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The Importance of the Emotional Climate in Schools: Linking Teachers' Sense of Belonging to School Community With Student Outcomes

Linda Rogerson

*Edith Cowan University*

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The Importance of the Emotional Climate in Schools: An Exploration of the Sense of Belonging Experienced by Teachers in an Australian School

Linda Rogerson

2004

Bachelor of Arts Honours (Psychology)
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The Importance of the Emotional Climate in Schools: Linking Teachers' Sense of Belonging to School Community with Student Outcomes

The Importance of the Emotional Climate in Schools: An exploration of the Sense of Belonging Experienced by Teachers in an Australian School

Linda Rogerson

A Report Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Award of Bachelor of Arts (Psychology) Honours, Faculty of Community Studies, Education and Social Sciences, Edith Cowan University.

October, 2004

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

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I certify that this literature review and research project 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 where due reference is made in text.

Signature: ____________________________
Date: ________________________________

16/04/05
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The Importance of the Emotional Climate in Schools: Linking Teachers' Sense of Belonging to the School Community with Student Outcomes

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Abstract

The way that children feel about school is important to their continued engagement with education. This review examines the issues that impact on the school environment and therefore influence students' school experience. A decline in educational standards in America prompted school reform research which has identified that the emotional climate in schools was impacting on students in that they felt alienated and disenfranchised from the school community. The emotional climate of a school stems from the nature of the relationship that exists between the students and staff of the school. A movement to establish caring community schools that promote the fostering of caring relationships was initiated to counteract the lack of support that students were experiencing. Caring relationships between teachers and students are believed to promote a sense of belonging to school in students which influences students' academic motivation and their engagement with education. In view of the importance of the teacher student relationship, the issues that influence teachers' sense of belonging to school, and the effect this may have on their work and their relationships with students, are examined.

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Submitted: August, 2004
The Importance of the Emotional Climate in Schools: Linking Teachers' Sense of Belonging to the School Community with Student Outcomes

People do not generally choose to live in isolation because of the loneliness and stress that a solitary existence can produce. In fact isolation from friends and family is used as a punishment to deter offenders from committing further crimes. Humans have a preference for social contact and seek to develop and maintain relationships with others to achieve the level of social interaction they require (Vaughan & Hogg, 1998). Communities are groups of people who, because of geographic proximity or shared interests, beliefs or goals, form a mutually supportive group. The community construct is, according to McMillan and Chavis (1986), composed of four elements: membership, influence, reinforcement and a shared emotional connection. The element of membership is underpinned by a sense of belonging (SoB) to a group because of feelings of safety within the boundaries set by the group and by a personal investment in the group. Influence in a group is reciprocal in that members are influenced by the group and are able to exert their influence within the group. Integration and fulfillment of needs incorporates the reinforcement of being identified with the group whose values you share. Finally a shared emotional connection arises from a history common to members of the group. It is apparent from this description of the community construct that belonging to a community should satisfy people's need for social contacts, in fact the desire to belong to a community is believed to be a fundamental human drive (Baumeister and Leary, 1995) There are as many varieties of communities as there are varieties of neighbourhoods, ethnicity, professions and recreational interests and these communities serve people of all ages.

Schools can be viewed as learning communities with the shared goal of educating children. The school environment has come under scrutiny in recent times
due to research that suggested that the reason for students' academic failure was not necessarily their lack of cognitive capabilities but due to feeling lonely and alienated from the school community (Beck & Malley 1998a). This lack of emotional connection to school frequently leads to educational disengagement and, in some instances, seeking solace in gangs of similarly disenfranchised peers (Goodenow, 1993a). The emotional climate of a school is believed to be under the control of the staff and is set by the nature of relationships that develop between teachers and students (Xin Ma, 2003). If the relationship between teachers and students conveys respect and genuine caring the atmosphere is likely to be welcoming and supportive of students and teachers alike.

Young children spend a large proportion of their early years in interactions with teachers and these relationships can have a considerable influence on a child's emerging self-perspective (Beck & Malley, 1998a). During their early school years children develop a concept of self. They develop the ability to think about and describe themselves in terms of personality traits rather than in purely physical terms. The refinement of children's self concept is dependant upon cognitive ability, especially language development, and by the opinions and feedback from significant others (Berk, 1999). Due to the amount of time children spend in school, teachers become significant others in their lives and the attitudes that teachers display towards children and the comments they may make regarding their work and behaviour are potential influences in the way children think, feel and value themselves (Berk). Attitudes displayed by teachers can invoke an educational self-fulfilling prophecy whereby children internalise the opinion teachers have of them and live up to their expectations (Kail & Cavanaugh, 1996). Although the educational self-fulfilling prophecy can have positive consequences for children who are academically successful, and receive favourable comments on their work, it can herald the downward spiral toward early withdrawal from school for
students whose lack of academic success results in unflavourable attitude and remarks from teachers.

Children are believed to perform to their potential when they have a SoB to a caring school community. Beck & Malley (1998a) reported that research investigating students' SoB to school confirmed the importance of the relationship between teacher and student to the development of a SoB. Edwards (1995) cautioned that if teachers do not have a SoB to school it would be difficult to encourage a SoB in students. Social learning theory suggests that children learn by observing and imitating appropriate behaviour from significant people in their environment (Berk, 1999). Teachers who feel connected to their school community are likely to model belonging behaviour and to engage in caring relationships with their students and this should encourage a SoB in students.

This review will examine the relevant literature in order to understand some of the factors that relate to the emotional environment in schools and how this impacts on teachers and their students. Initially the review will examine the reform movement in education that was prompted by the publication of an American report, entitled A Nation at Risk, by the National Commission on Excellence in Education (1983). An issue that emerged from the reform movement research suggested that the school environment had not been supporting students emotionally, which had contributed to the decline in academic achievement and increased dropout rates (Baker, Terry, Bridger & Winsor, 1997). To address the apparent lack of support for students in the school environment a recommendation was made for schools to function as caring learning communities (Battistich, Solomon, Watson & Schaps, 1997). This resulted in many schools developing programs designed to provide the kind of emotional support that students needed. Articles describing a community school in Maine (United States) and Oatlands
School in Tasmania are discussed to provide examples of the kind of caring school communities believed to provide the emotional support that students need.

The elements of the community construct that would satisfy the need for schools to be more emotionally supportive were highlighted by McMillan and Chavis (1986). They suggested that there are four elements to the construct; membership, influence, reinforcement and a shared emotional connection. The issue of membership is afforded particular importance in the community construct and is underpinned by a SoB to community. Baumeister and Leary (1995) claim that the need to feel a SoB is a deep-seated human motive that affects emotional and cognitive patterns. Students who have developed a SoB to school are more likely to remain academically motivated and less likely to drop out before completing their education (Goodenow, 1993a). The situational and personal factors that influence students’ SoB are discussed and evidence of the importance of the student teacher relationship is suggested (Baker et al., 1997; Goodenow, 1993b; Osterman, 2000). In view of the importance afforded the teacher student relationship the review concludes by examining the literature relating to teachers’ school experiences and in particular their SoB to school community. The way teachers experience their work environment is likely to have repercussions in their teaching arena, the classroom.

