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Running head: YOUNG ADOLESCENTS IN THE SCHOOL CONTEXT

A Critical Exploration of the School Context for Young Adolescents Completing

Primary Education

Sasha A. Stumpers

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A Report Submitted in Partial Fulfilment of the

Requirements for the Award of

Bachelor of Arts (Psychology) Honours

Faculty of Community Studies, Education and Social Sciences

Edith Cowan University

28 October 2002

Declaration

I declare that this written assignment is my own work and does not include:

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Abstract

Recent research suggests that students' classroom engagement, increased academic effort, and subsequent success or failure are not only influenced by individual differences in skills and pre-dispositions, but also by the school context. However, there is a need to further investigate the school context in relation to the well-being of the collective through concepts such as power and control. Therefore, this research sought to critically explore young adolescents' perceptions and experiences of their school context. Furthermore, how year seven students experience their school prior to the transition into high school was investigated. Using a semi-structured interview schedule, 8 male and 7 female year seven students were questioned on their experiences and perceptions of their school context. Using a thematic analysis, a question-ordered matrix was constructed to aid the detection of themes and sub-themes from the data. Four major themes were identified as a result. These included; the People within the school context, Social roles, School values, and the Pre-transition period from primary to high school. These findings suggest that there are a number of significant factors in addition to relational aspects within the school context that impact on young adolescents, which have the ability to shape positive and negative experiences. This qualitative study offers a 'counter adult-centric' (Prilleltensky, Nelson, & Peirson, 2001) view of young adolescents' experiences within their school. It also illustrates the value in giving young adolescents the opportunity to experience influence, responsibility, self-determination, and meaningful participation within their school. Several avenues for future research were identified, including the need to investigate the transition via longitudinal methods and exploring the experiences of other people involved within the school context.

Declaration

I certify that this thesis does not incorporate, without acknowledgment, any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any institution of higher education and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except when due reference is made in the text.

Signature: S. Stingers

Date: 16/01/03

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Introduction

To feel we belong is one of our most basic needs (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Glasser, 1991; Maslow, 1968). During adolescence, the need to belong and be accepted by one's peers is arguably one of the most predominant and overpowering psychological drives (Beck & Malley, 1998b; Dreikurs & Soltz, 1964). The failure to meet this need for belonging is thought to be a central cause of maladjustment and emotional illness in society (Beck & Malley, 1998b; Kagan, 1990). 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 the next most important source for meeting this critical developmental need for young adolescents (Basic, Balaz, Uzelac, & Jugovac, 1997; Beck & Malley, 1998a, 1998b).

Adolescence has been traditionally defined as beginning with the onset of puberty (Bee, 2000; Berndt, 1992; Reber, 1995). Chronological time frames for the different stages of adolescence have also been identified (Bee, 2000; Rice, 1996). For example, young adolescence is generally defined as being between the ages of 11 and 14 years (Van Der Graaf, 2001). The need for belonging, acceptance, and social support is particularly pertinent during this time as young adolescents begin to consider more seriously who they are and wish to be (Goodenow, 1993a; Steinberg & Morris, 2001). As adolescence involves exploring aspects of personal identity separate from parents and family, the adolescent increasingly relies on friendships and other non-kin relationships for support and direction (Cauce, Felner, & Primavera, 1983; Cui, Conger, Bryant, & Elder, 2002; Selman, Beardslee, Schultz. Krupa & Podorefsky, 1986).

Early Adolescence

Early adolescence is characterised by a number of features that are related to developing and maintaining peer friendships (Berndt, 1981, 1982). For example, the biological changes experienced during puberty can be troubling and disturbing to adolescents (Simmons & Blyth, 1987). As a result, they are likely to turn to friends for assistance in understanding and for support in an attempt to adapt to these changes (Berndt, 1981, 1982; Cohen, McGowan, Fookas & Rose, 1984; Lackovic-Grgin, Dekovic, & Opacic, 1994). Adolescents are not treated as children or adults (Berndt, 1982) and report they are 'in-between' (Van Der Graaf, 2001). In addition, young adolescents begin to acquire greater independence from their families, and close friends and other peers become the primary partners in adolescents' social interactions (Berndt, 1981, 1982; Patrick, 1997; Simmons, Blyth, Van Cleave, & Bush, 1979).

Support for the importance of the social context during early adolescence is evident through the structure and nature of friendships (Berndt, 1982; Cauce, 1986; Urberg, Degirmencioglu, Tolson & Halliday-Scher, 2000). With regard to psychological development during early adolescence, special importance has been attributed to friendships (Berndt, 1982; Rice, 1996). Unlike other relationships in the adolescent's life (i.e., with parents), friendship is an egalitarian relationship (Berndt, 1982; Hartup, 1996). In addition, as cognitive abilities continue to develop, adolescents acquire a new consciousness of self and of their own identity (Berndt, 1982; Broderick, 2001; Patrick, 1997; Piaget, 1972; Van Der Graaf, 2001). This in turn is likely to affect their friendships in such ways as having a better understanding of their friends' thoughts and feelings and being more aware of the importance of mutuality and reciprocity in friendships (Berndt, 1982; Cauce, 1986; Van Der Graaf, 2001).

Major features found in friendships during early adolescents include intimacy, responsiveness, and similarity (Berndt, 1982; Hartup, 1996). Intimacy involves the knowledge of each other and the conversations concerning intimate topics (Berndt, 1982). Intimate friendships have been found to contribute positively to self-esteem in adolescence (Crockett & Silbereisen, 2000; Harter, 1990; Mannarino, 1979). Responsiveness of friends to each other's needs and desires has often been equated with the degree to which they share and help each other (Berndt, 1982; Hartup, 1996). It is suggested that the changes between middle childhood and early adolescence in conceptions of reciprocity and equality are particularly obvious in friendships (Hartup, 1996; Youniss, 1980). Therefore, adolescents act pro-socially toward their friends and trust that their friends will do the same. For example research has shown that when given a competitive task, friends were more helpful and generous toward each other than other classmates were (Berndt, 1982; Youniss, 1980).

In addition, early adolescents tend to be similar to their friends through their orientation towards contemporary teen culture (i.e., same music and clothes) and through their orientation toward school (Berndt, 1982; Hartup, 1996). Adolescents with similar views of school are more likely to have more pleasant interactions and a more stable relationship with each other (Coleman & Hendry, 1999). It has also been noted that similarity can develop over the course of a friendship as friends influence each other's interests and behaviours (Berndt, 1982; Hartup, 1996; Kandel, 1978). Therefore, young adolescents are highly susceptible to both positive and negative influences through their friends and peers especially within the school context (Edwards, 1995).

