School Connection as School Reform in Rural Schools

Constance M. Perry and Walter G. McIntire

Abstract

This paper explores the relationship between rural students' perceived connection with their fellow students, teachers, and schools (school connection or sense of community), and their perception of safety at school, reported level of harassment experienced at school, and empathy for fellow students. Students who reported greater school connection also reported greater perceived safety, less harassment, and greater empathy. Differences by gender and grade level were significant. The study findings support the importance of creating a sense of community for all students within schools. This end appears to be a worthy school reform goal.

School Connection as School Reform in Rural Schools

This paper explores the relationship between rural students' perceived connection with their fellow students, teachers, and schools (school connection or sense of community), and their perception of safety at school, reported level of harassment experienced at school, and empathy for fellow students. It was hypothesized that students who report greater school connection will also report greater perceived safety, less harassment, and greater empathy.

Since the widely publicized tragic deaths of students in school shootings, national, local, and media attention has centered on school violence and ways to

make schools safer. Even though reports show that the overall school crime rate has declined since 1993 ("A Primer on School Safety," 1998), the fact that such violence has now occurred in rural American schools, as well as urban, has shocked millions. The belief that "it can't happen here" has been badly shaken, and creating even safer schools has become a major school reform movement.

There are two general strategies that school districts are employing to reduce or eliminate violence. One is characterized by the installation of metal detectors, forbidding backpacks, checking I.D. cards at the door, and controlling access by locking all but one entrance. However, there is little evidence that such prevention approaches reduce violence in schools (Hyman & Snook, 2000). The other strategy might be called a socio-emotional approach. In this approach, schools teach acceptance of differences; every student is valued. The goal is a school characterized by civility and respect. There is a sense of community, of connections among and between all groups and individuals (Hyman & Snook, 2000). It is this second approach that this paper explores.

School Connection

Early reports from an extensive evaluation of thirteen leading violence prevention efforts suggest that "preventing school violence involves comprehensive programs that forge close, trusting relationships…" (Halford, 1998, p. 1). The Child Development Project has found that "Students' experience of school as community – as a place where they belong and their voices are heard – is not just an amenity" (Schaps & Lewis, 1999, p. 215). Sense of community has been measured using items representing two elements of community: (a) students' perception that they and their classmates care about and are supportive of one another; and (b) students have an active and important role in classroom norm setting and decision making (Battistich, Solomon, Watson & Schaps, 1994). Child Development Project research shows that increases in sense of community are causally linked to students' later development of " …concern for others, democratic values, skill and inclination to resolve conflicts equitably, altruistic behavior, intrinsic prosocial motivation, enjoyment of helping others learn, inclusive attitudes toward outgroups and a positive interpersonal behavior in class" (Schaps & Lewis, 1999, p. 216).

School connection, as defined in this paper, includes the characteristics of the Child Development Project's sense of community – teacher respect, student-to-student positive regard, teachers valuing student opinions and input – as well as a sense of pride and trust in the school and its personnel. Empathy, the understanding and vicariously experiencing of the feeling and experiences of another, is a com-

ponent of altruistic behavior and valuing of others. Hoffman (1993) noted that most children have empathic capabilities and if their socialization enhances these capabilities, empathy may well become part of their values. If students report a high level of school connection, exemplified by respect for others, it appears that reported harassment should be lower and empathy higher than for students reporting lower school connection. It may also be that students reporting high levels of school connection will also report greater perceived safety.

Gender and Age

To date it has been young males who have committed the school shootings. We know that as a trait empathy is more often characteristic of female than male students (Garbarino, 1999). Are there differences in school connection, empathy, harassment, and safety by gender, and/or by grade, in this rural sample? As early adolescents increasingly seek autonomy, focus more on peer relations, and become increasingly concerned with social acceptance by peers (Eccles et al., 1993) do they become less connected to teachers and schools? Do they experience a changed perception of their safety? Are they more likely to be harassed at lower or higher grade levels? Are they too self-focused to feel empathy for others? If gender or grade level differences exist, can they help inform practices which will influence schools and communities?

Study Description and Methodology

This paper describes the results of 36,747 grade 6-12 Maine students' responses to a school climate survey designed to assess their aspirations, connection to their schools, perceived safety, harassment experienced, and empathy. One hundred seventy-five rural Maine schools participated. School configurations varied, but the majority of students attended 6-8 middle schools, 9-12 high schools or K-8 schools. The data is drawn from a larger study concerning aspirations of Maine youth entitled: The Aspirations Benchmarking Initiative. The initiative is a privately funded collaborative effort of The University of Maine College of Education and Human Development and the Maine Principals' Association Research Partnership.

