

## Identifying the Disconnect: Examining the Role of Connectedness in Cognitive Remediation for Children

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### Letter to Editor

At a time when it appears that many facets of the therapist-client relationship have been incrementally replaced by the efficiency and convenience of online applications and computerized neuropsychological assessments, one wonders what role, if any, connectedness plays in cognitive remediation for children. Some may argue that the domain of positive relationships and social functioning is that of psychotherapy, and that it is this therapy that provides the outlet for meeting the need to connect. However, connectedness research indicates that increasing children's feelings of belonging will only serve to enhance the effects of cognitive remediation therapy.

### Background

The definition of connectedness in this context is the state that results when a human being is in a relationship with another human being that is mostly positive, stable, and involves frequent interaction with the same person. In 1995, Baumeister and Leary authored what was to become the seminal work on the human need to bond, *The Need to Belong*. In an extensive review of the literature available on human social connections, Baumeister and Leary described the link between what was referred to as belongingness and an individual's health, cognitive processes, emotions, and overall well-being [1]. Feelings of belongingness had been shown to reduce depression, improve health in general terms, as well as affect memory and the methods used to classify information (1995). This research also provided evidence for their theory that there are two characteristics needed in a relationship in order for an individual to feel satisfied and have a sense of belongingness. First, the interactions with the other person must occur frequently and be mostly positive in nature; second, there needs to be the perception that the relationship involves caring and has the likelihood of continuing (1995). The paper cited research involving a diverse set of relationships ranging from World War II veterans, prostitutes, parent-child couplings, marriages and friends. Further, the findings were consistent across these groupings of various size and nature.

While the findings were consistent, as time elapsed, the term used to describe the construct of "belongingness" was not. The term was sometimes shortened to the simpler "belonging". Later researchers would often refer to the construct as "engagement" or "connectedness". A search of peer-reviewed journal articles containing the term "belongingness" yields a scant return of under 700 articles. By comparison, another term –"connectedness"– which describes essentially the same set of attributes appeared in nearly ten times as many. An indication that the term "belongingness" is not the word used by the majority of the population to describe this concept. In recognition of such, "connectedness" will be the term used here.

### Connectedness in the School Setting

By the 2000s, the work of researchers studying connectedness moved Baumeister and Leary's ideas from the theoretical into the empirical. Researchers began to apply the theory to the school and classroom setting. In June 2003, representatives from education, government and healthcare met in Racine, Wisconsin on the topic of school connectedness. The result was the Wingspread Declaration on School Connections. The Declaration clarified the requirements that must be met for a K-12 student to feel connected in a school setting. Additionally, it listed the benefits research indicated could be achieved by improved school connections, as well as, provided direction based on empirical evidence about how to implement structures that would support student connection [2]. The Declaration listed the "critical requirements" as (2004):

High academic expectations and rigor coupled with support for learning

Positive adult-student relationships

Safety: both physical and emotional

By 2011, additional research had provided evidence of still more benefits that could be derived by having a sense of connectedness. Connectedness had been shown to be related to better academic performance outcomes, increased standardized test scores, increased self-efficacy, increased student motivation, and increased attendance [3]. With this research, the role of school psychologists was expanded and psychologists became the connector between the students, the school and the community. It was believed that their participation was vital if efforts to improve school connections were to be successful [4].

### Wired for Connection: Connectedness and Cognitive Functioning

Social connectedness begins at birth and continues throughout the lifespan. Human babies are born needing at least one other human being to provide for all of its needs in order to survive. Bowlby's attachment theory states that the baby will suffer from anxiety if separation occurs between themselves and this primary caregiver [5]. As such, forming attachments is a basic human need. As the child grows older, the attachments formed go beyond this initial caregiver and are also different in nature from this initial attachment. Lacking social attachments has been cited as a contributing factor for the development of loneliness and depression [6].

In the school setting, failure to develop attachments can result in feelings of disassociation and can negatively affect academic performance. Conversely, studies of college students have shown that having a sense of connectedness increased the likelihood that a student

would continue their education [7]. By its very nature, education is a social process. Learning takes place as information is transferred from one human being to another. Consideration of the social aspect is unavoidable. Without attending to the social needs of children, negative effects begins to increase and with this increase, the effectiveness of the child's effort is diminished.