Crisis in Education

In the early 1980’s the American education system was deemed to be in crisis because of a decline in academic engagement and achievement among students. The National Commission on Excellence in Education (1983) in its report A Nation at Risk warned that the standard of education had fallen dramatically. The report stated that average scores attained by students sitting the College Boards Scholastic Aptitude Test had dropped by 50 points on verbal tests and 40 points on mathematical tests in the
period from 1963 to 1980. In addition it was reported that 13% of America's 17 year olds were believed to be functionally illiterate and science achievement among the same cohort had steadily declined as measured by national assessments conducted in 1969, 1973 and 1977. The educational crisis was perceived to be a threat to America's position as a world leader in science and technology and was the catalyst for a concerted effort by educational researchers to investigate and plan school reforms that would address the deficit in students' academic achievement (Block & Haring, 1992).

Baker et al. (1997) suggested that in response to the perceived crisis, the popular and scientific literature focused on the risk factors that children faced such as violence, drug use and family dysfunction, and had not considered the effect of the school environment as a factor. Similarly Schmuck and Schmuck (1992) argued that the reform called for, in such documents as A Nation at Risk, did not eventuate, as researchers had not acknowledged the importance of the relationships between students and teachers and the emotional climate of schools. This apparent omission in the reform research was eventually addressed through qualitative studies, which utilised observation and interview techniques among school student bodies. Baker et al. reported that the research found that many students were not happy in their respective school environments and felt alienated and disenfranchised. The inference from these results is that problems inherent in the educational process related not necessarily to the academic curriculum but, importantly, to the emotional environment in schools.

The emotional environment in Australian schools was discussed by Groundwater-Smith, Brennan, McFadden & Mitchell (2001) who advised that some aspects of education had remained unchanged from colonial times. The classroom climate in traditional schools was governed by an authoritarian style of teaching where the student was the passive recipient of information and the teacher had sole
responsibility for the decisions, rules and knowledge. Competition between students was encouraged by the grading of academic achievement based on comparison with students in the same grade (Berk, 1999; Kale & Cavanaugh, 1996). Grading promotes the in-group/out-group culture by labeling students and reinforces feelings of rejection and alienation among low achievers (Beck & Malley, 1998a; Osterman, 2000; Schmuck & Schmuck, 1992).

Berk (1999) suggests that the student in a traditional classroom may be more successful in terms of academic achievement than the student in a modern open learning classroom, but is less likely to develop into a critical thinker with an appreciation for individual differences. Reasons for this, as suggested by Kail and Cavanaugh (1996), are that in open classrooms students acquire knowledge in collaboration with the teacher, and peers while progress is based on individual improvement. These methods encourage the development of social and problem solving skills and an appreciation of their own progress. Groundwater-Smith et al. (2001) supported the open classroom system, suggesting that in order to better prepare the citizens of the future, the education system should encourage a more cooperative and innovative model of schooling. Beck and Malley (1998a) stated "...modern-day educators tend to emphasize a pedagogy that stresses economy, efficiency and technology over human relationships." (p. 134), indicating that a preoccupation with results oriented education tends to disregard the emotional aspect, as represented by the relationships between students and teachers, of the environment in which students spend a large proportion of their formative years. Further to this Schmuck and Schmuck (1992) argued that the competitive atmosphere in classrooms is not conducive to the optimal intellectual development of students.

As the transience of modern lifestyles, sometimes necessitated by current job market trends, has resulted in the breakdown of the traditional family unit, and, with
parents increasingly obliged to work long hours, quality family socialisation is often infrequent. As a consequence of this trend and due to the amount of time students spend at school, teachers are often one of the most influential role models in children's lives (Beck & Malley, 1998a; Groundwater-Smith et al., 2001). Baker et al. (1997) suggested that with the increasing incidence of children being raised in single parent homes, foster homes or homeless shelters, the school environment should be arranged to provide children with the opportunity to experience meaningful relationships with adults. In support of this Schmuck and Schmuck (1992) propose that the school environment may be the safest environment that some children experience, and the best influence in the development of interpersonal skills and pro-social behaviour. This is supported by research that shows that the relationships students have with their teachers are vital to their academic motivation and social engagement at school (Baker et al.; Osterman, 2000).

For example Wentzel (1998) researched the effect that supportive relationships between 167 sixth graders and their parents, teachers and peers, had on their school motivation. School motivation was operationalised as participant's school and class related interest, their performance and mastery goal orientations, social goal pursuits, academic achievement and psychological distress. Data were gathered by way of questionnaires designed to probe measures of perceived support from peers, teachers and parents, psychological distress, performance and social goal orientations as well as interest in school and class. Data were also gathered from teachers who rated students' interest in class and provided their grade point average to indicate academic achievement. Correlational results indicated that perceived support from teachers was significantly related to all motivational areas except performance goal orientation whereas parent support was related to all motivational areas except pro-social goals and
interest in class. Peer support was only related to interest in school and social goal pursuit. Unfortunately the correlational nature of this study means that no causal claims can be made and the data collection method suffers from the biases that are associated with self-reports. The relatively small number of participants and the fact that they were all students in grade 6 limits the generalisability of the findings to other student populations, however the study adds to the body of information regarding the association between students motivation and supportive relationships in the school community (Baker et al. 1997; Osterman, 2000)

Learning Communities

In America the effort to reform the educational system has focused on relationally oriented education that depicts schools as learning communities instead of bureaucratic rule governed institutions (Baker et al., 1997). Communities, as discussed previously, are groups that form because of the common interests and goals shared by the members. The essence of the community construct is the support that ensues to members. According to Larrivee (2000) schools should place equal emphasis on educating and caring for their students and encourage the formation of bonding relationships among staff and students.

An example of a school that has emphasized the relational aspect of the school experience is provided in a paper by Pariser (2002) who described a community school located in Maine (U. S.) that has been successful in helping high-risk students to complete their education. The high-risk students included students who dropped out of school because of drug related problems, pregnant teenagers and students suspended from their school as a result of behavioural problems. The school philosophy is grounded in respect, trust and the formation of supportive relationships. Teachers at the school work collaboratively with the students and together they become co-creators of
knowledge. Each student at the school has an advisor who works with them on a one-to-one basis to solve any problems that arise. The school’s relational oriented style of education has resulted in 80% of students, who attended the school for at least 2 months, receiving their diplomas and 40% proceeding on to college.

Within Australia a similar example of a relationally oriented school is Oatlands School (2002). Oatlands is a small rural school in Tasmania that was suddenly faced with an influx of recently located students from low income and itinerant families seeking low cost housing. The school’s management was faced with the need to deal with students’ lack of engagement with the school as evident in escalating levels of bullying and truantism. The school has subsequently become an example of how a school environment can benefit from a holistic community approach to reform. The reform employed at Oatlands included social skills objectives as part of the curriculum; it also addressed welfare and behavioural issues that affected the students and staff in a whole school attitude. Oatlands School claimed that one of the keys to its success was team teaching where two teachers are responsible for a unit of 50 students who they teach collaboratively. Students are also assigned to a principal teacher who is responsible for a group of students with whom they develop a supportive relationship. The principal teacher also schedules tutorials with members of their group who may need extension or remedial work. Time is scheduled for staff to engage in collaborative planning where ideas are shared and problems are solved together.

Students at Oatlands School (2002) are allowed to negotiate the curriculum for all subjects other than mathematics and language, thus giving them a sense of influence in their own education. Oatlands’ Care, Welfare and Behaviour management program was developed during whole school meetings and although students were not involved in planning the program they are allowed to negotiate their path through the behaviour
management strategies. As well as the improvement in student outcomes at Oatlands school the success of the school wide innovation is evident in this comment from a year 10 student “I like the kids in my group and I know that working with them has made me better at resolving problems and more assertive. I know I’m expected to have my say and to listen to others, I can see that the teachers work really hard to help us learn. I know a lot more now about the best ways for me to learn.” (p. 2). The papers describing the community school in Maine and Oatlands School, Tasmania were written by directors of the respective schools and as such can be viewed as self-promoting. Future research on the effect of programs designed to improve the emotional environment of schools would benefit from being conducted by independent investigators to reduce the possibility of biased reporting.

