friendship and the quantity of interaction between individuals. In addition, they suggested if relationships are cultivated in a positive environment the friendships are likely to be strong and intimate (Hays). The children expressed this with replies such as:

The nice people are my friends, and they treat other people nice, and they help

each other, and when someone's hurt, they go and tell the teacher.

Interestingly, Rizzo & Corsaro (1995) suggested a child's understanding of the accessibility and quality of their friendships is important with regards to their perceived social support network, and the quality of friendships appeared to be correlated with, and influenced by the socioecological elements of the classroom. This was indicated in the children with remarks such as:

In my classroom, I can be with my work, my friends and my teachers.

When the children were asked what their school meant to them the common reply was:

Friends.

This corroborates the fourth element of McMillan and Chavis's (1986) model, in that an increased amount of interaction between individuals results in strong bonds and a high degree of intimacy and trust. Importantly, the authors suggested *shared emotional connection* is a definitive element of community. This notion was supported with statements from the children, for example:

Having friends...because I like being with my friends.

Therefore, if communities promote positive PSOC and support the relationships or friendships of the members, it will allow for positive interactions and a sharing environment school environment (Simpkins & Parke, 2002; Yugar & Shapiro, 2001). This was established with responses including:

I have a lot of friends and I have big friends ... I have friends in my

classroom... and we play together at recess and lunch, and after school. We

have fun together.

Children in the current study used a variety of expressive words to describe people in their school and how they made them feel at school including '*happy*' and '*nice.*' This supports Davidson & Cotter's (1993) research findings in relation to happiness having the most salient connection with PSOC. In describing their friends in their school environment the children used additional words such as:

Fun, sharing, playing, friendly, and *caring.*

Yugar and Shapiro (2001) contended friendships are an integral factor in children's lives externally of the home environment and have a considerable influence on a child's general social development. This was revealed in the responses from the children, for instance:

I play a lot of games with my friends.

Stumpers (2002) who stated, "friends are the single most important factor in children feeling connected to their school" supported this concept. (p. 31). These responses confirmed the fourth element of McMillan and Chavis's (1986) model, as an increased amount of interaction between children results in strong bonds, and a high degree of intimacy and trust. Importantly, the authors suggested *shared emotional connection* appears to be the most definitive element of community. The stronger the investment individuals offer within their community such as the level of self-disclosure, the stronger the degree of intimacy and friendship with others (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Friendship is essential for children's interpersonal relationships and adjustment to their world (Hays, 1985). This was demonstrated in responses to questions asking why friends are important to the children:

Because they share their stuff with us.

The quality of those friendships and the context in which they develop allows children to work together in an attempt to understand their psychosocial requirements (Hays, 1985; Rizzo & Corsaro, 1995). Friendship assists social learning, provides emotional support, and functions as an antecedent to relationships throughout the lifespan, thus the substantiation of childhood friendships in a school setting is important in understanding children's social development (Hartup, 1996; Yugar & Shapiro, 2001). The following response to questions about their school demonstrated this concept:

Its fun...I'm clever...I get to play with friends and we learn stuff together.

Simpkins and Parke (2002) examined differences between the positive and negative behaviours for friends, as opposed to non-friends. Their results indicated a variance between the positive behaviours, as children appeared to be more positive towards friends, than non-friends. Children who have supportive and positive relationships in

a caring and supportive environment, tend to experience a positive self-worth and psychological well-being and view their social environment as a positive and caring place (Schaps & Solomon, 1990; Solomon et al., 1996).

Previous research supports the underlying principle of *shared emotional connection* as the amount, quality and valence of contact between children in a positive environment that impacts on their psychosocial development (Burroughs & Eby, 1998; Pretty et al., 1994). Although friendships function as supportive social supports in stressful circumstances, young children do not believe conflict and support are a single dimension, that is, children who are arguing with each other do not expect to share with each other (Berndt & Perry, 1986). The difficulty for children who have been isolated in a school community and are not accepted by their classroom peers, is the lack of quality of friendships (Parker & Asher, 1993).

Antisocial Behaviours

An unexpected finding from the children's interviews exhibited predominantly from the second school, were the numerous statements demonstrating a high prevalence of *antisocial behaviours*. One child commented:

Well there's a lot of nice people in my school, and there's a lot of not very nice people in my school.

