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Sasha Stumpers  
*Edith Cowan University*

Lauren Breen  
*Edith Cowan University*

Julie Ann Pooley  
*Edith Cowan University*

Lynne Cohen  
*Edith Cowan University*

Lisbeth Pike  
*Edith Cowan University*

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A critical exploration of the school context for young adolescents completing primary education

Sasha A. Stumpers, Lauren Breen, Julie Ann Pooley, Lynne Cohen & Lisbeth T. Pike

Many schools have adopted relational approaches to attend to the social context in which learning transpires. More recently however, such approaches and their supporters have been criticized for not examining the school context in its entirety and the student experience within this context. The current research sought to critically explore young adolescents' experiences within the context of their school. Fifteen year seven students in an Australian primary school were interviewed about their experiences of their school context. The data were analysed using a thematic analysis and a question-ordered matrix was constructed to aid the detection of themes and sub-themes from the data. Three major themes were identified as a result. These included: the people within the school context, the social roles of the adolescents', and the values the school espouses. These findings suggest that there are a number of factors in addition to relational aspects within the school context that impact on young adolescents. This exploratory qualitative study offers a 'counter adult-centric' view of young adolescents' experiences within their school. It also illustrates the potential value in transforming the school context to provide opportunities to experience influence, responsibility, self-determination, meaningful participation and community within the school.

Keywords school context; adolescents; Australia; qualitative methods; power; community

The need to belong and be accepted by one's peers is arguably one of the most predominant and overpowering psychological drives. The needs for belonging, acceptance and social support are particularly pertinent during adolescence as adolescence involves exploring aspects of personal identity separate from parents and family (Cauce, Felner, & Primavera, 1982; Cui, Conger, Bryant, & Elder, 2002; Selman, Beardslee, Schultz, Krupa, & Podorefsky, 1986). In an era where traditional sources of belonging have diminished due to changing family and community demographics (i.e. the breakdown of the nuclear family), schools have increasingly become important sources for meeting this critical developmental need for young adolescents (Basic, Balaz, Uzelac, & Jugovac, 1997; Beck & Malley, 1998a, 1998b).

Of much concern to young adolescents is finding their place in their school (Edwards, 1995; Rubin & Mills, 1988). Consequently, belonging in the school has received much attention (Beck & Malley, 1998b; Goodenow, 1993a; McCullough, Huebner, & Laughlin, 2000; Roeser, Midgley, & Urdan, 1996). Sense of belonging (SOB) has been defined as a 'sense of being accepted, valued, included, and encouraged by others ...and of feeling oneself to be an important part of ...life and activity ...' (Goodenow, 1993a, p. 25). Poor school performance and early school leaving has been associated with the lack of connectedness between students and their school, teachers and peers (Arhar & Kromney, 1995; Edwards, 1995; Goodenow, 1993a, 1993b). Students who do not feel they belong are thought to gravitate to subcultures such as gangs or cults to satisfy their need to belong (Beck & Malley, 1998a; Kaplan & Johnson, 1992; Rice, 1996). Alienation can therefore be seen as a reaction to not belonging and has been found to have serious negative implications and produce disruptive behaviours such as withdrawal, lack of a sense of responsibility and hostility towards others (Edwards, 1995; Kagan, 1990).

Unfortunately, there is evidence to suggest that current school environments and practices fail to engender a sense of belonging for many students and may actually intensify feelings of rejection, inferiority and alienation (Beck & Malley, 1998a). This is mainly due to educators being placed under pressure to push a pedagogy that emphasizes economy, efficiency and technology over promoting compassion, self-determination and self-efficacy

(Baker, Terry, Bridger, & Winsor, 1997; Beck & Malley, 1998b; Prilleltensky, Nelson, & Peirson, 2001). Despite the time spent together, the relationship between students and teachers remains formal and superficial (Lesko, 1988) creating what some have referred to as a 'society of strangers' (Brice-Heath, 1983; Goodman, 1992; Lesko, 1988). The roles and relationships within schools are stratified and the discourse that dominates the interpersonal dynamics tends to be more about notions of control and discipline than of caring and support (Arhar & Kromney, 1995).

The concept of school as a community provides a useful framework for examining educational practice and for guiding education reform efforts (Battistich, Solomon, Watson, & Schaps, 1997; Schaps & Solomon, 1997). Sense of community (SOC) is a useful construct for investigating schools as communities. SOC has been defined as '...a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, a shared faith that members needs will be met through their commitment to be together' (McMillan & Chavis, 1986, p. 9). Additionally, SOC has four elements: membership, influence, integration and fulfilment of needs, and shared emotional connections (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Studies suggest that the SOC construct is relevant to children and adolescents within the school context (Chipuer et al., 1999; Pooley, Breen, Pike, Drew, & Cohen, 2003; Pooley, Pike, Drew, & Breen, 2002; Pretty, Andrewes, & Collett, 1994). In attempting to implement a comprehensive programme to enhance student's pro-social development, the concept of the school as a 'caring community' has emerged recently as being central to understanding and accomplishing school reform (Battistich et al., 1997; Bryk & Driscoll, 1988). In other words, the focus changed from an emphasis on individual deficits to systemic deficits within the school.

