



# Teacher Perceptions of School Connectedness of Students with Emotional and Behavioural Disorders

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## Abstract

*The purpose of this study was to examine the perceptions of teachers about the level of connectedness students with emotional and behavioural disorders (EBD) had to their school environments. An online survey adapted version of the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (Goodman, 1997) was used to measure teacher perceptions. Online surveys were administered to 66 teachers that work with students with EBDs in eastern Australia. Scores on the adapted survey were used to determine if teachers of students with EBD felt their students are connected to their school environments. Comparisons were made between teachers' perceptions on comprehensive school campuses and teachers' perceptions on specialized campuses.*

**Keywords:** Emotional & behavioural disorders, School connectedness, Teacher perceptions

Students with emotional and behavioural disorders (EBD) typically exhibit challenging behaviour in the classroom; however, the traditional exclusionary disciplinary responses employed by schools exacerbate the situation (Kern, 2015). Suspension and expulsion not only remove the academic and behavioural supports these students receive in school, they also have a negative effect on the relationship between students with EBD and their teachers and administrators. This can have the outcome of further isolating students with EBD, who characteristically struggle to integrate in the school environment, resulting in a breakdown in their connectedness to their school (Evans & Lester, 2012). Blum (2005) argues that when students are not connected to their school environments, there is a greater probability that they will engage in health-risk behaviours such as substance abuse, engaging in violent or deviant behaviour, and are at increased risk for social isolation, depression, and suicide. Students with EBD are at an increased risk because they may already struggle with other issues such as anxiety or post-traumatic stress disorder, which may further isolate them (Gresham & Kern, 2004; Kauffman & Landrum, 2013; Kern, 2015).

School connectedness is defined as the student's beliefs that school staff, teachers and administrators on their school campus care about their learning and more specifically about their overall wellbeing (Blum & Libbey, 2004). Researchers have found that school connectedness is an important factor in reducing the likelihood that students will engage in behaviours that may compromise their physical and mental health (Blum & Libbey, 2004; McNeely, Nonnemaker, & Blum, 2002). Researchers also have linked school connectedness to an increase in student academic success (Blum & Libbey, 2004; Farrington et al., 2012). Ultimately, the goal of discipline for all students, including students with EBD, should be to increase students' time learning, while also incorporating time to address their social and emotional needs involving learning opportunities such as handling stress and anxiety, resolving conflicts, working with others, developing interpersonal relationships, and successfully navigating the school environment (Evans & Lester, 2012; Kern, 2015).

Quality connections between teachers and classmates create a sense of belonging to a school (Loukas, Suzuki, & Horton, 2006). Students who have this connection to a school are more likely to adjust to the school social environment and display less challenging behaviour in the classroom and on school campuses (Loukas et al., 2006). Students with EBD may have difficulty connecting with their peers and adults, which can lead to social isolation, alienation, and the development of mental health issues (CDC, 2009; Lane, Carter, Pierson, & Glaeser 2004). Consequently, students with EBD have more disciplinary reports; spend significantly more time out of class due to discipline, and miss more days of school (Lane et al., 2004). Because of these factors, these students are at a particularly higher risk of becoming disconnected from the school environment.

## School Connectedness

The CDC (2009) organized the concept of school connectedness into four components: (a) the development of teacher-student relationships; (b) positive peer relationships; (c) educational commitment; and (d) safe and positive school environments (CDC, 2009). Most school connectedness research has centered on students in general education settings, although due to the nature of inclusive education, it is plausible that some of the students in those studies had disabilities. The few studies that have focused on school connectedness of students with disabilities had small sample sizes. Most research involving the perceptions of students with emotional and behavioural disabilities towards school explore each of the four components above as separate entities, rather than viewing school connectedness as a holistic concept.

### Development of teacher-student relationships

McLaughlin and Clarke (2010) reviewed research published 1995-2010 in the area of the importance of teacher-student relationships and found that although many studies acknowledged the importance of these relationships, very few conducted detailed explorations in the area. They also found an absence of using the research for policy and practice development. McLaughlin and Clarke emphasized the importance of the attachment that students have to teachers in regard to their overall connectedness with school, academic outcomes, and emotional well-being. When adolescents feel that they are being supported, cared for, and listened to, it contributes to feelings of being safe and belonging.

