

2018

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### Recommended Citation

J-F, J., Swabey, K., Pullen, D., Getenet, S., & Dowden, T. (2018). Teenagers Perceptions of Teachers: A Developmental Argument. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, 43(2).  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.14221/ajte.2018v43n2.2>

This Journal Article is posted at Research Online.  
<https://ro.ecu.edu.au/ajte/vol43/iss2/2>

## Teenagers' Perceptions of Teachers: A Developmental Argument

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*Abstract: Using the concept of a developmental lens (Brighton, 2007; Caskey & Anfara, 2014; Davis, 2006; J-F, Pullen, & Carroll, 2013; National Middle School Association, 2010; Peterson, 2010), this article focuses on young teenage students' perceptions of teachers. School teachers play an important role in the educational development of teenagers but little is known about how teachers cater for teenage students' social, emotional, physical and cognitive developmental domains. Even less is known about teenage students' perceptions of their teachers. The current study asked a cohort of Year 9 students in a secondary school in Brisbane, Australia (N=182) to comment on what they "liked" about their teachers. The students' responses were mapped against each of the four developmental domains. Analysis of the data showed that students' emotional and social domains were more salient than their physical and cognitive domains. Specifically, the young teenage students reported liking their teachers when the teachers' were emotionally positive and socially accommodating. The findings of this paper are discussed via a developmental lens with regard to the implications for teacher education.*

**Key words:** Teenagers, school, teachers, developmental domains

### Introduction

Effective education must specifically cater for the developmental needs of teenagers in accordance with what is known about the human developmental domains (i.e., social, emotional, physical and cognitive), as this is paramount to individual wellbeing and positive outcomes to ongoing maturation (Brighton, 2007; Caskey & Anfara, 2014; Davis, 2006; J-F, Pullen, & Carroll, 2013; National Middle School Association, 2010; Pendergast, Main, & Bahr, 2017; Peterson, 2010). The implication for teacher education is that it is vital for teachers to understand that the developmental needs of teenage students and positive teacher-student relationships, along with constructive emotional exchanges and processes, profoundly effect how teenagers develop and learn (Brighton, 2007; Elliot & Dweck, 2005; Pickeral, Evans, Hughes, & Hutchison, 2009; Shanks & Dowden, 2015).

In the school context, young teenage students' needs can be catered for by giving positive attention to students, listening to them, being emotionally supportive, being caring, positively managing behaviour and planning for differentiated needs (Hoffnung et al., 2012).

Accordingly, the simple act of asking students what they like about their teachers and then analysing their responses has the potential to provide insight into how teachers can cater for the developmental needs of their students during daily classroom interactions. The inference is that when teenagers judge adults or teachers in a positive manner, it communicates that they are comfortable, their degree of social and emotional wellness is high, and that they feel a sense of belonging; thus, documenting what young teenagers like or dislike about teachers offers clues towards knowing how well their needs are catered for (J-F et al., 2013; Peterson, 2010). This approach is based on a psychological paradigm which argues that a teenager's perception of a positive experience is likely to have a positive effect on their developmental maturation (Peterson, 2010). Accordingly, this study extends the work of both Marchant, Paulson, and Rothlisberg (2001) and Kodero, Misigo, Owino, and Simiyu (2011) by focusing specifically on students' insights with respect to what they like about their teachers and then mapping this against social, emotional, physical and cognitive developmental domains.

Teachers can play a significant role in the lives of their students because they exercise a substantial adult influence on student wellbeing and development (Brighton, 2007; Hilton & Hilton, 2010; Pendergast & Main, 2017). Spilt, Koomen, and Thijs (2011) argued that this is because teacher-student relationships have a significant effect on students' social and emotional state and their ongoing academic participation, engagement and performance. Given the above, teachers need to: learn particular principles and develop specific pedagogical approaches in order to foster positive teenage development; thus creating favourable learning environments. In so doing, teachers are likely to nurture students' development in accordance with specific developmental domains (Huebner & Gilman, 2003, Peterson, 2010). When the above conditions are in place, the focus shifts from an emphasis on student performance to facilitating positive behaviour development (Rubie-Davies, 2006; Sprague & Biglan, 2011). Importantly, the act of consciously catering for the developmental needs of teenagers directly contributes to greater academic success, enhances active engagement in students' learning and builds each individual's positive social and emotional resilience (Brighton, 2007; Crosnoe, Johnson, & Elder, 2004; Dowden & Nolan, 2006). Contemporary literature is unclear as to which developmental domain(s) are catered for by teachers, thus the process, in this study, of mapping student responses against developmental domains is intended to capture which domain or domains are being catered for, and in what way.