To implement the idea of schools as communities, relational approaches to school reform have been recognized. A relational approach has been defined as an attempt to improve schooling by attending to the social context in which academic learning transpires (Baker et al., 1997). A spirit of cooperation rather than competition is nurtured and a sense of meaning and purpose is encouraged by placing a high value on student-centred learning approaches and developing an intrinsic motivation to learn (Baker et al., 1997; Battistich et al., 1997; Deci & Ryan, 1985). This is achieved by getting students to interact personally and collaboratively with teachers who mentor their learning (Baker et al., 1997; Schaps & Solomon, 1997). Programmes based on the relational approach (e.g. Child Development Project) have been evaluated (Baker et al., 1997). As expected, such interventions are significantly related to positive outcomes for students and include both personal and social qualities (i.e. general social competence and higher self-esteem) and school-related variables (i.e. increases in achievement motivation) (Battistich et al., 1997; Schaps & Solomon, 1997).

#### Critical approaches to schools

Despite support for communally oriented practices in schools there is evidence to suggest that some schools are more akin to societies where the exclusion of some is encouraged and justifiable (Fine, 1990). Critical theorists suggest that schools may actually 'teach' students to feel unwelcome resulting in such outcomes as withdrawal (Beck & Malley, 1998a; Fine, 1990). In understanding this process, the issue of exclusion from school should not be viewed around the matter of access but rather the process of exclusion through students' differential experiences and outcomes within school needs to be investigated (Giroux, 1988; Hillard, 1998).

A conceptual analysis of educational ideologies and practices that attempt to justify in the name of 'common good', have been identified as exclusionary (Fine, 1990). Using three different case studies, Fine (1990) identified three ideologies surrounding school exclusion including: academic inability, parental choice and tradition. Whilst the ideologies provided coherence and meaning to the institution and the individuals within it, they also required the exclusion of some groups (Fine, 1990). The process of exclusion of some is justified by the discourse of being for the collective best (Fine, 1990; Kagan, 1990).

Such ideologies rationalize exclusion practices and are thought to comfort those individuals who are insiders by justifying existing boundaries (Fine, 1990). Until these ideologies are challenged within schools, students are likely to be educated within publicly sanctioned communities of exclusion and consequently are sheltered from a rich education characterized by diversity and critique (Fine, 1990). More importantly, schools may teach these young people to see public exclusion as natural, justifiable and perhaps even necessary for the 'common good' (Fine, 1990). Therefore, it is likely that rather than fostering a community structure that facilitates bi-directional influence, self-determination, self-efficacy and the achievement of collective goals (McMillan & Chavis, 1986; Prilleltensky et al., 2001), schools are more akin to societies where exclusion may have the opportunity to dominate (Fine, 1990). Therefore, a true community approach within schools extends beyond the relational aspects commonly focused upon within the literature.

Extending the views of community-oriented schools, a cornerstone of a 'wellness' approach includes '...engineering settings and environments that facilitate adaptation, foster autonomy, support empowerment and promote skills needed to cope effectively with stress' (Cowan, 1996, p. 246). Evidence suggests that opportunities to experience power and control in one's life contribute to health and wellness and that a sense of personal control, empowerment and self-determination are associated with positive mental health (Prilleltensky et al., 2001; Ryan & Deci, 2000).

In the context of wellness, the way power and control are conceptualized is seen as linked to many of the concepts associated with promoting and fostering a SOC (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Power and control provide opportunities for participation, self-determination, competence and self-efficacy (Prilleltensky et al., 2001). Individually, the concepts of power and control have generally been viewed as being tangible qualities possessed by individual people (Prilleltensky et al., 2001) and have been largely ignored within the school context. Therefore, there is a need to conceptualize power and control as being derived from the reciprocal relationship between the individual and his or her context rather than as an innate personality feature (Prilleltensky et al., 2001; Ryan & Deci, 2000).

In addition to investigating beyond the individual level, what is known about SOC in the school environment has for the most part been the result of studies using quantitative methodologies. Many of the measures of SOC are quantitative (e.g. Chavis, Hogge, McMillan, & Wandersman, 1986; Lounsbury & DeNeui, 1996) yet the experience of community is phenomenological (Hill, 1996; Sonn, Bishop, & Drew, 1999). The lack of qualitative studies has resulted in a dearth of information relating to young adolescents' experiences within their schools. Previous research (e.g. Pooley et al., 2002, 2003) suggests that, consistent with developmental stages, early adolescents are able to express their experiences of their schools. Through allowing adolescents a voice, a qualitative approach provides a counter-'adult-centric' method of examining and interpreting young adolescents' realities (Prilleltensky et al., 2001).