Sense of Belonging

According to Pariser (2002) the success of the community school in Maine is underpinned by connection, responsibility and a sense of belonging. In order to experience the benefits that ensue from being part of a community, members must first have a sense of their place in the community or a SoB to a community. Similarly in order to be motivated to function as part of a community, members must have a SoB (Baker et al., 1997; Goodenow, 1993a). A SoB is fundamental to the community construct and, according to Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, is essential to the continued health of an individual. Belonging is at the third level of Maslow’s hierarchy signifying that after the basic essentials of sustenance, shelter and safety have been satisfied, humans need to feel that they belong so that they can proceed to the higher levels of self-esteem, mastery and self-actualisation (Kunc, 1992). Baumeister and Leary (1995) evaluated the hypothesis that the need to belong is a fundamental human motivation to
enjoy and maintain satisfying interpersonal relationships. They posed nine questions for examination in order to investigate the proposed hypothesis.

A fundamental motivation should (a) produce effects readily under all but adverse conditions, (b) have effective consequences, (c) direct cognitive processing, (d) lead to ill effects (such as on health or adjustment) when thwarted, (e) elicit goal-oriented behaviour designed to satisfy it (subject to motivational patterns such as object substitutability and satiation), (f) be universal in the sense of applying to all people, (g) not be derivative of other motives, (h) affect a broad variety of behaviours, and (i) have implications that go beyond immediate psychological functioning. (p. 498).

Baumeister and Leary reviewed the literature pertaining to SoB and found much evidence of a strong association between the need to belong and behavioural, emotional and cognitive patterns and general health. They concluded that the need to belong was in fact a powerful and influential concept in the realm of the human experiences. A SoB signifies acceptance, respect, inclusion and support from members of the community which serves to eliminate feelings of alienation and lack of connection (Goodenow, 1993b). In view of this it seems reasonable to presume that a sense of belonging to school would assist students to feel connected to their school community.

Students' Sense of Belonging to School

Research has been undertaken investigating students' perceptions of school community and their identification with the community as denoted by a SoB to school. For example, Goodenow (1993a) has developed a Psychological Sense of School Membership Scale that explores the students' feelings of acceptance, influence, respect, peer and teacher relationships and belongingness. In developing the scale Goodenow (1993a) found that SoB was the product of a person environment fit, in that it was
dependant on the individual’s personality traits combined with elements of the environment. By this Goodenow inferred that personality differs between individuals and influences the way the environment is viewed, therefore a person with an anxious personality is more likely to focus on negative elements of the environment than someone with a more confident and happy disposition. This has implications for efforts to enhance SoB in that not all children will be influenced alike; their SoB will be based on their perception of how much they are accepted, supported and liked. Beck and Malley (1998b) suggest three strategies for increasing students’ SoB to school: removal of the competitive environment in classrooms, promotion of relationships based on unconditional regard, respect and acceptance, and smaller schools.

Personal factors that may influence children’s SoB to school include ethnicity, socioeconomic status (SES) and gender. Girls reportedly display stronger SoB than boys possibly due to being more emotionally involved in relationships (Goodenow, 1993b), or because boys do not have as strong a desire for social acceptance as girls (Brutsaert & Van Houtte, 2002). Xin Ma (2003) looked at the possible effect of individual and environmental characteristics on students’ SoB to school. Using data collected in a state survey the study examined personal variables of gender, (SES), native status, family characteristics, academic record, self-esteem and health status. SoB was the dependant variable and measured students’ perception of the extent to which they were accepted, respected, included and supported in the school social environment.

The original data were collated from self-report questionnaires and achievement tests completed by 13,751 students in grade six and eight from 240 schools in the New Brunswick area. The data was subjected to hierarchical linear modeling and regression analysis and effect size was used as a measure of comparison. No significant differences were found in effect size for gender, SES and native status in relation to
SoB. However general health and self-esteem were the most significant predictors of SoB. What is not ascertainable from the study is whether students’ self-esteem was a product of having a strong SoB to school as suggested in Maslow’s hierarchy of needs (Kunc, 1992) or whether a SoB developed when self-esteem was high.

Situational factors that have been suggested as influential in students’ SoB to school include the size of student population and school emotional climate. In Xin Ma’s (2003) study mentioned previously no support was found for the hypothesis that the size of a school would influence students’ SoB; however school climate showed statistically significant effects. What is not provided in the study is the definition of large or small schools or the actual number of students per campus of the schools involved in the research, therefore a judgment on the validity of the claim that size of school was not influential to students’ SoB is not possible.

According to Solomon (1999) educational experts recommend that elementary schools should have an enrolment of no more than 200 to 400 students and high schools between 400 and 900 students. Many of the schools in America are capable of housing student enrollments of between 2000 and 4000 students. Recent cost effective decisions in Australian Education have seen the amalgamation of small schools with larger schools in the same area. Beck and Malley (1998b) recommended a move to establishing smaller schools because of their belief that smaller school communities enhance feelings of belonging among students. Cotton (1996) elaborated on this point suggesting that there are more opportunities for students to be involved in school activities in smaller schools because there are fewer students competing for inclusion in activities in a favourable needs to numbers quotient. In addition Raywid (1996) pointed out that the smaller a school the more time teachers are likely to have to devote to each student and this should have the effect of enhancing student-teacher relationships.
Solomon (1999) suggests a link between escalating violent incidence in schools and the size of student enrolment. Mega-schools, such as the infamous Columbine High School which has 1900 students, are believed to engender feelings of isolation among students which can result in violence. Xin Ma (2003) and Beck and Malley (1998b) concurred with this supposition and suggested that a SoB was one element missing in students who attend schools with large student numbers. If feelings of alienation are the catalyst for students becoming violent then large schools are the ideal environment for this to develop. With a large student population it is almost impossible for teachers to acquaint themselves with each and every student, therefore students who are withdrawn and feeling isolated are likely to go unnoticed thus reinforcing their feelings of alienation (Solomon).

The Importance of the Student-Teacher Relationship

Goodenow (1993b) examined the association between young adolescents’ perceived classroom belonging and support and their academic motivation, effort and achievement. School motivation was measured by students’ anticipated success in an academic subject and how much they were interested in and valued the subject, grades achieved and effort as rated by the teacher. Perceived belonging was measured by students’ sense of being included, liked, respected and supported by peers and teachers in the classroom. Of these dimensions Goodenow (1993b) found that the most influential factor affecting effort and achievement was perceived interest, respect and support from teachers. This finding was supported by Baker et al (1997), who posited that teacher caring and support is perceived as having most influence in children’s classroom experience, and Osterman (2000) who states that engagement with school is directly influenced by teacher-student relationships. The influence of the teacher-student relationship weakens as children approach late adolescence and self-assessment
based on prior experience influences evaluation of achievement and peer relationships start to exert their influence on social acceptance (Goodenow, 1993b). The implications of these findings are important because as discussed previously it is during a child’s primary school years that their self-concept develops and out of this concept self-esteem, self-regulation and moral reasoning grow (Berk, 1999). Beck and Malley (1998a) supported this statement suggesting that feelings of connectedness with a community promote a sense of social responsibility based on democratic values.

