“Only Connect”: Exploring Student and Staff Understandings of Connectedness to School and Factors Associated with this Process

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Abstract

Young people’s relationship with school is a significant element in their relational set. With school a compulsory feature of most young people’s lives, the nature of their relationship with this institution can be highly influential in terms of the quality of their overall school experience. Young people experiencing fragile or alienating relationships with school are more likely to withdraw and experience the precarious outcomes that often follow.

School connectedness is one of a number of terms used to describe young people’s relationship to school and has attracted increasing research interest over the past two decades. The consistent findings from the research are optimistic, situating school connectedness as protective in young people’s lives against a range of health compromising behaviours. Despite this bourgeoning research profile, school connectedness has yet to achieve conceptual clarity which threatens to undermine its utility as a construct.

To address this conceptual ambiguity, this thesis used a qualitatively driven mixed methods approach to explore the meanings of connectedness to school. The study was conducted at a co-educational secondary college in outer metropolitan Melbourne. Data collection involved a 109-item researcher developed questionnaire including open and closed-ended questions administered to a sample of 206 students. In addition, data were drawn from 12 student focus groups and 11 staff focus groups and 12 student diaries. A literature audit was conducted on a selected set of articles and materials to determine core

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1 An overview of the study has been published as: Gowing A, Jackson AC. (2016). Connecting to school: Exploring student and staff understandings of connectedness to school and the factors associated with this process, *The Educational and Developmental Psychologist*, 33, 1, 54-69. doi: http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/edp.2016.10
components of definitions and measures within school connectedness research. Five hypotheses regarding factors associated with school connectedness were also tested.

The study has been framed by the following research questions:

1. What are the meanings of being connected to school?
   a) How is school connectedness understood in the literature?
   b) How do students understand their connectedness to school?
   c) How do teachers and other school staff understand students’ connectedness to school?

2. What factors are associated with students’ connectedness to school?

School connectedness emerges from this study as a multi-dimensional, socio-ecological concept, placing the individual in relationship with others within the school and beyond. Three hypothesised associations between SC were supported: collaborative decision making with parents about selection of school, prior knowledge of school and proximity of residence to the school.

The practice implications that arise from this study pivot around the relational climate of schools. According to this study’s findings school connectedness flourishes in schools with opportunity rich environments with relationally inclusive, respectful and supportive climates. Further research is needed to arrive at deeper understandings of SC and consolidate its place as a unique concept among the multiple terms used to describe a young person’s relationship to school. A priority in this future research is including student and school staff perspectives as a key pathway to understanding this important concept.
Declaration

I declare that:

1) The thesis comprises only my original work towards the PhD except where indicated in the Preface;

2) Due acknowledgement has been made in the text to all other material used;

3) The thesis is fewer than 100,000 words in length exclusive of tables, maps, references and appendices.

Ann Maree Gowing
Preface

Esmé Murphy, a professional editor proofread sections of this thesis according to the guidelines laid out in the university endorsed national ‘Guidelines for Editing Research Theses’.
Acknowledgements

Popular wisdom places great emphasis on the value of the journey over arrival at the destination, often with dewy-eyed sentimentality. I would be less than sincere to join this chorus as I reach the end point of this study. There is immense relief, satisfaction and fatigue as the monitor is dimmed on this work. I do know however that in time these feelings will fade and finely grained memories of the research journey will reassert themselves, especially the people who have accompanied me along the way. Some of these have been highly influential in the journey and I will name them, however I also wish to acknowledge the legion of people who have shown interest in my work over the years, in different workplaces and social settings. There have been conversations in staff rooms, across desks, at dinners, on car journeys and in supermarkets as acquaintances, colleagues and interested others have enquired about my study. I thank all of them as their interest has encouraged me and helped me adhere to the project, especially when energy has flagged and other priorities have threatened to usurp my commitment.

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discover a richer palette from which to present my work at several conferences.

This study has travelled with me into different workplaces over the years and I wish
to thank colleagues in all those locations. I wish to record my particular thanks to two
former colleagues, now friends, from “Woodlands” College. Jodie Cook provided tireless
practical assistance when I was collecting data at Woodlands. She sorted questionnaires,
imposed some order on my lists and schedules for class visits and focus group meetings and
provided encouragement when most needed. She has maintained an interest in my
progress since our days together at Woodlands and I greatly appreciate her unflagging
support. Aileen Shanahan, another colleague from Woodlands, has been an ongoing source
of kind but firm expectations about my completion of this project. Her belief in my capacity
to bring this work to completion has reenergised my commitment on occasions when it has
been depleted. Her own research journey provided a model of persistence and discipline
which I have tried to, but not always succeeded in emulating.

