

IN IT TOGETHER: A QUALITATIVE CASE-STUDY OF STUDENT EXPERIENCES OF
CONNECTEDNESS

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In it Together: A Qualitative Case-Study of Student Experiences of Connectedness

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ABSTRACT

Having a sense of connectedness to school may help students thrive, increasing their capacity for engagement and protective factors. A qualitative case study design was used to explore the research question: How do students at Anywhere High School experience connectedness at school? Two focus groups with juniors and seniors were conducted. Four themes emerged from a thematic data analysis. Connectedness has the power to create positive relationships while disconnectedness has the power to destroy them. Student involvement in activities, even simply attending school-related activities, fosters connectedness. Connectedness does not remain static—students’ sense of connectedness changes with the growth and development of their identity. Further, students desire connection to adults and peers at school and a place to display vulnerability. Directions for future research, as well as recommendations, are discussed.

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DEDICATION

For Keith who has been right next to me every step of this incredible journey.

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CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

In the fall of 2015, students at Anywhere High School, a public school in the Midwest with approximately 1,200 students, completed a survey from AdvancED, “a non-profit, non-partisan organization that conducts rigorous, on-site external reviews of Pre-K-12 schools and school systems to ensure that all learners realize their full potential” (www.advanc-ed.org). This survey was taken by all middle and high school students in Anywhere High School’s district and each school was given their individual report. The survey included 32 items and asked students to assess statements using a Likert scale from “Strongly Agree” to “Strongly Disagree”. Items on the survey were in the form of statements such as, “In my school, programs and services are available to help me succeed,” “My school prepares me to deal with issues I may face in the future,” and “My school prepares me for success in the next school year” (Student Survey Report, 2015). Some of the items focus more on the relationships students have with others and on students’ voice in the school:

- In response to the statement, “My school makes sure there is at least one adult who knows me well and shows interest in my education and future,” just over half of students (52%) agreed or strongly agreed.
- In response to the statement, “In my school, students help each other even if they are not friends,” just over one-third of students (35%) agreed or strongly agreed.
- In response to the statement, “In my school, all students are treated with respect,” 39% of students agreed or strongly agreed.
- In response to the statement, “My school considers students’ opinions when planning ways to improve the school,” just under half of students (48%) agreed or strongly agreed (Student Survey Report, 2015).

These survey results provided the impetus for the current research project as they seem to suggest that many students at Anywhere High School do not feel connected to school. School connectedness, according to Goodenow (1993), is “the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included and supported by others in the school social environment” (p. 80).

Research indicates that connectedness in high school functions as a protective factor and is strongly associated with positive personal, social, and academic outcomes, including increased motivation, higher levels of academic engagement and achievement, increased self-esteem, better conflict resolution, and greater likelihood of altruistic behavior (Bradshaw, Waasdorp, Debnam, & Johnson, 2014; Bryan et al., 2012; Chhuon & Wallace, 2014; Frydenberg, Care, Freeman, & Chan, 2009; Geller, Voight, Wegman, & Nation, 2013; Waters, Cross, & Shaw, 2010). School connectedness is also associated with a decrease in risk-taking behavior including, smoking, alcohol and other drug use, violent behavior, and delinquency (Bryan et al., 2012; Chapman, et al., 2013; Chhuon & Wallace, 2014; Frydenberg, Care, Freeman, & Chan, 2009; Geller, Voight, Wegman, & Nation, 2013; Waters, Cross, & Shaw, 2010).

Conversely, students who feel isolated or disrespected are more likely to experience alienation and disengagement from school, as well as academic failure and engagement in high-risk behaviors such as substance abuse (Bryan et al., 2012; Chhuon & Wallace, 2014; Frydenberg et al., 2009). Students spend a substantial portion of their lives in school and yet only about 50% of students report feeling connected to their school (Bryan et al., 2012). Further, by the time they reach high school, 40-60% of students report being disengaged, a number which does not include those that have already dropped out (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2010). Qualitative studies that investigate the factors associated with school connectedness are limited and many interventions used by schools to increase connectedness

have been informed primarily through quantitative studies employing, surveys, questionnaires, and school climate profiles. A qualitative study opens up space for new ideas and stories not measured by surveys.

Statement of the Problem

Feeling a sense of connectedness to school helps students thrive. Yet many students at Anywhere High School, a largely homogeneous group of students from White, upper-middle-class backgrounds, appear to be lacking in connectedness to school. Understanding students' experiences of connectedness at Anywhere High School may highlight current strengths and weaknesses in promoting school connectedness and inform future interventions designed to increase connectedness.

Purpose

The purpose of this qualitative case study is to understand students' experiences of connectedness at Anywhere High School. A qualitative case study research design (Merriam, 2001) was used in order to increase understanding of the present phenomenon and inform future interventions at Anywhere High School.

Research Questions

To find out how students experience connectedness at Anywhere High School, I posited the following guiding question: How do students at Anywhere High School experience connectedness? Sub questions will include:

1. What does it mean for students to be connected at school?
2. What does it mean for students to be disconnected at school?
3. What factors do students identify as influencing their sense of connectedness?

4. What specific instances of connectedness and disconnectedness have students experienced at school?

Significance

The results of the Anywhere High School Climate/Culture survey showed that a significant portion of the student body may be experiencing disconnectedness from school. According to Chhuon and Wallace, 2014, “High school adolescents have the reflective and communicable competencies to understand and interpret their own experiences. Hence, these youth should be considered valuable sources of information about how to enhance their own development” (p. 381). Giving students the opportunity to tell their stories and give soul to the data will allow teachers, counselors, administrators and other school staff to examine ways of improving school connectedness. Helping students to feel more connected to school may result in positive outcomes for the student, the school, and the community.

Theoretical Perspective

A theoretical perspective used in the current project was social constructivism. According to Hays and Singh (2012), social constructivism is a paradigm which acknowledges that “multiple realities of a phenomenon exist” and that there is no “universal truth” (p. 40-41). When a researcher is interested in multiple perspectives and a deep understanding of a phenomenon, social constructivism allows for multiple perspectives, not privileging one voice over another, but allowing space for all perspectives. Students participating in this research study came to the group with different experiences in school and different perspectives of what connectedness and disconnectedness look like for them. Chhuon and Wallace (2014) state, “...students possess valuable perspectives about their own learning and development, the kind of knowledge that

school-based adults often overlook” (p. 384). The focus group experience allowed for these different and complex perspectives to be expressed and understood.

Thesis Overview

Students’ experiences of connectedness at Anywhere High School is the focus of the present qualitative case study. Qualitative methodology using focus groups was used to explore this bounded system. The following research question guided the study: How do students at Anywhere High School experience connectedness? A thematic data analysis was performed and the results will be shared in chapter four.

CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Chapter 2 contains an extensive review of the literature centered on school connectedness. The chapter includes a discussion on the importance of school connectedness as well as its definition in the research. Bryan et al.'s (2012) three components of school connectedness will be used to outline this chapter: (a) school attachment (peer relationships), (b) attachment to school personnel (e.g., teachers, administrators, counselors, etc.), and (c) involvement in school. In addition to these components, focus will be placed on research defining the importance of school connectedness and theoretical foundations for connectedness.

An Introduction to School Connectedness

According to Eccles and Roeser (2011), adolescents spend more time at school than anywhere else, except perhaps their beds. “It is the place where they are exposed to their culture’s font of knowledge, hang out with their friends, engage in extracurricular activities that can shape their identities and prepare for their future” (p. 225). As a result, school experiences play a significant role in adolescents’ development intellectually as well as psychologically (Eccles & Roeser, 2011). And different individuals have vastly different experiences at school. According to Eccles and Roeser (2011):

“Some youth thrive at school—enjoying and benefitting from most of their experiences there; others muddle along and cope as best they can with the stress and demands of the moment; and still others find school to be an alienating and unpleasant place to be—a place that is difficult to enjoy and benefit from” (p. 225).

Connectedness is multidimensional (Chung-Do, Goebert, Chang, & Hamagani, 2015). It is affective (i.e., students’ feelings about their teachers and peers); behavioral (i.e., student involvement in activities); and cognitive (i.e., students’ perceptions of school) (Chapman,

Buckley, Sheehan, & Shochet, 2013). Several thematic constructs have emerged from the connectedness research, including: (1) feelings of belonging, (2) students' liking of school (3) feeling supported and cared about by adults in school, and (4) involvement in extracurricular activities (Chung-Do et al., 2015; Geller et al., 2013; Libbey, 2004; Rawatlal & Petersen, 2012).

Defining School Connectedness (and Disconnectedness)

School connectedness is often defined in the context of a student's sense of belonging. (Chhuon & Wallace, 2014; Rawatlal & Petersen, 2012). Goodenow (1993), defined school connectedness as "the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others in the school social environment" (p. 80).