Furthermore, research investigating young adolescents' experiences within the school context has mainly focused on individual and relational aspects. There is a need then to look at school reform from a collective wellness framework whereby the examination of adolescent's views of the school as a context that incorporates and acknowledges concepts such as power and control are seen as being central to the formation and maintenance of their well-being (Prilleltensky et al., 2001). Therefore, a critical approach that examines the students' experiences of their school context is required.

In light of findings in the literature, the present study aimed to explore young adolescents' experiences of their school context. More specifically, this study examined the aspects of the school context that impact on year seven students in Australia (in their last year of primary school). The research questions were:

- 1 What is the experience of young adolescents within their school context?
- 2 How does the school context impact on young adolescents' well-being?

## Method

### Research design

A qualitative approach was adopted for this study as the study was exploratory and as experiences are not amenable to quantification (Moutsakas, 1990). A qualitative approach allows the detail and descriptions discussed by the participants to emerge (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998; Miles & Huberman, 1994) and to obtain a deeper understanding and appreciation of the issues arising from participants' responses (Breakwell, Hammond, & Fife-Schaw, 1995).

### Participants

Fifteen year seven students participated in this study. Participants were from a primary school in the northern suburbs of Perth, Australia. All 32 year seven students were eligible to participate in the study. The students were interviewed in the order their permission slips were returned from their parents, until saturation occurred after the fifteenth interview. Permission for the interview was also granted from each child. The participants were aged from 11 to 12 years of age and included eight males and seven females. Eleven of the participants were born in Australia while two were from England, one from New Zealand and another from Thailand. Primary education in Western Australia is divided into junior primary (grades one to three) and primary school (grades four to seven) which usually are separate entities. At the time of interviewing, ten had been at the school for the duration of their primary education while the remaining five had been at the school for less than two years (see Table 1).

### Instrument

A semi-structured interview schedule was designed to identify and assess adolescent's experiences of their school environment. The questions were derived from reviewing

TABLE 1 Participant pseudonyms and demographics

	pseudonym	age (years)	country of birth	length of time at the school (years)
1	Jane	11	England	Less than 2
2	Shane	11	Australia	Greater than 4
3	Annie	11	Thailand	Less than 1
4	Mathew	12	Australia	Greater than 4
5	Emily	12	Australia	Greater than 4
6	Jack	12	New Zealand	Less than 1
7	Jason	12	Australia	Less than 1
8	Nathan	11	Australia	Greater than 4
9	Joanne	12	Australia	Greater than 4
10	Aaron	12	Australia	Greater than 4
11	David	11	England	Less than 1
12	Nicole	11	Australia	Greater than 4
13	Erin	11	Australia	Greater than 4
14	Adam	12	Australia	Greater than 4
15	Sarah	12	Australia	Greater than 4

the concourse of literature on adolescents' experiences within their school and through the researchers' experiences of the school context in Western Australia. Consistent with a 'funnelling' technique (Smith, 1995), the schedule begins generally and becomes more specific, thus enabling an exploration of the school experiences for the students and ensuring the findings were driven by the data (see Appendix). The pilot study indicated the schedule was suitable in content and clarity for year sevens.

#### Procedure

Once permission was granted from the principal, informed consent was obtained from the parents/guardians of the adolescents and then the adolescents themselves. The interviews were individually conducted in an unused classroom and lasted approximately 20 - 30 minutes. Previous research (e.g. Pooley et al., 2002) indicated that informal interviews worked well with children and subsequently a conversational style of interviewing (Burgess-Limerick & Burgess-Limerick, 1998) was adopted for the research outlined in this paper. At the conclusion of each interview, each participant was given the opportunity to ask questions. Brief notes were made during the interviews and were used in conjunction with the transcripts during the analysis phase.

#### Data analysis

The overarching aim of a thematic analysis is to reduce a large amount of data to smaller units (or themes) to aid interpretation. First, the tape-recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim to ensure authentic records for analysis. The interviews were analysed as soon as possible after each interview using thematic analysis (Crotty, 1998; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Rose & Webb, 1998). Analysis steps included reading and re-reading the transcripts, noting reflections, and sorting for recurring and unique phrases and themes (Cresswell, 1994; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Sonn & Fisher, 1996). A question-ordered matrix was used to organize and display the data and aid the analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Gradually, themes representing the data emerged (Berg, 2001; Smith, 1995). Both similarities and differences between interviews were looked for (Berg, 2001). A co-analysers verified the findings (Silverman, 1993). When the final themes were documented, they were compared with existing literature, enabling a 'bottom-up' approach to interpretation and ensuring the substantive nature of the findings (Crotty, 1998; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Rose & Webb, 1998).