My colleagues at The University of Melbourne, Desma Strong, Liz Freeman, Vivienne
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The scholarly and personal interest in my studies that they and many other colleagues have
shown has nourished and invigorated my work over the years.
I bring a deep sense of gratitude to my family. Since childhood my wonderful parents, Mary and Brian Carroll, have encouraged my curiosity and love of learning and have shown an unwavering belief in my capacity to pursue this study. They have given me opportunities that have enabled me to arrive at this point and for that I am truly grateful. My sister Chris and parents-in-law, Jim and Mary, also provided encouragement along the way.

Above all, I wish to acknowledge and thank my husband Dennis. Inevitably projects such as this demand sacrifices, not just from the key players but also from their partners, and Dennis has made many sacrifices but always with great generosity of spirit. I thank him for his patience, his caring and his good humour which has served as a wonderful tonic on many occasions. This study would not have been possible without his unflinching and loving support.

Finally, I want to thank the students and staff at Woodlands College for their generosity and candour in sharing their views and insights into their experiences of school life. The visceral joy I experienced in listening deeply to their stories has never left me and has underpinned this research journey. Their voices are the heart of this work and I salute their contribution.
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Chapter 1: Overview and Context

1.1 Introduction

In 2010 Time Magazine named Mark Zuckerberg, founder of Facebook, its Person of the Year. The headline announcing this news read “Only Connect” (Stengel, 2010) and the associated article claimed that the world was experiencing an evolution in the ways individuals connect with each other and institutions in their lives. In a pleasing symmetry spanning a century, the Time Magazine headline mimicked E. M. Forster’s famous passage from Howard’s End (1910), which reads “Only connect! ... Live in fragments no longer.” (p.188). Both the fourth estate and the literary canon, so different in their purposes and audiences, captured the quotidian and universal nature of humans connecting with each other.

School connectedness (SC) has established itself over the past two decades as an important concept in prevention research around adolescent risk behaviour, first gaining a conceptual profile in the 1990s when Resnick and colleagues named it as a protective factor for a range of health-compromising behaviours (Resnick et al., 1997; Resnick, Harris, & Blum, 1993). Since these studies SC has continued to generate research interest in the fields of health and education, further consolidating its place as a protective factor for young people by decreasing the likelihood of certain health risk behaviours such as suicidal ideation, violence, substance abuse and early sexual debut (Borowsky, Ireland, & Resnick, 2001; Kirby, 2001; Resnick et al., 1997).

Despite SC research now being in its third decade, the meaning of the construct remains frustratingly diffuse, striving for a firmer anchorage within the lexicon of terms used to describe young people’s relationship to school. The lack of clarity draws frequent
comment (Libbey, 2004; Ripperger-Suhler & Loukas, 2012) and often results in SC being relegated to the position of a synonym for other terms such as engagement, bonding and belonging. This thesis charts a practitioner’s quest to discover more secure conceptual moorings for SC, determining its position in relation to other constructs, by exploring the meanings of connecting to school through a qualitatively driven, mixed methods approach. This approach foregrounds the voices of young people and their understandings of the experience of connecting to school and mines the literature for the conceptual ancestry from which SC has evolved and the definitions which have ensued.

1.2 Rationale for the Study

The origins of this study are situated in the researcher’s professional experiences working as a social worker at Woodlands College (a pseudonym), a secondary school in outer metropolitan Melbourne, Australia. Such a position afforded daily contact with young people who were experiencing distress around a variety of concerns. Young people accessed the counselling service through self-referral or referral by teachers or parents. Regardless of their pathway to the counselling team, their presenting issue or the intensity of their distress, all the young people with whom the practitioner worked had a connection to school. The quality of that connection varied from fractured and diminishing to robust and strengthening and all stages between these two points. The practitioner worked with students whose only connection to school was to a certain teacher or their passion for a particular subject. Sometimes these two points of connection were linked, as in the case of students who loved music and their guitar or drum teacher or sport and their football or netball coach. For some young people these connections were sufficient to hold them at school despite their fragile and eroded links to other aspects of their school experience. For others, even some with more solid connections, their trajectory away from school seemed
inexorable. As a professional helper working with these young people, this observation
interested and perplexed the practitioner in equal measure. The complexity of the
relationship between the school and students and the influence of this relationship in young
people’s lives were starkly evident in each counselling encounter, yet the multiple tangents
and the intersecting pathways that shaped this relationship, often resulting in vastly
different outcomes, were less clear. It was in this ruminative state as a practitioner that this
researcher first encountered SC and was ready to explore the concept more fully.

