

SCHOOL CONNECTEDNESS: EXPLORING THE CONCEPT IN ZIMBABWEAN SCHOOLS

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ABSTRACT

This study on 'school connectedness' arose from the motivation of the authors to establish the extent to which students in high schools in Zimbabwe perceived as the source and of their academic and social supports from significant groups (adults, peers and teachers) within the schools. This support from important groups within the schools was hypothesised to give a feeling of being supported by adults, feeling of being supported by peers, feeling of being supported by peers which would lead to feelings of being part of the schools and a perception that schools were a safe place to be in. Specific objectives of the study were to measure the level of connectedness, find the variations in connectedness by school type and by gender. The study employed the School Connectedness Scale (SCS), a simple five-item survey instrument that has been extensively used in the United States of America. Using a sample size of 151 students from one Form IV class at each of four different types of school (Government boys only, Government girls only; Christian Mission school with boys and girls and a Government day high School) this study found that: close to 80% of students were happy/very happy with being in the schools where they were and agreed/strongly agreed that they felt they were part of their schools. A much lower percentage of 60% felt that they were close to the adults in their schools and that their schools were safe places in which to be. Almost a third of the student-respondents felt that their schools were not safe places to be in. Interestingly, only 43% of the students agreed/strongly agreed that their teachers treated their students with fairness. Almost half of the students (48%) disagreed/strongly disagreed that their teachers treated students fairly. No important differences in connectedness were found by school type (which was surprising) and by gender which seemed consistent with findings elsewhere. Average levels of connectedness in all schools showed that students were disconnected/ disengaged. Research with bigger samples from primary to tertiary education and more triangulating techniques are recommended. Also recommended is the engagement of practitioners and policy makers in strategies to raise the level of student connectedness but more to engage in preventive strategies because it is known that the situation becomes very difficult to correct once students have been allowed to slide into health risk behaviours (which result from low connectedness).

Keywords: School connectedness, Students' behaviours, Students' support

INTRODUCTION

The concept of connectedness in schools is one that has received a great deal of attention in developed countries particularly in the United States of America. It is commonsensical that families, schools, communities must all work collaboratively to create healthy development for school-going children (CDC, 2009). The perception of wellbeing by students in schools has been described using several terms which include school bonding (Hallfors, Cho,

Rusakaniko, Iritani, Mapfumo, & Halpern, 2011; Jenkins, 1997) school belonging (Anderman, 2002); school climate (Blake & Mouton, 1964/1985); teacher support and student engagement (Blum, 2005; Finn, 1993; Simons-Morton & Crump, 2002); attachment (Moody & White, 2003); social belonging (Bollen & Hoyle, 1991); social membership (Wehlage, Rutter, Smith, Lesko, & Fernandez, 1989); sense of community (Battistich & Horn, 1997). Perhaps, the term 'child-friendly' schools (UNICEF, 2004), commonly used in Zimbabwe is also one which suggests school environments in which students could develop the healthy levels of bonding/connectedness.

Youths in high schools worldwide spend up to a quarter of their waking lives in classrooms and this makes the classroom a potentially powerful context for influencing young people and the relations formed in the classroom with the adult teachers and the peer group necessarily have a great influence on the lives of the youths particularly with respect to social and educational outcomes (Cohen, McCabe, Michelli, & Pickeral, 2009). Over the years educational and health researchers have recognised that social and psychological connectedness to school is a protective and promotive factor for all youths (Brookmeyer, Fante, & Henrich, 2006; CDC, 2009; Furlong, Whipple, St. Jean, Simantal, Solz, & Punthuna, 2009; McNeely, Nonnemaker & Blum, 2002; Nonnemaker, McNeely, & Blum, 2003; Resnick et al., 1997; Rice, Kang, Weaver, & Howell, 2008).