The School Context

Of much concern to young adolescents is finding their place in the classroom, as it is here that they spend so much time (Edwards, 1995; Rubin & Mills, 1988). It is thought that student's feelings of belonging and being cared for vitally affect the learning process and can lead to significant learning and growth (Combs, 1982; Edwards, 1995). However, 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 are seen as stratified and the discourse that dominates the interpersonal dynamics of the school tends to be more about notions of control and discipline than of caring and support (Arhar & Kromney, 1995). School can therefore often be seen as being more similar to groups of strangers than people working together as a community (Goodman, 1992; Wehlage, Rutter, Smith, Lesko & Fernandez, 1989).

Group processes, whether acknowledged or not, are operating within all classrooms (Schmuck & Schmuck, 1992). The classroom peer group is a salient reference group for the attitudes and behaviours of individual students (Borman & Schneider, 1998; Schmuck & Schmuck, 1992; Zeichner, 1978). Jackson's (1959) conceptual model of person-group relationships has been employed to describe the various types of membership relations in the classroom. This model proposes that the quality of an individual's psychological relationship to a group may be described by the combined effects of the attraction one feels for a group, its goals, values and people, and acceptance of the relative clarity of role prescriptions for a person in a group (Zeichner, 1978, 1980). These two dimensions of acceptance and attraction are placed into what is known as an R-space (Zeichner, 1978, 1980). In this space, group membership has been examined at four different levels; a

student's attraction to the group (high/low) and his or her perceived acceptance by the group (high/low) (Zeichner, 1980).

The research indicates that the quality of a student's membership in their classroom peer group is related to the student's attitudes toward school, self-concept as a learner, and school-related anxiety (Routt, 1996; Goodenow, 1993b; Zeichner, 1978). These findings further support the importance of attending to the social dynamics of classroom groups. Furthermore, fostering student acceptance in the peer group seems to be an especially important issue for teachers (Galbo, 1989; Williams & Downing, 1998; Zeichner, 1980). It has been proposed that teachers examine the informal dynamics of student peer groups and be able to develop strategies for influencing these processes in ways that are beneficial for the emotional and academic growth of students (Berndt, 1982; Schmuck & Schmuck, 1992; Zeichner, 1978). It is then that significant improvements in the quality of education are able to occur (Schmuck & Schmuck, 1992; Zeichner, 1978).

To further explore the influence of peers at school for young adolescents, the focus has been on examining the relationship between friendship social network variables and social competence inclines (Cauce, 1986; Ford, 1982; Wentzel, 1991). Social competence has been defined as being an individual's everyday effectiveness in dealing with their environment as well as an ability to relate to adults and other children (Cauce, 1986; Zigler, 1973). Social competence at school can be addressed in two domains: the first being young adolescent's ability to meet societal expectations and the other the ability to interact effectively with peers (Cauce, 1986; Wentzel, 1991). However, an individual's perception of support and the amount of support actually available in one's environment can be seen as separate constructs (Wellman, 1981). In an attempt to overcome this problem, social network analysis has been employed to better understand social support and support

systems (Cauce, 1986; Wellman, 1981). This means that the concept 'social network' is used as it does not presuppose that relationships are supportive and allows for a greater appreciation of the complexity of social ties (Cauce, 1986; Hirsch, 1980).

Using this methodology, social networks can be analysed in both structural and interactional terms. Structurally the network can be analysed in terms of the arrangements of interrelationships between members and characteristics such as size and density of the network (Cauce, 1986; Hirsch, 1980; Wellman, 1981). In terms of the interactional characteristics, quality and content of the relationships between individuals in the network and narrative and exchange content are all important characteristics to look for (Wellman, 1981); narrative being whether the relationship is one of friendship or kinship and exchange being the types of ideas and values shared between individuals in the network (Cauce, 1986; Wellman, 1981).

The perceived emotional support received from friends and the number of reciprocated best friends in an adolescents' social network have been found to be positively related (Cauce, 1986; Cohen et al., 1984). Furthermore, friendship network school achievement orientation has shown to be positively related to school competence but uncorrelated to peer or perceived self-competence (Cauce, 1986; Harter, 1982; Heller & Swindle, 1983). It is assumed from these findings that the ability to actively shape one's environment in a way that is conducive to the development and maintenance of supportive positive relationships is an aspect of social competence (Cauce, 1986; Ford, 1982; Wentzel, 1991). In conclusion, the development of such competencies can be seen as being influenced by one's social network, both in terms of the support it provides and the values it promotes (Cauce, 1986; Heller & Swindle, 1983).

The social context of schools is not only important in relation to social competencies and supportive relations but it also places significant emphasis on achievement motivation (Anderman & Anderman, 1999; Elliot & Dweck, 1998; Goodenow, 1992, 1993a). Two major types of goal orientations that students may adopt or be influenced by in educational settings have been identified (Anderman & Anderman, 1999; Anderman & Midgley, 1997; Dweck & Leggett, 1988). The first, being task or mastery-orientated whereby students are interested primarily with mastering a specific task and the focus is on learning, self-improvement, and personal effort (Ames & Archer, 1988; Anderman & Anderman, 1999; Anderman & Maehr, 1994). The second major type identified is referred to as ability goal or performance-orientated where the primary interest is in demonstrating their ability to others (Ames & Archer, 1988; Anderman & Anderman, 1999).

The goal orientation theory assumes that students' perceptions of the goal structures in their classrooms influence their adoption of personal goal orientations as well as other important educational outcomes (Ames, 1992; Anderman & Anderman, 1999; Blumenfield, 1992). It has been found that students who endorse responsibility goals have higher perceived self-efficacy for academic work (Anderman & Anderman, 1999; Roeser, Midgley & Urdan, 1996). 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).

The importance of the social context of school for academic motivation has been demonstrated as students who report feeling accepted and a 'part of' their school are more likely to presume their academic work for the purposes of personal understanding and

increased competence (Anderman & Anderman, 1999; Roeser et al., 1996). Similar patterns have been found for students who endorse social responsibility goals (Anderman & Anderman, 1999; Hicks, 1997; Patrick, 1997; Roeser et al., 1996). Therefore, the endorsement of social responsibility goals might have an indirect effect on student's learning strategies mediated through an academic task orientation (Anderman & Anderman, 1999; Hicks, 1997; Wentzel, 1991). Furthermore, it has been found that students' perceptions of the goals emphasised in the classroom predict their adoption of personal goal orientations, and both task and ability goal orientations are related to the goals emphasised in the classroom (Anderman & Anderman, 1999; Patrick, 1997; Wentzel, 1993).