#### Findings and interpretations

Three major themes relating to young adolescents' experiences of their school were identified. These were People, Social Roles, and School Values. Table 2 illustrates the major themes and related sub-themes identified from the analysis of the participants' responses. Quotes from the participants are included throughout the 'Findings and interpretations' section to ensure the participants' own words were at the forefront of the research.

#### People

As identified in the literature, the school context is equally as important as individual skills and pre-dispositions in influencing positive as well as negative outcomes and experiences for students (Anderman & Anderman, 1999; Combs, 1982; Edwards, 1995; Goodenow, 1993a, 1993b; Roeser et al., 1996). Healthy relationships with others are a primary indicator of young adolescents' social and emotional growth (Routt, 1996). From the participants' responses in this study, three major groups of

TABLE 2 Themes and sub-themes concerning year seven students' experiences of school

main themes	sub themes
People	Teachers
	Friends and peers
	People outside of the school context
Social roles	Student councillor
	Good student
	'Big kids'
School values	Meaningful participation
	Safety
	Fairness
	Need fulfilment

people who held some importance and influence for the participants were identified. These were teachers, friends and peers, and people outside of the school.

Teachers. Outside of the family unit, teachers are the most important adult influence in young adolescents' lives (Arhar & Kromney, 1995; Beck & Malley, 1998a, 1998b; Williams & Downing, 1998). Results from our study were consistent with the idea that teachers are a significant adult influence in the lives of students (Broderick, 2001; Buckner & Bickel, 1991; Williams & Downing, 1998). This was evident as teachers were mentioned as often as were friends and peers.

The students were consistent in reporting the personal characteristics of teachers that contribute to creating a good school environment. The characteristics were 'caring' (Mathew, Emily, Jack and Adam), 'fun' (Annie, Shane and Jason) and 'nice' (Jane and Aaron). It was especially important that teachers helped students and listened to them: '[a good teacher is] understanding and caring' (Emily), 'listens to you like yeah, they don't jump to conclusions' (Jane) and 'they understand your needs and things like that' (Emily). According to the students, good teachers listen to and respect their students.

The students viewed certain teaching styles as being important in creating an environment that students feel competent within. Teachers who adopted a 'fun' (Annie, Jason and Shane), 'fair' (Annie, Joanne and Sarah) and 'caring' (Mathew, Emily, Jack and Adam) approach and those who helped the students with their work were thought to make the best teachers. For example, '[a good teacher is] a teacher who can like always help us with our work and do fun things sometimes' (Shane). It was really important to participants that they felt valued and that their teachers acknowledged them as individuals. As another participant illustrates:

They could probably like give people a chance more and maybe if they wanted to do better, probably they could talk to people for about two minutes and just find out a bit about them and so that they can like know more about who they're teaching. (Joanne)

Teacher characteristics that were seen as favourable by the participants gave them the sense that they are important and valued members of their school. Feeling valued and having the ability to influence others are both fundamental concepts in 'true' communities (Battistich et al., 1997; McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Respectful communication from teachers represents a commitment to students and diminishes the power imbalance that can become a barrier between the students and teachers (Beck & Malley, 1998b). Thus, teachers have an important role in creating an atmosphere where the students' potential to engage is maximized (Galbo, 1989; Williams & Downing, 1998).

Friends and peers. The early adolescent years are an especially critical period for the intricate interplay between individuals and their social context (Patrick, 1997; Steinberg & Morris, 2001). It is during this period that the individual begins to acquire considerably expanded mobility (Berndt, 1982) and with it more opportunities for and control over

interactions with others (Prilleltensky et al., 2001). It is imperative that young adolescents have the ability to choose and engage in appropriate peer social networks as a source of emotional support, information, orientation and guidance (Battistich et al., 1997; Beck & Malley, 1998a; Kaplan & Johnson, 1992).

As the literature suggests, the importance of friendships increases during young adolescence (Berndt, 1982; Hartup, 1996; Rice, 1996). Undoubtedly, the single most important factor contributing to students in this study feeling connected to their school was their friends. When asked if they felt accepted at their current school almost everyone responded that they did. When asked why this was so, answers reflected the fact that they had many friends at the school and that everyone within the school knew each other and related well: '[I've] got like loads of friends right and they make me feel comfortable like I'm not left by myself at any time' (Jane).