Students feel connected to the school environment when there are high academic standards coupled with strong teacher support and an atmosphere in which adult and student relationships are positive and respectful within a physically and emotionally safe context (Blum, 2005; CDC, 2009; Lezotte, 1991; Machingambi, 2012; Stracuzzi & Mills, 2010). Connected students have been found to be less likely to use state-altering substances; to exhibit emotional distress, demonstrate violent/deviant behaviour; experience suicide ideation or to undergo early sexual initiation (Barber & Olsen, 1997; Battin-Pearson, Newcomb, Abbott, Hill, Catalano, & Hawkins, 2000; Klem & Connell, 2004; Lonczak, Abbott, Hawkins, Kosterman & Catalano, 2002; Resnick et al., 1997; Rosenfeld, Richman & Bowen, 1998; Samdal, Nutbean, Wold & Kannas, 1998). Also less likely among connected students are such behaviours as truancy, tardiness and absenteeism, bullying, fighting and vandalism and smoking (CDC, 2008; Cohen et al., 2009; Schapps, 2003; Wilson & Elliott, 2003). In addition, connected students have been found to be more likely to succeed academically and graduate and also while at school to demonstrate a higher sense of belonging and positive socio-emotional well-being (Anderman, 2002; Barber & Olsen, 1997; Battin-Pearson, et al., 2000; Connell, Halpern-Felsher, Clifford, Crichlow, & Usinger, 1995; Klem & Connell, 2004; McNeely, 2003; Rosenfield et al., 1998; Wentzel, 1998).

Socio-emotional wellbeing is very important in that it subsumes positive psychological, physical and social outcomes (Appleton, Christenson & Furlong, 2008; Bonny, Britto, Klostermann, Hornung, & Slap, 2000; Cohen et al., 2009; McNeely, Nonnemaker & Blum, 2002; Pollard & Child, 2003; Rice et al., 2008; You, Furlong, Felix, Sharkey, Tanigawa, & Green, 2008). School connectedness is even more important particularly if it is taken into account that it implies the ability to successfully, resiliently and innovatively participate in the routines and activities deemed significant by a cultural community (the school) (Weisner, 1988). It can be seen that the attributes ascribed to school connectedness are correlates of successful academic and other positive outcomes in school. Overall, school connectedness turns around the notion that when young people receive empathy, attention and praise at school they feel a sense of belonging and support that leads to healthy growth and development (Whitlock, 2003). Children's beliefs about themselves and their abilities are clearly shaped by the extent to which they perceive that the adults (and others) are involved in their lives and care about them (Blum & Libbey, 2004; Blum, McNeely & Rinehart, 2002;

Blum & Rinehart, 1997; Resnick et al., 1997) and children and adolescents that have the perception of being supported are more engaged in school and learning (Croninger & Lee, 2001). This feeling of support and the consequent engagement is enhanced by feelings that staff dedicate their efforts and time as well as interest and emotional support to the welfare of their students (National Research Council and the Institute of Medicine, 2004) which is also reflected in teachers' knowledge of each student and sometimes teachers' practice of personalising educational programmes to individual student needs (Blum, 2005; Cohen et al., 2000; Lee & Smith, 1995; McNeely, Nonnemaker & Blum, 2002).

The issue of school connectedness came into very high profile when a major study in the United States of America found that by high school as high a proportion as 40 to 60 percent of all students ---urban, suburban and rural--- were chronically disengaged from school (Klem & Connell, 2004). This means that the students felt that they were 'in the wrong place' in attempting to achieve their goals. Consistent with the findings of Klem & Connell were prior findings that high levels of truancy and dropout could be explained by the high levels of disconnectedness among high school students (Bennett & LeCompte, 1990; Bowles & Griffiths, 1976; Connell et al., 1995; Croninger & Lee, 2001; Muller, Davies, Morais, 2004; Toldson, 2008; Worrel & Hale, 2001; Wotherspoon, 2004).

Schools should do what they can to establish suitable environments that promote connectedness and these environments should be healthy, safe, supportive, clean and pleasant (CDC, 2001; CDC, 2009; Machingambi, 2012). These features are enhanced by meaningful student participation (Battistich & Horn, 1997; Wilson, 2004), sensitive well-organised classroom management (Ryan & Patrick, 2001). Harsh and punitive environments, of course, detract from the establishment of the correctly high levels of connectedness (Blum et al., 2002; McNeely et al., 2002). The present study was therefore an attempt to assess the extent to which students in high schools in Zimbabwe today felt connected to the schools in which they were participants and perhaps to suggest ways in which connectedness could be enhanced if the results pointed to the need for such improvement. The present investigators surmised that it might be more important to seek answers to the question of connectedness before answers to academic outcomes such as pass rates were sought, since connectedness was known to be an important determining factor for quality of educational outputs such as scores on in-class tests and examinations. Given that protective and promotive effects of school connectedness have been documented in other countries, there was a clear incentive for carrying out a study such as the present one to assess the state of connectedness which is as critically important for enhancing social and academic outcomes in the education system of Zimbabwe as it is for other countries.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

School connectedness seems to be a foundation concept for academic and social integration of students in schools. It is clear that disengaged students are at risk for many types of inappropriate behaviour such as taking of drugs, alcohol, violent behaviour, truancy and less resilience while they are in school. These attributes of students are a recipe for academic underperformance by students in schools.