Teachers' Sense of Belonging to School

The emotional and psychological climate of a school environment is, to a large extent, controlled by the staff (Larrivee, 2000; Xin Ma, 2003). Brandt (1992) is of the opinion that if a school does not provide its teachers with a secure professional environment then it will also not be a welcoming place for students. Unfortunately many teachers do not feel secure in their work environment because the requirements of performance based appraisal and changes in curricular frameworks serve to challenge teachers' beliefs in their competencies (Groundwater-Smith et al., 2001). The administrative tasks that teachers must attend to encroach on their class time and opportunities to enhance the social environment in the classroom are also overridden by the need to produce assessable work. For teachers to function in the best interests of their students it is important that the school environment supports them. Frequently, however, schools are “...impersonal, indifferent, and generally insensitive to the individuals within them.” (Merrell Hansen & Childs, 1998, p.14).

In view of the importance afforded the influence that the teacher student relationship has on students' development of SoB to school it is surprising that so little research has been conducted to investigate the influence that the relationship may have on teachers' SoB to the school community. SoB is not a construct that relates to
childhood experiences alone. High performing companies like McDonald’s and Apple Computers are well aware of the influence that the work environment can have on worker motivation and contentment (Schmuck & Schmuck, 1992). The management of these companies recognise that if staff feel included, respected and appreciated for their contribution toward the company’s goals this will promote SoB in the work place and this is believed to be important to the success of the organisation (Schmuck & Schmuck). Osterman (2000) agrees with this assessment stating that relationships between employees that are supportive and collaborative in nature enhance employee motivation and performance.

The teaching profession is somewhat maligned because of the general public’s perception about the brevity of their working hours. Parsons (2003) suggests that even though teachers’ actual teaching contact is only nine months of the year they will often achieve more in that time than other workers do in twelve months. Katter (1997) illustrates this point by reporting that on retiring after 40 years of teaching he struggled with the loss of SoB to the school community. He explained that his teaching colleagues had become his extended family because of the sheer amount of time he had spent in their company during his years of teaching. Katter’s long service record supports a suggestion made by Long (2003) that a SoB leads to feelings of loyalty.

Employees who enjoy their work and work environment are more likely to be productive and less likely to seek new employment. Marlow, Inman and Betancourt-Smith (1997) cited inadequate support from colleagues and administrative staff as the reason for high resignation rates among beginning teachers in their first ten years of service. Collegiality, or the support and respect of colleagues was quoted as one of the most important influences in teachers’ sense of self-worth, and their performance (Osterman, 2000). A lack of collegial support was reported to result in feelings of
isolation whereas collaborative work among teachers is credited with encouraging a sense of camaraderie and belonging (Cousins, Ross & Maynes, 1994). Pariser (2003) attributed the climate of trust, openness and belonging found in the community school in Maine to the fact that the students and teachers chose to be at the school because they wanted to be involved in the supportive relationships that developed.

Very little research has been conducted examining the way that the school community is experienced by and impacts on teachers. Royal and Rossi (1999) examined predictors of teachers' sense of community (SoC). As previously indicated it is the contention of this review that in order to develop a sense of community one must feel a SoB to that community. The predictors of teachers' SoC are therefore believed to relate to feelings of membership as well. In the study by Royal and Rossi they explored time related variables, such as length of service and time spent interacting with students and staff within the school, and work variables such as mentoring and team teaching. Finally they investigated organisational variables relating to orderliness within the school and attitude toward innovative teaching methods. The results of the study indicated that variables relating to time and organisation were the strongest predictors of teachers' SoC. In particular, teachers' length of service with the school and team teaching arrangements were strongly related to teachers' SoC. The study also suggested that teachers' SoC might differ in respect of their relationships with students, colleagues and management. Battistich et al. (1997) found in a review of the SoC literature that teachers' SoC was influenced by co-operative collegiality, shared educational goals, involvement in decisions affecting their role in the school and in decisions about general school practices. The perceived competence of, and support from, the school principal was also found to be influential in teachers' SoC.
Teachers who are happy in their employment, who feel valued and have a sense of their worth are likely to be more positive and productive in their work (Battistich et al. 1997). The repercussions of this attitude to teaching are likely to result in a classroom environment that supports students in their efforts, encourages collaborative work and appreciates individual differences thus promoting a SoB among students.

Also, in accordance with social learning theory as discussed previously, it is reasonable to assume that children who observe teachers behaving in a positive manner showing support and respect for their colleagues and students are likely to imitate this behaviour. Schools that embrace collaborative work practices such as information exchange, joint planning and sharing of resources, common classroom themes and team teaching are encouraging the type of behaviour that illustrates how supportive relationships work for the benefit of all (Cousins, Ross & Maynes, 1994).

Summary and Directions for Future Research

This review has attempted to critically examine the literature relating to the parameters of the educational environment that children and teachers experience. In doing this it has traced the movement to effect school reform from the critical report produced by the The National Commission on Excellence in Education (1983) to the concept of the caring school community. Much evidence was found in support of the benefit to students and teachers alike of a caring school community. An important aspect of the community construct, SoB, was reported to be vital to students' academic engagement and social development and one of the important influences in students' SoB was found to be the nature of their relationships with teachers. In view of this finding the nature of teachers' school experience was explored and a link between students' SoB and teachers' SoB was established. There was a scarcity of literature examining teachers' SoB to school and the relationship between students' and teachers'
SoB. Given the importance of the school experience to children's cognitive and emotional development and the established link between the nature of the relationship that develops between teacher and student it is suggested that this is an area deserving more attention. The educational reform movement in America sparked the focus on the relational aspect of the educational experience. In Australia some work has commenced investigating the educational experiences of students, however, the educational experiences of teachers has received little attention. In order that a complete understanding can be reached of the functioning of the whole school community research should be undertaken to investigate the experiences of all members of school communities and their interrelationships.
References


The Importance of the Emotional Climate in Schools: An exploration of the Sense of Belonging Experienced by Teachers in an Australian School

Linda Rogerson
The Importance of the Emotional Climate in Schools: An exploration of the Sense of Belonging Experienced by Teachers in an Australian School

Abstract

The emotional climate in schools is characterised by the nature of teacher-student relationships and can be enhanced by the acceptance, respect, inclusion and support that a Sense of Belonging to school engenders (Goodenow, 1993b). Teachers’ SoB to school was explored to understand teachers’ school experiences, and the influence they may have in the classroom environment. Ten primary school teachers were interviewed regarding their SoB to school. Supportive collegial relationships emerged as most influential to teachers’ SoB, with shared goals, emotional safety, size and locality of school and principal’s influence also being important. Additional information about teachers’ SoB should be sought from a variety of educational environments so that strategies can be devised to enhance the school environment for teachers and their students.
The Importance of the Emotional Climate in Schools: An exploration of the Sense of Belonging Experienced by Teachers in an Australian School

Introduction

The emotional climate of a school is characterised by the nature of the relationships that exist between the students and staff at the school. If the teacher-student relationship conveys respect and genuine caring the atmosphere is likely to be welcoming and supportive of students and teachers alike. Unfortunately this is often not the case and Beck and Malley (1998) advise "...modern-day educators tend to emphasize a pedagogy that stresses economy, efficiency and technology over human relationships." (p.134). The school environment has come under scrutiny in recent times due to research that suggested that the reason for students’ academic failure was not necessarily their lack of cognitive capabilities but due to feeling lonely and alienated from the school community (Beck & Malley 1998). This lack of emotional connection to school frequently leads to educational disengagement and, in some instances, seeking solace in gangs of similarly disenfranchised peers (Goodenow, 1993a).

