School connectedness in community and residential treatment schools: The influence of gender, grades, and engagement in treatment ☆

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ABSTRACT

This study compared perceptions of school connectedness to traditional community schools and residential treatment center (RTC) schools for youths between the ages of 12 and 18 receiving treatment within two RTCs. The influence of gender, report card grades, and engagement in treatment were also examined in relation to school connectedness in the RTC schools. Findings indicated that youths reported greater connectedness to the residential schools and that engagement in treatment led to higher levels of school connectedness while in residence. Results are discussed in the context of practices that may increase school connectedness in community and RTC schools.

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1. Introduction

Schools serve as important settings for the formation and nurturing of social connections for youths. Positive connections to teachers and peers may serve as protective factors in reducing long-term negative outcomes (Furlong et al., 2003; Osterman, 2000). Traditionally, research on school involvement has focused on drop out, academic and discipline problems, and disengagement, whereas more recent work has begun to focus on the protective factors such as school engagement, school bonding, and school connectedness or attachment (Furlong et al., 2003). The purpose of this study was to explore school connectedness across settings for youth who were placed in residential treatment because they were unable to remain safely or function successfully in their home, school, and community.

Specifically, self-reported connectedness to each youth's community school was compared to connectedness to the residential treatment school. In addition, the influence of gender, grades, and engagement in treatment on reported school connectedness while in residential treatment was examined.

2. School connectedness

School connectedness is an umbrella term used to describe a student's relationship to a school, although numerous overlapping terms and definitions have also been used, such as school engagement and school bonding (Libbey, 2004). School engagement is a multifaceted construct that includes three dimensions: behavioral, affective, and cognitive (Fredericks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004; Jimerson, Campos, & Greif, 2003). Similarly, school bonding includes a behavioral component (i.e., involvement), an affective component (i.e., attachment), and a cognitive component, which includes commitment (Abbott et al., 1998; Maddox & Prinz, 2003). We use the term school connectedness to describe this construct and its related dimensions.

The behavioral dimension of school connectedness includes students' observable actions or performance related to school, such as following rules, not engaging in disruptive behaviors, and being involved in academic tasks marked by concentration, effort, and participation in class discussions (Fredericks et al., 2004). Behavioral engagement, also referred to as school involvement (Libbey, 2004; Maddox & Prinz, 2003), has been reflected by participation in extracurricular activities, homework completion, grades, and achievement test scores (Jimerson et al., 2003). The affective or emotional

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dimension of school connectedness includes students' positive and negative reactions to and feelings about school, teachers, classmates, and academics (Fredericks et al., 2004; Jimerson et al., 2003), and is also referred to as school attachment or identification (Libbey, 2004; Maddox & Prinz, 2003). The cognitive dimension of connectedness includes students' perceptions and beliefs related to school, with an emphasis on investment in learning (Fredericks et al., 2004). It includes constructs relevant to internal motivation, self-regulation, preference for hard work, persistence, and flexibility (Fredericks et al., 2004).

3. Influences on and outcomes of school connectedness

School connectedness has been conceptualized as malleable, resulting from a student's interaction with his or her environment (Fredericks et al., 2004). The physical environment, characterized by school size, number of students, faculty, classrooms, and campus structure, is one important element related to school engagement (Furlong et al., 2003). There is an association between moderate sized school enrollment and higher levels of school engagement, and smaller school size is positively associated with attendance, classroom participation, and perceptions of support (Finn & Voelkl, 1993; Furlong et al., 2003; McNeely, Nonnemaker, & Blum, 2002). The regulatory environment, including discipline policies and authority relationships between teachers and students, is another important variable related to school engagement (Furlong et al., 2003; Osterman, 2000). Highly structured environments with high expectations for students' behavior are associated with school connectedness, whereas strict and arbitrary discipline procedures negatively impact school connectedness (Furlong et al., 2003; McNeely et al., 2002). In addition, teachers' implementation of proactive classroom management, interactive teaching, and cooperative learning predict higher school connectedness (Abbott et al., 1998; McNeely et al., 2002). Integration has had mixed findings, with some researchers finding racial integration to be associated with students' perceptions of feeling welcomed and supported in the school (Finn & Voelkl, 1993) and others finding that school connectedness is higher for those in racially segregated (as opposed to integrated) schools (McNeely et al., 2002).

