

Growing wellbeing

Peter Beamish

Senior Lecturer, School of Education and Science, Avondale University, Cooranbong, NSW.

Keywords: Adolescent, connectedness, COVID-19, mental health, relationships, wellbeing

Mental health has been identified as an issue of national concern in the Mission Australia's Youth Survey. From 2016 to 2018, the proportion of young people identifying mental health as an issue of national importance doubled, rising from 21% in 2016 to 43% in 2018 (Carlisle, et al., 2018). The emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 created an environment where poor mental health was exacerbated for many. In the 2020 Youth Survey, youth indicated that their top three concerns were: coping with stress, mental health and body image and their biggest personal issues were education, mental health and COVID-19 (Tiller et al., 2020). In the 2021 survey, over half (51.5%) of youth nominated mental health as a barrier to achieving their study or work goals, which is a large increase considering that only 16.6% of students identified mental health as a barrier in 2019 (Tiller et al., 2021).

As schools are looking to offer post-COVID education they need to recognise students at risk and help those who are struggling with their mental health and consequent low levels of personal wellbeing in a very important way. Feeling connected to their school through positive inter-student and student/teacher relationships has been found to positively impact student wellbeing (DES, 2013). High levels of school connectedness help students to feel socially, emotionally and physically safe in schools (Cohen et al., 2009) and leads to a greater sense of belonging. As schools assist students to rebound from the COVID pandemic, this area of connectedness should be a focus and its importance is reflected in its inclusion

in the World Health Organisation's whole of school approach to enhancing student wellbeing (Goldberg et al., 2019).

Establishing trusting and supportive relationships (Payne, 2018) builds school connectedness for students and is positively associated with academic achievement, peer and teacher relationships, and emotional wellbeing (Riekie, 2016).

High levels of school connectedness lead to a greater sense of belonging, which, in turn, leads to more prosocial behaviours for both teachers and students. As the needs of both teachers and students are met, students become more connected to the school's values and goals, more likely to adopt school norms and rules, and generally report positive school and learning experiences (Payne, 2018). In this way better school connectedness is linked to increased

“
From 2016 to 2018, the proportion of young people identifying mental health as an issue of national importance doubled, ... from 21% ... to 43%”



Images: Selected from NNSW and Greater Sydney Adventist Schools image files



Images: Selected from NNSW and Greater Sydney Adventist Schools image files]

engagement at school, higher levels of academic achievement, and reductions in anti-social or disruptive behaviours (Australian Catholic University & Erebus International, 2008, p. 68, 69).

So as many students who are doing it a bit tough with respect to their mental health return to school campuses after COVID closures, how do schools increase school connectedness? Establishing trusting and supportive relationships between students and between students and teachers is an important step (Riekie, 2016). Now is the time for schools to reach out and offer support through a focus on quality relationships. In a practical sense, Shochet and Orr (2017) describe how teachers can build quality relationships as they greet students by using their names and focus on being fully engaged when talking to students. Teachers can get to know student interests and engage students in conversation about them. They can acknowledge positive student progress and express delight in student discoveries. Teachers can show appreciation for students' help and join with them in extra curricula activities. These small gestures help build positive teacher-student relationships that help build connectedness.

In considering learning tasks, adopting a 'strengths approach' increases engagement and "Recent research has highlighted the importance of 'student voice' in giving students a sense of meaning and connectedness to the curriculum" (ACU & EI, 2008, p. 69) so enhancing their sense of purpose and wellbeing.

In a post-COVID world connectedness is particularly important in helping students to navigate some tricky parts of their life journey—

dealing with challenges and transitions—contributing to empowering them to remove barriers to their success (Harding et al., 2019).

References

- Australian Catholic University & Erebus International. (2008). *Scoping study into approaches to student wellbeing: Literature review*. Report to the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations: Canberra. <https://www.dese.gov.au/student-resilience-and-wellbeing/resources/scoping-study-approaches-student-wellbeing-final-report>
- Carlisle E., Fildes, J., Hall, S., Perrens, B., Perdriau, A., & Plummer, J. (2019). *Youth Survey Report 2019*, Mission Australia.
- Cohen, J., McCabe, E. M., Michelli, N. M., & Pickeral, T. (2009). School Climate: Research, Policy, Practice, and Teacher Education. *Teachers College Record*. 111: 180–213.
- Department of Education and Skills, Department of Health, Health Service Executive, and National Educational Psychological Service Agency (2013). *Well-being in Post-primary Schools: Guidelines for Mental Health Promotion and Suicide Prevention*. Department of Education and Skills, Ireland. <https://assets.gov.ie/25105/b32a40105ca541688f3ab73d9687cccb.pdf>
- Goldberg, J. M., Sklad, M., Elfrink, T. R., Schteurs, M., Bohlmeijer, E., & Clarke, A. (2019). Effectiveness of interventions adopting a whole school approach to enhancing social and emotional development: A meta-analysis. *European Journal of Psychology Education*, 34, 755. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10212-018-0406-9>
- Harding, S., Morris, R., Gunnell, D., Ford, T., Hollingworth, W., Tilling, K., Evans, R., Bell, S., Grey, J., Brockman, R., Campbell, R., Araya, R., Murphy, S., & Kidger, J. (2019). Is teachers' mental health and wellbeing associated with students' mental health and wellbeing? *Journal of Affective Disorders*, 253, 460-466.
- Payne, A. (2018). *Creating and sustaining a positive and communal school climate: Contemporary research, present obstacles, and future directions*. National Institute of Justice Report, Office of Justice Programs. <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/250209.pdf>
- Riekie, H. (2016). *Student wellbeing, resilience and moral identity: Does the school climate have an impact?* [Unpublished Doctor of Philosophy Thesis. Curtin University.] <https://espace.curtin.edu.au/handle/20.500.11937/1366>
- Shochet, I. M., & Orr, J. A. (2017). Promoting school connectedness. Promoting a sense of belonging. In B. Sagers (Ed.), *Developing positive classroom environments: Strategies for nurturing adolescent learning* (pp. 167–178). Allen & Unwin.
- Tiller, E., Fildes, J., Hall, S., Hicking, V., Greenland, N., Liyanarachchi, D., & Di Nicola, K. (2020). *Youth Survey Report 2020*. Mission Australia.
- Tiller, E., Greenland, N., Christie, R., Kos, A., Brennan, N., & Di Nicola, K. (2021). *Youth Survey Report 2021*. Mission Australia.

Author Information

Peter Beamish is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Education and Science, at Avondale University.

“connectedness is particularly important in helping students to navigate some tricky parts of their life”