Characteristics of good friends included them being 'nice' (Joanne, Nicole and Jane), 'honest' (Joanne and Emily), 'trustworthy' (Emily), 'kind' (Erin) and 'caring' (Erin and Joanne). Good friends 'listened' (Erin) and were 'funny' (Erin, Nathan and Jason). Some also thought that good friends are respectful of the feelings of those around them. Examples include: 'they're like really honest and don't laugh at things that you say, you know, just really nice and caring and when you're sad they just sort of comfort you and [they're] loyal' (Joanne), 'they enjoy what you like' (Mathew) and 'the way they treat you, they treat [you] back the way they want to be treated' (Annie). This reflects that the influence of friends is bi-directional in nature. Thus, students are attracted to their friends because they have some influence over the group and cohesion is strengthened because the group is also able to influence its members (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). The responses all indicate that because of the qualities mentioned above, participants felt valued and respected by their friends. The literature has suggested that when one feels valued and respected, feelings of belonging (Broderick, 2001; Goodenow, 1993a) and having a sense of purpose are fostered (Battistich et al., 1997; McMillan & Chavis, 1986).

In addition, participants who had been at the school since the beginning of their primary education reported that being at the school for a long time contributed to them feeling a part of their school: 'Probably 'cause mostly I've been here since pre-primary and like my best friend has been here from pre-primary as well and we've sort of like grown up together' (Joanne). This statement reflects that many participants felt that they had built up a strong relationship with their peers over time. They reported that the history they shared with friends was important to their school community and is an important element in feeling like a member of a community (Baker et al., 1997; McMillan & Chavis, 1986).

When asked whether they felt they could be themselves at school, all of the students responded for the most part that they could. This again indicates the importance of friends within the school context. When asked how important their friends were to participants, the following comments were made: '[friends] are probably more important than anything at school' (Annie) and 'like if I'm upset I can talk to them and if it's like something like personal I know they will keep a secret' (Joanne). Therefore, peer relationships allow trust and intimacy to develop. These are features of egalitarian relationships more common in adolescence and adulthood than childhood, and reflect the important role peers occupy as we age (Berndt, 1982; Hartup, 1996).

Within peer friendships, the influences of that group are not always positive, such as in the case of gangs (Beck & Malley, 1998a, 1998b; Kaplan & Johnson, 1992). Our findings indicate that feeling a connection to a peer group might be at the cost of conformity as these examples illustrate: 'I can be myself but I usually just hang around with my friends and do whatever they do' (Nathan) and 'I try to change ways to fit in with my others' (Jason). Like in many Western countries, excessive conformity is devalued in Australia and as such it is vital that educators and families help children understand that peer relationships do not have to be purchased at the price of conformity (Routt, 1996).



People outside of the school context. As mentioned earlier, children and young adolescents view their school within the wider community or collective (Pooley et al., 2002). The participants occasionally mentioned other people that were important in their lives, including their family and friends outside of school. However, the people outside of school were not seen to have direct influence on the school context and were therefore not viewed as important influences on the day-to-day school experience.

### Social roles

Roles comprise certain responsibilities which offer students the chance to exercise power and control and can provide students with many benefits such as identity development, self-efficacy and self-determination (Prilleltensky et al., 2001). Defined roles give members of a community the feeling that they are making a worthwhile contribution and can influence their group (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Many roles exist for students within the context of their school. Some are explicit and structured which only certain students are entitled to such as being a student councillor and other roles appear to be implicit and not so clear like those associated with being the older kids at school. Through the participants' responses, three roles within the school context were identified, namely, school councillors, being a 'big kid' and being a good student.

**Student councillors.** When asked if participants felt that they had any influence within their school context, those who were student councillors tended to be the only students who felt they had any influence, as these comments illustrate: 'I'm a student councillor and I can just talk to the principal' (Emily), 'yeah, this year mainly because I'm a student councillor and we do a lot of things you know like surveys and things' (Joanne) and '[it] feels like people need me like now I'm a student councillor people come to me if there's trouble like in the playground' (Emily). These quotes indicate that the role of a student councillor is structured and explicit and implies certain responsibilities. For those few students who are in defined roles such as student councillors, the role is important in the formation of their identity: 'I think they see me as well behaved and like especially people look up to me 'cause I'm a student councillor' (Joanne).

Despite the positive effect having such a defined role can have (e.g. increased competence, self-efficacy and self-determination) (Prilleltensky et al., 2001), the majority of the students in this study did not report having any influence within their school. As a result, it is concerning that only a select few are invited to be in the role of a student councillor. Amongst the students, many do not feel they have influence because, within their school, influence is seen as being equated with positions of power. As empowerment strives towards a state of affairs whereby '...people have enough power to satisfy their needs and work in concert with others to advance collective goals' (Prilleltensky et al., 2001, p. 145), unrestrained use of power by any one individual can have an effect on the self-determination and participation of others ultimately affecting their well-being (Prilleltensky et al., 2001; Ryan & Deci, 2000). The fact that only some participants felt they had an influence within the school and this was only as a result of their explicit role as a councillor, indicates that there is a power imbalance within the school resulting in the needs of some being unfulfilled (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). By creating a context where select students have more power and influence than do others, schools might be inadvertently creating a situation whereby the majority of students feel disempowered. It might be the imbalances of power that lead to such negative outcomes as alienation and hostility (Edwards, 1995; Kagan, 1990).