The survey instrument consisted of four sections and seventy-three items. The first section collected demographic data (seven items). The second asked students to indicate the amount of time each week they spent on various activities (nine items). The third section included items on aspiration conditions, school environments, parents, and the students' sense of the future (52 items). The fourth section

asked students to indicate the relative importance to them of various social influences (five items). Sections three and four utilized Likert scale response formats. Several items are negatively worded as a precaution against positive response bias. The overall alpha was .9365.

All Maine public schools including any grade six through twelve were invited to participate. The survey was administered by the staff of each participating school between January and June 1999. Students completing the voluntary survey generally did so in approximately thirty minutes. The instrument is machine-readable. Returned completed surveys were scanned and data were analyzed at the Center for Research and Evaluation, University of Maine. Individualized reports were sent to schools within thirty days of receipt. Preliminary reports on statewide data were also produced and distributed to participating schools to allow comparisons between local and state-wide outcomes.

For the purpose of this paper, judges identified fourteen items representing positive student-to-student and student-to-teacher relationships, teacher valuing student input, and a sense of pride and trust in the school and its personnel as a "school connection" scale.

School Connection Scale Items

Teachers respect my thoughts
Students show respect for each other
Teachers value my opinions
Teachers expect me to succeed
Teachers show respect to students
Teachers help me to succeed
I am proud of my school
School rules are enforced fairly
Students show respect for teachers
Teachers care about my problems and feelings
Teachers tell me I do a good job when I do
Teachers care about my success in class
Teachers support me when I try something
Teachers say things to hurt or insult me (reverse coded)

An alpha reliability of .9015 was obtained.

For analysis purposes, the sample was grouped into low, middle, and high groups based on their School Connection Scale scores. One way analysis of variance (ANOVA) with range tests (Scheffe) was used to compare the three groups (school connection) on perception of safety (I feel safe at school), harassment (I have been threatened either verbally or physically at school by another student) and empathy (It bothers me when others are insulted or hurt verbally) items. Similarly, school connection was also examined by grade and sex.

Results

Significant differences in perception of school safety, reported harassment and empathy by School Connection Scale score were found. Students who reported a greater sense of connection and reported feeling significantly safer at school, were less likely to report having been harassed at school, and were significantly more bothered when others were insulted or hurt verbally ($p < .0001$ level). (See Table 1).

Table 1. School Connection Scale

Item	High Connection Mean	Middle Connection Mean	Low Connection Mean	Groups Differing
I feel safe at school.	2.03	2.47	3.06	H – M – L*
I have been threatened either verbally or physically at school by another student.	2.74	3.13	3.44	H – M – L*
It bothers me when others are insulted or hurt verbally.	1.85	2.17	2.61	H – M – L*

(lower mean indicates greater school connection)
*all groups for all items differ at $p < .0001$

A significant difference in the School Connection Scale by gender ($p < .0001$) was found (see Table 2). Females at each grade level reported a greater sense of school connection (see Table 3). Grade level differences in reported school connection were also significant ($p < .05$). Grade six reported the highest level of school connection, significantly different from all other grades, and grade seven the next highest, and also significantly different from all other grades (see Table 4). The per-

centage of females and males reporting a high level of school connection decreases from grades six through ten with an increase in grades eleven and twelve (see Table 3). The greatest decrease for both males and females occurs between grades six and seven.

Table 2. School Connection Scale by Gender

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	F	Sig.
Male	18280	37.32	10.99	298.72	.000
Female	18309	35.44	9.72		
Total	36589	36.38	10.42		

(lower mean indicates greater school connection)

Table 3. School Connection Scale Results by Grade and Gender

Grade	High Connection Group %		Middle Mean Group %		Low Connection Group %	
	Males	*Females*	*Males*	*Females*	*Males*	*Females*
6	50.5	59.1	26.0	25.4	23.5	15.5
7	34.2	41.7	28.2	31.6	37.7	26.7
8	29.9	33.7	28.4	32.2	41.7	34.2
9	26.4	29.1	32.0	35.9	41.6	35.0
10	23.7	26.4	31.6	35.4	44.7	38.1
11	25.4	28.1	30.1	36.3	44.5	35.6
12	28.6	31.0	34.2	36.3	37.2	32.7