According to Chhuon and Wallace (2014), "sense of belonging within the school community is actualized through the reciprocal relationships between the student and others within the school" (p. 381). Students view themselves in relation to others, rather than in isolation (Chhuon & Wallace, 2014). Eccles and Roeser (2011) add that, "adolescents actively create their own identities through their social interactions" (p. 236). Chapman et al. (2013) stated that "when social groups such as in the school environment produce bonds with corresponding degrees of attachment and commitment and promote standards for positive behavior, adolescents behave in ways that are consistent with these standards and values" (p. 98).

If a sense of belonging equates with strong school connectedness, then a lack of this sense of belonging equates with disconnectedness (Chhuon & Wallace, 2014). Schulz (2011) defines students who are disconnected as "those who cannot name anyone at school that they trust or can confide in and rarely find an adult to whom they can turn for support..." (p. 76). Even students in generally supportive schools may find themselves feeling socially excluded, unsupported or uninvited (Goodenow, 1993). It is these negative school experiences that are

primarily responsible for students' disconnectedness (Bond, et al., 2007). Schulz (2011), citing Mau (1992), identifies four dimensions of disconnectedness to school:

1. Powerlessness: Students disengage from school when they believe they have little influence on their future and feel unheard.
2. Meaninglessness: Students do not see the relationship between the expectations of their school work and their future adult self.
3. Normlessness: Students believe that they need to engage in socially unacceptable behaviors in order to achieve a sense of success (e.g., cheating on a test for a good grade).
4. Social estrangement: Students are unable or unwilling to integrate into the current network and reject the values and goals of the school (p. 76).

Students who feel isolated or disrespected are less likely to do well in the school context (Chhuon & Wallace, 2014; Schulz, 2011). Isolation and connectedness are two sides of the same coin. Therefore, it is logical to conclude that a significant number of students may feel isolated or disconnected in school (Bryan et al., 2012). Helping these students to feel connected at school will help them to develop academic and social resiliency (Chhuon & Wallace, 2014). Yet few qualitative studies exist that examine school connectedness, factors that impede or promote it, and its influence in students' lives (Bryan et al., 2012; Rawatlal & Petersen, 2012).

Why School Connectedness Matters

McNeely, Nonnemaker, and Blum (2002) point out that students come to school with varying predispositions toward education and with differing levels of encouragement from family to succeed. Goodenow (1993) adds, "In schools, students from grade school through college have difficulty sustaining academic engagement and commitment in environments in

which they do not feel personally valued and welcome” (p. 80) Research suggests that schools have the ability to influence a student’s sense they are cared for at school through fulfilling students developmental needs (McNeely, Nonnemaker, & Blum, 2002). The primary developmental needs of high school students include, “increasing opportunities for autonomy, opportunities to demonstrate competence, caring and support from adults, developmentally appropriate supervision, and acceptance by peers” (McNeely et al., 2002, p. 138). School connectedness increases when these developmental needs are met. When these needs are not met, however, disconnectedness occurs (McNeely et al., 2002).

Students’ attachment to their school (i.e., their sense of liking their school) and their involvement (i.e., their participation in school activities), two components of connectedness, showed a significant positive effect on students’ academic achievement (Bryan et al., 2012). “Young people who feel connected to school, that they belong, and that teachers are supportive and treat them fairly, do better” (Libbey, 2004, p. 282). When students perceive that they are accepted and respected by peers and adults in school they are more likely to have higher expectations for their future (McNeely et al., 2002).

School Attachment (Peer Relationships)

One factor in the development of school connectedness is the relationship a student has with his/her peers. Students are in constant contact with one another as classmates, during group work and in friendships. Peer relationships provide social and emotional support, help with problem solving, and serve as a basis for identity development (Wentzel, 2005). Positive relationships with peers are correlated with higher levels of emotional well-being, higher self-esteem, positive self-concept, and engagement in prosocial behaviors as well as with academic achievement (Wentzel, 2005).

According to the CDC (2010), students who feel a high level of connectedness to school “...report having the most friends at school and having friends from several different social groups...” (p. 22) while those who report low levels of connectedness to school “have more friends from outside school than inside or are socially isolated, reporting few friends either inside or outside of school” (p. 22). Researchers know that as children become adolescents they become less reliant on parental support and more reliant on the support of friends (Waters, Cross, & Runions, 2009). Fredericks and Simpkins (2013) state, “Youth spend more time with their peers, place greater emphasis on the opinions and expectations of their peers, and are more strongly attuned to and motivated by belongingness and positive peer regard” (pp. 2-3).

Involvement in School

Connecting peer relationships and involvement in school, Fredericks and Simpkins (2013) pointed out that involvement in extracurricular activities led to the development and maintenance of friendships, providing students with greater opportunities for peer interactions and friendships than the traditional classroom setting. The opportunity to develop and maintain friendships are the two primary reasons students join extracurricular activities (Fredericks & Simpkins, 2013). The reason students quit extracurricular activities resulted primarily from negative peer interactions and taking time away from friends who were not involved in the same activities (Fredericks & Simpkins, 2013). The researchers further pointed out that students who are involved in extracurricular activities are more likely to develop high quality friendships.

Eccles and Roeser (2011) identified three ways in which these activities are good for students: (1) doing something good with their time keeps students from engaging in risky behaviors; (2) students learn good things through extracurricular activities (i.e., competencies, prosocial values, and attitudes); and (3) students develop positive social supports and networks

with peers and adults. Further, according to Fredericks and Simpkins (2013), involvement in extracurricular activities is positively correlated with academic achievement, social competence, and self-esteem while disconnectedness from activities and peer relationships is positively correlated with delinquency, substance use, and depression. Chung-Do, Goebert, Chang, and Hamagani (2015) added that “Involvement in school activities that are meaningful, relevant, and interesting to students can enhance motivation for learning and identification with the school, which supports the development and attainment of educational goals” (p. 180).

Geller et al. (2013) suggested that students involved in activities of civic engagement such as helping, leadership in a school club, or working to improve the school, helped to increase school connectedness. Researchers believe that school involvement may be bidirectional (Geller et al., 2013); when students are involved in some capacity in school it increases their sense of connectedness and when students feel connected, they are more likely to engage in prosocial behaviors. Similarly, Eccles and Roeser (2011) see a link between involvement in extracurricular activities at school and positive academic and social outcomes such as higher grade point average, increased school engagement, and higher academic aspirations.

Student leadership in a school club or activity, in particular, is positively associated with students’ perceptions of relatedness (Geller et al., 2013). Further, Geller et al. (2013) found that student involvement in school government (e.g., student council) may give the impression to the whole school that students have a voice either because they have observed their peers or because their peers have sought their opinion (Geller et al., 2013).

Engagement in civic behaviors in particular allows students to have an impact on their environment (Geller et al., 2013). These opportunities are unique in that they help students not only develop autonomy, or independence, and responsibility, but also increase relatedness

through connections with adults, teachers, and peers (Geller et al., 2013). Relatedness can be defined as “the need for belonging and for secure interpersonal connection” (Cooper & Miness, 2014, p. 266). Other studies support the idea that when opportunities for autonomy and relatedness are present in the school environment, students will seek to fulfill that need and in turn feel a stronger sense of school connectedness (Waters, Cross, & Shaw, 2010). Going further and giving students a voice in whole-school policies has also been shown to increase school connectedness (Chapman et al., 2013). When students are given a choice and encouraged to set goals for themselves, they develop autonomy; when they become involved in school and receive emotional support, they experience connectedness (Waters, Cross, & Runions, 2009).

Relationships with School Personnel

Another factor associated with school connectedness is students’ relationships with educators (Waters et al., 2010). Educators, including administrators, teachers, coaches, and counselors are crucial to an adolescent’s development (Chhuon & Wallace, 2014) and to overall school climate (Geller et al., 2013). These relationships are more likely to cultivate confidence and connectedness resulting in social and educational resiliency (Chhuon & Wallace, 2014) and improve the school climate, or quality of interactions between adults and students (Geller et al., 2013).

Teachers in particular play a pivotal role in students’ development of identity, perception of self, and conceptualization of how others perceive them (Bryan et al., 2012; Chhuon & Wallace, 2014; Geller et al., 2013; Waters et al., 2010). “Affective displays, both positive and negative, toward students and students’ work likely influence not only students’ self-perceptions, but also their conceptualizations of how others perceive them” (Chhuon & Wallace, 2014, p. 383). According to Eccles and Roeser (2011), “adolescents’ perceptions of how caring their

teachers are predict gains and losses in their feelings of self-esteem, school belonging, and positive affect in school” (p. 229). The student-teacher relationship is key in an adolescent’s development that is distinct from other adult relationships and may be considered critical in helping students define academic and career aspirations and contributing to academic achievement and engagement (Chhuon & Wallace, 2014; Schulz, 2011).