A proportion of between 40 and 60 percent of American adolescents being disengaged from school means that a vast proportion of students who are in schools do not believe in the good intentions of teachers, adults and perhaps their own peers in those schools. The problem of student disengagement could be worse in Zimbabwe and other developing countries where students in high schools due to overcrowded classrooms, overworked teachers and poor infrastructure, autocratic leadership in school and in class and curricula that are not always

perceived as relevant amid examinations that are often way beyond the ability of large numbers of students, could feel that the school environments are not as sensitive to their needs as they should be. This sets up clear gap that has to be filled by reconnecting students that are now not connected. It is also possible that many students that do not perform well in school are not students that are per se unable to perform but perhaps are students who do not believe that they are getting the adult support that they need and who have no sense of belonging to the schools in which they are acquiring their education. Connecting students is an important task for teachers and other functionaries in schools across all grades but it seems more important to connect students who are going through their adolescent years where there are high fears that the young people will engage in health-compromising behaviours which also detract from the expected high academic achievement. As long as students feel alienated from the systems that are supposed to serve their best interests, schools will neither be efficient nor effective and will hence be difficult for students to connect to.

The big challenge for schools, therefore is create and sustain in students a feeling of belonging to schools, a belief that teachers and other adults as well as peers care about them and their learning; belief that education matters and that it is important to have and to hold friends at school and also the perception that discipline procedures in their schools are fair and in their own best interests.

It is necessary for school management processes to counteract threats to school connectedness. These threats are in the form of social isolation, lack of safety in schools, poor classroom management practices. Social isolation has been singled out as particularly important and risky for adolescents. It has been found that it can result from students being ignored, bullied or teased and this situation thrives in situations characterised by social cliques that engage in unhealthy competitions.

The establishment and enhancement of school connectedness is often compromised by the way in which schools are run and administered. In attempts to hold youths accountable for their actions, school managements from time to time mete out punishment on the transgressors and these punishments and sanctions are in spirit opposed to connectedness. These practices comprise such actions as detention, exclusion, expulsion and suspension. Then the students that have been punished develop negative outcomes such as increases in maladjustment such as withdrawal or avoidance of interactions with staff. The result is a negative impact on self-respect which is worsened by stigma from peers. Educational progress is then often disrupted. Victims of various misbehaviours such as those that are bullied may also be disconnected from school because the schools are unsafe and also because the victims lose respect for the justice system of the school.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

Much is said about examination results in high schools and schools are rated according to the quality of their examination results. It is, perhaps, more basic to investigate first whether the students in high school are connected to those high schools. It would seem that school connectedness is a key factor in academic attainment and this factor should be investigated and its level established before other features of schools. The origin of this study was the researchers' interest to start a big research effort in connectedness in schools. It was their feeling that before addressing other major challenges in the education system it might be worth their while to attempt to answer a big, but often neglected question, 'Do students in schools believe that they are in the right place and that the best is being done for them to achieve their goals?' This question could be indirectly answered through finding out whether students felt that they were supported by important groups of individuals within their schools.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This study, therefore, aimed to:

1. identify the level of connectedness of students in high schools
2. find out any variations in connectedness by school type (Government all-girls, Government all-boys, Mission (Co-educational) and Government Day school (Co-educational))
3. determine variations in connectedness by gender

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

In order to satisfy the objectives above, this study sought answers to the following questions:

- I. What is the level of connectedness in high schools in Zimbabwe?
- II. Are there any variations that are explained by school type?
- III. What are the connectedness levels for boys and girls in high schools?

METHOD

Participants and setting

This study was exploratory and a preparation for a bigger study that was to be carried out at a later date. The sites selected for study were schools that were stratified by type. One school was a government day plus boarding boys' school, one school was an urban day mission school, one was a day government school and the other was a government day plus boarding all-girls high school. Participant in this study were high school students in Form Four. A class of pupils to participate in this study was requested at each school.