In addition to school factors that predict school connectedness, individual difference variables have also been examined. For example, student involvement in extracurricular activities has also been associated with greater school connectedness (McNeely et al., 2002). Students' affiliative motivation, defined as a stable and enduring tendency to want to form and maintain relationships with others, has been positively associated with school connectedness (Hill & Werner, 2006). These authors found this relationship to be moderated by gender, and there was also an interaction between gender and school attachment. Specifically, affiliative orientation was a protective factor for boys but not for girls; however, among students with low attachment, affiliative orientation was a protective factor for both boys and girls. Students with disabilities have also been found to differ in their reports of school connectedness when compared to students without disabilities. Specifically, students with emotional disturbance (ED) and those with mild mental retardation (MMR) reported less closeness with teachers than did students with other disabilities and those without disabilities (Murray & Greenberg, 2001). Students with ED report being dissatisfied with relationships with teachers and have lower school connectedness than other students (Murray & Greenberg, 2001).

The effects of school connectedness often vary by gender, and these gender differences have important implications for academic outcomes (Dotterer, McHale, & Crouter, 2009; Voelkl, 1997). The relationship between gender and school connectedness is complex. Several studies indicate that girls tend to report better school connectedness than boys (Voelkl, 1997). However, other research suggests that this trend changes over time, with girls reporting greater school attachment than boys in middle school and boys reporting greater attachment and

connectedness than girls in high school (Johnson, Crosnoe, & Thaden, 2006; McNeely et al., 2002). Frey, Ruchkin, Martin, and Schwab-Stone (2009) found an interaction between gender and attachment to school, suggesting that male students who became disengaged from school were at particular risk for deviance. In addition, Shochet, Dadds, Ham, and Montague (2006) found that school connectedness predicted (in an inverse direction) anxiety for girls, but not boys, and general functioning for boys, but not girls. Thus, the research presents a complex picture of the relationship between gender and school connectedness that warrants further examination.

School connectedness has been shown to be important for a variety of positive outcomes. Adolescent connectedness to school has been found to reduce the prevalence of deviant and delinquent behavior (Dornbusch, Erickson, Laird, & Wong, 2001; Murray & Greenberg, 2001), a finding that persisted across high economic as well as economically deprived communities (Dornbusch et al., 2001), and for students with and without disabilities (Murray & Greenberg, 2001). In addition to being associated with reduced violent behavior, school connectedness is also related to higher academic motivation, greater school competence, and more positive perceptions of the overall school climate (Frey et al., 2009; Murray & Greenberg, 2001). School connectedness has also been found to be strongly and inversely related to future self-reports of depression (Shochet et al., 2006). Moderate levels of school engagement and participation, in comparison to low levels have been positively correlated with grade point average and development of supportive relationships with teachers and peers (Jennings, 2003). Clearly, the emerging literature base in this area suggests that school connectedness is an important construct, both as an outcome variable and a predictor of various positive outcomes for youths. This may be a particularly important construct for at-risk youth, such as those in residential treatment settings.

4. RTC and alternative schools

Because school contexts contribute to students' connectedness to school, it is important to examine the extent to which connectedness may vary for the same students in different school environments. Residential Treatment Center (RTC) schools serve students who have been removed from their homes and public schools, typically due to severe emotional and behavioral problems (Muscott, 1997). Many of these youths have a mental health diagnosis (Connor, Doerfler, Toscano, Volungis, & Steingard, 2004), and are likely to have histories of abuse, neglect, or abandonment, and to have families that experience stress (Baker, Heller, Blacher, & Pfeiffer, 1995). Youths placed in out-of-home care tend to have more frequent changes in residence and academic placements (Mehana & Reynolds, 2004), which can prevent the formation of relationships with adults at school. In addition, students with emotional and behavioral disorders experience a combination of consistent and pervasive academic difficulty and disruptive behavior that can interact to produce school failure, social rejection, and school dropout (O'Shaughnessy, Lane, Gresham, & Beebe-Frankenberger, 2002). Although preventing out-of-home placements is preferred for ideological, financial, and other reasons, RTCs are an essential component in comprehensive systems of care that include a range of restrictiveness of placement depending on the needs of the children (Hair, 2005).

Although the research on the effectiveness of RTC schools is scarce, literature on effective alternative school settings provides clues about school characteristics that are likely to be successful with these youths. Youths enrolled in alternative schools share some similar risk factors with youths in residential treatment, such as histories of physical and sexual abuse, substance abuse, and antisocial behavior (Escobar-Chaves, Tortolero, Markham, Kelder, & Kapadia, 2002; Grunbaum et al., 1999; Van Acker, 2007).

Researchers present mixed conclusions regarding the effectiveness of alternative schools in improving academic and behavioral outcomes.