In the early 1980’s the American education system was deemed to be in crisis because of a decline in academic engagement and achievement among students. The National Commission on Excellence in Education (1983) in its report *A Nation at Risk* warned that the standard of education had fallen dramatically. The report stated that average scores attained by students sitting the College Boards Scholastic Aptitude Test had dropped by 50 points on verbal tests and 40 points on mathematical tests in the period from 1963 to 1980. The perceived crisis resulted in a focus on efforts to reform the American educational system that included qualitative studies that investigated how students felt about school. Baker, Terry, Bridger and Winsor (1997) reported that what emerged from the qualitative research was that many students felt alienated and
disenfranchised, the inference being that problems inherent in the educational process related not necessarily to the academic curriculum but, importantly, to the emotional environment in schools.

The emotional environment in Australian schools was discussed by Groundwater-Smith, Brennan, McFadden & Mitchell (2001) who argue that some aspects of education have remained unchanged from colonial times. For example, the classroom climate in traditional schools was governed by an authoritarian style of teaching where the student was the passive recipient of information and the teacher had sole responsibility for the decisions, rules and knowledge. Competition between students was encouraged by the grading of academic achievement based on comparison with students in the same grade (Berk, 1999; Kale & Cavanaugh, 1996). Grading promotes the in-group/out-group culture by labeling students and this reinforces feelings of rejection and alienation among low achievers (Beck & Malley, 1998; Osterman, 2000; Schmuck & Schmuck, 1992).

Learning Communities

The school reform movement in America, motivated by the publication of *A Nation at Risk* (The National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983), focused on relationally oriented education that depicts schools as learning communities instead of bureaucratic rule governed institutions (Baker et al., 1997). The elements of the community construct that would satisfy the need for schools to be more emotionally supportive were identified by McMillan and Chavis (1986). They suggested that there are four elements to the community construct: membership, influence, reinforcement and a shared emotional connection. The issue of membership is afforded particular importance in the development of a sense of community (SoC). Membership is underpinned by a sense of belonging (SoB) to community and is signified by feelings of
acceptance and inclusion. In order to experience the benefits that ensue from being part of a community, members must first have a sense of their place in the community or a SoB to the community. Similarly in order to be motivated to function as a community affiliate, members must have a SoB to the community (Baker et al., 1997; Goodenow, 1993a).

**Sense of Belonging**

Maslow also emphasised the importance of belonging by placing it at the third level of his hierarchy of needs signifying that, after the basic essentials of sustenance, shelter and safety have been satisfied, humans need to feel that they belong so that they can proceed to the higher levels of self-esteem, mastery and self-actualisation (Kunc, 1992). Baumeister and Leary (1995) also emphasised the importance of belonging by claiming that the need to feel a SoB is a deep-seated human motive that affects emotional and cognitive patterns.

Research on students' SoB conducted by Goodenow (1993a) revealed that students who have developed a SoB to school are more likely to remain academically motivated and less likely to drop out before completing their education. A SoB signifies acceptance, respect, inclusion and support from members of the community, which serves to eliminate feelings of alienation and lack of connection (Goodenow, 1993b). Using the dimensions of students' motivation in an academic subject, as measured by their anticipated success, interest and appreciation of the subject, and their perception of the social and emotional environment of the school, as measured by their SoB and the support they felt they had from their teacher and peers, Goodenow (1993b) explored the factors that influence students' effort and achievement at school. Perceived interest, respect and support from teachers was found to be the most influential factor affecting students' effort and achievement. This finding was supported by Baker et al. (1997)
who posited that teacher caring and support is perceived as having most influence in children's classroom experiences. Osterman (2000) conducted an integrative review of the research into students' sense of acceptance within the school community. The research suggests that there is a strong relationship between teacher support and student engagement.

The Importance of the Teacher-Student Relationship

The influence of the teacher-student relationship is of particular importance in the primary school years. Young children spend a large proportion of their early years in interactions with teachers and these relationships can have a considerable influence on a child's emerging self-perspective (Beck & Malley, 1998). During their early school years children develop a concept of self. They develop the ability to think about and describe themselves in terms of personality traits rather than in purely physical terms. The refinement of children's self-concept is dependant upon cognitive ability, especially language development, and by the opinions and feedback from significant others. In addition social learning theory suggests that children learn by observing and imitating appropriate behaviour from significant people in their environment (Berk, 1999).

Due to the amount of time children spend in school, teachers become significant people in their lives. The attitudes displayed by teachers together with comments they may make regarding the children's work and behaviour are potential influences in the way children think, feel and value themselves (Berk, 1999). Attitudes displayed by teachers can invoke an educational self-fulfilling prophecy whereby children internalise the opinion teachers have of them and live up to their expectations (Kail & Cavanaugh, 1996). Although the educational self-fulfilling prophecy can have positive consequences for children who are academically successful, and receive favourable comments on their work, it can herald the downward spiral toward early withdrawal from school for
students whose lack of academic success results in unfavourable attitudes and remarks from teachers.

The influence of the teacher-student relationship weakens as children approach late adolescence when self-assessment based on prior experience influences evaluation of achievement and peer relationships start to exert their influence on social acceptance (Goodenow, 1993b). The implications of these findings are important because as mentioned previously it is during a child's primary school years that their self-concept develops and out of this concept self-esteem, self-regulation and moral reasoning grow (Berk, 1999). Beck and Malley (1998) support this statement suggesting that feelings of connectedness with a community promote a sense of social responsibility based on democratic values.

Teachers' Sense of Belonging to School

In view of the importance afforded the influence that the teacher-student relationship has on students' development of SoB to school it is surprising that so little research has been conducted to investigate the influence that the relationship may have on teachers' SoB to the school community. SoB is not a construct that relates to childhood experiences alone. High performing companies like McDonald's and Apple Computers are well aware of the influence that the work environment can have on worker motivation and contentment (Schmuck & Schmuck, 1992). The management of these companies recognises that if staff feel included, respected and appreciated for their contribution toward the company's goals this will promote a SoB in the workplace, which is important to the success of the organisation (Schmuck & Schmuck). Osterman (2000) agrees with this assessment stating that relationships between employees that are supportive and collaborative in nature enhance employee motivation and performance.
The teaching profession is somewhat maligned because of the general public's perception of the scarcity of their working hours. Parsons (2003) suggests that even though teachers are only contracted to work nine months of the year they will often achieve more in that time than other workers do in twelve months. A retired teacher illustrates this point by reporting that on retiring after 40 years of service he struggled with the loss of SoB to the school community. Katter (1997) advised that his teaching colleagues had become his extended family because of the sheer amount of time he had spent in their company during his years of teaching. Katter's long service record supports a suggestion made by Long (2003) that a SoB leads to feelings of loyalty.

Employees who enjoy their work and work environment are more likely to be productive and less likely to seek new employment. High resignation rates among beginning teachers in their first ten years of service were attributed to inadequate support from colleagues and administrative staff (Marlow, Inman and Betancourt-Smith 1997). Collegiality, or the support and respect of colleagues, was cited as one of the most important influences in teachers' sense of self-worth, and their performance (Osterman, 2000). Jarzabkowski (2002) describes collegiality as "... teachers' involvement with peers on any level, be it intellectual, moral, political, social and/or emotional." (p. 2) and advises that in terms of teachers' job satisfaction they valued the relationships they had with peers and students above any other factor. A lack of collegial support was reported to result in feelings of isolation whereas collaborative work among teachers is credited with encouraging a sense of camaraderie and belonging (Cousins, Ross & Maynes, 1994).