Design

The study was a survey. The survey was deemed suitable for the study considering the considerable number of participants that was involved and the nature of the data that were to be collected. The survey was also preferred for its suitability in assessing attitudes, beliefs and perceptions of individuals. This study was entirely exploratory to enable the researchers to make a judgment on whether the results pointed to a need for more empirical research in the area. The researchers adopted a 'dipstick' (cross-sectional) approach targeting students in their fourth year of high school where low levels of connectedness were expected (from studies elsewhere).

Instrumentation

The instrument that was used was the School Connectedness Scale (SCS) (Furlong et al., 2009; McNeely, et al., 2002; Resnick et al., 1997). This 5-item Scale used here comes from the original Add Health study in the United States. In this Scale, students were presented with the prompt, 'How strongly do you agree or disagree with the following statements about your school----?' The question is completed by focusing on five issues of school connectedness: being close to people (in general) in the school, happiness to be in the particular school, feeling like being part of the school, teachers' fair treatment of students and feeling of safety in the school. The questions are answered on a five-point Likert-type scale ranging from 'strongly disagree' through 'neither agree nor disagree' to 'strongly agree'.

DATA ANALYSIS STRATEGY

The SCS (School Connectedness Scale) item responses were examined and responses for each of the dimensions on the SCS (School Connectedness Scale) were noted, totalled and

turned into percentage of the participants. For instance those responding that they ‘strongly’ disagreed that their schools were safe places to be were totalled and converted to percentage of the full number of the respondents who participated in the study. In addition, the present researchers have in part followed the tradition of Hawkins, Guo, Hill, Battin-Pearson, & Abbott, 2001; Resnick, et al., 1997) in combining dimensions of school connectedness into a single global measure. This all means that averages for different dimensions of connectedness were calculated but in addition the overall average connectedness score was also calculated.

DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURE

Permission to carry out this study was obtained from the Provincial Office of the Ministry of Education, Sports, Arts and Culture. On appointed days, the schools were visited and the study was explained to the heads of the schools that were identified for the study. A form class was selected at random. The purpose of the study was explained to the participants in the selected class.

Students were encouraged to be as truthful as they possibly could. They were also assured that their responses would be treated in the strictest confidence and would not be used for any other purpose except the research that was being undertaken. To make certain that responses could not be traced to individual students, respondents were encouraged not to write their names on any of the documents that they would work with in the course of the study.

After explaining the purpose of the study, participants were guided through the instrument to make sure that they understood each stimulus question. Participants were also given an opportunity to ask any questions. Participants were then given the opportunity to respond to the questions on the instrument that was before them. Participants were informed that it was not allowed for them to collude in giving their answers and that if there were things that they still wanted explained, they would have to ask the research assistant and not any one of the research participants. Participants were given up to forty minutes to give their responses. All the participants finished completing the survey by the expiry of forty minutes.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study aimed to assess the level of connectedness among high school students in selected schools in Manicaland Province, in Zimbabwe by gender and school type. The results are presented below in line with the variables outlined in the objectives.

Table 1. School Connectedness by School: Response Frequency in Schools A, B, C and D (n= 151)

	Strongly Disagree				Disagree				Neutral				Agree				Strongly Agree			
	A	B	C	D	A	B	C	D	A	B	C	D	A	B	C	D	A	B	C	D
Closeness to people	1	2	4	1	6	8	5	6	6	7	5	6	18	19	18	18	7	1	6	7
Happiness	1	2	-	1	2	4	1	2	6	6	2	5	17	16	24	17	12	9	11	13
Being part of the school	1	4	1	1	-	2	2	-	3	4	10	4	15	21	18	15	19	6	7	18
Teachers' fairness	7	16	7	5	12	7	7	12	8	8	10	9	7	4	10	8	4	2	4	4
Feeling of safety	10	1	3	10	4	8	8	4	2	8	2	1	17	13	17	18	5	7	8	5

Table 1 above shows the number of respondents 'strongly disagreeing', 'disagreeing', adopting a neutral stand, 'agreeing' and 'strongly disagreeing' with the presence of closeness to other people in the school, happiness at being in the particular school, feeling of being part of the school, students' perception of teachers' fairness in treating students in the school and students' feeling of safety in the school.