Chhuon and Wallace (2014) pointed out that students who experience a sense of being known by their teachers are more likely to develop genuine trust and respect for those adults. In addition, students who feel a sense of connection to adults in their school are more likely to do well academically (Bryan et al., 2012). Further, a sense of connectedness between students and teachers communicates worth, respect, and care to students (Cooper & Minness, 2014). Cooper and Minness (2014) identify several specific teacher behaviors that students perceive to convey caring, including: (1) offering respect and encouragement, (2) assisting with homework, (3) frequent interactions, (4) treating students fairly, (5) using positive classroom management strategies, and (6) helping students with personal problems. When students develop positive relationships with teachers, they experience higher levels of belonging in the classroom, more positive views of school and consequently higher levels of motivation and engagement (Cooper & Minness, 2014). Cooper and Minness (2014) added that engagement occurs in classrooms where students feel known and valued as people. Conversely, when students experience a lack of connectedness in school and classrooms, there is an increased likelihood of behavior problems, stress and dropping out (Cooper & Minness, 2014).

Additionally, the student-teacher relationship may help an adolescent build social capital and work toward answering the questions of “Who am I?” and “Who do I want to be?” (Chhuon & Wallace, 2014). Teachers also serve as mentors to students, helping students learn how to

practice building and sustaining relationships, preparing them for future relationships where a power differential exists (i.e., work relationships) (Chhuon & Wallace, 2014).

In a qualitative study utilizing focus groups, Chhuon and Wallace (2014) developed a clearer picture of quality student-teacher interactions. The overarching themes indicated that the highest quality student-teacher relationships occurred with teachers who went beyond “just teaching,” provided instrumental support to improve students’ academic skills, and gave students the benefit of the doubt. The researchers suggested that students’ perceptions of being known might not only influence their own engagement and learning but may lead to teachers’ increased work in the classroom through high-leverage practices. The researchers stated that, “Teaching and learning, when viewed as a two-way street, can foster a kind of mutual reciprocity in school in which adolescent students view themselves as significant actors in their own development as well as positively affecting those around them, including their teachers” (Chhuon & Wallace, 2014, p. 396).

The positive student-teacher relationship can be measured by students’ perceptions that their teachers practice good teaching, praise and support their students, and show high level of interest in students (Bryan et al., 2012; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2010). However, there is a negative relationship between low teacher support/high structure and students’ academic engagement and achievement (Bryan et al., 2012). And unfortunately, adolescents’ perception that their teachers care and provide emotional support tends to decrease between the elementary and secondary years of school (Eccles & Roeser, 2011).

Another study focused on the counselor-student relationship. Lapan, Wells, Petersen, and McCann (2014) found that students experience more school connectedness when they have a sense that their counselors respond to their needs, build individual relationships with students

and help students to feel significant. The researchers discovered that students who received services from their school's counseling program were more likely to have a significant adult-student relationship that helped them feel connected at school (Lapan et al., 2014).

This chapter provided a review of the literature concerning school connectedness, including its meaning and importance, as well as three main components of school connectedness: peer relationships, involvement in school and attachment to school personnel. The literature makes a strong case for the importance of school connectedness. The sense of school connectedness appears to be diminished at Anywhere High School and I wish to further explore this case.

CHAPTER 3. METHODOLOGY

Chapter Three describes the research methods for the current project including a brief overview of qualitative case study methodology, data collection, and analysis procedures. The current project is guided by the question, how do students at Anywhere High School experience connectedness at school? Further sub-questions include:

1. What does it mean for students to be connected at school?
2. What does it mean for students to be disconnected at school?
3. What factors do students identify as influencing their sense of connectedness?
4. What specific instances of connectedness and disconnectedness have students experienced at school?

Design of the Study

A qualitative case study was conducted. According to Merriam (2001), “Qualitative researchers are interested in understanding the meaning people have constructed, that is, how they make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world” (p. 6). Using a qualitative approach allowed me to gain a deeper understanding of the meaning students assign to their experiences of school connectedness (Sheperis, Young, & Daniels, 2017).

According to Merriam (2001), there are four distinct characteristics of qualitative research. The first is that qualitative research seeks to understand the emic perspective, or that of the insider as opposed to the etic, or outsider, perspective (Merriam, 2001). The second characteristic is the use of a “human instrument” for data collection and analysis—the researcher (Merriam, 2001). Merriam states, “...the researcher is responsive to the context; [they] can adapt techniques to the circumstances; [and] the total context can be considered...” (p. 7). Third, qualitative research is inductive, it does not test existing theories, but instead builds toward a

theory (Merriam, 2001). Finally, qualitative research is “richly descriptive” of a phenomenon, employing the use of words and pictures in place of numbers (Merriam, 2001). These four characteristics helped to guide the current qualitative case study.

Qualitative Case Study

Merriam’s (2001) definition of case study was used. She defines qualitative case study research as, “...intensive descriptions and analyses of a single unit or bounded system (or case) such as an individual, program, event, group, intervention, or community” (p. 19). She further explains, “A case study design is employed to gain an in-depth understanding of the situation and meaning for those involved. The interest is in process rather than outcomes, in context rather than a specific variable, in discovery rather than confirmation” (Merriam, 2001, p. 19). In this case, students’ individual experiences of connectedness and disconnectedness at Anywhere High School was the case.

An initial step in determining fitness of case study methodology was to assess the boundedness of the topic (Merriam, 2001). In the current project, the central question was, “How do students at Anywhere High School experience connectedness at school?” The case was bounded by location—Anywhere High School. Additionally, Merriam (2001) by way of Stake (1995) states, “The case is one among others...The...case, might be selected because it is an instance of some concern, issue, or hypothesis” (p. 28). Students at Anywhere High School are a largely homogeneous group from White, upper-middle-class backgrounds, yet results of the Anywhere High School Culture/Climate Survey suggest that nearly half of the student population may be experiencing disconnectedness. Thus, qualitative case study methodology was an appropriate fit both in seeking to understand the present phenomenon and informing future interventions at Anywhere High School.

The Role and Bias of the Researcher

I am coming into this current project with my own worldview about school connectedness. I personally understand its importance and its impact. As a student, I struggled with peer relationships. Though I had a very close group of friends, some of my peers constantly teased, and even bullied, me. Yet I managed to be a successful student. Every year, there was at least one adult that I felt connected to. In 7th and 9th grade it was Mr. W who encouraged me to pursue more advanced social studies classes. In 10th grade, it was Mrs. L who encouraged me to join the high school speech team. In 11th grade, it was Mr. R, my school counselor, who encouraged me to sign up for a few courses at one of the local colleges during my senior year. It was because of these relationships, these connections that, in spite of my struggles with my peers, I was able to develop and grow as a person and to be successful.

I am in my tenth year as a Social Studies teacher and my sixth year at Anywhere High School. During this time I have taught and interacted with more than 1200 students. Developing relationships with students is the best and most important part of my job; it's the reason I am currently working to earn a master's degree in school counseling where I can focus even more on relationship-building. As an educator, I have strived to develop positive relationships with each of my students, just as my teachers did for me. The results of the Anywhere High School 2015 Culture/Climate Survey really struck a chord with me because it suggests that many of our students do not have positive relationships with their teachers and/or peers. This led me to wonder why students feel less connected at our school. As a teacher who cares deeply about her students I wanted to know, what is it that we, as a school, are doing wrong (and what are we doing right)? And how might we help all of our students to feel connected at school?

Sample Selection

The research site for the current project was Anywhere High School, a public 9-12 high school in a Midwestern state. At the time of focus, approximately 1,200 students were enrolled.

Purposeful sampling (Merriam, 2001) was used to select students to participate in focus groups. According to Merriam (2001), “Purposeful sampling is based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned” (p. 61). Students who are juniors and seniors (ages 16-19) were invited to participate in the focus groups as they were most likely to have been students at Anywhere High School since freshman (9th grade) year. An email was sent to all students in 11th and 12th grade inviting participation in the focus group. Students who are currently enrolled in the researcher’s current courses were not eligible to participate. Additionally, students who accepted the invitation to participate were selected for focus groups based on their self-identified level of connectedness, via a scaling question. Students were divided into “higher connection” and “lower connection” groups with the goal that students would be more comfortable sharing with peers who felt similarly connected.

Data Collection

Focus groups

The primary source of data collection was focus group discussions. According to Kress and Shoffner (2007), focus groups “can be used to obtain information about the opinions, perceptions, attitudes, beliefs, and insights of a small group of people” (p. 190). The use of focus groups was appropriate for the current project, given the guiding research questions. Utilizing focus groups allowed participants from Anywhere High School to share their own understanding of experiences with school connectedness.