Very little research has been conducted examining the way that the school community is experienced by and impacts on teachers. Royal and Rossi (1999) examined predictors of teachers' sense of community (SoC). As previously indicated it
is the contention of this report that in order to develop a sense of community one must feel a SoB to that community. The predictors of teachers' SoC are therefore believed to relate to feelings of membership as well. In the study by Royal and Rossi they explored time related variables, such as length of service and time spent interacting with students and staff within the school, and work variables such as mentoring and team teaching. Finally they investigated organisational variables relating to orderliness within the school and attitude toward innovative teaching methods. The results of the study indicated that variables relating to time and organisation were the strongest predictors of teachers' SoC. In particular teachers' length of service with the school and team teaching arrangements were strongly related to teachers' SoC. The study also suggested that teachers' SoC might differ in respect of their relationships with students, colleagues and management. Battistich, Solomon, Watson and Schaps (1997) found, in a review of the SoC literature, that teachers' SoC was influenced by co-operative collegiality, shared educational goals, involvement in decisions affecting their role in the school and in decisions about general school practices. The perceived competence of, and support from, the school principal was also found to be influential in teachers' SoC. Osterman (2000) explored the question of how schools influence students' SoC and found that teachers make an important and distinct contribution to students' well being. Further they found that collegiality among teachers was the most important influence in their performance, sense of efficacy and commitment to teaching.

Objectives and Research Questions

The way that children feel about school, and in particular their SoB to school, has been recognised as instrumental in their continued engagement with education. Research has suggested that the nature of the relationship that students have with their teachers was the most influential factor in their interest and achievement in education.
In view of the importance of the teacher-student relationship, how teachers feel about their work environment is likely to have repercussions in the classroom, and ultimately in the school experience of their students. In spite of the apparent connection between teachers' school experience and students' educational engagement very little research has been conducted in this area. Therefore the aim of this research is to explore teachers' experiences of their work environment by examining teachers' SoB within the school community. There are two main questions to be posed in the study:

1. What do teachers understand by SoB?
2. What is their experience of SoB within the school?

Methodology

Research Design

This research project aims to explore teachers' experiences of SoB to school and in order to achieve this a qualitative study, phenomenological in nature, utilising personal interviews between participants and the researcher, was deemed to be appropriate. A semi-structured interview schedule (Appendix A) using open-ended questions and prompts, was generated based on the findings of Goodenow (1993b) that acceptance, respect, inclusion and support from community members signifies a SoB. The first question was designed to encourage participants to consider the meaning of SoB in order that they could then apply that meaning to their experiences in their work environment in answer to the second question. A semi-structured design using open-ended questions allows participants the freedom to relate their experiences while providing the researcher with opportunities to follow up on topics of interest that may emerge during the course of the interview (Smith, 1995). Data collected in interviews are often rich in language descriptive of the participant's day-to-day reality and this
should facilitate a deeper understanding of how teachers experience their work environment. Interviews were audio taped in order that a permanent record be available for future verification and demographic information regarding the age and gender of participants as well as their length of service at the school, the number of years they had been teaching and their employment status (permanent or contract) was collected to add contextual information to the data collected.

Sample

The school chosen as the research site was located in the Northern Metropolitan Education District of Perth. This area was selected because it has experienced population increases due to sub-division and re-development of residential property in recent years and the resultant increase in population has impacted on school enrolments in the area. The school is a co-educational catholic primary school and has an enrolment of 257 pupils from kindergarten through to year 7. The school draws enrolments from the surrounding middle class suburbs which it has served for the last 56 years. The school is run under the auspices of the Catholic Education Office and is managed by a school board. The school board members include the school principal, the parish priest, parish representatives and parents of students in the school; however the school principal is responsible for staff appointments. The school has a non-teaching, female principal and a male assistant principal with 40% release time. The staff consists of 9 full time teachers, 1 part-time teacher (kindergarten) and 5 teacher assistants.

This was an exploratory project therefore, in accordance with Lincoln and Guba (1985), a sample with maximum variation was desirable consequently the only requirement of sample selection was that participants be qualified teachers. The approach to the principal of the school was met with strong support and resulted in the canvassing of the entire teaching staff for their participation. The sample consisted of 10
teachers, 7 female and 3 male. Demographic information collected from participants at the commencement of interviews revealed that the sample was varied and ranged from young teachers in their first tenure to more mature teachers with up to 26 years of teaching experience. The average age of participants was 35 and the mean length of service in current employment was 3.75 years, with two of the participants having served at the school in excess of 10 years. All but 3 of the participants were employed on contract basis as a result of maternity or long service leave absences among permanent staff.

**Data Collection Procedures**

Information letters giving the background to and purpose of the proposed research together with a letter of consent (Appendices B and C) were supplied to the school’s principal for onward distribution to potential participants. All participants signed the consent form prior to commencement of the interviews thereby signifying that they had read the information letter and were aware that interviews would take approximately 60 minutes and would be audio taped and later transcribed. Participants were assured that interviews would be confidential and at no time would their name be reported along with their interview. Interviews were arranged and conducted over a four-week period at participant’s convenience. Interviews were of 30 to 40 minutes duration and 8 of the participants were interviewed during pupil free time in their classroom, the remaining 2 interviews were conducted in the staffroom which was unoccupied at the time. The researcher maintained a contact summary schedule to record additional information considered relevant to the interview. Approval to conduct the research was obtained from the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Community Services, Education and Social Sciences of Edith Cowan University prior to commencement of the research project. In respect of ethical considerations for the
welfare of the participants, participation was voluntary and participants were informed about the subject to be explored.

Data Analysis

In order to present the voices and perceptions of the participants interviews were transcribed verbatim to facilitate the use of quotes to illustrate themes that might emerge from the data (Creswell, 1998). Transcripts were read several times to increase familiarity with the information. In accordance with coding strategies suggested by Miles and Huberman (1994) data collected, including demographic information and relevant observations from the contact summary schedule, was subjected to thematic content analysis. Codes were developed inductively from the data and listed with a description of what each code represented. The codes were then applied to groups of words in the transcripts that were indicative of the code description. The list of codes was then examined to identify descriptives that represented common themes. In this way data reduction continued until a definitive set of themes was generated. A data display schedule was constructed to list the themes that emerged along with excerpts that illustrated these themes.

Findings and Interpretations

An Understanding of Sense of Belonging

As mentioned previously the first question was designed to stimulate participant’s thoughts about a SoB. A thematic content analysis conducted on the data collected in response to the question revealed four themes. Emotional and psychological safety, denoting feelings of comfort, security and being welcomed into the group. The second theme was organisational culture which referred to the function of the group represented by shared goals, a sense of achieving together, knowing how a group works and where you fit in. The final themes, value to the group and sense of self worth are
linked in that a sense of self worth is likely to be present along with being appreciated, respected and necessary to the group. The last two themes raise the interesting question of whether a healthy self-esteem is the product of feeling a SoB as suggested by Maslow in his hierarchy of needs, or whether a SoB develops when self-esteem is high. On this point Xin Ma (2003) suggests that the relationship between SoB and self-esteem is circular in nature in that they reinforce each other.