With respect to students' closeness to other people in the school 24/151 (16%) were neutral i.e. feeling neither close to nor distant from other people in the school. Thirty-three respondents (22%) 'Disagreed'/'strongly disagreed' that they were near to people in their school. Sixty-two percent (62%) (94/151) 'agreed/strongly agreed' that they were close to people in the organization/school. The majority therefore felt that they were close to people in their schools. As will be seen below, closeness to people was not closeness to the teachers in the schools because connection to the teachers was very low. This might suggest that students were happily connected to other students as opposed to their teachers.

Connection to people in any social situation is important for the adaptive behaviour of students/children and reduces the risk of negative developmental outcomes such as aggression (Brookmeyer et al., 2006); substance abuse (Wang, Mathew, Bellamy, & James, 2005); initiation of smoking (Dornbusch, Erikson, Laird & Wong, 2001) as well as school dropout (Miltich, Hunt & Meyers, 2004). Less socially connected students victimise and are victimised by their peers (Buhs, Ladd & Herald, 2006; Ito, 2011; Skues, Cunningham & Pokharel, 2005; Young, 2004). The close-to-forty-percent of students in this study who did not see themselves as close to the people in their schools would be expected to be in danger of involvement in these health risk behaviours suggested in this paragraph. It is suggested that the percentage of students who did not see themselves as close to other people in the schools too high. The distance which some students feel between themselves and other people has further implications. These students are alienated and become less willing to invest conventional norms even if they continue to have the sympathy and support of their teachers and the more conforming peers (Stanton-Salazaar, 2001). Perhaps, these close to forty-percent of the students who did not see themselves as close to people in the schools account in part for the large percent of students who dropped out of school from 1980 to the present day (Zengeya, 2007; Machingambi; 2012).

Thirteen percent (13%) (19/151) were unsure if they were happy to be in the schools where they were students when this study took place. Thirteen (13) out of one hundred and fifty-one (151) i.e. 9% of the respondents 'disagreed'/'strongly disagreed' that they were happy to be in the schools in which they were students when this study took place. One hundred and nineteen respondents out of one hundred and fifty-one (119/151) i.e. 79% per cent of the respondents 'agreed'/'strongly agreed' that they were happy to be in the schools in which they were students.

Happiness at school can originate from satisfaction with the academic life of the school (Blum et al., 2000; McNeely, 2004; McNeely & Falci, 2004). This happiness could also just come from having more friends (McNeely, Nonnemaker, & Blum, 2002; Thompson, Iacham, Overpeck, Ross & Gross, 2006) and having connection to other individuals who may not be teachers. In this study where it is unlikely that happiness comes from the connectedness to teachers (the connectedness with teachers is extremely low), it is likely that happiness came from sources outside the conventional connectedness (McNeely & Falci, 2004). It may indeed be based on connectedness to peers some of whom may be involved in health risk behaviours or other antisocial behaviours. Connectedness in this informal network (amid less connectedness with teachers) means that such students are less likely to model along the behaviours of teachers and adjusted peers (Karcher, 2003) and they are less likely to be

receptive to regulations of teachers to whom they do not feel well connected (Hawkins & Weis, 1985).

Table I also shows that fourteen percent (21/151) of respondents were uncertain whether or not they were part of the school while seven percent 'disagreed'/ 'strongly disagreed' that they felt being part of the school. Seventy-nine percent (79%) i.e. 119 'agreed'/ 'strongly agreed' that they felt they were part of the schools in which they were students.

The finding here is that a large majority of the participants in this study felt that they were part of the schools in which they attended classes. This finding lends itself to two possibly different interpretations. On the one hand, it could mean a feeling of involvement in meaningful roles at school, feeling safe in the school and taking part in creative engagement within the school and in particular healthy relationships with teaching staff. On the other hand feeling of being part of the school could come from personal relationships with peers and other people who are not teaching staff and therefore could have little to do with favourable academic and social outcomes (Anderman & Freeman, 2004; Lezotte, 1991).

Responses with respect to teachers' fairness in the treatment of students were as follows. Twenty-three percent (23%) i.e. 35 out of 151 respondents felt uncertain about whether or not teachers treated students with fairness. Forty-eight percent (73/151) of the respondents 'disagreed'/ 'strongly disagreed' that their teachers treated their students with fairness. Twenty-eight percent (43/151) 'agreed'/ 'strongly agreed' that their teachers treated their students fairly. This is small percentage indeed of students who perceive their teachers as fair to them.