Certain approaches to schooling, where student performance and success is seen as paramount, leave little room for the appropriate recognition of developmental needs in the early teenage years. To this end, attending to developmental needs in the social and emotional domains is often underemphasised and can be overlooked due to the demands of a performance-driven education model (J-F et al., 2013; Stewart & Suldo, 2011). Equally, there appears to be a mismatch between young teenagers' developmental needs and the characteristics of high stakes assessment which emphasises student performance (Caskey & Anfara, 2014; Elmore & Huebner, 2010). Accordingly, the importance of social, emotional, physical and cognitive domains and how these domains influence classroom interactions or teacher-student relationships, has not been well explored (Hattie, 2009; Hsieh, Jang, Hwang, & Chen, 2011; Ishihara & Cohen, 2014; Van de Pol, Volman, & Beishuizen, 2010). Students' emotional connections with their teachers are likely to impact on their success in school (Reyes, Brackett, Rivers, White, & Salovey, 2012). More specifically, the young teenagers' voices, in terms of what they like about their teachers and how they relate to their teachers and interact with them, is lacking and has not been accounted for with respect to the specific domains of human development from the perspectives of young teenagers.

Previous research has ascertained that students learn best when their teachers are perceived by students to be providing proactive behaviour management and extended

reasoning with instructional conversations that they find to be warm and sensitive; in other words, students like their teachers in the everyday classroom context when teachers cater for students' social and emotional needs via social interactions and exchanges (NICHD [National Institute for Child Health and Human Development], 2002; Perry, Donohue, & Weinstein, 2007; Pianta & Hamre, 2009). Furthermore, research into students' perceptions of teachers with regard to teacher quality has found that students view their teachers positively when they believe their teachers manage the classroom effectively by reducing the incidence of negative social behaviour. This suggests that students like their teachers when they experience positive outcomes in social interaction and exchanges with teachers (NICHD, 2002; Rimm-Kaufman, La Paro, Pianta, & Downer, 2005). Importantly, these results imply that when teachers are perceived in a positive light, students perceive that their social and emotional wellbeing is being supported. Thus, teachers catering for the developmental domains of teenage students – be it deliberate or accidental – is likely to lead to improved social and emotional outcomes for teenagers, and may result in students taking a greater degree of personal ownership of their learning (Elmore & Huebner, 2010; Giles, 2012; J-F et al., 2013).

Hattie (2009) showed that constructive teacher-student relationships have a significant and large positive impact on student academic results; to this end, he also found that teachers' positive relationships with students has a larger effect on their performance than socio-economic status, professional development or reading recovery programs. This is because, when students believe that they have a good relationship with their teachers, they are likely to follow teacher instructions, ask for help and seek guidance, and collectively these lead to greater engagement in learning and better academic outcomes (Elmore & Huebner, 2010, Marchant et al., 2001). Consequently, the quality and type of teachers' social and emotional interactions with teenage students are increasingly acknowledged as a major contributing factor to students' sense of who they are socially and emotionally (Elmore & Huebner, 2010; Hattie, 2009). Indeed, student academic success is more pronounced when students have positive views about the teacher (Hamre & Pianta, 2005). To illustrate this point, a study conducted in the USA in more than 800 classrooms revealed that student engagement was significantly higher in classrooms when students had positive views of their teachers and believed that their teachers were supportive of their needs (NICHD, 2002). Suldo and Huebner (2004) also found that positive school experiences led teenagers to positively deal with stressful events which resulted in reduced negative behaviours. Another study concluded that students attain higher academic grades and demonstrate emotional self-satisfaction when they perceive their teachers are catering for their academic performance as well as their personal development (Perry et al., 2007). While these studies relate to the significance of positive student perceptions of teachers, they do not identify the different characteristics, traits and/or behaviours of teachers with regard to developmental domains; this is a field of inquiry that is in need of greater attention.