Thus, the importance of social aspects of the school experience contributing to changes in student motivation is clearly evident (Anderman & Anderman, 1999; Roeser et al., 1996; Wentzel, 1993). As the research has illustrated, the social context of school influences academic motivation and achievement in a variety of different ways during early adolescence via the myriad of interactions that early adolescents have with one another (Anderman & Anderman, 1999; Roeser et al., 1996). This further highlights the need for schools to attend to the social variables in their classrooms (Schmuck & Schmuck, 1992; Patrick, 1997).

The Importance of Belonging at School

It has been acknowledged that students' classroom engagement, increased academic effort, and subsequent success or failure are not only influenced by individual differences in skills and pre-dispositions, but also by situational and contextual factors such as the quality of school social relationships (Anderman & Anderman, 1999; Goodenow, 1993a; Roeser et al., 1996). Consequently, belonging and membership in the school or classroom has recently been one aspect of the social context within schools that has received much

attention (Beck & Malley, 1998a; Goodenow, 1993a; McCullough, Huebner, & Laughlin, 2000; Roeser et al., 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). It is thought that the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, supported, and included in the school environment may be a key influence on motivation (Battistich, Solomon, Watson, & Schaps, 1997; Goodenow, 1993a; Weiner, 1990).

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). When students do not feel they belong they are likely to feel helpless and have no sense of control over their environment (Crandall, 1981; Routt, 1996). To gain a sense of control and avoid feelings of alienation and loneliness, they may gravitate to subcultures such as gangs or cults to relieve the frustration of not belonging and satisfy their need to belong (Beck & Malley, 1998b; 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, 1998b). This is mainly due to educators being placed under pressure to push a pedagogy that emphasises economy, efficiency, and technology over promoting compassion, self-determination, and self-

efficacy (Baker, Terry, Bridger, & Winsor, 1997; Beck & Malley, 1998a; Prilleltensky, Nelson, & Peirson, 2001).

Until recently, little empirical research has directly addressed the importance of belonging at school, despite the convergence of several themes in recent developmental and educational psychology on the issue. As a result, Goodenow (1993a) developed a short scale measuring school belonging intended for use both as a research instrument in studies of social and contextual influences in education and also as a measure of individual differences in belonging/alienation, which would be potentially helpful for identifying students 'at-risk'.

Subsequent research suggests that a SoB explains over one third of the variance in students' expectations for success in one of their academic classes (Goodenow, 1993b). In addition, teacher support explained over one third of students' assessment of the interest, importance, and value of academic work for that class (Goodenow, 1993b). In addition, research suggests that early adolescents may derive much of their academic motivation from the perceived supportiveness of others in the school environment (Broderick, 2001; Cauce, 1986; Goodenow, 1993a, 1993b; Roeser et al., 1996). As a result of such findings, educators are encouraged to identify students whose sense of acceptance and belonging in classes and schools is low and to make special efforts to ensure their inclusion (Edwards, 1995; Goodenow, 1993b).

Fostering Sense of Belonging at School

It is recognised that achieving membership in school is a very important yet complex process (Goodenow, 1993a, 1993b). Students' experiences in school and the manner in which these experiences are interpreted are affected by many factors such as a student's personal and social background, student's relationships with teachers and peers,

and the school 'structure' (Arhar & Kromney, 1995; Galbo, 1989; Kagan, 1990; Williams & Downing, 1998). Research suggests that school context is just as important as individual characteristics in influencing student bonding (Arhar & Kromney, 1995; Bronfenbrenner, 1989). School organisation in particular is an important factor to consider in its effect on student social bonding (Arhar & Kromney, 1995; Beck & Malley, 1998a; Berndt & Miller, 1990; Cotton, 1996). Furthermore, interdisciplinary teaming, which is the organisation of teachers from different disciplines with students into 'teams' or 'houses', has been considered as the cornerstone of school reform (Arhar & Kromney, 1995). Reformers advocate the reorganisation of schools into interdisciplinary teams as a means of creating close, stable relationships between adults and adolescent students (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989).

Teachers also have a significant role in fostering student SoB. For example, interview data from young adolescent students suggested teachers who called on every student to participate in class activities, who treated students equally, and who did not have favourites, assisted students to feel like members of the class (Buckner & Bickel, 1991; Galbo, 1989; Williams & Downing, 1998). Additionally, those teachers who 'joked around' and were 'fun' made students feel like members and facilitated student learning and participation (Baker et al., 1997; Williams & Downing, 1998).

Attributes of teachers that made students feel less of a member of their class included not smiling, being mad, less tolerant and when they made rules and did not follow them themselves (i.e., chewed gum although students not allowed to) (Williams & Downing, 1998). Furthermore, students favour a classroom structure where they are seated in groups of four as it allows for more interaction with friends and facilitates the development of a sense of being a part of the class (Janney & Snell, 1996; Schaps &

Solomon, 1997; Williams & Downing, 1998). For students, freedom in choosing activities and picking their own groups was also associated with membership (Baker et al., 1997).

Students' perceptions of their role within the school context have also been investigated. For example, when asked about their perceptions of membership, students respond with comments that reflected what they most liked about school and included such things as their friends and nice teachers (Buckner & Bickel, 1991; Williams & Downing, 1998). Therefore, a prerequisite for student engagement in academic work may be the belief that school is a worthwhile investment of their time and energy as well as the confidence that they are valued members of their school (Arhar & Kromney, 1995; Goodenow, 1993a, 1993b). From this, the relationship between belonging and engagement can be viewed as reciprocal (Anderman & Anderman, 1999). The extent to which one feels a sense of affiliation with a group and its values is thought to be the extent to which 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).

As a result, there is a need to consider the differential impact of school practices on individual students as well as groups of students (Arhar & Kromney, 1995). Adolescents' experiences at school depend on the context and thus assessing adolescent's belonging in specific situations as well as toward the school context as a whole is important (Arhar & Kromney, 1995). Furthermore, research has suggested that the structure of schools, the characteristics of the teachers, and the students themselves are all important factors in creating and fostering membership in the classroom (Arhar & Kromney, 1995; Buckner & Bickel, 1991; Goodenow, 1993a, 1993b; Williams & Downing, 1998). In other words, the school context is vitally important in determining whether or not an adolescent feels he or she belongs (Arhar & Kromney, 1995; Kagan, 1990).

School as a Community

The literature suggests that SoB in the individual does not occur in isolation (Arhar & Kromney, 1995; Schmuck & Schmuck, 1992; Williams & Downing, 1998) but rather implies a relationship or social integration within the school context (Reber, 1995; Schmuck & Schmuck, 1992). Thus, a group or community perspective allows an individual's SoB to be examined within the wider school context (Felton & Shinn, 1992). Communities are places where implicitly or explicitly, members care about and support each other, actively participate in, and have influence on the group's activities and decisions (Battistich et al., 1997; Schaps & Solomon, 1997).