Students' feeling of support from teachers is critical. When students believe that they are being fairly treated or unfairly treated, what difference does it make? Students' feeling of support by teachers is critical in reduction of risk behaviours by students. When students feel that they are supported by their teachers they do tend to model the behaviour of those teachers and to internalise the regulations passed by those teachers (Lonczak, Abbott, Hawkins, Kosterman & Catalano, 2002; Samdal et al., 1998). Complete lack of a feeling of being supported by teachers would suggest a number of tendencies towards risk behaviours. Teacher support plays a meditational role which generates a sense of belonging and engagement which in turn leads to positive educational outcomes (Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Wehlage et al., 1989). It is hence not an asset for the schools that were studied that the lowest scores were with respect to feelings that teachers did not treat their students with fairness. Perhaps, the fair amount of student misdemeanours in Zimbabwe schools could be explained by the possibility suggested in the present findings that students do not perceive their teachers as supportive and perceive them on the contrary as not treating students with fairness.

Studies show that the large number of students dropping out of school did so not just because of socio-economic factors but because they were students that were unable to get along with teachers (and their peers) (Bennett & LeCompte, 1990; Worrell & Hale, 2001). Treating students without fairness was found in many kinds of situations such as not caring whether students passed or failed and grading that separates and demeans children (Bourdieu, 2005; Bitzer, 2010; Croninger & Lee, 2001); curricula not matched to student needs (Mandebvu, 1996); insensitive climates in classes (Nakpodia, 2010; UNESCO, 2000); and schools that ideally force students to do what they would otherwise not do (Toldson, 2008). The vast number of dropouts, for instance, was found to be those that were unable to get along with their teachers (and other students) (Bennett & LeCompte, 1990; Worrel & Hale, 2001). These observations are perhaps the more reason why writers such as Machingambi (2012) have asserted that the strongest reasons for school dropout are not just in the traditional socio-

economic factors outside the schools but are located within the schools themselves in student-unfriendly policies, practices and routines. It can be concluded that schools can reduce dropout rate by taking appropriate action within them to be fair to students who are in those schools (Stewart, 2008).

With respect to feeling of safety, thirteen respondents (9%) were unsure about whether their schools were safe place or unsafe places for them. Sixty-percent (90/151) of the respondents 'agreed' / 'strongly agreed' that their schools were safe places for them. Thirty-one percent (48/151) of the responds 'disagreed' / 'strongly disagreed' that their schools were safe places for them. Safety is a basic for all effectiveness in schools. That is students should feel that they are operating within an orderly environment, which is both purposeful and business like as well as non-oppressive (Lezotte, 1991). Safety is not just about the absence of threat or danger but an environment that is conducive to education for all (Lezotte, 1991). It is, therefore, worrying that students in all the schools did not feel safe in their schools and this is a dimension that is worth pursuing in subsequent studies. The lack of safety, a problem of worldwide dimensions, has been found in the extensive violence by girls and other victims in schools in Sub-Sahara Africa (Aluede, 2006; Beran, 2005; de Wet, 2007; Hong & Espelage, 2012; Management Systems International, 2008; Munn, Johnstone, Sharp & Brown, 2007; Thornberg, 2010; Wellesley Centre on Research on Women Development and Training Services, 2008; Zindi, 1994).

This lack of safety in the schools may also assist in explaining such risk behaviours as dropout and escalating student-on-student violence (Machingambi, 2012).

Table 2. Average levels of School Connectedness across all schools in the study

School	Average School Connectedness Scores: Female Responses (n= 83)						Average Connectedness	Comments
	Closeness to people	Happiness	Being part of the school	Teacher Fairness	Safety	Total		
A	3.4	4.3	4.3	2.4	3.3	17.5	3.5	Disconnected
B	3.4	3.7	3.6	2.2	3.5	16.5	3.3	Disconnected
C	3.4	4.2	3.7	2.9	3.5	17.5	3.5	Disconnected
D	3.6	4.1	4.4	3.0	3.1	18.0	3.6	Disconnected
Total	13.8	16.3	16	10.5	13.4		3.5	
Average	3.5	4.1	4.0	2.6	3.4		3.5	

Table 2 above shows school connectedness average scores. Respondents in all the four schools felt, in general, uncertain about whether or not they were close to other people in their school. Respondents in School A, C and D 'agreed' that they were happy in to be in their schools. Those in School B were uncertain. Respondents in Schools A, B and C did not 'agree' that teachers in their schools handled students fairly. Those in School D were unsure whether or not their teachers handled students fairly. Respondents in all schools were uncertain about their safety in their schools.