## Implications and Conclusions

Research in the areas of connectedness and attachment back up the claim that humans are designed for and naturally seek connection. Empirical evidence in this area shows that human performance can be tied to the levels of connection experienced either in the moment or across time. Students that feel connected perform better in the educational setting and this is acknowledged by the development of the Wingspread Declaration on School Connections. The Wingspread document was evidence-based and pulled from a variety of different sectors, including government, education, health and the social sciences. School psychologists used the Wingspread Declaration to develop or enhance ways for students to feel connected in the educational setting. The importance of connectedness has been documented in both K-12 and higher education settings.

Research designed to explore the effectiveness of the use of cognitive remediation with children has just started to appear in peer-reviewed journals within the last years. While the early results seems positive, more studies with larger sample populations are needed. Further, the role of feelings of connectedness while delivering cognitive remediation therapy remains a topic of exploration. Yet, evidence about the importance of connectedness in cognitive development of the general K-12 population is well-documented. It is recommended that the role of connectedness be studied as both a method to help clients maintain treatments and to maximize its overall effectiveness.

Schools can ensure this connectedness is provided to students by teachers and school psychologists by holding connection trainings over the summer. During these trainings, presentations on compassionate communication as well as deep level listening can help reinforce a teacher's natural instincts to support the students. By spelling out concrete techniques such as looking students in the eye, sitting down and speaking to them at eye level, asking open ended questions, and spending time listening to the words, body language and facial expressions of students, as well as exploring ways to enlist the student's help in a classroom project, as simple as erasing the chalkboard or turning off the lights. These actions can help a student feel connected to a teacher.

Dr. Edward Hallowell, a psychiatrist, wrote about the power of connection in his book, *The Childhood Roots of Adult Happiness*. In that book, he described a five step cycle that could be implemented in the trainings on connection for teachers and school staff. It starts with a connection to an adult (teacher). Then the child plays (perhaps with clay or a basketball). After finding an activity that interests him or her, he or she practices the skills involved in the activity. With time, the child obtains mastery of the skills. Then, after this mastery, the child receives recognition from peers, teachers, parents, or the school community. After the recognition, the student feels a sense of competence and then can start the five step cycle again with connecting to the adult or teacher. That connection needs to be with someone that believes in the child and supports the child.

Dr. Robert Brooks, another psychiatrist, also addresses connection in his book, *Raising Resilient Children*. He describes the importance of a "charismatic adult" in a child's life. A charismatic adult is defined as a person from whom a child gathers strength. This could be a teacher, a parent, a relative, or even a friend's parent. With a charismatic adult supporting a child and sharing a deep connection with the child, that child has extra power and motivation to reach his or her potential by trying extra hard in school and in extra-curricular activities.

The Marva Collins Way is another book that further describes the importance of the connection between a student and a teacher. Marva Collins was a master at bringing out the best in her pupils with positive regard, high expectations, compassion, and a non-judgemental attitude. Students that were struggling before entering Marva Collins classroom left her classroom with renewed life, increased confidence, increased skill, and a solid connection to the teacher.

Many research studies and leaders in the fields of psychiatry and teaching have demonstrated the power of connection in the classroom. Teachers and school staff have the unique opportunity to connect with students, be the charismatic adult in their lives, and empower them to reach their potential and overcome difficulties by identifying their core strengths, believing in them, giving them a chance to show their competence, and letting them shine.

As medical students and physicians in training as well as practicing physicians are moving towards a patient centered approach, they are going back to the basics of connection. In fact, many schools are working on empathy training modules. Making eye contact, shaking hands with patients, listening and not interrupting, and asking open ended questions in a non-judgemental manner are all aspects of care that physicians are working to embody and to impart to medical students. A similar back to basics campaign in the classroom could also prove to be fruitful. The medical literature demonstrates that physicians that are rated as more empathic on the Jefferson Scale of Empathy have patient panels of people who have better control of their hemoglobin A1C and LDL cholesterol [8]. Focusing on the needs of the patient and meeting them where they are, not where the physician wants them to be, are critical pieces of patient centered healthcare. Similarly, in the classroom, student centered learning meets students where they are in their learning and tries to connect, collaborate, and educate a child in a way that suits their learning style. In order to do this, there must be a deep understanding and empathy that the teacher has with the student.

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