The present research project was conducted with two focus groups composed of high school juniors and seniors (ages 16-19). Students indicated level of connectedness when they accepted the invitation to participate by answering a simple scaling question (i.e., “On a scale of 1-10, how connected do you feel at Anywhere High School”). One focus group was composed of eleven students who identified as feeling connected at school (a self-rating of 7-10) and the second focus group was composed of seven students who identified as feeling disconnected at school (a self-rating of 1-6). The focus groups were conducted separately to encourage open disclosure in response to the interview questions (see Appendix A) as there was a concern that students who felt less connected at school would be less willing to discuss their experiences with students who expressed a high level of connectedness at school. As suggested by Kress and Shoffner (2007), no students currently enrolled in the researcher’s classes were selected to participate in order to avoid role confusion and lessen any impact on the student-teacher relationship. Focus groups were conducted at Anywhere High School in a private setting, outside of school hours so as not to impede class participation and instruction. Focus groups were audio recorded to allow for later transcription and analysis of content and themes (Kress and Shoffner, 2007). A semi-structured interview was used for both focus groups (Merriam, 2001).

I moderated the focus groups. According to Kress and Shoffner (2007), “...it is important for focus group moderators to be clear about their past or potential future relationships with focus group participants and to strive to be aware of any potential ethical issues that may arise...” (p. 191). As a Social Studies teacher at Anywhere High School, I previously taught some of the students who participated in the focus groups. Therefore, participants were given information about my role in the current project during informed consent. As previously stated, none of my current students were participants in the focus groups.

Data Analysis

The current project utilized thematic analysis. Braun and Clarke (2006) consider thematic analysis to be part of the foundation of qualitative analysis. It allows the researcher to identify, analyze, and report patterns found in the research. Further, it allows for description and interpretation of research data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis is both flexible and accessible, able to fit with multiple theoretical frameworks, as it is not tied to any particular theory (Braun & Clarke, 2006). I utilized an inductive thematic analysis, not seeking to fit the data into a pre-existing theoretical construct which allowed me to code themes more diversely (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Braun and Clarke (2006) identified six phases of thematic analysis that were used to analyze the current project; I followed these phases for analyzing the data in this study:

1. In this phase, the researcher familiarizes themselves with the data. This occurs through transcription, reading, and re-reading of the data. Braun and Clarke (2006) refer to the act of transcribing as interpretative. Transcription is not simply “putting spoken sounds on paper,” but the creation of meanings (p. 17). During this phase, the researcher may be able to identify early themes or patterns (Braun & Clarke, 2006).
2. In this phase, the researcher generates initial codes. Generating codes allows the researcher to identify the features that are most interesting to them. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), during this phase it is important that the researcher code for as many themes as possible, keep in mind the context of the information, and extracted information may be coded multiple times and for more than one theme (p. 19).

3. In this phase, the researcher searches for themes from the coded data. Whereas the second phase requires the researcher to investigate specific codes, the third phase returns to a “broader level of themes” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 19). Coded data is then catalogued into the identified themes.
4. In this phase, the researcher reviews the themes and makes any necessary revisions. The first step in reviewing the themes is identifying whether the coded data supports a theme. The researcher may rework or throw out data that does not support a theme during this step. The second step in this phase can begin once the researcher has completed a thematic map. In this step, the researcher determines whether the thematic map is an accurate representation of the entire data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006). According to Braun and Clarke (2006), “At the end of this phase, you should have a fairly good idea of what your different themes are, how they fit together, and the overall story they tell about the data” (p. 21).
5. In this phase, the researcher defines and names the themes. The researcher must identify the meaning of each theme and what it says about the data. To do this, the researcher creates a detailed analysis of each theme, including identifying any sub-themes that may be present. The name given to a theme needs to concisely convey the theme’s meaning to the reader (Braun & Clarke, 2006).
6. Finally, in the sixth phase, the researcher produces a report. The final report tells a story of the data. It presents the reader with clear evidence, through carefully chosen examples, of the identified themes.

Trustworthiness and Credibility

According to Merriam (2001), there are several strategies a researcher can use to establish trustworthiness and credibility. Strategies that I identified pertaining to the current project included:

1. Examination of researchers' biases. By including a section clarifying my role as researcher, my personal experiences, and worldview regarding school connectedness, the reader is given the opportunity to understand how my perspectives influenced interpretation of the data (Sheperis et al., 2017). To further minimize bias and to deepen data analysis, I maintained a reflexive journal to record my thoughts and reactions, particularly those concerning my values and interests (Sheperis et al., 2017) and my prior experience with participants.
2. Prolonged engagement. I had established prolonged engagement as a teacher at Anywhere High School for the past five years and had been embedded in the culture and structure of the school. This prolonged engagement aided me in both the collection and analysis of data (Sheperis et al., 2017).
3. Transferability. The element of transferability is apparent through the creation of a thick description of data provided in the results section. This rich description of the study will allow the reader to decide whether the findings would be generalizable to other school settings (Sheperis et al., 2017).

Understanding researcher bias is a critical process to undertake before analyzing the data, as it allows the reader to understand the lenses through which the data were analyzed. The results of this analysis will be shared in Chapter 4.

CHAPTER 4. RESULTS

The purpose of this research study was to understand students' experiences of connectedness and disconnectedness at Anywhere High School. A qualitative case study research design was used to increase understanding of the factors involved in connectedness at a primarily White, upper-middle class high school in the Midwest. A second purpose of this research study was to inform future interventions to help increase connectedness at Anywhere High School.

The research question that drove the study was: How do students at Anywhere High School experience connectedness? Additional subquestions guided the case study:

1. What does it mean for students to be connected at school?
2. What does it mean for students to be disconnected at school?
3. What factors do students identify as influencing their sense of connectedness?
4. What specific instances of connectedness and disconnectedness have students experienced at school?

Chapter Four provides the research findings based on analysis of focus group data.

Background

Two focus groups were conducted for the present study. Focus groups included students at the junior and senior level (ages 16 to 18) from Anywhere High School. A total of 18 students participated in the focus groups, including 15 females and 3 males; one student identified as Black. Participants were assigned pseudonyms to preserve privacy. As previously stated, participants answered a simple scaling question when they accepted the invitation to participate (i.e., "On a scale of 1-10, how connected do you feel at Anywhere High School?"). The first focus group consisted of seven students who self-identified as more disconnected (based on a self-rating between 1 and 6). The second group consisted of eleven students, most of whom self-

identified as feeling connected (based on a self-rating between 7 and 10). Groups were separated in this manner in order to encourage open disclosure in response to the interview questions based on the concern that students who identified as more disconnected would be less likely to discuss their experiences. However, the data showed no real difference between the two focus groups. All participants felt connected to the school in some way (e.g., teachers, administrators, support staff, coaches, peers, activities).

Study Findings

Participants defined connectedness as being involved in school life and activities, having connections with people, feeling included, being nonjudgmental towards others, and feeling comfortable at school. One participant, Alison, a senior, said, “It’s each individual person talking to and knowing another individual.” Another participant, Daisy, a junior, viewed connectedness as “...showing up to school and wanting to be there and developing relationships between, like, your peers, and also your friends, but also your teachers...”

The following themes emerged from the data:

1. Connectedness has the power to create positive relationships.
2. Disconnectedness has the power to damage relationships and create barriers.
3. Involvement in activities is a significant source of connectedness for students.
4. Connectedness is not static.

Theme 1: Connectedness has the power to create positive relationships

Participants discussed the power that individuals in school have to create positive relationships. Gillian, a senior, remarked, “I think if you feel connected, you develop more relationships. So, like, if you have more relationships, you’ll be connected.” Gillian’s statement

is illustrative of the following subthemes: 1) Positive relationships with teachers, 2) Positive relationships with other adults, and 3) Positive relationships with peers.

Positive relationships with teachers

Positive relationships with teachers were the most mentioned in terms of building relationships and played the most significant role in whether or not students felt connected to school. Bree, a senior, shared, “For someone who can struggle to create connections with peers and having those teachers who are more than able and willing to create a connection with students in replacement or in addition is great because everybody should feel connected to someone.” Jessica, a junior, added, “...if you have that one bad experience with a teacher or something, like, that will carry on with us just as much as having a really great teacher that will help us will carry on...high school’s so important, because, like, I think it kind of sets the tone for...how we view education...it’s kind of important for teachers to try and set that good example.”

Every participant, whether they identified as connected or disconnected, described feeling connected to at least one of their teachers. Kelly, a senior, stated, “I feel like there’s the teachers that do [show up, teach, and go home] but then there’s the teachers who are coaches and have clubs after school and are more involved in the school life than others.” Carrie, a senior, agreed. “I think there are some [teachers] that offer to stay after school and help anybody who asks for it, too. I don’t think I’ve ever had a teacher tell me that they’re not going to stay after and help me. Even if they don’t like me...they put in more effort than they have to.” Jessica agreed, “I think teachers here do a...really good job...to get kids involved with something, whether it is a one-on-one connection with that teacher, or with a classroom, or with like, a club outside...these teachers do a good job of going above that call.” Bree agreed, stating, “...to...have multiple

teachers...being willing to give up their free time in their busy schedule...and have personal conversations...to be willing to put in effort to making students feel okay in their classrooms...to be invited to participate in other organizations like this [focus group] by teachers or have teachers invite me to be in their clubs...was amazing.” Kelly added, “...teachers here really, like, if you say you’re feeling upset or something happened...they’ll, like, take the time and be like, ‘Well, what happened? Do you want to talk about it? I’m here for you.’” She recalled an exchange from earlier this year with one of her former teachers:

Kelly: And, like, I said to one of my old...teachers this year...he’s like, “How are you?” and I’m like, “I want to kill myself.” He’s like, “Whoa, whoa!” and he followed me to my class like, “I have to report this now. You going to talk to me about it?” And I was like, “Go away. I’m kidding.”