Other studies have revealed that teenagers who experience teacher support feel less lonely and feel better about themselves; this may be interpreted as teachers catering for the social and emotional developmental domains of students (Crosnoe et al., 2004; Gest, Welsh, & Domitrovich, 2005). Teachers who attend to students' wellbeing are liked by their students because they are perceived to be emotionally and socially supportive (J-F, Swabey, & Pullen, 2014). In addition, Hallinan (2008) and Van Petegem, Aelterman, Van Keer, and Rosseel (2008) found that when students perceive their teachers as positively catering for their needs by valuing them, students' attachment to their school increases and their overall learning performance improves. Importantly, across the developmental domains, research has identified that young teenagers are less likely to participate in or engage in maladaptive risky behaviours, such as smoking, indulging in casual sexual relationships or being truant, when

they feel they are being supported and have good relationships with their teachers (Baker, 2006; Wills, Sandy, & Yaeger, 2000).

Zins, Weissberg, Wang, and Walberg (2004) contended that teachers in schools can have a positive psychological and social influence on students but how this happens has not been clearly accounted for, nor has it been measured. Further, little is known in terms of how teachers cater for students' developmental domains from the perspectives of teenage students during normal classroom interactions. One way to examine this is to explore teacher-student interactions and the role of a teacher from students' perspectives, by inviting students to specifically identify what they like about their teachers and then map this against the four developmental domains. Further, given that Year 9 students' developmental needs are specific to junior secondary schooling (Years 7-10), it is important to capture their unique perceptions about their teachers. Such a study is likely to give fresh insights into how teachers cater for the development of teenagers, from the perspective of teenagers (Brighton, 2007; Kodero et al., 2011; Spilt et al., 2011; Van Petegem et al., 2008).

### **Context of the Study**

This current study is based on J-F et al.'s (2013) conceptualization of adolescent needs within a learning context, where they argued that communicating a sense of belonging, showing genuine care, and fostering and promoting positive social relationships are paramount to teachers being able to build relational connectedness with students. The current study was similar to that of Marchant et al. (2001) where the focus was on capturing students' perceptions of teachers. However, unlike the study by Kodero et al. (2011), which explored salient characteristics of trained ineffective teachers, the current study took a more pragmatic approach by investigating what young teenage students "like" about their teachers, in order to capture how developmental domains are catered for in the classroom context. Thus, students were invited to answer one simple question: "What is one thing you like about your teacher?" This was a straightforward way to explore how students perceived their teachers in terms of their interpersonal behaviours, values, attitudes and characteristics beyond the realm of normal pedagogical practices or curriculum delivery (Keddie & Churchill, 2010; Lewthwaite & McMillan, 2010; Maele & Houtte, 2011; Tosolt, 2009). It is assumed that young teenagers are conscious of their own personal development, but the extent to which their developmental needs are catered for and accounted for from their perspective in the classroom is unclear. Therefore, this issue warrants on-going investigation (Ashman & Elkins, 2011; Brighton, 2007; Eccles, 1999; Eccles & Midgley, 1989; Fenzel, 2000; Hardy, Bukowski, & Sippola, 2002; Hoffnung et al., 2012; Larson, Moneta, Richards, & Wilson, 2002; Peterson, 2010; Sprague & Biglan, 2011; Way, Reddy, & Rhodes, 2007).

In addition, a single perspective investigation from the multiple voices of a cohort of students is likely to provide critical insight into documenting their own real life experiences (Alloway, Freebody, Gilbert, & Muspratt, 2002; Mee, 1999; Wayman, 2002). Rubie-Davies (2006) noted that students as early as fourth grade (typically 10 year-olds) can accurately report how they perceive teachers and, further, are able to accurately interpret teacher behaviours and beliefs about them. Put another way, it can be argued that students older than 10 years of age can accurately answer questions about their teachers. The psychosocial notion of one's perception of a positive experience leading to developmental gain is recognized by Marchant et al. (2001) who went on to argue that "students internalize messages received from their learning contexts as late as elementary/middle school years", suggesting that direct experiences and messages from teachers are consciously assimilated as positive or negative experiences (p. 515). Hence, this study sought to understand how young teenagers view their

teachers. Consequently, this study aims to map young teenagers' response against the social, emotional, physical and cognitive developmental domains and, explore which developmental domains are salient.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

The participants were Year 9 students (N=181; 69 female, 50 male and 62 who did not reveal their gender) from a secondary state high school in Queensland, Australia. Students' ages ranged from 13 to 15 years with a mean age of 14 years. The school was located in a low socio-economic suburban area in Brisbane, Australia. Over 97% of the students enrolled in the school were from the same community as the school's location, which is fairly representative of Australian public school districts.