This feeling was indicative of many children's comments from the second school revealing the sub-themes of *bullying, alienation* and *fighting*

Bullying

Bullying has been described as negative verbal, physical, social, or psychological incidents perpetrated on younger children, by older children, or by groups of children on a single child (Beale & Scott, 2001; Department of Education Training and Youth Affairs, 2000; Soutter & McKenzie, 2000). One child responded:

Some people fight, and some people get hurt.

It's the people that are naughty, and the bullies, and the naughty, naughty,

naughty people that.' don't like.

The anti-harassment and anti-bullying programs in Western Australian schools was

examined by Soutter & McKenzie who contended schools that are offering

intervention to students after an incident of bullying, reduced the occurrence of direct

bullying, however, indirect bullying remained unchanged and in some cases an

increase in bullying behaviours was found. Some examples of the bullying behaviours

exhibited by the children were:

Some people bully me, and some people fight, and some people start a fight by

calling names.

Children who are exposed to unfriendly and uncaring school environments are

considered to develop a low self-esteem and an increased possibility of peer

acceptance of deviant behaviour, as these children are more likely to associate with

deviant peer groups (Boulton, Trueman, Whitehand & Amatya, 1990; Espelage, Holt

& Henkel, 2003; Offord et al., 2000).

It has been suggested 'the whole is greater than the sum of the parts' (Brodsky

& Marx, 2001; Sargent, Nilan & Winter, 1998; York-Barr, 1997), however, in

facilitating the understanding of what it means to be a part of a community perhaps

the context is the important element to be considered (Sonn et al., 1999). In effect,

shared feelings of the members of a particular community may reveal more about an

individual's PSOC, than elements of the community itself. This was indicated in the

children in the second study with numerous responses such as:

I don't like the bad people in my school

Sonn et al. stated the loss of community in society leads them to believe the emphasis should be on how to prevent individuals from experiencing a lack of PSOC. The elements incorporated in PSOC and the sub-element of belonging appears to significantly reduce an individual's involvement in antisocial behaviours (Battistitch & Hom, 1997; Goff & Goddard, 1999). Although a strong awareness of belonging has traditionally been associated with family and neighbourhood it is also an integral element of PSOC. Thus, promotion of the elements of PSOC within the school environment could reduce the possibility of children indulging in problematic behaviours such as bullying (Battistitch & Hom, 1997; Perry, 1999; Pretty et al., 1996; Soutter & McKenzie, 2000).

Alienation

A longitudinal study, investigating individuals who were deficient in positive prosocial values found they are more likely to engage in antisocial behaviour and associate with delinquent peers, than individuals who exhibit prosocial behaviours (Scott et al., 2001). Evidence has suggested 40% of eight year-old children who exhibit conduct disorder are convicted in adolescence of vandalism, theft, and assault and their use of alcohol and drugs increases (Scott et al.). The financial cost to society in relation to antisocial behaviour in childhood and adolescence is well documented (Scott et al.). Therefore, an increased understanding of *antisocial behaviours* and social exclusion in childhood is paramount, as it equates to a decrease not just economically to our mental health services and formal criminal justice system, but also in the social cost to future generations (Scott et al.).

Inferior associations with their peers and teachers have also been associated with antisocial behaviours (Howes, Hamilton & Matheson, 1994; Roeser, Midgley &

Urdan, 1996; Battistitch & Hom, 1997). This was demonstrated in the children from the second school. Examples were:

> *Being shouted at by the teacher...being said to put a bomb under yourself.*

> *Sometimes they get angry at us...because we never do stuff right.*

Research has indicated individuals who exhibit antisocial behaviours are those children who experience condemnation (Scott et al., 2001). This notion was indicated with responses such as:

> *People fighting ... some kids came up and they bullied me.*

> *I would say that every Vietnamese alive, they're traitors.*

Rejection or *alienation* in the school environment has been consistently associated with loneliness, violence and suicide (McNeely, 1999; Osterman, 2000). Children who are deficient in the positive elements of a PSOC have an increased probability of experiencing behavioural, psychological and academic problems (Battistitch, Solomon, Watson & Schaps, 1997, Schneider, 1999; Van Dyke, Stallings & Colley, 1995; Segrin, 1999).