[Laughter]

Kelly: He followed me around until I like, told him I was okay or whatever. But he’s still like... he didn’t just brush it off like, “Ah-ha! LOL!” But he was like, “Really? Were you just saying that?” He made sure I was actually mentally okay before wandering off again... to go bother someone else. [Laughs]

Participants also felt more connected to teachers in certain departments. Kelly reported that she has had better experiences with Social Studies teachers than with teachers of other subjects, explaining that it depended on “...what your interests are and stuff...your better experiences lie with teachers in different wings.” Other participants corroborated this, with Lacey stating, “I think it’s because they teach about humans and they understand humans more than the other, like, a math teacher would...I look forward to going to their class every day.”

Molly suggested that this connection to certain types of teachers may have to do with teachers' acceptance of students. She described one class where the discussion centered on politics and described the teacher as offering "...an accepting conversation [rather] than...like, sometimes when we've been talking about politics in class, it's like you can easily tell where the teacher stands and you almost feel judged...for what you believe. [This teacher's class] felt more open to me." Carl agreed with Molly's take, adding, "You open up to [teachers] and they open up to you and they don't really care [if your opinions are different]." Carl seemed to be alluding to that feeling of being accepted by teachers despite their differences, a sense of unconditional positive regard.

Participants reported being more connected to teachers they viewed as relatable and willing to be vulnerable with students. Molly described a time in class when the teacher disclosed an embarrassing moment they had to the class. Molly stated, "I talked to her after class. I was like, 'I feel that.' And I don't know, like, that relationship is just like, built. Like, once they kind of share more of their personal life." Other participants agreed that being able to have conversations with teachers or understand a teacher's point of view helps to create connectedness. Erin, a senior, stated, "I want to be influenced by teachers. Like, you guys have like, been out there in the real world and like, you're coming back and teaching us stuff that we need to know...[but] I want to know what's actually going on out there." Natalie added, "I'd rather hear your experiences than how to create the co-sin graph or a multiple choice question."

Participants noted that teachers overall have decent and enjoyable conversations with one another and that serves as a model for students. Bree said, "I think the students are also influenced to do similar things by, you know, talking, being into inviting people in and gaining groups." And participants noted that this tendency to be inviting was displayed in the classroom.

Bree and Carrie recalled one class they shared where they felt a sense of trepidation going in, but leaving feeling connected to the teacher and to other students in the class as a result of that teacher. Bree stated, “Whether you liked the class or not, you had to admit that [the teacher] was a fantastic teacher in inviting kids to get connected either with himself or with, like, the other kids in the classroom.” Jessica added, “. . .as a teacher, that’s part of your job to be there for kids and to show. . . We’re going to be kind to each other. We’re going to be open with each other.”

Positive relationships with other adults

While positive relationships with teachers appeared to be the most significant to participants, positive relationships with other adults in the school also played a role in students’ sense of connectedness. Lacey, a senior, said, “. . .this school’s pretty good at trying to make people feel included. The principals will say, ‘Hey, how’s your day going?’ in the hallway. And. . .even if they don’t know who we are personally, they’re just trying to make our day better and I think that’s a really good thing.” Jessica noted that members of the support staff also play a role in students’ connectedness, saying, “. . .there’s always that lunch lady that you go to and she’s amazing and there’s always the lunch ladies that are like, ‘Hey, how are you?’ and like, they’ll memorize your name. It’s great!” Natalie added, “. . .I like the people, like, the ladies that sit out in the [student services] office. . .they are so nice! I love them!” One participant, Alison, told a story of getting support from an assistant swim coach: “And he listened through. . .he listened to me even though I’m sitting there, I’m freaking out. . .I was so distraught. He’d be sitting there and he’d be like, ‘Alright, tell me what’s going on. What can we do to fix this?’”

Positive relationships with peers

The third subtheme surrounded developing positive relationships with peers. Lacey, a senior, said, “I feel like there are a lot of friend groups. . .in high school. So I think being

connected is, like, kind of being involved in more than just one friend group.” Fallon, a senior, agreed somewhat, saying, “I think you have to have a working relationship with many different groups even though you can still have like, your select little special group.” Lacey added, “It really all just depends on your friends. I think, that’s like, the base of feeling connected at school. And then the teachers and the other students play into everything else.” She summed up connectedness to peers by saying, “It’s quality over quantity...once I got to high school I realized that it does not matter what group you’re in as long as you have people that love you and you love them back. It’s all that matters...”

For Carl, a junior, “I think just a big key thing is that, you know, you go up to that person, say ‘Hey, how’s it going?’...introduce yourself.” He added, “I think if you just, um, interact with other people and go out of your way to, you know, to meet other people, and um, get connected with other people, I think that’s really important.”

Erin, a senior, talked about not understanding why people are mean to or about each other, “It’s not that hard to be nice...you all come to school every day, you might as well just get along. It’s much easier to just say hi or be friendly. Because you all kind of need each other. And you see each other every day, so it just makes more sense.”

Theme 2: Disconnectedness has the power to damage relationships and create barriers

Disconnectedness was more difficult for students to define though they shared many experiences of disconnectedness throughout the focus groups. Jessica, a participant in the “lower” connectedness group, pointed out, “...it’s kind of hard to stay disconnected, because I think anytime you’re talking with someone, like from your school and you’re kind of making friends in school, you’re kind of connected to school...because school is such a big part of our life. It’s kind of hard to be completely disconnected.” Several participants shared her view of the

disconnected student as being "...that person who goes home right away or if you're in class and you aren't participating and you aren't talking and, like, making that effort to try and talk to people." Lacey added that, "They walk with their head down and their shoulders slumped, just like trying... you can tell they're trying to get through another day...they just don't feel comfortable at school." Kelly said, "I feel like it's all in the mindset of...when you're at school...it's kind of all to the person themselves." Some participants, though, saw the influence of others on connectedness. Alison said, "Other people could be causing you to be disconnected. People could be ignoring you. Teachers could be focusing more on other students and not ever really focusing on helping you with anything." Fallon concluded, "I think choosing to be isolated versus being isolated by others is a completely different thing." Even though none of the participants identified themselves as truly disconnected, their experiences showed how disconnectedness could damage relationships with teachers, other adults, and peers.

Damage to relationships with teachers

Participants discussed experiences that demonstrated teachers' ability to damage relationships with students. Bree, a senior, talked about how she perceived one of her teachers displaying favoritism toward students with more outgoing personalities, ignoring quieter students like herself. "...I attempted to ask a question and the teacher...completely ignored me. And that furthered the disconnection and the mentality of... 'Why am I trying if nothing is going to go anywhere?'" She further explained that, "...teachers will have an influence on the students, no matter what kind of personality you have. These are people who, you are almost programmed to see as examples, as representatives. And to have this one teacher...kind of drew me back a little further and took longer to see other means of finding a connection." Bree talked about an idea brought up by several participants: one bad experience with a teacher can influence the ability to

connect with others. This disconnection created doubt and anxiety to the point that students dreaded going to class.

Bree brought up another example of disconnectedness created by a teacher, similar to her earlier experience. She recalled raising her hand to ask a question and being told that her question was “irrelevant and it wasn’t important.” Bree explained, “[Teacher] negativity in general...reflects onto the students and it just, like, makes your entire learning experience worse. And then...you just...kind of give up...you just doubt yourself more. Like, the more you’re doubting yourself, the more you’re struggling and the more you’re struggling, the less likely you are to make strong connections to people.” Other students commiserated with Bree’s experience and agreed that when teachers tell students that the questions they ask don’t matter, students hear, “You don’t matter.” Erin, a participant in the “higher” connectedness group, added that it frustrated her when this would occur, because, “Like, ‘I’m struggling, please help me.’ And they just kind of expect you to know it or find it yourself, but when you’ve kind of worn out all of your options, and they don’t answer your question legitimately...”

Daisy shared a similar experience adding, “...it makes me not want to...speak up in a classroom or makes me feel like, a disconnect with the teacher and like, the class itself...If you’re a teacher...you shouldn’t make your students feel less of themselves for coming forth to ask you questions.” Many participants echoed this experience, talking about feeling judged by some of their teachers for asking questions or not knowing the answers to questions. Daisy’s experience, however, is also unique. “...I’m black, and, um, some teachers...think that’s an excuse to treat me a different way, like, for example, um, I’m, like, in the upper level class. People are like, ‘Wow, I never thought that you would be in that type of class.’ And I’m just like,

why is my race, like, a factor?” She added, “I have to like, prove...I’m having to, like, constantly prove myself.”