**Big kids.** Despite most participants reporting that they had little or no formal influence within their school, most felt that they held an important informal position by being the year sevens or the 'big kids' of the school. When asked about their experiences of being the 'big kids' of school, the students thought that they had more responsibility and felt that people listened to them more and that the 'little kids' in lower grades looked up to them, as these quotes illustrate: 'you've got more responsibilities' (Sarah), 'people pay attention as you are year seven's' (Jason) and 'no one can boss you around or anything' (Adam).

However, some also noted that they had to do more within the school and their schoolwork was harder which they did not dislike but it was a concern for them. For example, 'the work's harder and you gotta be more organised' (Nicole).

In general, the participants enjoyed the extra responsibility that came with the role of being the 'big kids' within the school. The role provided the students with a sense of responsibility, respect and value. It gave them the sense that they were needed and without them being there, things would have been different; 'it just gives you the feeling like you're grown up and stuff and head of the school' (Annie), 'small kids look up to you' (Mathew), '[I] like being older 'cause it makes you feel that you're more confident and everything' (Nicole) and '[it] feels more like that the teacher thinks you're a more responsible person and they trust you to be responsible' (Erin). Thus, through the opportunity to participate and contribute meaningfully to their school, participants' perceptions of self-efficacy and control were enhanced (Lord & Hutchison, 1993; Prilleltensky et al., 2001).

When the participants experienced that they were valued members of their school community they wanted to do more for it and be more involved as reflected through their responses to liking the extra responsibility. The 'big kid' role also provided the participants with the feeling that they had a place in the school fostering a sense of connection to it. In addition, being the 'big kid' gave students the opportunity to be a part of mentor programmes like the following participant described; 'like [what] I'm actually doing with the year threes like reading with them like just the people who can't really read properly' (Jack). Therefore, when needs such as competence, autonomy and engagement are met by the school, students are able to actively participate and implicitly influence their school context (Battistich et al., 1997; McMillan & Chavis, 1986).

Good student. It is important to recognize that just by being students, participants are implicitly involved in a role. This is important as roles come with expectations of how one is to behave and this sets the structure for many power relations, such as those between teachers and students. Generally, students are seen as passive receivers of information while teachers have more power through knowledge and exercise this through such means as discipline (Arhar & Kromney, 1995). The responses echoed this, with some students thinking that the role of a good student involves, 'doing what [they are] told' (Jack, Joanne and David) and 'getting on with [their] work' (Jack). They also recognized that this role involves listening to the teacher and not talking in class: '[a good student is someone who] do(es) their homework on time, things like that and they don't call out and they're just like really good' (Jane). The responses reflect a school atmosphere whereby students feel the rules are to be obeyed and having a 'voice' is discouraged.

Furthermore, when asked what participants thought students themselves could do to improve their relationships with teachers their responses included 'getting on with their work' (Jane and Erin), 'stop mucking about' (David), 'do what you're told' (Jason) and 'stop calling out and talking in class' (Jane, Jack and Jason). Therefore, students felt that they needed to behave in a way that they thought equated to being a good student in order to experience positive relationships with their teachers. This is thought to be the result of a desire and willingness to adhere to social expectations of schooling and thus also endorse the importance of learning, personal improvement and the exertion of personal effort in their school work (Anderman & Anderman, 1999; Roeser et al., 1996). It is possible, when students internalize the expectations associated with the role of a good student, they are reinforcing the power imbalance by accepting that some students are more deserving of a 'privileged' education than are others (Fine, 1990).

#### School values

Recently the social and relational aspects of schooling have received much attention (Anderman & Anderman, 1999; Arhar & Kromney, 1995; Edwards, 1995; Goodenow, 1993a, 1993b). However, often the overarching values of the school system remain overlooked. It is important to recognize these aspects as the individual school experience

cannot be divorced from the social fabric in which it is embedded (Pooley et al., 2002; Weiner, 1990). Students' responses about their school reflected four sub-themes: meaningful participation, safety, fairness and need fulfilment.

**Meaningful participation.** Participation yields a sharing of power that can lead to greater ownership of the community by its members which further results in greater satisfaction and cohesion within the group (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). When the participants were asked what they thought made a good school and what they like most about their school, responses alluded to the opportunities for meaningful participation with peers and teachers: 'the chance to socialise like I like playing with my friends' (Emily) and 'I like it the most when teachers help you a lot' (Erin). In addition, it was also important that students were provided with many interesting subjects and activities to be involved in; 'I enjoy [school] because of all the activities we do' (Erin). Therefore, it was really important to participants that they were meaningfully involved with their peers and teachers for school to be a 'good' and enjoyable place.