Excerpts from interviews that illustrate the themes are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Main Themes and Illustrative Excerpts Relating to Teachers' Understanding of a SoB

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Illustrative Excerpt</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Emotional and psychological</td>
<td><em>I guess it's a sense of feeling safe and feeling that you are able to be yourself</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Safety</td>
<td><em>Fitting in and sort of not feeling like an outsider</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organisational culture</td>
<td><em>Having ... the same common goals and ideas, a sense of achieving something together</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>When you feel that you can identify with the community and that you have a place and can contribute</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Value to the group</td>
<td><em>To feel needed and even essential I suppose</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sense of self worth.</td>
<td><em>You're confident with yourself, you're confident with who you are as a person</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sense of Belonging Experiences

Thematic analysis of the responses to the question regarding the SoB teachers experienced in their school revealed similarities to the themes discussed above however
they dichotomised into dimensions of professional and personal issues. The themes; value to group and sense of self worth were subsumed under collegiality and psychological and emotional safety. The emergent themes and sub-themes are presented in Table 2:

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Main Themes</th>
<th>Sub-themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Collegiality</td>
<td>Professional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Personal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organisational culture</td>
<td>Shared goals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychological and emotional safety</td>
<td>Professional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Personal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Characteristics</td>
<td>Size of school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>School locality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Management</td>
<td>Principal's influence</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Collegiality

Collegiality emerged as the most influential theme to teachers' SoB. Collegiality from the professional sub-theme perspective refers to the support afforded work colleagues and is evident in the collaborative behaviour, open communication and respect shared between teachers. Osterman (2000) claimed that collegial support was one of the most important influences in teachers' performance, self-efficacy and commitment to teaching. The following comments from participants support this claim:

*An interest in my professional opinion made me feel accepted ... I feel that if my position is valued then I feel like I belong.*
That people ask me for things for them or if I can help out as well and I think that sort of makes me feel that I am part of the school

From the personal sub-theme perspective collegiality is represented by non-teaching related social interaction between teachers. This interaction can be in the form of organised out of school social activities or it can be the staffroom socialisation that occurs during morning tea and lunch as is evident in this comment by one participant:

*They are people who get together and they have a social time, they get together in the staffroom and have an eating time and a talking time*

Jarzabkowski (2002) posits that positive social relationships are necessary in order that genuine collaboration can take place. In addition Jarzabkowski suggests that social interaction among staff may be instrumental in alleviating the emotional pressures associated with teaching. From a formal point of view the school has a social committee that organises social activities for the staff and informally the staff seem to enjoy friendships that extend beyond school hours. This works well for some people but in certain cases the friendships that are of long standing tended to alienate some teachers:

*There is quite a cliquey group in the staff which I am not a part of and sometimes that can be a bit of an issue*

The beneficial effect that the social interaction between teachers can have on students was proposed by one participant:

*I think children are quite perceptive they like, I think they generally like to see teachers get on with each other just in fun ways, you know in the classroom and out in the playground, and if they see two teachers get on well I think it's a positive thing... the boys (male teachers) especially, they are always having jokes and carries on and I think that's a very good aspect of this school there is that humour coming through and I think children need to see that*
This comment is pertinent to the social learning theory suggestion that children learn by observation (Berk, 1999).

Most participants cited both professional and personal aspects of collegiality as being part of their experience of SoB to the school, however some participants did not feel as included socially as others but this did not seem to preclude them from feeling a SoB to school. This suggests that it is not always necessary to feel both professionally and socially a member of a group to identify with that group and have a SoB.

Organisational Culture

This theme refers to the shared philosophies, ideologies and values that guide the school community and is indicative of the shared educational goals that Battistich et al. (1997) identified as influential in teachers' SoC. In response to a query regarding what made them feel part of the school community one participant replied:

*I guess the goals, probably the life time goals and that is being – doing something for children, that is everyone, I feel, we've all got that same purpose we all have that love of wanting to impart knowledge to children*

Being a Catholic school shared philosophies are an integral part of the curriculum so it is not surprising that this emerged as a theme important to teachers' SoB. For one participant who did not have a strong sense of social connection with the school the spiritual aspect was of particular significance:

*I do belong here in a Catholic school... for me the Catholic side of things is the most important thing*

For this participant perhaps their SoB was not necessarily felt in connection to the school but to the catholic educational system instead.

Input into the decision making processes in the school emerged as another important aspect of the organisational culture and was also identified by Battistich et al,
(1997) as one of the influences on teachers’ SoC. All teachers agreed that decisions made regarding the running of their classroom were generally in their hands however with decisions made regarding the whole school they felt that they were encouraged to express their opinions but did not have a controlling influence.

Yes I guess if I’ve ever had any points to raise or views to share they’ve been accepted, or sometimes accepted, but listened to anyway

Psychological and Emotional Safety

The psychological and emotional safety theme, as with the collegiality theme, had professional and personal aspects. Being made to feel welcome on first being employed featured in a number of interviews:

Well at first ... they all sort of took me under their wing and showed me what I needed to know ... helped me fit in

Before I started I came in for morning tea I met the staff ... a great introduction to the beginning of the year in an environment that was happy and friendly

Being included, feeling that I can talk to anyone whether it be professional or personal.

The personal aspect of the psychological and emotional safety theme relates to the issue of support and understanding during personal difficulties. According to Jarzabkowski (2002) the personal aspect of collegiality namely the social interaction among staff increases the prospects of emotional support for personal issues. For one of the participants this was of particular importance because of the severe disability suffered by his daughter:

We had our children here, we had our problems with our children here and they have been so flexible to allow us to do what we needed to do ... they were very understanding and very accepting of the fact that I needed time off
For another a participant support was as simple as:

That little bit of understanding that people do have personal issues.

Size of School

The school characteristic sub-theme relating to size of school encompassed negative and positive aspects to big and small schools. In general aspects relating to SoB to large schools were negative:

Big school is not better; I think again you get into that anonymity and people lose their sense of belonging

I did work in a big school and it was awful, 100 staff and you never see them all, you just feel like there is all this other stuff going on that you don’t really know anything about

The only negative aspect to small schools related to staff cliques that developed over time and tended to make it difficult for new staff to feel fully included. On the positive side, by comparison with experiences working in bigger schools the small school was seen as:

More homely, more kind, they were just more like a family unit, a community

Participants experiences at large schools indicate that emotional and psychological safety is perhaps more evident in small schools whereas large schools would appear to suffer from lack of collegial support.

School Locality

The sub-theme of school locality arose out of the negative experiences some participants had had when working at country schools. The negative experiences were attributed to the nature of some of the staff employed in country schools and their attitude to work which made it difficult to feel a SoB to the school:

Like in N. we came to do the job which was teach and then go home, it was very
different people weren't so much interested in making things run smoothly

R. I felt that was very stand-offish... the staff never met as the entire staff... I felt that was very static, you just go in do your job and go home... I didn't put in any where near the effort, a, that I could have or b, that I should have, into those kids

The following observation was made about the staff at country schools:

I think they were so desperate for teachers and they tend to take what they can get... basically teachers who couldn't get a job anywhere else so you have got teachers that have skills lacking

These comments regarding experiences at country schools indicate a lack of collegial support and common goals among staff and are disturbing in view of a recent news article regarding a 15 year old boy who had hanged himself. According to his family the only stress he had felt in his life related to school, he had told his sister that he felt he was a failure and was unwelcome at his school in country Western Australia (Kelly, 2004).

Principal’s Influence

The final theme identified in relation to teachers’ SoB to school was the influence that the school principal has over the school climate. This theme was also identified by Battistich et al. (1997) as influential to teachers’ SoC. The information that emerged from the data stressed the fact that if the Principal did not have good people skills and was not a good leader then the school atmosphere suffered:
I think it all comes from the Principal and their energy and their vision ... if the Principal can't keep the momentum going then it's very hard for everyone to keep going because they need leadership.

The implications of this are that the emotional climate in a school is not necessarily a constant because of the effect that the customary relocation of school principals from time-to-time may have on it.