Other participants expressed outrage at Daisy’s experience, pointing out that teachers are supposed to be positive role models. Lacey stated,

“They’re [teachers] are supposed to be teaching us how to treat people and um, how to form connections with people along with what we’re learning in the class. But if they treat people like [Daisy’s] been treated, there’s no way we’re going to be able to form those important connections with people of different races or different genders or different political views. There’s no way we’re going to be able to form those connections if we don’t see it happening.”

Natalie reiterated, “...if you have one bad connection with one [a teacher]...you wouldn’t want to go make more connections with teachers if, like, that was your first connection with a teacher. And then that will, like, affect you throughout high school as well.”

Damage to relationships with other adults

A second subtheme concerns the possible damage to relationships with other adults in the school building. Much of the discussion surrounding this subtheme was about relationships with administrators. Experiences involving administrators were typically of a disciplinary nature.

Gillian, a senior, remarked, “I think principals...have a lot to do with being connected...” As with teachers, participants saw administrators as having the power to create or destroy relationships. Gillian talked about an instance where she wanted to talk to a principal about an issue she had with a teacher:

“I wasn’t given the respect I felt I deserved at school... [they] called me down with two minutes left of class, of the entire day, to talk to me and then when I didn’t come

into...[their] office because I thought it was rude, [they] found me the next day in the hallway and proceeded to talk over me loudly...while everyone was walking by...just not listening.”

Kelly recounted a similarly negative experience with a principal, stating, “...from the minute [they] walked in the door [they were] yelling. [They] actually...spit in my face when [they were] yelling and [they were] just so mad.” For both students, this one experience destroyed a potential relationship with the principal: “I feel like [principals] have a big job because there’s a lot of people that they have to deal with but they should make when they deal with the students positive...it’s really hard for me to get over, like, how [they] treated me then. I feel like [they]...I just, I don’t feel like [they are] genuine anymore.”

Natalie talked about an experience she had with an adult in the school that led to disconnectedness: not being known by her counselor. “Like, [my counselor] doesn’t even know my name. Like, at all. And...that makes it hard because...as a counselor, like, if I need help...you’re supposed to be there to, like, help me. Like, whether it’s...emotionally, whether it’s...with anything...I do not feel, like, I mean that’s me though...that I could...ever go to [them] for anything.” Fallon was able to relate. She shared her own story of not being known by a teacher and the situation escalated to the point she had to pull out her driver’s license to prove her name to the teacher. While Natalie and Fallon had unique stories of being unknown than other participants, theirs are illustrative of how damaging the feeling of being disconnected can be.

Damage to relationships with peers

The third subtheme concerns how disconnectedness can damage relationships with peers. Alison, a senior, remarked that, “...everyone kind of has, like, their own little groups that they all

hang out in and they're all, like, super buddy-buddy and they'll kind of stay away from other groups in the school." Carrie agreed, "It just limits who you talk to...you're going to feel more connected to people with something in common with you."

Another major factor in participants' feelings of disconnectedness was social media. Lacey brought up the topic by saying, "...I think that the feeling of connectedness at school, um, has changed a lot over time because of social media...it can either make you feel super connected or super disconnected." Participants agreed that students are technologically connected to one another, but may lack real-life connections. Molly talked about social media lending itself to feeling isolated: "...you would see, like, on their Instagram, 'Oh, they're all hanging out,' you know...it's really, like, minor, but it feels like it's the most major thing that has ever happened, you know?" Fallon wondered, "Isn't there something like Facebook depression? ...because no one ever really puts anything sad or bad on Facebook. They just put up all the good stuff, all the happy stuff on Facebook..." Erin agreed, "...it kind of seems like the end of the world. Like, and it's easy to jump to conclusions...and make yourself feel really bad about it." She added, "...it is so easy to feel disconnected in high school because there's always going to be somebody doing like, something better or with like, cooler people, or like, you don't get included."

Participants also felt that disconnectedness stemmed from, as Erin put it, "...that underlying fear of being judged...you'll be sitting next to a person...and then they leave and you literally turn around and talk bad about that person. Like, right after they leave...And it's like, ugh. Like, you're around all this and it's, like, okay, when you leave, what's going to happen?" Olivia agreed with this and told a story about a friend who was ridiculed by some of the guys in their grade,

“...and then on someone’s Snap story, like, he took a picture of [her shoes] and said, like, ‘Girl, you wearing cleats to school?’ And like, obviously she heard about that and like...she loves those shoes, you know, and now she...told me...that she won’t wear certain things to school because of this one person and because of what they did to her in school...I think that totally pushes her away and like, makes her not be herself.”

This fear of judgment from peers extends into the classroom itself. Lacey talked about feeling judged by her peers in her advanced classes, “I’ve noticed in, like, [advanced] classes it is way harder to ask questions than like, in a regular class because I feel...judged by other people because they’re, like, smarter, you know?” And it was more than just the words that peers used that led participants to feel disconnected.

Lacey: I think it’s honestly more the facial expressions and the tone of voice and the body language than the actual words. Because they often, I mean sometimes, they’re like, ‘Why are you in this class?’ But other times, they’ll pretend that they’re not judging you but you can tell that they actually are.

[Participants voice agreement and nod heads]

Olivia: It’s almost worse [referring to body language, facial expressions, and tone of voice]

Another factor that participants mentioned as relating to disconnectedness with peers was mental health/mental illness. Natalie shared, “I’ve had times in high school where, like, I’ve had to fake emotions. Like, I wake up, I’m like, okay, I’m just going to pretend to be super happy today, like, get along with all of my friends, like, say hi to people in the hallways...and like, it’s exhausting.” She added,

“I think mental health definitely plays a role in, like, feeling connected in school as well. Because, like, even like, especially for me, like, um, I mean everyone’s been through stuff. Like, everyone’s like, had their own struggles. And like, four years, like, it’s not a lot of time, but like, that’s a lot of time...And it’s hard to get that, like, mental flip. You know what I mean? You have to, like, tell yourself that this is actually better for you to make these connections.”

Lacey stated, “...when you’re feeling down on yourself, and like, you’re just feeling depressed, like, you do not want connection with anyone. You just want to be alone.” Then there was an exchange:

Natalie: Um, at the senior retreat, something, like, hit me...so many people in our grade...have struggled through depression and, like, suicide was a topic, like, often brought up...And like, it baffles me that it’s not talked about more. And like, this is something we all go through and especially in high school.

Lacey: It’s a set up for depression.

[Laughter]

Natalie: Yeah, So like...

Lacey: No, I’m serious. There were, like, so many people that are suffering through depression.

Natalie: Yes! But that’s, like, the thing. Like, we don’t feel connected enough to, like, share our experiences. Like, everyone is going through this but, like, we don’t go out and, like, talk about it and stuff. We just keep it, like, bottled up inside because we don’t feel, like, connected enough to, like, share that personal information with, like, the people we’re around every single day.

Carl, a junior, added, “A lot of people bottle that stuff up. And it really sucks because, you know, some people, you know, they have problems...they’re older, they’re adults, they still have problems from high school that they don’t talk about.”

Theme 3: Involvement in activities is a significant source of connectedness for students

Next to positive relationships with teachers, the most mentioned source of connectedness for students appeared to come from being involved. Olivia, a senior, said, “Um, I’d say another big factor in becoming connected would be like, activities, and sporting events, and like, shows and stuff.” She talked about recently joining Knowledge Bowl and feeling connected to the other students on the team. Participants varied widely in their activities: sports, theater, speech and debate. Other participants talked about attending games and events and going out to eat together afterward. Erin pointed out, “There are so many people and so many opportunities here, too. Like, that’s what this school is really good about...like, if you want to, like, form a club or anything, like, they try so hard to make that happen. So there’s something for everyone.” Daisy agreed, saying “...there’s a lot of clubs or groups or like, um, sports that you can join and where...you feel that closeness, even if you don’t feel it inside the classroom.” Molly said, “...I think it’s [being connected] easier, because if you’re in a club, like, you have that common ground. Whereas, like, if you’re just sitting next to someone in, like, math class, like, you don’t know if you guys have anything in common...So I think it’s kind of different if you’re in a club.”

Though participants had discussed experiences of disconnection with their peers, many perceived clubs and activities at Anywhere High School to be inclusive. Jessica, who had been involved in multiple activities throughout high school, summed up being involved by saying, “I met a lot of people and from there, I joined a group, and like, from there I was able to find my

little place in school.” She added, “. . . people from here are very welcoming and if I wanted to go join a group, most people would be like, ‘Oh yeah, give it a try.’” Erin expressed sadness about students who are not involved, “Not sad if they’re happy, but like, I don’t know, being involved, once you find what you like to do, it really does help you, like, feel connected.” She added, “. . . I mean whether you want to be connected or not, I guess you kind of are. . . and you like, learn to work together and like, accomplish things, it’s really like, rewarding. It definitely makes me feel connected in a lot more ways than other things in school.”