### Educational commitment

The educational commitment of students with EBD is often measured under the construct of student engagement. Student engagement can be defined as “the degree to which students participate in all aspects of the school environment (academic and social) and assume the appropriate level of responsibility for their own learning and behaviour” (PBIS.org, n.d.). Appleton, Christensen, and Furlong (2008) describe student engagement as a multidimensional construct, with a myriad of definitions, ranging from two to four dimensions. The most commonly cited dimensions were cognitive engagement, academic engagement, and behavioural engagement. Appleton, et al. (2008) stress the need for a common definition in order to better plan interventions to prevent school dropout, as engagement is seen as a major factor for this.

### Positive peer relationships

The impact of peer relationships during adolescence is well known (Brown & Larson, 2009), so it is logical that positive peer relationships at school would contribute to a greater sense of connectedness. Veiga, Wentzel, Melo, Tiago, Faria, and Galvão (2014) completed a narrative review on the connection between peer relations and student school engagement. Three areas of peer relations were identified: (a) acceptance, (b) friendship, and (c) proximity. Peer acceptance was found to be positively associated with school satisfaction, motivation, and socially appropriate behaviours. Adolescents with a large number of friends tend to have better grades, higher completion of school tasks, and a higher level of school adjustment and engagement (Yu & Gamble, 2010). Yu and Gamble also found that students with a lot of friends displayed a lower frequency of delinquent behaviours.

### Safe and positive school environments

Safe and positive school environments are a crucial part of school connectedness. Gage, Larson, and Sugai (2016) examined the effect of students' perceptions of their school climate on their social and behavioural outcomes, measured by office discipline referrals. They discovered that students with the most challenging behaviours benefit from teachers reinforcing their appropriate behaviour and parents reinforcing the value and importance of school. They also surmised that students who exhibited high levels of problem behaviours performed worse academically than their well-behaved peers. Gage et al. suggested that schools create positive school environments by reinforcing positive behaviour, working with parents to build a culture that stresses the importance of education, and providing behavioural and academic supports to students at-risk for or exhibiting problem behaviours. They posited that positive school climates align with positive academic, social, and behavioural outcomes for all students.

## Teacher Perceptions

Although extensive data have been collected regarding general education students' levels of school connectedness, very little is understood regarding levels of school connectedness of students with EBD (Chapman, Buckley, Sheehan, & Shochet, 2013; Hecker, Young, & Caldarella, 2014). As these students have difficulty creating and maintaining positive relationships with their teachers and peers, typically exhibit low levels of work completion and school attendance, and have a higher rate of school removal than do any other disability population, they conceivably would have low levels of school connectedness (Hecker et al., 2014; Reschly & Christenson, 2006;

U.S. Department of Education, 2014). To further understand the construct of school connectedness in relation to behaviour exhibited by students with EBD, teachers of students with EBD were surveyed. Teacher's perceptions of students can not only influence personal practice, but can also influence the behaviours of the student's motivation and behaviour within the classroom (Woodcock & Vialle, 2011). Consequently, teachers who perceive students as problematic due to engagement in challenging behaviour may lower their own expectations and begin to develop negative attitudes towards those students (Meltzer, Reddy, Pollica, Roditi, Sayer, & Theokas, 2004; Woodcock & Vialle, 2011). This is particularly true for teachers of students with EBD, who often struggle to consistently address challenging internalized and externalized behaviours (Conley, Marchant, & Caldarella, 2014).

Conversely, teachers who perceive students as working hard to overcome obstacles and issues related to their disability are more likely to maintain high behavioural expectations (Meltzer et al., 2004). To this end, it is important to understand teacher perceptions concerning levels of school connectedness of students with EBD, as positive teacher perceptions are fundamental to designing effective interventions (Landrum, Cook, Tankersley, & Fitzgerald, 2007). The purpose of this study was to examine the perceptions of teachers of students with EBD's connectedness to the school environment. Specifically, to answer the following research questions:

1. To what extent do teachers of students with EBD feel their students are connected to their current school environment?
2. Are there differences in the perceptions of teachers on comprehensive campuses and the perceptions of teachers on specialized campuses?

The aim of this pilot study was to gain an understanding of the perceived level of school connectedness of students with EBD in both the comprehensive campus environment and the specialized school environment. Results from this study will be used to generate further studies exploring school connectedness of students with EBD and designing interventions to foster high levels of school connectedness for students with EBD. Outcomes from this study also will add depth to the current school connectedness literature, which has typically excluded students with EBD, who are among the most disciplined group of students with the poorest student outcomes.