Table 4. Results of Multiple Range Test (Scheffe) by Grade: School Connection

		Subset for alpha =.05				
	N	1	2	3	4	5
Grade 6	6422	31.79				
Grade 7	6400		35.412			
Grade 8	6108			37.15		
Grade 12	3290			37.51	37.51	
Grade 9	5254				38.06	38.06
Grade 11	4029				38.18	38.18
Grade 10	5047					38.68
Sig.		1.00	1.00	.802	.092	.148

(lower mean indicates greater school connection)

Emerging Questions and Issues

Findings of this study indicate positive relationships between school connection, perceived safety, and empathy and a negative relationship between school connection and reported harassment. These findings support research which indicates that when students feel respected, when they belong and have developed trusting relationships in schools, school violence is prevented or at least decreased (Halford, 1998). However, the fact that school connection is related to gender and grade level raises many questions. Why do females report a greater sense of school connection and a higher perceived level of safety, less harassment, and more empathy than their male counterparts? Females are less often physically violent. Many are socialized to fight with words or better yet to avoid confrontations. In addition, girls regularly report greater empathy than boys. Gilligan (1993) speaks to the gender difference in empathy. It is her hypothesis that boys are more socialized than girls to see maturity as independence, and also to show few emotions including empathy. Given the heightened consciousness of teenagers and their fear of ridicule, can young men dare to care in our society? As stated earlier, (Hoffman, 1993) most children have empathic capabilities and if their earlier socialization enhances these capabilities, they may become part of their values. Again the different socialization of males and females may be a partial answer to the gender differences.

Why does school connection decrease for both males and females grades six through ten and then begin to turn around? Data show an increase in at-risk behavior (smoking, drinking) beginning between grades six and seven (McIntire, personal communication, October 20, 1999). Does this at-risk behavior result in less connection to school? Perhaps the quest for autonomy is at play here, too. Further research is needed in order to explain the gender and grade differences.

One issue not studied here is school size. There is a great deal of evidence that violence is much less likely to occur in small schools than in large ones (Raywid & Oshiyama, 2000). Does the fact that rural schools tend to be small influence school connection, safety, and level of harassment?

Conclusion

This study found a positive relationship between school connection, perceived safety, and empathy, and a negative relationship between school connection and reported harassment. When students perceive themselves as connected to school they report feeling safer, more empathic, and less harassed. These findings lend support to the importance of school connection. The educational literature has

identified strategies such as advisor/advisee programs, student assistance teams, and schools within schools, to name a few, as enhancing school connection. Creating conditions that enable each student to feel connected to school appears to be a worthy school reform goal.

However, the findings raise questions concerning the factors underlying the differences in perceived school connection by gender and age. Identifying such factors may well be a prerequisite to the successful choice of strategies to foster school connection.

References

A primer on school safety. (1998, December). *Maine Educator, 59*(4), 1-2.

Battistich, V., Solomon, D., Watson, M. & Schaps, E. (1994, April). *Students and teachers in caring classroom and school communities.* Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New Orleans.

Eccles, J.S., Wigfield, A., Midgley, C., Reuman, D., MacIver, D., & Feldlaufer, H. (1993). Negative effects of traditional middle schools on students' motivation. *The Elementary School Journal, 93,* 553-574.

Garbarino, J. (1999). *Lost boys: Why our sons turn violent and how we can save them.* New York: Free Press.

Gilligan, C. (1993). Adolescent development reconsidered. In A. Garrod (Ed.), *Approaches to Moral Development* (pp. 103-132). New York: Teacher's College Press.

Halford, J.M. (1998). Towards peaceable schools. *Educational Leadership, 56*(1), 1.

Hoffman, M. (1993). Empathy, social cognition and moral education. In A. Garrod (Ed.), *Approaches to Moral Development* (pp. 157-179). New York: Teacher's College Press.

Hyman, I. & Snook, P. (2000). Dangerous schools and what you can do about them. *Phi Delta Kappan, 81*(7), 487-501.

Raywid, M. & Oshiyama, L. (2000). Musing in the wake of Columbine: What can schools do? *Phi Delta Kappan, 81*(6), 444-449.

Schaps, E. & Lewis, C. (1999). Perils on an essential journey. *Phi Delta Kappan, 81*(3) 215-218.

Constance M. Perry is a professor of education in the College of Education and Human Development of the University of Maine in Orono. Her areas of research include moral development, building school community and the development of Professional Development Schools.

Walter G. McIntire recently retired from his position as a professor of education at the College of Education and Human Development of the University of Maine in Orono. He was the founder and for 10 years editor of the Journal of Research in Rural Education, and is co-director of the Maine Education Policy Research Institute, a partnership of the Maine state legislature and the University of Maine System.