Fighting

Factors such as a positive school environment, belonging, and positive self-efficacy function as buffers to children's involvement in drug use and antisocial behaviours (Offord et al., 2000). Schaps and Lewis (1999) suggested students who identify their school as a place of belonging exhibit an opposition to antisocial behaviours. However, previous research supports the notion that students, who possess a PSOC and experience their school as a community, display an even stronger opposition to antisocial and problem behaviours (Battistitch & Hom, 1997; Espelage et al., 2003). It could be inferred from the above research that although the second school may have been promoting the elements of belonging or 'school membership,'

they were inadequately promoting the elements of PSOC within their school environment. This was demonstrated with responses from the children such as:

> *I gotten hurt once by... I was running and he tripped me over, he just punched me in the tummy.*

Research has found problem behaviours such as shoplifting, petty theft, physical violence, vandalism, and trouble at school are all inhibited by feelings of belonging to a community (Goff & Goddard, 1999). Previous research by Battistitch and Hom (1997) supports the notion that if the children in the second school had possessed a PSOC then the following behaviours would not have been revealed:

> *Yes...Hits people and everything. One day I saw him, he was dragging this kid by the legs, and umm, I don't like the bad people in my school.*
>
> *Fighting, pushing people, punching, fighting in the toilets.*

The authors suggested schools that possessed a higher PSOC score, exhibited a lower amount of antisocial behaviours. The findings in the current study support this notion, as the children in the second school appeared not to possess an understanding of a PSOC in their school environment. This was demonstrated by the amount of antisocial behaviours revealed by the children's responses such as:

> *Yes, because my friends always pick on me, because I am the only one who comes from ... and they hate people from other countries.* (How do they know you come from ... ...?) *They know because I talk a bit of ... ...* (Do you see yourself as different to them?) *Yes.*

These remarks highlight the need for research concentrating on those who feel morally excluded, that is, the subjugated, the alienated and the stigmatised (Fisher & Sonn, 1999; Pretty et al., 1996; Sonn et al., 1999, p. 209). The significance of developing a positive PSOC as a buffer to the psychological, social and behavioural

disorders exhibited by individuals, has been proposed by researchers such as McMillan & Chavis (1986) and Sonn and Fisher (1998) as a positive PSOC is an important foundation of an individual's well-being.

Summary and Possible Directions

The current exploratory study examined Psychological Sense of Community (PSOC) in a small sample of West Australian school children, aged seven to eight years. The current findings concurred with Pooley, Pike et al. (2002) and Pooley, Breen et al. in that young children do possess the ability to articulate their understanding of their PSOC within their school environment. The children in the current study described their school community in respect of behavioural comparisons as described by Barenboim (1981). The children from the first school revealed an understanding of their school as a community and analysis of the descriptive data indicated they also possessed an understanding of their PSOC within their school environment. These findings supported the model of PSOC offered by McMillan and Chavis (1986). Conversely, the children from the second school did not reveal an understanding of possessing a PSOC within their school environment; rather, they revealed themes relating to antisocial behaviours and a sense of 'school membership' (Baker et al., 1997) in terms of enrolment. The children's needs in relation to safety and security were not being met (Soutter & McKenzie, 2000), as the bi-directional elements of *influence* and *integration and fulfilment of needs* were not indicated. In essence, the children from the second school appeared to have no control over the decision-making processes within their school environment. The findings of the current study concur with Stumpers (2002) in that the children from the second school appeared to be lacking in individual empowerment.

Australian community psychology has traditionally been guarded with implementing community interventions and community development policies (Bishop & D'Rozario, 2002). The certainty of the increase in nationalities within Western Australian schools is clear, hence implementation of programs and policies promoting caring communities (Larrivee, 2000; Schaps & Solomon, 1990) whereby all the students are included, will enhance children's PSOC within their school environments (Royal & Rossi, 1996; Sonn et al., 1999). This may promote positive feelings of being part of and contributing to a larger entity than themselves (Berman, 1990). Soutter and McKenzie (2000) suggested a positive correlation exists between bullying behaviours in childhood and domestic violence in adulthood, therefore, the need to create a culture incorporating all of the elements of PSOC in Western Australian schools, is essential.