A sense of community (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, the proposed definition has four elements: namely membership, influence, integration and fulfilment of needs, and shared emotional connection (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Studies suggest that the SOC construct is relevant to adolescents and the school context. For example, students with best friends at the school report stronger SOC and SOC is positively related to social support and negatively correlated with loneliness (Chipuer et al., 1999; Pretty, Andrewes, & Collett, 1994; Pretty, Conroy, Dugay, Fowler, & Williams, 1996). The SOC definition has aided the interpretation of adolescents' experiences of exclusion (Van Der Graaf, 2001). Furthermore, recent research suggests that children aged from 9 to 12 years can conceptualise their communities in a way reflective of the SOC definition (Pooley, Pike, Drew, & Breen, 2002).

Researchers agree that students have basic psychological needs for belonging, autonomy and competence and that their level of engagement or disengagement with school is largely dependent on the degree to which these needs are being met by the school (Battistich et al., 1997; Deci & Ryan, 1985; Goodenow, 1993a, 1993b; McMillan & Chavis, 1986; Solomon et al., 1992). Needs for competence, autonomy, and belonging are therefore thought to be met when students are able to participate actively in a cohesive and caring group with a shared purpose, that is, within a community (Battistich et al., 1997; McMillan & Chavis, 1986; Schaps & Solomon, 1997). As a result, student's needs would be more than likely satisfied resulting in the formation of a bond and commitment to the school and they would hopefully be more inclined to identify with and behave in accordance with the school's expressed goals and values (Battistich et al., 1997; McMillan & Chavis, 1986).

The concept of school as a community provides a useful framework for examining educational practice and for guiding education reform efforts (Battistich et al., 1997; Schaps & Solomon, 1997). 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.

Relational Approach to School Reform

The concept of school communities seems to have much practical utility in that it provides a clear direction for improvement efforts to help schools more effectively meet the needs of both students and teachers (Battistich et al., 1997; Glasser, 1991; Perry, Kelder & Kormro, 1993). To implement the idea of schools as communities, relational approaches to

school reform have been recognised (Baker et al., 1997; Elmore, 1990). 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). Educational tasks in relationally orientated schools extend a sense of community and caring to students by fostering interactive and collaborative arrangements so that a spirit of cooperation rather than competition is nurtured (Baker et al., 1997; Battistich et al., 1997). 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; 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). This allows students to make choices and decisions about what and how they learn. Following these recommendations, workbooks and published curricula are replaced more with situational learning and authentic tasks to structure meaningful and important opportunities for learning (Baker et al., 1997).

In a school employing a relational approach, discipline problems are prevented by giving children a legitimate 'voice' in the classroom (Battistich et al., 1997). Most discipline strategies involve cooperative rule setting between teachers and children so that personal commitment and shared values are nurtured (Baker et al.; Battistich et al., 1997; McMillan & Chavis, 1986). As rules are based upon principles and virtues children are able to learn the purpose underlying civic constraints (i.e., importance of being quiet to show respect for others), rather than a seemingly 'arbitrary' rule set by adults (i.e., be quiet or get name on board) (Baker et al., 1997). Arbitrary rules are thought to remain external to the child's spirit whereas rules due to mutual respect are more comprehensible and meaningful to the child (Lickona, 1991). Instances of misbehaviour are also handled using

collaborative problem solving rather than punishment where possible so the purpose of rules can be appreciated and students are able to assume responsibility for improving their behaviour (Baker et al., 1997).

A resulting intervention based on the relational approach to schooling is the Child Development Project (CDP). The CDP attempts to enhance pro-social development by providing students with numerous opportunities to collaborate with others in the pursuit of common academic and social goals (Baker et al., 1997). It was thought that this would be achieved by discussion and reflection upon (a) the experiences of others to gain an appreciation and understanding of other's needs, feelings, and perspectives, and (b) one's own behaviour as relating to fundamental pro-social values of fairness, concern and respect for others (Baker et al., 1997; Battistich et al., 1997). Thus the superordinate goal that integrates all CDP elements is the creation of a caring community which is a community that meets the students' needs for autonomy, competence, and belonging (Battistich et al., 1997; Deci & Ryan, 1985).

The programme was implemented over a 7-year period and its effectiveness was evaluated by following a longitudinal cohort of students at three elementary schools. As expected, SOC was found to be significantly related to a large number of positive outcomes for students and included 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; Pretty et al., 1996; Royal & Rossi, 1997; Schaps & Solomon, 1997).

School as a Community and as a Society

Researchers have recently questioned the push towards relationally-based school reform. Despite support for communally-orientated practices in schools there is evidence to

suggest that some schools are more akin to societies where the exclusion of some is encouraged (Fine, 1990). This is reflective of Tonnies (1957) dichotomy of *gemeinschaft* (community) and *gesellschaft* (society). For example, schools may be seen as societies because of the focus on achievement, competition, and rules. Critical theorists suggest that schools may actually 'teach' students to feel unwelcome resulting in such outcomes as withdrawal (Beck & Malley, 1998b; 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 was justified by the discourse of being for the collective best (Fine, 1990; Kagan, 1990; Raskin, 1988).

Such ideologies rationalise 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 characterised by diversity and critique (Fine, 1990; Raskin, 1988). More importantly, the 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 extends beyond the relational aspects commonly focussed upon within the literature.

Extending the views of community-orientated 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 ones' life contributes 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 conceptualised are 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, 2001; Wiley & Rappaport, 2000) and have been largely ignored within the school context. Therefore, there is a need to conceptualise 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).

Future Directions

A number of avenues for future research investigating the school context can be identified. Despite the overwhelming support for community-orientated approaches to schooling (Battistich et al., 1997; Schaps & Solomon, 1997), there still remains a number of potential problems and issues that are not easily dismissed (Baker et al., 1997). For example, schools need to decide whose or which values it should adopt when identifying itself as a community. It is becoming increasingly difficult to achieve consensus on community values that are equally respectful of the ethnic, religious, and cultural diversity within schools (Baker et al., 1997).

Another area that has been overlooked is the extent to which others involved within the school experience the school as a community. If a school can truly be characterised as being a caring community it should be experienced as such by its staff as well as its students (Battistich et al., 1997). This could be examined through a contextual analysis of the school whereby students, teachers, parents, and community members are consulted. In other domains such as recovery from work-related trauma and grief, contextual analyses have proved useful (Breen, O'Connor, & Sonn, 2002; Edmondson, 2001).

Furthermore, an important implication to consider when examining the school context involves taking into account the power of the dominant paradigm of schooling reflected in their formal organisation 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). This 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 program effectiveness are needed especially regarding educational outcomes. More vigorous investigations would therefore substantiate the apparent success of relationally-orientated programs (Baker et al., 1997; Schaps & Solomon, 1997).