### **Design**

The design of this study was similar to that of Marchant et al. (2001) where a survey method was used to capture students' perceptions of their school teachers. As part of an English lesson, students were given a one-question survey to complete; the question was: "What is one thing you like about your teachers?"

### **Instrument**

A self-constructed survey questionnaire, informed by Ferguson (2010), was used to construct one open-ended question. Further, this survey question is in line with research by Sprague and Biglan (2011) who argued that young teenagers should be presented with simple and clear information or directions with a definite purpose and theme in order to minimise the possibility of misunderstanding.

The word 'like' in the survey was used to capture student perception about their teacher, be it psychological, social, emotional, physical and/or cognitive. In addition, the word 'teachers' was meant to be open-ended and plural. No particular teacher was nominated or specified which gave the locus of control to students and allowed them to choose any context or time they liked and the freedom to comment on any teacher they wished (Brighton, 2007). Further, in terms of safeguarding student anonymity and teacher anonymity, students were only asked to indicate their gender and age.

### **Data Collection**

Data collection occurred within a classroom setting during a school day and all students' responses were qualitative apart from their gender and grade. Surveys were distributed by research assistants during English classes to all Year 9 students who were present on the day the survey was conducted. The research assistants informed students that this activity was to learn what they liked about their teachers. Students were also informed that this activity was not part of their school work and that no student would be penalised if they chose not to carry out the activity. All the students answered the question anonymously. Classroom teachers left their classroom while the task was being undertaken in order to reduce their influence on students' responses; thus no teacher was present in the classroom

during this task. Students were given 10 minutes to complete the task, after which they returned the surveys to the research assistant.

**Data Analysis**

The data were analysed with reference to developmental domains. Qualitative responses were mapped against developmental domains (i.e., emotional, social, physical and cognitive). The domain of ‘emotion’ was further divided into two: positive and negative. The mapping of students’ qualitative responses was completed by a specialist in curriculum and pedagogy in the middle years of schooling (Years 5-10) and then reviewed by the first author who is a specialist in developmental studies; a third reviewer from adolescent health further ratified any disagreements. It is important to note that there were few disagreements, which may be due to the researchers having worked collaboratively in the past. The peer review process verified external consistency and enhanced the reliability and validity of the coded domains (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Responses were assigned to either a single developmental domain or multiple domains in a best-fit model. For example, the response “*respect*” was assigned to the emotionally positive domain; and the response “*They don't treat us like dirt, they respect us*”, was assigned to both the social and emotionally positive domains. Students who responded in a positive fashion, for example, “*I like my teachers*”, was coded by the researchers as a positive response i.e., ‘YES’. Likewise, students who responded in a negative fashion, for example, “*my teacher could be more caring*”, was coded by the researchers as a negative response i.e., ‘NO’. Table 1 displays examples of how the student responses were categorised.

Emotional (positive)	Emotional (negative)	Cognition	Social	Physical	Qualitative Response
x	x		x		<i>They can be mean and I like when they're nice</i>
x			x		<i>They help you ...when you need it and when they're nice</i>
x			x		<i>Caring attitude</i>
x		x	x		<i>Mr XXX He understands us</i>
x			x		<i>She is a fun teacher to have, very funny, nice, she won't yell much</i>
			x	x	<i>Really good at dancing and pretty</i>

**Table 1: Categorising Student Responses into Developmental Domains**

Table 1 also shows examples of how students’ responses were coded against domains. A middle school expert categorised student responses according to one of the four developmental domains. This coding was then reviewed by a child development specialist, thus increasing the validity of the sample coding. Where the two experts disagreed on the categorisation of a particular response belonging to a particular domain, a third reviewer from adolescent health determined which category to assign and resolved any disputed categorisation, further increasing the inter-rater reliability. A chi-square statistical test was used to compare observed data with expected data to obtain statistical significance for each of the developmental domains. In addition, a multiple-response analysis was used to investigate which of the developmental domains were statistically significant.