Many schools do not recognise the advantages of group cohesion as they continue to encourage competition and an individualistic approach to learning, which is in direct opposition to the fundamental tenets of PSOC (Schaps & Solomon). The school environment is reported to be critically important in the psychosocial development of children (Pooley, Breen et al., 2002) because it provides the forum for them to socialise and learn about themselves. This highlights the need for programs promoting the elements of McMillan and Chavis's (1986) model of PSOC within all Western Australian schools. It is imperative we attempt to promote the positive underlying values that exist throughout Australian society (Fisher & Sonn, 1999; 2002; Sonn et al., 1999). The increase in statistics relating to antisocial behaviours in children as low as aged seven (Goff & Goddard, 1999; Moffitt, 1993) indicates the necessity for interventions, as they are suggested to be predictors of later psychological maladjustment (Moffitt, 1993; Rubin & Mills, 1988). Karp (1999)

suggested crime prevention and justice in society would have endurance if it comes from within a community, rather than from an outside influence. The longitudinal study by Sanson et al. beginning in 2002, may provide a comprehensive understanding of children's development within the Australian social, economic, and cultural environment currently, which should inform policy and practice in regards to fostering a positive PSOC for children in Australian schools.

In conclusion, an effort to combine the positive aspects of all cultures from within our society may provide a strong and positive PSOC for all Australians in the future. It is anticipated the outcomes of this study will increase the awareness, knowledge, and understanding of issues regarding PSOC in children. The findings of the current exploratory study lend support to the notion that if PSOC can be identified and nurtured in young children and facilitated in a school setting, it has the potential to translate into other settings, which ultimately may achieve an enrichment of all Australian children's developmental and psychological wellbeing.

Limitations and Future Research Considerations

There were a number of methodological limitations in the current study that need to be considered. Firstly, the interviews were a self-report measure and could have elicited unreliable and inaccurate data, which depended on the children's understanding of the process in which they were participating, and their willingness to reveal their thoughts and feelings concerning their school. Secondly, the children's interpretation of the questions being asked may have differed from what was actually being asked. In essence, children construct their own reality (Garbarino & Stott, 1992) and appraise and decipher information differently to adults (Beal & Flavell, 1984). Thirdly, researcher effects could have been involved as the researcher was an active participant in the interview process (Smith et al., 1995) and although the method of

researcher triangulation was applied, the researcher's interpretation of the descriptive data may not have accurately reflected the meaning of the children's responses (Garbarino & Stott). An additional effect could have been the age of the researcher, which also may have inhibited the children's responses.

Fourthly, the difference in the socio-economic status of the schools could have impacted on the children's lack of PSOC in regards to the second school (Harnish, Dodge & Valante, 1995). In effect, the antisocial behaviours exhibited in the second school could be due to the internalisation of behaviour problems suggested in children from lower socioeconomic groups, rather than a lack of the elements of PSOC in the school (Harnish et al., 1995). Moreover, the current study did not collect demographic data in relation to school and classroom sizes and previous research has suggested the size of a school can impact on an individual's PSOC (Lounsbury & DeNeui, 1996). Consequently, future research could examine these two variables to determine their impact on PSOC in children, within their school environment.

Qualitative research is more of a working hypothesis that verifies the findings of research and does not generate conclusions. Hence, longitudinal research would facilitate a better understanding of the implications of PSOC on individual psychological well-being across the lifespan (Cronbach, 1975). Dunham (1986) suggested that researchers should ensure against a utopian vision of PSOC as proposed by McMillan and Chavis (1986). Hence, future research should consider using a methodology that incorporates both qualitative and quantitative ideologies, as they may have an increased capacity to identify the specific factors influencing children's PSOC. Finally, due to the exploratory nature of the current study the findings may not be transferable to other contexts, hence, future research needs to

identify the underlying factors contributing to PSOC within the school environment in order to ascertain which factors impact on PSOC in children.

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Appendix A

Interview Schedule

Set of Ten Questions

Question 1: TELL ME ABOUT YOUR SCHOOL.