In addition, what is known about SOC in the school environment has for the most part been the result of studies using quantitative methodologies. Much 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' perceptions and experiences within their schools. Furthermore, through allowing adolescents a voice, a qualitative approach provides a counter-'adult-centric' method of examining and interpreting young adolescent's realities (Prilleltensky et al., 2001).

In addition, the transition from primary to high school is a concern for young adolescents (Schumacher, 1998). Research on the transition from primary to high school focuses on the post-transition period (e.g., Schiller, 1999; Weiss, 2001). However, a search of educational and psychological databases failed to yield any research examining the effect of the school context prior to the transition process that occurs before commencing high school. As a result, there is a need to examine student's perceptions about their impending transition to high school and examine the role the school context has on this pre-transitional period.

Furthermore, research investigating young adolescents' experiences within the school context has mainly focused on individual and relational aspects (Pooley et al., 2002). There is a need then to look at school reform from a collective wellness framework whereby the examination of adolescents' 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' perceptions and experiences of their school context is required.

Summary

This review focused on areas related to the school experience for young adolescents; namely the importance and influence of friendships during early adolescence, the social context of schools; including classroom and peer groups, the idea of schools as communities, and a critique of current school practices and ideologies. Outcomes in personal and social areas as well as those relating to school and academic variables were identified. Across these areas of research is the importance of relationships within the school environment and the school system itself in promoting positive outcomes for adolescents.

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; McMillan & Chavis, 1986; Goodenow, 1993a, 1993b; 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.

Aims and Research Questions

In light of findings in the literature, the present study aims to explore young adolescents' perspectives and experiences of their school context. More specifically, this study is interested in examining the aspects of the school context that impact on year seven students (in the last year of primary school). The research questions include:

- 1) What is the experience of young adolescents within their school context?
- 2) What is the experience of being a year seven student?
- 3) How does the school context impact on young adolescents' wellbeing?

Method

Research Design

This exploratory qualitative study was designed to address the research aims and objectives and to answer the questions relating to young adolescents' experiences within the school context that are not amenable to quantification (Moutsakas, 1990). The nature of qualitative research is multi-method in focus and involves an interpretive and naturalistic approach to its subject matter while attempting to make sense of a phenomenon through interpreting the meanings that participants bring to them (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998). Qualitative methodologies rely on inductive processes whereby themes emerge from informants that provide rich context bound information (Creswell, 1994). A qualitative approach was therefore adopted for this study to allow 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. The participants were aged between 11 and 12 years and included 8 males and 7 females. Eleven of the participants were born in Australia while two were from England, one from New Zealand, and another from Thailand. At the time of interviewing, 10 had been at the school for the duration of their primary education while the remaining 5 had only been at the school for one year or less. Furthermore, 8 participants came from a dual parent family with both the mother and father (or father figure) present in the home whereas 7 participants came from single parent homes where the mother was the parent present.

Participants were selected from a primary school in the Joondalup Education District of Perth, Australia. The school was identified in consultation with the Director of Student Services and the Joondalup Education District Office and permission was granted from the principal of the identified school. Participation was voluntary, however consent from both parents and children was sought prior to participation in this study.

Instrument

A semi-structured interview schedule containing open-ended questions was designed to identify and assess aspects of adolescents' perceptions and experiences of their school environment (Appendix A). Consistent with a 'funnelling' technique (Smith, 1995), the schedule begins generally and becomes more specific. In addition, probes and questions were used to explore the issues raised by the participants.

Prior to the main study, the questions were pilot tested with an adolescent who did not participate in the present study but fit the profile of the participants used in the final study. This pilot study was conducted so as to determine the effectiveness and appropriateness of the questions in retracting information (Smith, 1995). From this trial, questions were added and some semantic changes were made (e.g., the use of 'mate' instead of 'friend' in some cases).

Procedure

Permission to conduct the study was first sought from the principal of the prospective school (Appendix B) and a declaration form was completed to allow entry into the school (Appendix C). Once permission was granted from the principal, consent forms were sent out to the parents/guardians of all year seven students (Appendix D). A time for the return of the forms was also negotiated.

Students who had been granted permission to participate were selected one at a time from their class during the allocated interview times. Prior to the commencement of the interview, participants were provided with a verbal and written explanation of the study whereby the right to refuse any questions or withdraw from the study at anytime was made clear. They were then asked to sign a consent form (Appendix E). As part of developing rapport with participants, demographic information was also sought in the form of a discussion and completion of a brief form (Appendix F). Furthermore, participants were made aware that a nominated number was to be recorded on their demographic sheet so as to ensure confidentiality as well as providing an easy reference for the researcher.

The interviews were conducted in a room allocated by the school that was free from distractions. Each interview took approximately 20-30 minutes. A tape recorder was used to record the interviews so as to allow for verbatim transcription. At the conclusion of the interview, participants were given the opportunity to ask questions and were debriefed by allowing time to discuss any concerns that they may have had or through the researcher initiating concern about any issues that arose. At the conclusion of each interview, brief notes were made onto each participant's interview schedule concerning any issues or concerns that the researcher had. Notes were also made indicating responses that generated interesting and relevant information. These notes were also used to support the analysis by helping to further define the responses to the interview questions.

Data Analysis

After the interviews had been conducted, they were transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy of each participant's responses. Biases and questions that arose while examining the transcripts were recorded and significant concepts, statements, and words were highlighted in order to reduce the data into smaller units to assist in the search for factors

that may have contributed to the participant's perceptions and experiences (Creswell, 1994; Miles & Huberman, 1994).

To further reduce the data into a manageable working size, a thematic content analysis using a question ordered matrix (Appendix G) was utilised (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Sonn & Fischer, 1996). For this study, the matrix was achieved by ordering each of the participants identifying codes in rows and then ordering the interview questions and participant's key responses across into the columns. Among the advantages suggested for the use of a matrix includes the ability to reduce the data and display it in a systematic and logical way (Banyard & Miller, 1998; Miles & Huberman, 1994) allowing the researcher to systematically view the responses and note any patterns or themes emerging across the questions (Breakwell et al., 1995). Furthermore, any contradictory themes or patterns could also be identified.

As potential themes emerged they were placed with similar themes. Significant statements were allocated to categories or listed under the relevant themes identified. This allowed the generation of master themes containing relevant sub-themes. This helped to further verify and re-define the existing themes (Smith, 1995). Following this inductive generation of themes (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998; Miles & Huberman, 1994), responses highlighting the essence of the experiences and perceptions of the participants were grouped under the relevant theme so as to illustrate the meaning of each.