## Method

Approval to conduct this study was obtained through the human research ethics committee at the university of the second author. Sixty-six teachers working with students with EBD participated in this study. These teachers were either qualified general education or special education teachers who worked with at least one student with EBD on either a comprehensive school campus or a specialized school campus in a large metropolitan area of eastern Australia. After removing incomplete participant data, teacher response data for 94 students with EBD was used in this study. Of the student data reported, 53 students were attending a comprehensive school campus and 41 students were attending a specialized school campus.

## Setting

Participants in this study taught at either comprehensive or specialized school campuses. Comprehensive school campuses are schools where most students receive direct instruction in academic curricula. Students with and without disabilities attend classes on comprehensive campuses in either a single classroom or in multiple content specific classrooms (i.e., math, science, social studies) depending on the school level (i.e., primary or secondary).

Specialized school campuses are schools for students in years one through twelve whose aggressive or delinquent behaviour has resulted in their removal from a comprehensive campus. Programs on specialized campuses are more structured, with classrooms located on secure campuses that have a strong emphasis on students learning and improving their social and emotional competencies in an effort to successfully rehabilitate and reintegrate them back to their home school. Students may spend a semester, year, or multiple years on a specialized campus depending on their behavioural development and degree of skill acquisition.

## Procedures

Recruitment began with a recruitment email sent to school administrators asking them to forward the email out to their staff. Interested parties that met the inclusion criteria followed a link provided in the email and completed the online consent form and the *Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire* (Goodman, 1997). Participants were asked to complete the questionnaire regarding specific students with EBD that were currently on their caseload. Teachers who worked with more than five students with EBD were asked to complete the questionnaire for a maximum of five students. Teachers who work with less than five students with EBD were asked to complete the questionnaire for the number of students with EBD on their caseload. Questionnaires were completed using pseudonyms (i.e., student 1, student 2, student 3) to protect student identities.

## Measure

The *Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire* (Goodman, 1997) was used to provide information regarding social, emotional, and behavioural functioning of each student. This assessment is a compact assessment that measures engagement in externalized and internalized behaviour. The questionnaire contains five subscales: Emotional Problems (5 items, e.g., many fears, easily scared), Conduct Problems (5 items, e.g., often fights with other youth or bullies them), Hyperactivity (5 items, e.g., thinks things out before acting), Peer Problems (5 items, e.g., generally liked by other young people), and Pro-social Behaviour (5 items, e.g., often volunteers to help others). Teachers were asked to rate the degree of truth of each statement on a 3-point Likert scale (Not True, Somewhat True, or Certainly True). The alpha coefficient for the total scale is .82.

## Results

Data were analysed using descriptive and inferential statistical procedures. Means and standard deviations were calculated for responses based on students attending comprehensive campuses or specialized campuses as shown in Table 1.

Characteristic	n	M	SD
Campus			
Comprehensive	53	23.37	5.48
Specialized	41	23.65	4.45

Table 1: Teacher Reported SDQ Results

An independent-samples *t*-test was conducted on the mean scores from each of the two campuses as shown in Table 2. The *t*-test indicated no significant differences ( $t(92) = .0077$ ,  $p = .994$ ) in levels of school connectedness between students attending comprehensive campuses ( $M = 23.67$ ,  $SD = 5.48$ ) and students attending specialized campuses ( $M = 23.65$ ,  $SD = 4.45$ ).

Design	df	t	Sig.
Between groups	92	0.008	0.99

Table 2: Differences in Teacher Perceptions Based on Environment

Note. Significance was set at  $p < 0.05$ .

Analysis of individual questionnaire items revealed similarities in groups' scores as shown in Table 3. Teacher perceptions of students with EBD attending comprehensive and specialized campuses were lowest for "considerate of others people's feelings" and "would rather be alone than with other youth" questionnaire items. Teacher perceptions of both groups of students with EBD were highest for "good attention span, sees tasks through to the end."