**Safety.** Another important finding from the responses included some participants understanding of a good school as being a safe and secure place: 'a good school is a safe environment for all students to work and play safely you know, like no bullies, and like [you] feel secure at school' (Emily). Although safety can be viewed as belonging to the broader notion of security, emotional safety is also embedded within this concept (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Therefore, to encourage a SOC it is important that physical as well as emotional safety is assured. This is further reflected in what participants viewed as constituting a bad school: '[when you] don't feel safe being at school' (Emily) and 'when [it is] full of bullies' (Jack).

**Fairness.** Teachers play an important role in creating an environment conducive to fostering a positive school experience (Anderman & Anderman, 1999; Patrick, 1997; Schmuck & Schmuck, 1992). One aspect of a positive school experience is fairness. The participants could identify events where favouritism occurs within the school. 'I had a lot of teachers that favoured people then other people get annoyed 'cause like I know I used to get favoured and other people used to not like you' (Sarah). Another stated, 'if I get picked on [the teachers should] do something just like not just watch and walk away and just not do anything' (Aaron). Therefore, it is vital that teachers are perceived as fair and just as the perceptions of unfairness and injustice can have a negative effect on how students perceive themselves and how they feel others perceive them.

In addition, one participant pointed out that it was important for teachers to look more closely at the situation in the classroom in respect to who is being rewarded for doing the right thing. This reverts back to the importance of teachers being fair and focusing on the individual:

[Teachers] need to look because they're rewarding people for doing something that they didn't do before, they need to also reward the people who have always been doing it like 'cause sometimes you feel a bit like you know, you may as well start off in the beginning of the year bad and then get better and then get more rewards than you would have been than if you were consistently well behaved like so they need to look at like the good people not just the naughty people behaving at that time. (Joanne)

**Need fulfilment.** For any group to maintain a positive sense of togetherness, the association between the individual and the group must be rewarding for its members (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). One participant referred to the small size of the school as fulfilling the needs of the group by maintaining a positive sense of togetherness:

'I think the issue that we have less people and it's a small school is really good because you're not just a nobody' (Joanne).

It has been proposed that a community of close and mutually respectful relationships can only take place in a small school as a large school is an institution where control, compliance and orderliness become the focus of daily activities (Beck & Malley, 1998a). A

small school can be seen as a community whereby person to person relationships become the focus of learning (Cotton, 1996).

However, the same student also mentioned that the small size of the school had a negative impact as it reduced the possibility of getting extension classes due to the lack of demand for them:

Sometimes [the small size of the school] can be like totally turned around and say oh we need more people because then they can divide us into groups and get extension teachers in to teach us, that's probably why we don't have extension teachers 'cause only like so few of us need extension. (Joanne)

Therefore, the size of the school was used as justification for the lack of extension. As a result the student's learning was impeded. Unfortunately, this is a reflection on how schools sometimes fail to meet the needs of the individuals within them and instead aim to suit the majority of those in the group (Arhar & Kromney, 1995; Baker et al., 1997; Kagan, 1990).

### Conclusions

In this study the aim was to explore young adolescents' experiences of their school context. The findings offer support for the idea that the more one feels a sense of affiliation to a particular group and its values, the more one is likely to become an active participant in the activities valued by that group (Arhar & Kromney, 1995; Baker et al., 1997; Schaps & Solomon, 1997). However, the findings further suggest that when a power imbalance presents itself within a school, certain implicit rules dictated by assigned roles might impact on the amount of influence that some students have within the group. Thus, the types of roles available to and created by students within their school in order to exercise influence and participate in a meaningful way, have a powerful affect in shaping the types of experiences they have at school.

An implication to consider when examining the school context involves taking into account the power of the dominant paradigm of schooling reflected in the formal organization and competitive grading systems (Baker et al., 1997; Fine, 1990; Kagan, 1990). To adopt a caring community approach would require a critical reflection about the ideologies conveyed through the overt and covert practices in conventional schools and how sustained efforts would transform them (Baker et al., 1997; Royal & Rossi, 1997). A shift in ideology would also require different roles and practices for teachers. Both teachers and pre-service teacher education programmes would require support, information and reassurance to make this transformation as their status and professional respect may be interpreted as being diminished (Baker et al., 1997; Royal & Rossi, 1997). Furthermore, well-controlled studies of programme effectiveness are needed especially regarding educational outcomes. More vigorous investigations would therefore substantiate the apparent success of outcomes.