In order to preclude researcher bias, a co-analysers looked over the findings and was asked to interpret and verify the existing themes (Silverman, 1993). Consultation with the co-analyst followed whereby the necessary changes and adjustments were made to ensure that the themes reflected the participants' responses. Further authentication of the data was achieved through the process of triangulation (Silverman, 1993) whereby cross-checking

and reviewing of journalised data was conducted (Grbich, 1999). This involved comparing hand-written notes made at the completion of each interview with the transcribed data so as to detect any inconsistencies. Furthermore, within the context of the relevant literature, a colleague checked the identified themes and labels to further corroborate the findings (Patton, 1990).

Findings and Interpretations

Four major themes relating to young adolescents’ experiences and perceptions of their school were identified. These were People, Social roles, School values, and Pre-transition from primary to high school. Table 1 illustrates the four major themes and related sub-themes identified from the analysis of the participant’s responses.

Table 1

Themes and Sub-themes Concerning Year Seven Student’s 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
	Need fulfilment
Pre-Transition from Primary to High School	
<i>People</i>	

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 participant's responses in this study, three major groups of people who held some importance and influence for the participants were identified. These being; teachers, friends and peers, and people outside of the school.

Teachers. Outside of the family unit, teachers are the next most important adult influence in young adolescents' lives (Arhar & Kromney, 1995; Beck & Malley, 1998a; 1998b; Williams & Downing, 1998). Students spend a considerable amount of time in their classrooms and with their teachers (Edwards, 1995; Goodman, 1992; Rubin & Mills, 1998). Results from this study were found to be 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 (e.g., “*caring*”, “*fun*”, and “*nice*”). It was especially important that teachers helped students and listened to them: “[*a good teacher is*]...*understanding and caring and listens to what you have to say...they understand your needs and things like that...*”. According to the students, good teachers listen to and respect their students.

Furthermore, the students viewed certain teaching styles as being important in creating an environment that students feel competent within. Teachers who adopted a “*fun*”, “*fair*”, and “*caring*” 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...*”. It was really important to participants that they felt valued and their teachers acknowledged them as individuals.

As the words from this participant further illustrates: “...*they could probably like give people a chance more and maybe um if they wanted to do better, probably they could talk to people like say talk to them 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*”.

It is important that teachers pay attention to the social dynamics operating within their classrooms and of the influence they have in creating an environment conducive to fostering a positive school experience (Anderman & Anderman, 1999; Patrick, 1997; Schmuck & Schmuck, 1992). The participants felt that this was especially important in regard to favouritism that sometimes occurs in the classroom. “*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...*”. Another stated, “*if someone is bossing you around or something... if I get picked on [the teachers should] do something just like not just watch and walk away and just not do anything*”. 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...cause sometimes you feel a bit like...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...so they need to look at like the good people not just the naughty people behaving at that time”.

Therefore, teacher characteristics that were seen as favourable by the participants gave them the sense that they are important and valued members of the school. Feeling valued and having the ability to influence others are both fundamental concepts in ‘true’ communities (Battistich et al., 1997; McMillan & Chavis, 1986). When the manner in which teachers communicate with their students is respectful, it represents a commitment to students and diminishes the power imbalance that can become a barrier between teachers and students (Beck & Malley, 1998a). Thus, teachers have an important role in creating an atmosphere where the students’ potential to engage is maximised (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, 2000). 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 an appropriate peer social network as a source of emotional support, information, orientation, and guidance (Battistich et al., 1997; Beck & Malley, 1998b; 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 got like loads of friends...and they make me feel comfortable...I’m not left by myself at any time...”*.

Characteristics of good friends included them being *“nice”*, *“honest”* and *“trustworthy”*, *“kind”* and *“caring”* and that they *“listened”* and were *“funny”*. Some also thought they were good friends because their friends saw them as funny and they enjoyed the same things as them. Examples include; *“they’re like really honest and don’t laugh at things that you say...just really nice and caring and when you’re sad they just sort of comfort you and [they’re] loyal...”* and *“...they enjoy what you like...the way they treat you...they treat [you] back the way they want to be treated”*. 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 year one, reported that being at their 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 ...my best friend has been here from pre-primary as well and we’ve sort of like grown up together...”*. 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...” 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...*”. 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). Findings from this study indicate that feeling a connection to a peer group may be at the cost of conformity as this example illustrates: “*I can be myself but I usually just hang around with my friends and do whatever they do*”. Therefore, 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. 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 (Malley, 1998; Prilleltensky et al., 2001). Within the school context many roles exist. 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. It is important that roles are defined as it gives members of a community the feeling that they are making a worthwhile contribution and have some influence within the group (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). 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 the 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...yeah, this year mainly because I'm a student councillor and we do a lot of things...like surveys and things..."* and *"...[it] feels like people need me...now I'm a student councillor people come to me if there's trouble like in the playground..."*. 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... especially people look up to me cause I'm a student councillor..."*.

Despite the positive effect having such a defined role can have (e.g., increased competence, self-efficacy and self-determination) (Malley, 1998; 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 this role. 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). From what the literature has suggested this could lead to such negative outcomes as alienation and hostility (Edwards, 1995; Kagan, 1990).

Big kids. Although most participants felt that they had little or no formal influence within their school, most felt that they held an important 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. However, some also noted that they had to do more within the school and their school work was harder which they did not dislike but it was a concern for them: "...you've got more responsibilities...people pay attention as you are year seven's...the work's harder and you gotta be more organised...no one can boss you around or anything".

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’s just gives you the feeling like you’re grown up and stuff and head of the school...small kids look up to you...” and “(I) like being older cause it makes you feel that you’re more confident and everything...feels more like that the teacher thinks you’re a more responsible person and they trust you to be responsible”. Thus, through the opportunity to participate and contribute meaningfully to their school, participants’ perceptions of self-efficacy and control were enhanced (Prilleltensky et al., 2001; Lord & Hutchison, 1993).

Therefore, 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, for some being the ‘big kid’ gave students the opportunity to be a part of mentor programs like the following participant described; “...like I’m actually doing with the year threes...reading with them...just the people who can’t really read properly”. 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 recognise that just by being students, participants are implicitly involved in a role. This is important as with roles comes 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*” and “*getting on with [their] work*”. They also recognised 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...*”. The responses reflect a school atmosphere whereby rules are to be obeyed and having a ‘voice’ is discouraged. Thus, some of the characteristics mentioned were reflective of what teachers would consider a well-behaved student.

Furthermore, when asked what participants thought students themselves could do to improve their relationships with teachers their responses included “*getting on with their work*”, “*stop mucking about*”, “*do what you’re told*”, and “*stop calling out and talking in class*”. 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. However, when students internalise 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 recognise these aspects as the individual school experience cannot be divorced from the social fabric in which it is embedded (Pooley et al., 2002;

Weiner, 1980). Students' responses about their school reflected three sub-themes; meaningful participation, safety 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 related to the opportunities for meaningful participation with peers and teachers; "*the chance to socialise...I like playing with my friends*" and "*I like the most when teachers help you a lot*". In addition, it was also important that students were provided with lots of interesting subjects and activities to be involved in; "*I enjoy [school] because of all the activities we do now in year seven*". 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...like no bullies...[you] feel secure at school*". 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...[it is] full of bullies*".