Being involved also helped participants to become mentors to other students. Dylan, a senior, said, “. . . you want school to be a place where everyone can feel, like, welcome. . . the locker thing’s kind of nice. . . you see, like, different people and, like, people that aren’t just in your grade. . . you get to know them.” Erin, who played multiple sports, said, “I think it’s kind of important to reach out to the younger people or people that are struggling. And just make them feel more connected as well.”

Theme 4: Connectedness is not static

Participants agreed that connectedness changes, sometimes as a result of changing priorities, or because of their own change and growth. Natalie stated, “As you change, your connections change.” She talked about how as a sophomore she really disliked one of her teachers, “I literally hated him.” As she has gone through high school, however, her view has changed, “. . . now when I listen to him talk or listen to him read, I’m like, ‘This guy has a lot of knowledge.’ The way he is, like, talking, like his vocabulary stuff, like, I’ve come to admire that and. . . that changes connections, too, because. . . I can look at things from a different perspective.” She acknowledged that she is the one who has changed. As she has changed, her connection with that teacher has also been transformed. Other participants saw connectedness change as they

discovered their own identities and learned who their friends were. Lacey said, “You realize that you’re more comfortable in your own skin and I think that’s why high school has been the best. Because you start realizing who you are.”

Several participants discussed a dwindling sense of connectedness as their priorities changed. This was most evident in participants who were seniors. Carrie, one such participant, said, “...the way I see that relationship [with the school] is more of like, this is a stepping stone to get where I want to be in life. And, like, once I’m done with it, then...I’m done.” Another participant, Natalie, said,

“I think that...it...pertains to the perspective you’re looking at as well...I try so hard...to be an optimist, but like, I also look at some people in the hallway and like, why do I want to have, like, a two-minute meaningless conversation with them?...why do I feel like I’m forced to have, like, small talk with these people...?...it depends on the person and I think, like, different people thrive in different environments.”

Jessica, a senior, described school connectedness as being temporary, “...if you were to talk to someone who has gone through college or is in college...they’d probably feel more...connected to their college than, like, their high school because it fades away. ...or it shifts to the next school that you go to.”

Being upperclassmen, participants noted, really increased their sense of connectedness. Lacy stated, “...being a senior has made me feel way more connected in this school. Like, throughout the years I’ve gotten more and more connected as I’ve gotten older...I can join Knowledge Bowl or I can join anything because you feel you...if people judge you, you’re just, like...I don’t really care as much as I used to.” She added, “...it just feels so good to walk down the hallways and just, like, say ‘Hey’ to everyone...it has made such a difference.” Lacey said,

“Last year, I would never have dressed up. Like, so we had a DECA week for DECA Club. Um, I was the only person that dressed up every single day. Um, but like, being a senior I didn’t even care; I was just having fun doing stuff for my club.” Heidi agreed, noticing that the underclassmen did not dress up for Spirit Week, “...and we were all just like, it’s Spirit Week! Like, you’re allowed to be weird!” She added, “I think that part of Spirit Week is like, at least having one other person you know is going to go all out...you’re going to dress up, too. Because, like, I’m not going to let them be alone. I’m not going to be like, alone then either.” Lacey chimed in, “...Spirit Week this year was probably one of the best weeks of the year...It was really fun as a senior. I felt like the senior class came together more than we ever have...even after it...I’ve formed like, new connections now.” Natalie said, “...I see some underclassmen and I’m like, should I say hi? Like, oh, it doesn’t really matter, like, I’m in a rush. But like, to some people that matters. So much.”

Participants shared many ways to feel more connected to and at school. Natalie was the first to say, “I think people should talk about things like this more often. Like, even just like us, like, I feel like I’m connected with you guys just because we have had, like, these conversations and stuff.” Lacey agreed, “We should have this conversation every single year of high school. Like, this feels good.” Erin added, “I just wish we could have those kinds of conversations in school. Because, like, we’re different and I think, like, just even talking to this group you get, like, more educated about what other people, like, think and, like, understanding where people come from and seeing different people’s views.” Natalie had an idea, “You should, like, invite people, like, have different topics, like, ‘Today we’re talking about this.’ And then we can all come and we can talk about it!” Erin concluded, “It would just make everyone more connected.”

This chapter presented study findings based on analysis of the focus group data. Several themes emerged from the data analysis. A discussion of what conclusions were made and suggestions will be shared in Chapter 5.

CHAPTER 5. DISCUSSION, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND CONCLUSION

The purpose of this research study was to understand students' experiences of connectedness and disconnectedness at Anywhere High School. Research was conducted through focus groups with junior and senior students at Anywhere High School. This chapter reviews, analyzes, and discusses the research findings. Implications for improving school connectedness are discussed, as well as limitations and areas for future research.

Discussion

The research question that drove the study was, how do students at Anywhere High School? Additional subquestions further guided the case study:

1. What does it mean for students to be connected at school?
2. What does it mean for students to be disconnected at school?
3. What factors do students identify as influencing their sense of connectedness?
4. What specific instances of connectedness and disconnectedness have students experienced at school?

The following themes that emerged from the data analysis were as follows:

1. Connectedness has the power to create positive relationships.
2. Disconnectedness has the power to damage relationships and create barriers.
3. Involvement in activities is a significant source of connectedness for students.
4. Connectedness is not static.

A discussion of what these findings mean and how they relate to the literature will be provided here. Summaries of how the data analysis answered research subquestions 1-3 are given. As subquestion four (What specific instances of connectedness and disconnectedness have

students experienced at school?) was used to support the answers to the first three subquestions, it is not discussed discretely in this section.

Answer to Research Subquestion 1: What does it mean for students to be connected at school?

Participants defined connectedness in terms of relationship-building and the power that individuals in school have to create positive relationships. Relationships with teachers, administrators, support staff, and peers were discussed.

Participants identified teachers as playing the most significant role in their experiences of connectedness. The importance of the student-teacher relationship is studied extensively in the existing school connectedness literature. Participants in both focus groups were able to identify at least one teacher they felt connected to. I was struck by this finding, particularly for the “lower connectedness” group, as even students who had rated themselves as low as a 1 or 2 in connectedness talked about being connected to at least one teacher, often multiple teachers. Though research shows that there is a decline in school connectedness between elementary school and high school (Eccles & Roeser, 2011), this finding suggests that there is still an opportunity to foster connectedness with those who come to high school feeling disconnected.

Next to teachers, peers appeared to have the greatest influence on participants’ sense of connectedness to school. There was debate about whether it was important to be connected to more than just one’s close friend group or if connectedness was more about being able to work with many different peers. Ultimately, most participants agreed that connectedness could be created through positive interactions with peers, even if close relationships did not develop. Participants described such positive interactions as being as simple as going up to someone and saying hello.

Participants also discussed their experiences of positive relationship-building with other adults in the school. Some participants recognized attempts by school administration to help students feel more included. A few participants discussed positive relationships with support staff in the school, including office personnel and kitchen workers. Others discussed having positive relationships with coaches affiliated with school activities.

Having a relationship with a significant adult in the school is one key to fostering school connectedness (Chhuon & Wallace, 2014; Chung-Do et al., 2015; Geller et al., 2013; Libbey, 2004; Rawatlal & Petersen, 2012). That every student felt connected to adults in the school gave me a sense of hope. To me, this said that we are doing a lot of things well at Anywhere High School. The broader implication is that it is the adults at school that have the power, and perhaps the responsibility, to create a sense of connectedness for students.

Answer to Research Subquestion 2: What does it mean for students to be disconnected at school?

Participants struggled more with defining disconnectedness but were able to describe what they saw in other students they believed to be disconnected. Participants expressed difficulty in imagining that anyone in school could be completely disconnected because of the major role that school played in everyone's life. They described students who were uninvolved and tended to isolate themselves as being the most disconnected. There was also some debate among participants about whether or not disconnectedness came from the self or from others, but the majority of experiences discussed in the focus group involved failed relationships with others resulting in disconnectedness. The research supports this finding as students who feel disconnected are often socially excluded or disinvited from peer groups (Bond et al., 2007).

A surprising finding was that participants in both focus groups described experiences of disconnectedness with teachers. This finding surprised me because even participants in the “higher connectedness” group were able to point to vivid, painful experiences of disconnectedness with a teacher, and yet they still considered themselves connected at school. This tells me that when students have positive relationships at school, those relationships can help the student through the toughest of times.

Another interesting finding related to disconnectedness was that multiple participants described feeling disconnected to the same teacher. To me, this suggests that in the student-teacher relationship, it is almost solely up to the teacher to foster a sense of connectedness in the classroom. Further, a teacher who fosters disconnectedness has the power to destroy a student’s connectedness to school itself, as students may begin to engage in avoidance behavior, perhaps even choosing to not come to school. This led me to wonder, what can we do in undergraduate teacher programs to ensure that teachers are equipped to create connections with students? Further, how can a damaged student-teacher relationship be repaired?