Conclusions

This study aimed to explore teachers' school experiences by examining their SoB to the school community. The main theme that emerged as important to teachers' SoB to school was collegiality, which is supportive of the findings of Baker et al. (1997) that the emotional climate, as represented by the relationships between school community members, influences the way that school is experienced by teachers and students. However, whereas students' SoB is strongly influenced by the teacher-student relationship, teachers' SoB to school was found to be influenced by the collegial relationships among teachers. The difference between the importance that students and teachers place on the teacher-student and teacher-teacher relationship is illustrative of Goodenow's (1993b) suggestion that as adolescents mature the influence of the teacher-student relationship diminishes and relationships with peers are more important to their SoB to school.

Corroborative evidence was also found for Cousins, Ross and Maynes' (1994) report that collaborative work among teachers encourages a sense of camaraderie and belonging, and for the Battistich et al. (1997) finding that cooperative collegiality influences teachers' SoC, which, as mentioned previously, is underpinned by a SoB to school. The themes generated from this study also lent support to the Battistich et al. (1997) finding that shared educational goals, input in decisions and perceived...
competence and support of the school principal were influential in teachers' SoC. No support was found for Royal and Rossi's (1999) finding that length of service was a predictor of teachers' SoC, however in the present study only two of the participant's had been employed at the school in excess of five years so long service was not a dominant variable.

In support of Jarzabkowski's (2002) observation that collaborative work is at the heart of professional collegiality, collaboration was very much in evidence in the transcripts of participant's interviews. The re-writing of the school mission statement and in-school professional development programs were accomplished during collaborative group work. From the open communication that occurs during collaborative work it is possible for shared ideals and objectives to develop, these were also cited as important to the SoB of participants interviewed. As was mentioned previously the school from which participants were drawn was a catholic school so it was not unexpected for shared ideals to be important to them. All participants were of the catholic faith consequently it was not possible to establish whether the employment of non-catholic staff might have an effect on the organisational structure of the school or whether a non-catholic teacher would find the lack of common religious beliefs and practices an impediment to developing a SoB to a catholic school.

In the transcripts of interviews the psychological and emotional safety theme was alluded to frequently in relation to initial experiences on joining the school staff. An unofficial mentoring program seemed to be in place at the school in that experienced teachers teamed up with new recruits offering them advice, information and support. This is an example of the work variables of mentoring and team teaching that Royal & Rossi (1999) identified as predictors of teachers' SoC. These findings have implications
for the development of strategies aimed at engendering and enhancing teachers' SoB to school, especially for beginning teachers in their first placement.

It is hypothesised that there is a relationship between psychological and emotional safety and collegiality in that for collegial collaboration to take place it would be necessary for the collaborators to feel comfortable in expressing their ideas freely. At the same time being involved in supportive collegial interaction is likely to boost feelings of comfort and safety within the group. As with Xin Ma's (2003) suggestion that the relationship between SoB and self-esteem is circular, perhaps the same can be said of collegiality and psychological and emotional safety in that they each nurture the other.

One aspect of the school experience that was not addressed in this study is the person-environment fit that Goodenow (1993a) hypothesised was the productive constituent of a SoB. By this Goodenow implied that an individual's personality traits combined with elements of the environment will dictate their perception of a situation. Future research into SoB could be strengthened by the inclusion of some information regarding the environment personality interaction. Certainly the development of strategies aimed at enhancing teacher SoB would be improved by the acknowledgement that not all strategies will suit every personality type.

This study was conducted at a small private religious school and therefore represents a singular perspective on the variety of school contexts that exist. It is therefore suggested that future studies should encompass secular as well as religious schools of various sizes and locations so that any additional useful information regarding teachers' SoB to school may be revealed. This is believed to be of importance in view of the negative comments made by some participants in relation to their experiences at large schools and at schools located in country areas. Although this study
has been limited to primary school populations because of the emphasis placed on the teacher-student relationship in the development of primary students' SoB, this does not suggest that the experiences of senior school teachers are not also worthy of investigation.

Finally, the influence that the leadership style of the school principal has on teachers' SoB to school emerged as a theme in this study, it therefore seems a natural progression that the school experiences of principals be investigated in order that a complete understanding of the school environment be constructed. If schools are to be thought of as learning communities then it is important that the experiences of all the community members be considered. It is hoped that this study will encourage future research into the school experience and that the information that emerges be used to develop strategies to enhance the emotional climate of school for the benefit of the whole school community.
References


Appendix A

Interview Schedule

1. What do you understand by SoB?

2. What is your experience of SoB within this school?

Prompts

a. Do you feel accepted/not accepted by the school?

b. What makes you feel part/not part of your school?

c. Do you feel you have input into decisions made at the school?
Appendix B

Invitation to Participate in Research

Dear Teacher,

My name is Linda Rogerson and the research you are being invited to participate in is designed to investigate teachers' experiences of Sense of Belonging to a school community, and forms part of a Psychology (Honours) degree being undertaken by me. The research has been approved by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Community Services, Education and Social Sciences at Edith Cowan University.

As a participant you will be asked to discuss your experience of Sense of Belonging in an interview with the researcher. The aim of the research is to understand how Australian school communities are experienced and how they may be enhanced. The interview will last approximately one hour and will be audio taped.

Please be assured that any information you provide will be held in strict confidence by the researcher. At no time will your name be reported along with your interview; participants will be identified by number only, and only the researcher and her supervisor will have access to the data. At the conclusion of the project a report of the results will be made available to you. Your participation in this project is totally voluntary and you are free to withdraw at any time, without penalty, and to remove any data you may have contributed.

Any questions concerning this project can be directed to Linda Rogerson on 9246 2794 or by e-mail at ngrogerson@iinet.net.au or my supervisors Dr Lynne Cohen 6304 5575 or Julie Ann Pooley 6304 5591. If you wish to speak to someone independent of this research, please contact Professor Alison Garton 6304 5110. Please contact the researcher, using the above contact details, as soon as possible if you are willing to participate.

Thank you for your consideration,

Linda Rogerson
Appendix C

Consent Form: Sense of Belonging to School Community

I (the participant) have read the information above and any questions I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I agree to participate in an interview, on the understanding that I may withdraw at any time, and I agree to the interview being recorded on audiotapes. I agree that research data gathered for this project will be published provided I am not identifiable.

Participant ___________________________ Date ___________________________

Interviewer ___________________________ Date ___________________________
Appendix D

Manuscript Submission Information for Journal of Educational Psychology

Journal of Educational Psychology

Manuscript Submission Guidelines

Manuscript preparation. Authors should prepare manuscripts according to the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association (5th ed.); helpful information can also be found at http://www.apa.org/journals/guide.html. Instructions for typing and preparing tables, figures, references, metrics, and the abstract appear in the Manual. All manuscripts must include an abstract containing a maximum of 120 words typed on a separate page. Authors should follow APA guidelines for bias-free language and expressing ideas (see Chapter 2 of the Manual). Adequate description of participants is critical to the science and practice of educational psychology; this allows readers to assess the results, determine generalizability of findings, and make comparisons in replications, extensions, literature reviews, or secondary data analyses. Authors should see guidelines for sample/subject description in the Manual. Appropriate indexes of effect size or strength of relationship should be incorporated in the results section of the manuscript (see pp. 5, 25-26 of the Manual). Information that allows the leader to assess not only the significance but also the magnitude of the observed effects or relationships clarifies the importance of the findings. APA can now place supplementary materials online, which will be available via the Journal's Web page as noted above. To submit such materials, please see www.apa.org/journals/supplementalmaterial.html for details.