Another important implication of this research suggests that young adolescents can provide useful insight into the school's context in order to maximize their wellbeing. The results tentatively suggest that schools should create a culture whereby all students have a role in designing curriculum, programmes and interventions to better cater for their needs and which is significant for their own psychological wellness. The results of this exploratory study and that of others (Pooley et al., 2003; Prilleltensky et al., 2001) clearly indicate that students are capable of conceptualizing the role and dynamics of power, influence and self-determination within their school. Furthermore, the factors impacting on young people in terms of the biological, psychological and social changes occurring during adolescence, further highlights the need to ensure an environment conducive to engagement is nurtured and encouraged to enable young adolescents to achieve to their maximum potential and to ensure their well-being (Baker et al., 1997; Battistich et al., 1997; Goodenow, 1993a, 1993b; McMillan & Chavis, 1986; Prilleltensky et al., 2001). However, the challenge of creating a school context that will permit all young people to engage and reach their potential remains.

To further increase the understanding of the school context it is recommended that other members that are invested within it, such as teachers, are questioned on their experiences of school. This is especially important considering that a contextual approach provides a more thorough understanding of any context or system and thus it is important to investigate how others within the school context view school and the influence they feel they have within it as well as what they believe could be improved or changed. Investigating others not directly embedded within the school, such as parents, would also enrich and provide a more comprehensive understanding of the school context.

The findings from this study provide evidence that a relational approach to school reform is not satisfactory, but rather the focus needs to also address the influence members have within their school context and whether members' needs are being fulfilled. Thus, the current study offers support for recent research that suggests that young adolescents are capable of thinking about concepts related to community and wellness within the context of their school (Fine, 1990; Kagan, 1990; Pooley et al., 2003; Prilleltensky et al., 2001). Participants also demonstrated that they are aware of the power relations that operate in schools and the impact this has on their school experience. Therefore, when examining school reform, young adolescents should be among the first to be approached for ideas on how the school context can be improved.

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- Sasha A. Stumpers recently graduated with a Bachelor of Arts (Psychology) with First Class Honours and is currently enrolled in the Master of Psychology (Community) programme at Edith Cowan University. During the writing of the thesis she was employed as a Psychological Health and Education Assistant for a programme working towards



integrating severely alienated youth back into mainstream school. Address: Edith Cowan University, 100 Joondalup Drive, Joondalup, Perth, Australia 6027. [email: splasha22@hotmail.com]

Lauren Breen is a Lecturer in the School of Psychology at Edith Cowan University. Her research focuses on the transformation of systems and systemic influences on individuals and the collective. In particular, her focus is on schools, higher education and grief.

Julie Ann Pooley is a Lecturer in the School of Psychology at Edith Cowan University. Her current research is focusing on communities facing natural disasters, through which she is trying to determine what enables communities to become resilient to impending threats. She is also interested in the area of environmental education and attitudes towards the environment.

Lynne Cohen is a Lecturer in the School of Psychology at Edith Cowan University. Her background is in teaching where she was head of the Biology and sub-head of the Mathematics departments. She has developed and implemented a literacy programme for children with learning difficulties. In addition she has trained and led a team of teachers to provide a service for students with learning difficulties. Dr Cohen is interested in successful outcomes for students at school and the effect of migration on individuals and their families.

Lisbeth T. Pike, Associate Professor, is the Coordinator of the Community Psychology Stream in the School of Psychology at Edith Cowan University. She has taught and researched in the tertiary education sector in Australia since 1975. Dr Pike is an educational and developmental, clinical and community psychologist who is interested in all aspects of lifespan development but with a particular interest in children and families.

## Appendix A: Interview schedule

To participant: I would like to know how you feel about your school. If you do not want to answer a question just tell me and we can leave it out or go on to the next question. Remember it is okay to stop at any time \* just tell me.

Tell me briefly about your typical day at school. What are the things about school you like the most? What are some of the things that make up your school? What do you think makes a good teacher?

\* What can teachers do to make things better for you when you are at school? What do you think makes a good student? What could you do to make your relationship with teachers better?

\* What could they do? What types of rewards are given if you are good?

\* What happens when you are bad? Tell me about the kids at your school.

How important are your friends to you at school?

What makes them a good friend?

How do you think they see you?

\* What are the things you like most about being you? Tell me about being one of the 'big kids' of school now that you are in year seven?

\* Is it different to when you started primary school and if so how?

\* What do you like/not like about it? How do you feel about high school?

\* What do you expect from it?

\* How do you think it will be different? Do you feel accepted at school (feel you belong)?

\* What makes you feel part of your school? Do you feel you can be yourself at school? What do you enjoy about your school/what don't you enjoy? Can you think who you would share what is important to or for you, with? Do you think you do well at school? Why/why not? When you are at school what are the things you are good at doing and how do you know you are good at them? What makes a good school in your eyes? What makes a bad school then? Tell me then, what are some of the things you think could be changed at school? Who do you feel that you can talk to if you had a problem with anything at school? Do you feel you have any input in what goes on/happens in your school? What could change to make things better for you when you are at school?

I have really enjoyed our time together and the great things you have shared with me about yourself. This information will be very useful for my study. Thank you ...now is there anything you would like to ask me or discuss with me concerning our interview? Do you think there is anything I have missed about you or your school?