Table 3 reveals that students in this study were overall disconnected from their schools except with respect to happiness in being in their schools for girls in school C and boys in all the schools. Girls in school D felt that they were part of their schools while boys in school A (boys-only school) and school D also felt that they were part of their schools. School C boys also felt that they were close to the people in the school. Boys in school A also felt that they

were part of their school. No subsample felt overall that teachers treated their students with fairness and no subsample felt safe in the schools in which they were.

Table 3. Average school connectedness by school and by gender

School	<i>Average School Connectedness Scores: Female Responses (n= 83)</i>						<i>Average connectedness score per school by gender</i>	<i>Comments</i>
	<i>Closeness to people</i>	<i>Happiness in school</i>	<i>Part of school</i>	<i>Teacher Fairness</i>	<i>Safety in school</i>			
B (All girls)	3.4	3.7	3.6	2.2	3.5		Disconnected	
C	3.5	4.2	3.9	2.7	3.5		Disconnected	
D	3.5	3.8	4.1	2.6	3.0		Disconnected	
Av. scores for females	3.3	3.8	3.7	2.7	3.3		Disconnected	
	<i>Average School Connectedness Scores: Male Responses (n= 68)</i>							
A (All boys)	3.4	4.3	4.3	2.4	3.3		Disconnected	
C	4.0	4.5	3.6	3.3	3.6		Disconnected	
D	3.7	4.1	4.4	3	2.7		Disconnected	
Av. scores for males	3.5	4.2	4.1	2.6	3.2		Disconnected	

The overall lack of connectedness among high school students in this study may be due to such factors (already indicated above) as dictatorial teacher-student relationships in and around the classroom, discriminatory and demeaning practices such as tests and examinations, education that is given as a type of discipline and teachers expected to get students to do what they would otherwise not do (Bowles & Grintis, 1976; Bourdieu, 2005; Nakpodia, 2010; Wotherspoon, 2004). These factors could sometimes account for disconnection more than the often-cited cultural factors to do with socio-economic factors within communities (Cooper & Jordan, 2003).

This disconnectedness from school, perhaps, explains in part the rising prevalence of such misdemeanours among adolescent students as early sexual initiation and even multiple concurrent sexual partnerships amid widespread unprotected sexual intercourse (Pettifor et al., 2004; Dixon-Mueller, 2009; Chinsebu, Kasanda & Shimwooshili-Shaimemanya, 2011; Hindin & Fatusi, 2009; Peltzer & Pengpid, 2011); smoking (Bandason & Rusakaniko, 2010; Peltzer, 2011) and student-on-student violence stated elsewhere above.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

This study was very small and there should be no attempt to generalise any of the findings to the broader educational environment of the Zimbabwe. There should be even less justification to make generalisations beyond Zimbabwe. All the schools studied were urban. No generalisations could be possibly made to peri-urban and rural schools. The relationship between school connectedness and other important dependent variables such as students' academic performance, discipline, overall satisfaction with school or any selected risk behaviours has not been explored. Exploring that relationship would provide more revealing insights on the importance of connectedness in schools. The combination of dimensions of school connectedness into a single global measure may mask the different and combined effect of the various dimensions. This study is not powerful enough to reveal whether or not connectedness can reverse risk behaviours once they have started.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Future research should use samples across all the levels of educational system from primary to tertiary education so as to reflect connectedness at the varying levels. In the future more comprehensive research techniques should be employed over and above the survey that was used this time around. Perhaps, it would be more revealing to include qualitative techniques such as focus group discussions and in-depth interviews on a topic such as the present one that concerns deep human feelings and attitudes. In the future, too, researchers should attempt to seek the relationship between level of connectedness and other dependent variables such as adaptive behaviour among students, academic performance and others.

Practitioners should develop more general strategies to improve connectedness which is clearly low according to the present study. Specific efforts should also be made to find the causes why students in all the schools studied were generally disconnected from their schools. Practitioners are advised to take preventive action against risk behaviours of students because it is known that it is much harder to reverse student health risk behaviours when students have already started engaging in them that it is to prevent students from engaging in health risk behaviours. Perhaps, policy makers need to lay increased emphasis on connectedness in schools over and above the interest merely in whether or not teachers are teaching in the ways they are expected to. Specific attention should be given to teacher-student relationships and to an extent safety in schools which may be pushing students out of schools over and above socio-economic factors.

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