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*”. 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 becomes the focus of daily activities (Malley, 1998). A small school can be seen as a community whereby person to person relationships becomes the focus of learning (Cotton, 1996).

However, this participant also mentioned that the small size of the school also had a negative impact as it reduced the possibility of getting extension class 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*”. 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).

Transition from Primary to High School

The transition from primary to high school is a significant transition for the young adolescent (Schumacher, 1998). The participants in this study were in their final year of primary school and were cognisant of the fact that they would be commencing high school in the near future. The participants demonstrated that they were anticipating positive and negative experiences to occur across this transition. When asked about how they felt about high school most felt that it was going to be very different in that they would have more

teachers and different classes. They tended to be nervous about the work being harder and having more homework. Some also felt concerned about bullies and being the small kids again. For example, “[I feel] nervous, cause you don’t really know anybody there, you can’t really trust anybody...” and “...cause of all the bullies...oh it’s just like you hear like old teachers talking about how they beat up these kids and everything...and the harder school work”. However, most participants while nervous about high school were concurrently also excited by the prospect of meeting new people and friends and having different teachers. Responses included, “...it’s gonna be pretty fun cause you have to do different work every day... it’s an, the next step in my life” and “...meeting other kids and that...cause you get, gotta make new friends and you meet new teachers and they might be more fun than the ones in pre-primary and primary school”.

Some of the students also recognised the importance of high school as an integral step in their lives and in achieving their future goals concerning education, employment, and relationships: “I think I should like come out of high school and um be prepared for a job and so they train me like um different things to do for a job and um different relationships with people...cause you get like so many teachers ...we learn the basics in primary school and then sort of go outside of that into high school and look more in depth at things...you come out with a lot of new friends...and you broaden your knowledge”.

Therefore, meeting new friends and having a variety of different subjects and teachers appealed to the participants and was seen as a positive while the workload and thoughts of not being with the friends they had from primary school were concerns for the students. The fact that some recognised that there would be more responsibility involved in being a high school student shows that there is an awareness of what is expected and that they are able to conceptualise the likely changes in the school environment and their role

within it. Thus, participants were able to recognise that a negotiation of roles is part of the experience involved in the transition from primary to high school.

Conclusions

This study aimed to explore early adolescents' perspectives and experiences of their school context. More specifically, this study was interested in examining the aspects of the school context that impact on year seven students. For young adolescents, the school context comprises of the people in it, the roles available to them, and the values the school espouses. More specifically; teachers, friends and peers, explicit roles such as student councillor and implicit roles like being the big kids of school and being a good student, all comprise young adolescents' perceptions of their school context. The experience of year seven students is particularly influenced by the impending transition to high school and the negotiation of role changes that will take place.

The people within the school context impact on the individual experience of each student. Those directly within the school were considered to be the most important in their day-to-day school experience. These people are the teachers and peers. During adolescence, relationships with others are of increasing importance (Berndt, 1982; Hartup, 1996; Rice, 1996). Peer relationships were characterised by bidirectional influence, shared history, and intimacy, indicating their importance in shaping and creating a positive school experience.

Adolescents view their relationships with teachers as characterised by trust, intimacy and kindness, which are cornerstones of relational approaches to school reform (Anderman & Anderman, 1999; Roeser et al., 1996). However, the students also focussed on aspects of their teachers and their school that directly relate to power and control within the context. As demonstrated through this study, personal characteristics of teachers and their style of teaching, the way they relate to individual students and the types of activities they provide, all contribute to facilitating positive experiences at school. Furthermore, when students felt confident that they were valued members of their school and more

specifically in their classroom, they were more likely to engage as school was seen as a worthwhile investment of their time.

Explicit roles such as that of a student councillor provide students the opportunity to engage in their school by providing the opportunity for influence, responsibility, and self-efficacy. The remaining students reported having no explicit roles and as such had no explicit power within their school. A lack of power influences the self-determination and participation of others ultimately affecting their well-being by not meeting their needs of responsibility, value, and respect (McMillan & Chavis, 1986; Prilleltensky et al., 2001; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Alienation and hostility are likely outcomes of school structures that facilitate differences in the amount of explicit power and control held by individual students (Edwards, 1995; Kagan, 1990).

The findings from this study 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 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 very powerful affect in shaping the types of experiences they have at school.

Therefore, an important implication of this research suggests that young adolescents can provide useful insight into the school's context in order to maximise their well-being. It is imperative that in the future young adolescents have an integral role in designing programs and interventions to better cater for the needs of students in the school

context which in essence is significant for their own psychological wellness. The results of this study clearly indicate that students are capable of conceptualising the role and dynamics of power, influence, and self-determination within their school (Pooley et al., 2002; Prilleltensky et al., 2001).

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 and perceptions of school. This is especially important considering that a contextual approach provides a more thorough understanding of any context or system (Breen et al., 2002; Edmondson, 2001). It is important to investigate how others within the school context view school and the influence they feel they have with in 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.

In addition, future research would benefit from employing a longitudinal design whereby a cohort of year sevens is followed through the transition to year eight to investigate the impact of the changes that are likely to occur as a result of this transition. This is especially important in regard to facilitating a positive transition into high school. It may be of interest and use to also investigate the school context across the public and private sector of schooling practices so as to identify any important differences between the contexts.

In conclusion, 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., 2002; 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. In addition, young adolescents are mindful of the expectations and adjustments associated with the transition from primary to high school. 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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Appendix A

Interview Schedule

To participant: I would like to know how you feel about certain issues. If you do not want to answer a question just tell me and we can leave it out or go onto the next question. Remember it is OK to stop at any time-just tell me.

1. Tell me briefly about your typical day at school.
2. What are the things about school you like the most?
3. What makes a good school in your eyes?
-What makes a bad school then?
4. What do you think about wearing uniforms?
5. Tell me then, what are some of the things you think could be changed at school?
6. Teachers and kids (students) are what schools are all about. What are some of the other things that make up schools?
7. Do you feel that you can talk to your teachers if you had a problem with anything at school?
-Are you more likely to talk to your female teachers or male when you have a problem or concern (why)?
8. What do you think makes a good teacher?
9. What do you think makes a good student?
10. What could you do to make your relationship with teachers better?
-What could they do?
11. What types of rewards are given if you are good?
-What happens when you are bad?
12. Tell me about being one of the 'big kids' of school now that you are in year 7?
-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? (does this excite you or frighten you?)
13. Do you feel accepted at school (feel you belong)?
-What makes you feel part of your school?
-Do you feel you have any input in what goes on/happens in your school?
14. What do you enjoy about your school/what don't you enjoy?
15. When good things happen for you, how do you deal with it?
-What about when bad things happen?
-Can you tell me what other people do when they are at school and they feel happy/sad?
16. Can you think who you would share what is important to or for you, with?
17. Do you think you do well at school and why is/isn't this?
18. When you are at school what are the things you are good at doing-and how do you know you are good at them?
19. What can teachers do to make things better for you when you are at school?
20. Why do you think it is important to do well at school?
21. Why is it important for you personally to do well at school?
22. Do you feel you can be yourself at school?

