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Research to Practice Brief:

Teacher Connection and Flourishing Among Early Adolescents

This brief summarizes the following article:

Whitaker, R. C., Dearth-Wesley, T., Herman, A. N., Benz, T. L., Saint-Hilaire, S. A., & Strup, D. D. (2024). The association between teacher connection and flourishing among early adolescents in 25 countries. *Journal of Early Adolescence*, 44(5), 600-623. <https://doi.org/10.1177/02724316231190828>

10 Point Paradigm Connection: Educator/Student Connectedness

Establishing genuine connections among educators and students is a key element of healthy school environments. These connections are not just surface-level interactions; they are deep, meaningful relationships that reflect educators' commitments to understanding and supporting each student's unique background, strengths, and challenges.

The highlighted research evaluates the strength of connectedness among educators and students in relation to students' abilities to flourish in adolescence. The results support the necessity of these authentic connections to support the psychological well-being of students.

Research Summary

What

Connection, or connectedness, is summarized as student perceptions of closeness, empathy, interest, support, and warmth demonstrated by their educators. This may look like a student who is understood and valued by educators, creating an environment where they are comfortable expressing their thoughts and emotions. Such connection includes emotional encouragement and the assurance that students have someone to turn to in times of joy and difficulty. It also looks like an educator who is able to recognize and respond to their students' emotional and academic strengths and needs, encouraging a sense of being cared for beyond their academic performance. Furthermore, doing so with a friendly and approachable demeanor can help students feel at ease in their educational environments and promote open communication. Students who feel a connection with their educators have a greater sense of stability, safety, and being nurtured while interacting in educational settings.

Who

Data from a random sample of 33,269 students, ages 11 to 13 years, was gathered from the International Survey of Children's Well-Being (ISCWeB). These students attended mainstream schools across 25 countries. Of the sample, 51% were girls, 79% of the students lived with both parents, 56% reported medium-high to high connections with their parent/caregiver(s), and, although 81% reported always having sufficient access to food, only 34% reported never having family financial worries.

How

Researchers did not put a new practice into place for the purposes of this study. Instead, students were surveyed in a

multi-year project and the highlighted research used a relevant portion of that project to determine how connected those students felt to their educators.

Two outcomes were evaluated through statistical analyses of the survey data: teacher-student connection and student flourishing. The researchers described teacher connection as the students' response level to the following three domains:

- Care – “My teachers care about me.”
- Respect – “My teachers listen to me and take what I say into account.”
- Support – “If I have a problem at school my teachers will help me.”

The researchers described flourishing as the students' level of psychological well-being, as defined by Carol Ryff's six dimensions:

- Autonomy – “the ability to live in alignment with their personal beliefs,”
- Environmental Mastery – “success in managing their life across contexts,”
- Personal Growth – “use of their gifts and potential,”
- Positive Relationships – “deep connection with significant others,”
- Purpose in Life – “a sense of meaning and purpose in their life,”
- Self-Acceptance – “knowledge and acceptance of who they are.”

Major Findings

The key finding of the study indicated that students who reported the highest levels of connectedness to their educators

were more likely to demonstrate positive psychological well-being, or what the researchers called flourishing, than those students who reported lower levels of connectedness. The results are on par with similar research, which indicates positive perceptions of educational environments and teacher support lead to students who are more likely to flourish in school and further into adulthood.

Analytically, the researchers were able to control for some of the variables that may impact students' perceptions and experiences in school, including age, gender, socioeconomic status, family dynamics, and country of origin. They found that these variables had no effect on the level of connectedness reported by students or their association with level of flourishing.

Also interesting, students demonstrated levels of flourishing equal to their levels of teacher connectedness, independent of the level of their reported connection to their parent/caregiver(s). This would indicate that educators who work to ensure that their students feel a strong sense of connectedness can have a positive effect, regardless of their students' backgrounds and other potential dynamics outside of educational settings that may be perceived as counterintuitive to a healthy educational environment.

Based on their findings, the researchers suggest that the relationships educators have with their students, particularly their level of connectedness, contributes to the overall potential for those same students to thrive not only in their educational settings, but also into adulthood.

Conclusion

The findings highlight the critical role that educator/student connectedness plays in supporting the psychological well-being of

students. Students who perceive that their educators genuinely care about them are more likely to develop resilience and a positive outlook, which are essential for flourishing. These authentic connections in adolescence provide students with a stable foundation, offering emotional support and a sense of security that can help them navigate the complexities of the academic environment, and potentially their lives into adulthood.

The highlighted research supports the necessity to foster authentic, continuous connections among educators and students. By prioritizing these relationships, educators can create a more equitable and supportive learning environment that empowers all students to reach their full potential. As the researchers note, one modest way educators can begin to build connectedness with their students is to set aside time to individually ask students a simple question: “Tell me about you,” and use sincere active listening skills to engage them and build open communication.

Suggested Citation

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