Answer to Research Subquestion 3: What factors do students identify as influencing their sense of connectedness?

Participants described a number of factors that influenced their sense of connectedness to teachers, other adults, and peers and factors that created disconnectedness. Examples of the power of connectedness to create positive relationships between teachers and students included teachers serving as advisors for extracurricular activities, staying after school to help students, showing students they cared by taking interest in students’ lives, and attempting to relate to students through being vulnerable. Participants felt connected to teachers in spite of differences and had a sense of unconditional positive regard. Teachers displaying a high level of interest in

students has been noted as a factor in students' sense of connectedness to school (Bryan et al., 2012; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2010), as has showing caring toward students (Cooper & Minness, 2014). However, there is very little research on the impact of teachers displaying vulnerability in the classroom and in the current project participants expressed that they feel most connected to teachers who are willing to be vulnerable with them.

Participants also described factors that influenced disconnectedness at school by teachers, other adults, and peers. Displays of favoritism, shaming, making judgments, expressing prejudices, and not taking time to know individuals all lead to students experiencing disconnectedness to school. Participants described the ramifications of these experiences as being significant: one bad experience with one teacher could negatively affect one's entire high school career.

Negative experiences with administrators led to disconnectedness for some participants. While recognizing that administrators often have the unfortunate task of dealing with disciplinary issues, participants felt that those interactions could be more positive. Just as with teachers, one negative experience with an administrator led participants to feel they could not approach administration with their concerns.

Peers had the ability to create disconnectedness through the formation of cliques, interactions on social media, and face to face interactions in the classroom. Fear of judgment by their peers appeared to be the most significant source of anxiety for participants. Participants expressed how this fear of judgment leads to individuals suffering in silence and isolation with no one to talk to.

The findings regarding disconnectedness to teachers, peers, and other adults was fairly consistent with the existing research (Bond et al., 2007; McNeely et al., 2002; and Schulz, 2011).

However, one of the more interesting findings to come out of this current project was students' views on how social media influenced their sense of connectedness. Participants in the current study generally described social media as leading to more feelings of disconnectedness at school. They acknowledged that even though everyone is technologically connected, there is no real feeling of connectedness emotionally. Social media's relationship to school connectedness has not yet really been examined in the research. In "The Big Disconnect," (2015) Steiner-Adair states,

"The issue isn't that middle schoolers and high schoolers can be crude or cruel; that's always been true. The difference today is that an insult, slur, or rant now travels instantly and everywhere online, can be read by nearly anyone, and thus has the potential to do damage far in excess of a face-to-face imbroglio" (p. 36).

This quote reminded me of Olivia's story about her friend's beloved shoes that were never worn again and brings up the issue of how schools can foster school connectedness in an increasingly complex social and technological world for students.

Participants could not stress enough the importance of being involved at school whether on the court, in the pool, on the stage, on the field, or at the podium. There are a lot of opportunities to become involved at Anywhere High School in clubs, sports, or other activities and participants viewed most as encouraging inclusion. Much of the research in the literature regarding school involvement and school connectedness centers on being directly involved in a club, sport, or activity. Being involved helped students to find others with whom they shared something in common (Eccles & Roeser, 2011; Fredericks & Simpkins, 2013). However, a new finding in the current project was that simply attending an activity, such as a basketball game or a musical, resulted in students' feeling more connected to school. Though it was described in the

review of the literature, being in a traditional school leadership role (e.g., school council) (Geller et al., 2013) did not come up in either focus group. Participants in the current project instead talked about taking on more of a mentorship role, particularly when it comes to underclassmen either through the clubs, sports, or activities they were involved in or simply having a locker next to a stranger in a different grade.

Directions for Future Research

While invitations to participate in the present study were sent out to juniors and seniors at Anywhere High School, there were two groups of students notably absent: students in the English Language Learner (ELL) program and students in Special Education. There were two reasons for this: 1) It was imperative that all participants be able to fully understand the assent and/or consent form language, and 2) the researchers did not wish for the present study to become a comparison between different groups. Unfortunately, this means that not all voices were heard in the present study. Future research may be directed towards identifying marginalized populations within the school and providing an opportunity to discuss their experiences in order to better understand connectedness within and between groups of students.

Future research might include bringing freshman and sophomore students into the conversation as there was discussion in the present study about struggles with connectedness in earlier grades. Participants reported feeling more disconnected in ninth and tenth grade, as they were trying to figure out who they were and where they belonged. They talked about a lot of damaged relationships, particularly those with peers.

Additionally, only three males accepted the invitation to participate in the present study. It is possible that they did not feel entirely comfortable expressing their opinions or discussing

their experiences with other participants. Future research might include separate groups for males and females to ensure that all participants are able to freely talk.

Another direction would be to identify and invite participation from the students who feel extremely disconnected from school. The present study likely did not include students who would identify as truly disconnected. While the majority of participants shared experiences of disconnectedness, they also expressed a sense of connectedness with at least one adult in the school. The present study only investigated the experiences of connectedness at school; it did not investigate instances of connectedness with adults and peers outside of the school setting.

Action Steps for Anywhere High School

How do we become more connected at Anywhere High School? Through engaging in conversations with one another, understanding different points of view, and being inviting. The following is a list of recommendations for improving students' connectedness to school based on my conversations with students at Anywhere High School:

1. Promote opportunities for student involvement.

Students who are involved in clubs, sports and other school activities reported a higher level of connectedness. One consideration might be holding an activities fair each year that is open to all students. Current practice at Anywhere High School is to hold an activities fair for incoming freshman. Yet, several participants in the current study talked about migrating from one activity to another throughout high school. Holding an activities fair for everyone every year would allow students to explore options as their interests evolve and change. Currently, information about clubs/sports/activities is disseminated through daily announcements. Students may miss these announcements for a variety of reasons. Therefore, a second consideration would be the creation of a central

space for advertising activities that gives students a description of each club/sport/activity and the meeting days/times/places.

2. Provide a forum for students to communicate with one another.

Participants in the present study reported feeling a high level of connectedness with others in the focus group, even if they did not know one another. Providing this type of forum in the form of a small group for students to express their views and discuss their experiences promotes a sense of universality. Students come to the realization that they are not alone; others have had similar experiences or at least similar feelings.

Participants also want class retreats throughout high school, not just freshman and senior years. These retreats are powerful experiences for students and similar to the small group forum allow students to better understand one another through shared experiences.

One final consideration might be revisiting the concept of a school advisory. School advisories are a popular concept in middle school, but with a curriculum to guide staff, it could help students to connect with both adults and peers and provide consistency throughout high school. This would require further research into the use of advisories in a high school setting, an overhaul of the current schedule, and buy-in from staff (Odden Heide, 2015).

3. Provide staff with empathy and compassion training to help them with building positive relationships.

Both focus groups emphasized the importance of the student-teacher relationship in their feelings of connectedness to school. Participants felt most connected to teachers who display warmth, empathy, compassion, and vulnerability with students. Teachers have the power to foster connectedness with students in their classrooms if they are

mindful of the words they choose to use and the tone with which they convey their message.

Conclusion

The present study was conducted at Anywhere High School, a large high school in the Midwest with a largely homogeneous student population. A climate/culture survey taken by students at Anywhere High School suggested that students were feeling disconnected and I wanted to know more. More specifically, I wanted to understand this phenomenon from the perspective and experiences of the students at Anywhere High School.

The use of focus groups was beneficial to uncovering students' experiences as students provided valuable insight into the factors that help them feel connected to school and factors associated with their feelings of disconnectedness. Participants were enthusiastic and eager to share their experiences with one another and with me.

Further, students provided suggestions for how to improve connectedness at Anywhere High School. Students emphasized the power that adults have to foster connectedness at school. This was my biggest takeaway from the current project: students are yearning to connect with each other and with adults at school. They want to have real conversations that go beyond the content of the classroom. Students want the opportunity to be vulnerable with both adults and peers and have that vulnerability reciprocated. It is my hope to implement what I have learned to help students and staff at Anywhere High School become more connected. As Erin pointed out, we "all kind of need each other."

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APPENDIX. INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Student Perceptions of Connectedness

- What does it mean to you to be connected at school? Disconnected at school?
- How do you experience connection at school?
 - Respect?
 - Fairness?
- If students are struggling to answer:
 - Think about the student that is really connected:
 - What does that student do?
 - What does that student say?
- Who do you feel connected to in school?
 - Teachers?
 - Classmates?
 - Friends?
 - Other adults?
- What about these people helps you feel connected to them?
 - What do they do?
 - What do they say?
- What do you feel connected to in school?
 - The structure?
 - Rooms?
 - Activities?
- Tell me about a time you felt connected at school.

Student Perceptions of Disconnectedness

- How do you experience disconnection at school?
- If students are struggling to answer:
 - Think about the student that is disconnected:
 - What does that student do?
 - What does that student say?
- Tell me about a time you felt disconnected at school.