Question 2: WHAT DOES YOUR SCHOOL MEAN TO YOU?

Question 3: TELL ME ABOUT THE PEOPLE IN YOUR SCHOOL.

Question 4: WHAT ARE THE GOOD THINGS ABOUT YOUR SCHOOL?

Question 5: WHAT ARE THE BAD THINGS ABOUT YOUR SCHOOL?

Question 6: WHAT HAPPENS WHEN THERE IS A PROBLEM IN YOUR

SCHOOL?

Question 7: CAN YOU TELL ME WHAT THE WORD COMMUNITY MEANS?

Question 8: HAVE YOU HEARD THE WORD COMMUNITY BEFORE?

Question 9: DO YOU THINK OF YOUR SCHOOL AS A COMMUNITY?

Question 10: WHAT DO YOU THINK MAKES YOUR SCHOOL A

COMMUNITY?

Appendix B

Information/Consent Form

A Study of Sense of School Community in Seven to Eight-Year Old Children by Debra Robert: Bachelor of Arts (Hons) Edith Cowan University, Joondalup.

Dear Principal

I would like to ask your school to participate in a study conducted by the student researcher Debra Roberts of the School of Psychology at Edith Cowan University

The aim of the study is to explore sense of community in primary school children and specifically, to determine what differences if any, exist between children in grades 2 and 3 in relation to this. Previous studies on adults and adolescents and some younger children (9-11 year olds) have shown that having a strong sense of community has positive effects on a person's well-being. Sense of community in Primary School children has not been adequately investigated before, hence my interest in the area.

The study will be conducted by the student researcher who is completing a 4th year in a Psychology Honours Degree, under the supervision of participating Psychology Lecturers: Dr Lynne Cohen and Ms Dawn Darlaston-Jones. The study is an integral part of the course, culminating in an assessed Research Project.

This study will be conducted in the school, during class time. The children will be removed from the class, at a time that is deemed the least disruptive by the teacher. They will then be interviewed by one interviewer at a quiet location within the school, such as an office or common room. The semi-structured questions asked will tap into the child's perception and experience with sense of community. The interviews will be sound recorded using a tape recorder. This is so the responses will be recorded as accurately as possible. The child's name will not be used and when the tape recordings are transcribed the child's first name will be changed. The interviewing process will take approximately 20-25 minutes.

The study has met the stringent ethical requirements of the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Community Services, Education, and Social Sciences. Parents will be required to fill out a consent form for their child to participate and those who do not return the form will not participate. A copy of the results will be sent to you on completion of the study if you would like it. If you have any questions regarding the study/interviews, or would simply like a copy of the research to be sent to you when the study is completed, please contact the supervisors on Dr Lynne Cohen on 6304 5575 or Ms Dawn Darlaston-Jones on 6304 5541. If you wish to speak to someone not connected with the study, please phone Professor Alison Garton on 6304 5110.

I would greatly appreciate your help to make this study possible.

Yours Sincerely,

Ms Debra Roberts   _____

Appendix C

Principal Consent Form

A Study of Sense of School Community in Seven to Eight-Year Old Children by Debra Roberts: Bachelor of Arts (Hons) Edith Cowan University, Joondalup.

PERMISSION SLIP

I,_____being the principal

of_____ primary school have read the attached

information and any questions I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I

agree / do not agree (please circle one) for my school to participate in this study.

Principal's Signature: _____

Date: _____

Appendix D
Information/Consent Form
A Study of Sense of School Community in Seven to Eight- Year Old Children by Debra Roberts: Bachelor of Arts (Hons) Edith Cowan University, Joondalup.

Dear Parent/Student,
Your Primary School has agreed to take part in a study conducted by a group of student researchers from the School of Psychology at Edith Cowan University.

The aim of this study is to explore sense of community in 7 and 8 year old primary school children. Previous studies on adults and adolescents and some younger children (9-11 year olds) have shown that **having a strong perception of sense of community has positive effects on a person's well-being and development.** Sense of community in Primary School children has not been adequately investigated before, hence our interest in the area. **It is hoped that the outcomes of the study will increase awareness, knowledge and understanding of issues regarding sense of community in children, and be of future use when designing programs to increase sense of community in school aged children.**

If you and your child agree to help us with our study, your child will be individually interviewed within the classroom, (or just outside of it) by a student researcher for approximately 20 minutes, at a time that is deemed the least disruptive by the teacher. The questions asked will explore the child's perception and experience of sense of community. The researcher will help the teacher with classroom activities prior to the interviews, so that the children will feel more comfortable in their presence.