Questionnaire item	M	
	Comprehensive Campus	Specialized Campus
Considerate of other people's feelings	0.706	0.756
Would rather be alone than with other youth	0.627	0.683
Shares readily with other youth	0.882	0.829
Often volunteers to help others	0.882	0.854
Good attention span, sees tasks through to the end	1.627	1.61
Many fears, easily scared	1.039	1.049
Often lies or cheats	1.235	1.244
Often loses temper	1.49	1.488

Table 3: Teacher Reported SDQ Individual Item Analysis

## Discussion

The first research question explored teacher perceptions of the level of school connectedness of their students with EBD. After analysis, the data revealed that participating teachers perceive their students to be moderately connected to their current school environments. The mean score of school connectedness reported by the teachers was 23 out of a possible 42. This indicates that although students with EBD engage in problem behaviour on school campuses, teachers perceive them as having the ability to create connections. Also, teachers scored these students high regarding being able to see tasks through to the end. This may indicate a higher level of educational

commitment exhibited by students with EBD than indicated in previous research (Carter, Lane, Crnobori, Bruhn, & Oakes, 2011).

To answer the second research question, the differences in teacher perceptions from teachers on comprehensive campuses and teachers on specialized campuses were examined. The data revealed no significant difference; teachers in both environments felt their students with EBD are moderately connected to their school environments. Teachers of both groups scored students low for being considerate of other people's feelings, wanting to be alone, difficulty sharing with their peers, and voluntarily helping others. Both teacher groups also rated students high for having a good attention span, being easily scared, having a short temper, and being dishonest. These data are in line with current research that indicates that students with EBD continue to exhibit both internalizing and externalizing behaviours in the school environment, which can lead to social isolation and becoming disconnected (Blum, 2005; Kauffman & Landrum, 2013; Kern, 2015). However, teachers did report that their students with EBD prefer to be around their peers, which indicates that although these students may lack the skills necessary to develop and maintain peer relationships, having relationships with their peers is still important to them.

### **Implications for Practice**

The results of this study highlight several areas that are crucial to planning interventions for improving the school connectedness of students with EBD. Although teachers perceived that their students with EBD wanted to be with their peers, several of the areas they identified as lacking are skills that are important for initiating and maintaining relationships. More importantly, understanding teacher perceptions is the first step in designing effective intervention for targeting these skills as teachers tend to adopt interventions that are useable and valued by their peers (Landrum et al., 2007). Furthermore, Blum (2005) offers evidence-based suggestions for increasing the connectedness of students that align both with school-wide PBIS (Sugai et al., 2016) and the areas found needing improvement in the present study. These include school-wide organizational practices such as implementing high expectations, function-based behaviour training, goal setting, self-management training, mentoring, and fair and consistent disciplinary policies (Evans & Lester, 2012; Farrington et al., 2012; Kern, 2015).

The cultivation of trusting relationships between students, peers, teachers, school staff, and families is another recommendation that is warranted based on the results of the present study. In order to accomplish this, students with EBD may require more intensive individual interventions such as anger management, social skills training, and self-regulation instruction (Kern, 2015). Blum (2005) recommends that capable teachers who are skilled in meeting the academic and behavioural needs of all students provide this instruction. Lastly, providing students with a supportive adult mentor at school is an evidence-based practice that has been shown to improve student relationships, behaviour and achievement, which in turn should increase their feelings of connectedness to school (Campbell & Anderson, 2011).

### **Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research**

This study represents a step in a line of continued research into the school connectedness of students with EBD. With that in mind, a number of limitations should be highlighted. First, this study was conducted in public schools in NSW, Australia, and may not reflect the national demographics of students with EBD, thereby reducing the generalizability of the findings. Replication is necessary with teachers of students with EBD teaching in broader geographic regions to confirm the findings. Secondly, a questionnaire method that relied on teachers reporting on student characteristics was employed. Future studies should also collect data from the students themselves. As the study involved an online survey, diagnosis of EBD was reported by the teachers; however a corroboration of the diagnosis was not conducted. Lastly, the small sample size may have underpowered the analysis and limited the findings. Future research with larger samples will mitigate this concern.

### **Conclusion**

This study contributes to current research of school connectedness by extending the construct to students with EBD, who are the most at-risk for becoming disconnected from the school environment. Although this study analysed teacher perceptions only, it represents a small step in understanding the connectedness of students with EBD. Future research should continue to study school connectedness for students with EBD as well as other disability populations, as they are often the least connected students on school campuses. These studies should evaluate the school connectedness of these students using the four concepts outlined by the CDC (2009). The effects of comprehensive interventions such as PBIS in improving school connectedness should be explored, as a comprehensive intervention to build levels of school connectedness for students with EBD will push the field in a new direction emphasizing the value of multifaceted interventions for this vulnerable population of students.

**Works Citation**

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