**Results**

As shown in Table 2, most participants’ responses were ‘YES’ ( $N=156$ ) to the positively coded emotional domain construct, whereas only a few participants responded ‘NO’ ( $N=26$ ). The chi-square value indicated that the number of participants who responded ‘YES’ is significant:  $\chi^2$  ( $df=1$ ) = 92, 86,  $p < 0.05$ , indicating that students’ perceptions of their teachers were emotionally positive and an important characteristic of their teachers.

Domains	Observed		Expected	Chi-Square	df	Sig
	YES	NO				
Emotional positive	156	26	91	92.857	1	0.000
Emotional negative	29	153	91	84.484	1	0.000
Cognition	38	144	91	61.736	1	0.000
Social	147	35	91	68.923	1	0.000
Physical	7	175	91	155.077	1	0.000

**Table 2: Participants’ Responses Matched to Developmental Domains**

Similarly, most participants responded ‘YES’ ( $N=147$ ) for the social domain, whereas few participants responded ‘NO’ ( $N=35$ ). The chi-square value indicated that the number of participants who responded ‘YES’ is significant:  $\chi^2$  ( $df = 1$ ) = 68.93,  $p < 0.05$ , indicating that students’ perception of their teachers as socially supportive was important.

As shown in Table 2, the majority of participants responded ‘NO’ to the physical domain ( $N=175$ ) and only a very few responded ‘YES’ ( $N=7$ ). The chi-square value indicated that the number of participants who responded ‘NO’ is significant:  $\chi^2$  ( $df = 1$ ) = 155.1,  $p < 0.05$ , indicating that physical domain was not a significant teacher characteristic in terms of student perception.

Similarly, most participants responded ‘NO’ ( $N=153$ ) to the negative emotional domain construct, whereas only a few responded ‘YES’ ( $N=29$ ). The chi-square value indicated that the number of participants who responded ‘NO’ is significant:  $\chi^2$  ( $df = 1$ ) = 84.9,  $p < 0.05$ , indicating that negative emotional domain was not a significant teacher characteristic in terms of student perception. Finally, most participants also responded ‘NO’ ( $N=144$ ) to the cognitive domain and only a few responded ‘YES’ ( $N=38$ ). The chi-square value indicated that the number of participants who responded ‘NO’ is significant:  $\chi^2$  ( $df = 1$ ) = 61.74,  $p < 0.05$ , indicating that cognitive support/provision/domain was not a significant teacher characteristic in terms of student perception.

A multiple-response analysis was undertaken to investigate which of the developmental domains was significant. As shown in Table 3, a dichotomous group analysis revealed that the positive emotional domain was the highest (41.4%) compared to all of the other domains; the social domain rated 2<sup>nd</sup> highest (39%) and the physical domain (1.9%) rated the lowest.

Domains	Responses		Total
	N	Percentage	
Emotional Positive	156	41.40%	86.70%
Social	147	39.00%	81.70%
Cognition	38	10.10%	21.10%
Emotional Negative	29	7.70%	16.10%
Physical	7	1.90%	3.90%

**Table 3: Participants’ Responses Matched Against Developmental Domains to Detect Salient Domain**



As shown in Table 4, a cross-tabs chi-square test analysis was undertaken to investigate whether there was a difference in developmental domains as a function of gender. The analysis revealed that there was no significant gender difference in any of the domains.

Domains	Response	Gender			Chi-Square	df	Sig
		Neither	Boys	Girls			
Emotion Positive	No	8	8	10	0.252	2	0.882
	Yes	55	42	59			
Emotion Negative	No	54	40	59	0.852	2	0.653
	Yes	9	10	10			
Cognition	No	54	34	56	n/a	2	n/a
	Yes	9	16	13			
Social	No	9	15	11	n/a	2	n/a
	Yes	54	35	58			
Physical	No	61	49	65	1.248	2	0.536
	Yes	2	1	4			