Children will only participate if they wish to do so and if a signed consent to participate is obtained from a Parent/Guardian and from the child. Permission has already been granted from school's Principal and Teachers. **Involvement in this study is entirely voluntary** (it is not a school requirement that your child participate). Should you wish your child not to participate in this study, please circle the appropriate word/s on the permission slip and give the form to your child to give to the teacher at school.

The interviews, will be sound recorded using a tape recorder. This is so the responses will be recorded as accurately as possible. The child's name will not be used and when the tape recordings are transcribed (into print form) the child's first name will be changed. To ensure confidentiality, no-one other than the researcher and the transcriber will have access to the initial information gathered in the study. In the final report, only general themes which came from a group of participants will be reported; not individual responses. **The study has been approved by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Community Services, Education and Social Sciences.** Should you have any questions regarding the study/interviews, please contact the supervisors on Dr Lynne Cohen on 6304 5575 or Ms Dawn Darlaston-Jones on 6304 5541. If you wish to speak to someone not connected with the study, please phone Professor Alison Garton on 6304 5110.

I would greatly appreciate your help to make this study possible.
Yours Sincerely,

Appendix E

Consent Form for Parents and Guardians

A study of Sense of Community in Seven to Eight-Year Old Children

I, _____ have read the information on the previous page
and any questions I may have asked has been answered to my satisfaction.

I agree / do not agree (please circle one) for my child to participate in this study,
knowing that I may withdraw my child at any time. I agree that research gathered for
the study may be published, provided my child is not identifiable in any way. In
addition. I am aware that the interviews will be tape-recorded and that my child's
identity will be completely confidential.

Parent/Guardian: _____
Date:_____

Child's Signature/ Name: _____ Child's Age_____

Appendix F

Information and Consent for Students

Hello

My name is Debra and I go to school at University. I am doing a project for my teacher and I would like to ask you to help me.

My project is about schools.

I would like to talk to you about your school.

I would like to have a tape recorder to record what we say so that I don't make any mistakes.

If you agree to talk to me and have our talk recorded on a tape recorder I would like you to write your name on this paper.

Student Name:..

Date: ....

You can give this paper to your teacher and your

teacher will give it to me

Thank you for reading my letter.

Questions / Participants	"Tell me about your school?"	"What does your school mean to you?"	"Tell me about the people in your school?"	"What are the good things about your school?"	"What are the bad things about your school?"
G6	'... like playing ... netball court, ... play a lot of games with my friends ...'	'... means a lot to me, ... a good place to be, ... it's a safety house' '... if someone is trying to get me' 'Mean people, criminals' (Safety house) 'Nice ... caring people' '... good, safe'	'... a lot of nice people ... and ... a lot of not very nice people in my school' '... nice people are my friends ... treat ... nice, ... help each other, ... whenever someone's hurt ... tell the teacher'		'... not the same amount as good people' 'Everyone in the whole school is good but sometimes they can be a bit bad'
G7	'... very clean ...friendly ... lots of people to talk to and play with, ... if you want help ... go to the teachers or the year sevens.		'... friendly ... they help me. ... kind ... fun to talk to'	'... we've got very nice teachers'	
G8	'I really like getting new friends ... get to play with them ... have different things ... can do with them' '... you can be friendly ... to give away something that you don't like anymore to them' '... sometimes hard ... sometimes ... easy work ... get better marks'	'... good, fun, and sometimes bad' '... play with friends more' '... friendships, friends' 'Lollies from the Spanish room and stickers in the Music room'		'... get to play with your friends more' '... they share their stuff with us and we let them use our stuff'	'... I had to tell the truth ... 'cause I didn't want the class to get punished' 'You feel sad ... your friends have higher marks, ... other kids who aren't your friends tease you' '... fighting at the school ...report to the teacher or the Principal, ... person ... done ... bad thing ... has to go to the room'