23. How important are your friends to you at school?
24. What makes them a good friend?
25. What are the things you like most about being you?
26. How do you think others see you?
27. If you were to describe yourself to someone over the phone/net what would you say?

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?

Study code _____ (Researcher's use only)

Appendix B Letter to School

Dear Principal,

I am a 4th year honours psychology student at Edith Cowan University. As part of my degree, I will be conducting a study on the experiences and perceptions of school through the eyes of young adolescents.

Collecting information for my study involves conducting interviews of approximately 45 minutes in duration with 10 students from your year 7 classes. The interviews will contain questions relating to the participants feelings towards their school and questions related to sharing some of their experiences about being at school. I will seek participation from the students and their parents before commencing this study. Participation in this study is voluntary and the participants may withdraw from the study at any time or decline to answer any of the questions.

The information that will be collected from this study is relevant for understanding how young adolescents experience their school and for understanding the transition from primary to high school. Findings will be useful for developing interventions designed to minimise risk and promote well-being within schools for adolescents.

Yours sincerely,

(Researcher)
Sasha A. Stumpers

9349 4623
0402 260 205

(Supervisors)
Dr Lisbeth T. Pike
Dr Lynne Cohen
Ms Julie Ann Pooley
Ms Lauren Breen

9400 5535
9400 5575
9400 5591
9400 5543

Appendix C
Declaration to Principal

VISITORS

SCREEN FORM 2

EDUCATION DEPARTMENT OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA
151 Royal Street, EAST PERTH WA 6004
PHONE: 08 9264 4111

CONFIDENTIAL DECLARATION

This form is for persons requiring access to schools who are not employees of the Education Department.

Please place a tick in one of the boxes below.

(1)	I declare that I <u>do not have</u> any convictions, circumstances or reasons that might preclude my working with or near children.	<input checked="checked" type="checkbox"/>
-----	---	--

or

(2)	I declare that I <u>do have</u> convictions, circumstances or reasons that might preclude my working with or near children. The nature of these convictions, circumstances or reasons is outlined below.	<input type="checkbox"/>

I certify the accuracy of the above information. I am aware that I may be required to provide a police clearance if it is considered necessary to verify the information provided.

Name: SARAH STOMPERS
(PLEASE PRINT CLEARLY)

Date: 15/11/05

Signature: S. Stompers

Company (if relevant): EDITH COWAN UNIVERSITY

Address: 96 ALKANA RD WEST PERTH

Phone: 9149 4623 0402 250 205

Appendix D Parent Consent Form

Dear Parent/Guardian,

I am a 4th year honours psychology student at Edith Cowan University. As part of my degree, I will be conducting a study on the experiences and perceptions of school through the eyes young adolescents.

Collecting information for my study involves conducting individual interviews of approximately 45 minutes in duration with 10 students. The interview will focus on your child's feelings towards their school and questions relating to their experiences about being at school. The interviews will be audio-taped however, no one else will have access to the tapes except myself. Once the interviews have been transcribed only myself and my supervisors will have access to this information. Your child will be assured of confidentiality as no identifiable information will be used.

Participation in this study is voluntary and your child may withdraw from the study at any time.

If you have any queries please contact me on 9349 4623 or 0402 260 205
Or alternatively you can contact any of my supervisors.

Please return the permission slip to your child's teacher by ().

Yours sincerely,

Sasha A. Stumpers
(Researcher)

(Supervisors)

Dr Lisbeth T. Pike

9400 5535

Dr Lynne Cohen

9400 5575

Ms Julie Ann Pooley

9400 5591

Ms Lauren Breen

9400 5543

Appendix E Participant Consent Form

Hello, my name is Sasha,

I am a 4th year honours psychology student at Edith Cowan University. As part of my degree, I will be conducting a study on the experiences and perceptions of school through the eyes of young adolescents.

To find out this information, I have a number of questions that I would like to ask you. You can stop this interview at any time if you do not wish to answer any other questions. I would like to tape the interview but nobody else will hear it and you will not be identified in anyway.

Please read the questions below and initial or sign your name. Thank you for being part of my study.

The information about this study has been read to me by Sasha
 I had an opportunity to ask questions
 I am happy with the answers to my questions
 I understand I am not obliged to participate in this study
 I am aware I can withdraw from the study at any time
 I understand what I am being asked to do

Initials: _____.

Date: _____.

Study code _____ (Researcher's use only)

Appendix F

Participant Demographic Form

Student Initials:_____ (to be deleted later)

Age: Years _____ Months _____.

Sex: M/F

The Significant People in your home are;

Mother
Step-mother
Father
Step-father
Parent's partner
Brother(s)
Sister(s)
Grandparent(s)
Other

Your Teachers at school are;

Mostly male
Mostly female
About equal males and
Females

Your nationality can be described as:

You have been enrolled at this school for,

0-1 years
1-2 years
2-3 years
3-4 years

Study code _____ (Researcher's use only)

Questions	“What are the things about school you like the most?”	“What makes a good school in your eyes?”	“...bad school then?”	“What do you think could be changed at school?”	“...makes up schools?”	“...talk to teachers?” (More likely talk to M/F)	“...makes a good teacher?”
Participant							
1 (F)	‘Lunch and um I like music...that’s pretty good’	‘Um, ones with like um...really good teachers, like really nice ones, not ones that don’t like kids or anything’	‘...teachers who aren’t interested in kids’	(OK as is)	‘um, the education um...’	‘yeah-F...bec F’	‘um, yeah just that they are nice and listen to you, like yeah, they don’t jump to conclusions and all that...about things’
2 (M)	‘I like to see my friends...um, I like playing soccer’	‘I don’t know it’s just ...I like it cause my friends are here so...’	‘school that...you don’t have any friends or something’	‘um, lunch starts at 12.00’	‘um...just like paper...LAU GHS’	‘yes’	‘um, a teacher who can like always help us with our work and do fun things sometimes, like instead of always just doing like sheets and stuff do other things like spelling some days or um...’

Appendix G
Example of Question Ordered Matrix