**Table 4: Participants' Responses Matched Against Developmental Domains in Terms of Gender**

## Discussion

By mapping student perspectives against developmental domains, this study provided insights into how teachers can cater for the developmental domains of their students. Using a developmental domain categorisation of student perceptions was useful because it discriminated between developmental domains in a systematic and hierarchical manner (emotional being the first domain, then social, then physical, and then cognitive) and it was able to show that the emotional and social developmental domains are especially important in the early teenage years. Mapping was useful because it provided a clear indication of which developmental domains are salient (that is, emotionally positive) in the early teenage years within a schooling context (Van Petegem et al., 2008). Nonetheless, these results should not be understood as implying that attending to the physical and cognitive domains is unimportant because the study was limited to a simple categorisation of the four developmental domains with the narrow aim of mapping them in order of saliency with regard to teacher-student relationships. In part, this study confirmed J-F et al.'s (2013) conceptualisation of adolescent needs that communicating a sense of belonging and promoting positive social relationships are paramount to teachers building relational connectedness with students. In order to make sense of this from a teaching perspective, teachers need to consider not only their pedagogy but the practicalities of catering for a diverse array of students. Teachers explicitly and deliberately communicating a sense of belonging by showing genuine care, will probably be perceived by students as a building block for developing positive emotional connections, and be likely to promote positive social relationships within the schooling context (Reyes et al., 2012).

In terms of catering for the emotional domain at the teacher level, teachers should promote a sense of belonging by consistently creating opportunities for students to develop positive relationships. Further, teachers should provide consistent feedback on student work by showing genuine care about what they have undertaken and cultivating an attitude of connectedness by explicitly communicating to students that they are being supportive (J-F et al., 2013).

In terms of catering for the social domain, teachers should create activities embedded within lessons that allow opportunities for students to develop and build social relationships, and then teachers should encourage students to express and share these in a positive manner. In this way, teachers are likely to promote social agency among students, by allowing them to appreciate and respect individual differences and value social exchanges, irrespective of age, grade or gender (J-F et al., 2013). Equally, teachers modelling positive student relationships is likely to model the development of productive relationships among students, which again is very important in the early teenage years (J-F et al., 2013).

Future studies could extend the methodology of this study by capturing both the teenage student perspective and the teacher perspective. In addition, it would be interesting to use the same question with students at each grade level throughout their schooling. It would also be interesting to investigate whether teachers cater for particular developmental domains at the expense of others. While more complex instruments could be utilised to investigate students' perceptions of their teachers, such as multiple batteries (Burnett, 2002; Chong, Huan, Quek, Yeo, & Ang, 2010), this study used a simple one-question survey to minimise the complexity of the task and maximise the likelihood of compliance. Critics might argue that a one-dimensional instrument obtaining only one cohort of student perceptions within a single domain does not provide a holistic perspective on students' understanding of a teacher and/or schooling. However, within the young teenager context, it is advantageous to obtain a single domain perspective at the individual level in order to capture a clear understanding of students' perceptions about their teachers rather than including different systems and/or layers of other information and potentially confusing the issue. (Brighton, 2007; Marchant et al., 2001; Peterson, 2010).

This study should be considered in the light of both its strengths and its limitations for future research. First, this study was unique in that it presented young teenagers with only one question and captured their perceptions without other confounding or influencing factors. This allowed the teenagers to choose any teacher and may have enhanced the validity of the study because they were more likely to choose a teacher that they truly liked. To this end, this study adds to the literature because no previous study has documented a single domain perspective from the perspectives of young teenagers with regard to how they perceive their teachers through a developmental paradigm. This study also supports Rubie-Davies' (2006) finding that teenage students are able to accurately interpret teachers' characteristics, behaviours and beliefs. However, caution must be exercised in generalising these results because the findings of this study of a Year 9 student cohort are not universally representative of all young teenagers.

Finally, this research offers additional support to recent findings demonstrating that specifically targeted teacher education and on-going professional learning and development is needed to ensure that junior secondary (Years 7-9) teachers have a sound understanding of young teenagers' developmental needs (Pendergast, Main, Barton, Kanasa, Geelan, & Dowden, 2015; Rumble & Aspland, 2010; Shanks & Dowden, 2015). In particular, this study supports the position that junior secondary teachers must be able to establish warm and positive teacher-student relationships with all of their students; a key tenet of successful schooling in the early teenage years that is espoused by middle years of schooling advocates in the USA (National Middle School Association, 2006, 2010) and in Australia (Middle Years of Schooling Association, 2008; Pendergast, Main, & Bahr, 2017).

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