Fortuitously the practitioner’s eight-year period at Woodlands College coincided
with the emergence of SC as a construct which was increasingly gaining the attention of
researchers, policy-makers and educators and the concept beckoned with tantalising
possibilities around improved outcomes for the students with whom the practitioner
worked. This interest in SC was further fuelled by the participation of Woodlands College in
work being conducted by the Centre for Adolescent Health in Melbourne. An earlier
initiative of the Centre, the Gatehouse Project, had developed a comprehensive mental
health promotion program and conducted a cluster-randomized controlled trial in 26
Victorian schools in 1997 after conducting a pilot of the program in the previous year (Bond,
Glover, Godfrey, Butler, & Patton, 2001). While Woodlands College was not part of the
original trial, the school did participate in The Road Beyond the Gatehouse, a follow-up
initiative with similar aims to the original project, which were “to promote student
engagement and school connectedness as the way to improve emotional well-being and
learning outcomes” (Bond et al., 2001, p. 368).

The two Gatehouse projects were part of a changing understanding of school
influences on student outcomes, that had been emerging, albeit slowly, during the 1980s
and 1990s. The weight of research, particularly in early school leaving and dropout, rested
heavily on deficit approaches (Gallagher, 2002; Lee & Burkam, 2003), foregrounding individual influences over school effects. This perspective however was beginning to concede some ground to increasingly insistent calls for a greater focus on the role of schools in shaping student outcomes. Rutter, Maughan, Mortimore, Ouston, and Smith (1979) had addressed this issue in their landmark study of 12 London schools and the different outcomes for a group of students attending these schools. Their work, which memorably judged a young person’s time at school to be 15,000 hours, provided evidence that challenged the prevailing view that schools were impotent captives of their students’ backgrounds and characteristics.

This shift in perspective placed all aspects of schools under scrutiny from organisation (Alspaugh, 1998) to environment (Lee & Breen, 2007) while simultaneously young people were being reimagined within a heady mix of the positive youth development framework (Damon, 2004) and the construct of resilience (Doll & Lyon, 1998). The “at risk” young person, for so long a staple figure in youth research (Bottrell, 2007; Griffin, 2001), was making space for a young person with strengths and competencies, rather than deficits and vulnerabilities. Of course, the dualism of this characterisation was simplistic and reductive, taking little account of the complexity of young people’s lives, yet such approaches have continued to shape narratives about young people, regardless of the epistemological paradigms from which they are viewed (Stevens et al., 2007).

Observed from this practitioner’s point of view, the complexity of young people’s lives was always apparent and as a school social worker there was no difficulty in reconciling the co-existence of vulnerabilities and strengths in the students who contacted the Woodlands counselling service. While Ungar’s (2008) radical redefinition of resilience as a social ecological construct, had yet to be framed, it was obvious that the school was both a
source of risk and protection for students and that the relational fabric of students’ lives intersected with the ecology of the school at multiple points and in complex ways ranging from habitual and familiar to novel and resistant.

Against this backdrop of changing understandings and expectations of school effects on student outcomes SC was steadily establishing a research presence. From a practitioner standpoint, SC made intuitive sense, particularly its unapologetic focus on the school as a key player in promoting wellbeing outcomes for students. This welcome unyoking of culpability from individual students for their less than satisfying school experiences made sense within the practitioner’s work with young people. The arrival of the new millennium in 2000 therefore saw a powerful confluence of factors in place for the practitioner with years of stored professional experiences and observations on young people’s relationship with school and a deepening curiosity about the nature of these relationships in conversation with emerging SC research and accelerating local and international interest in the concept. This conversation resulted in more questions than answers and ignited a desire to understand this SC more deeply. The metamorphosis of the practitioner into a practitioner/researcher was underway and the seeds for this study were germinating.

1.3 Context of the Study

Young people have been and continue to be the subject of considerable research interest (Griffin, 2001; Malone, 2000; Wyn & White, 1997). Their relational worlds are often under scrutiny. The attention directed towards the place of new media technologies in young people’s lives is the latest example of this enduring interest (Christakis & Moreno, 2009; David-Ferdon & Hertz, 2007; Greenfield & Yan, 2006; Mooney, 2008). Educators, researchers, policy-makers, the media and not least parents and carers are all stakeholders
in the quest to define, understand and at times censure and regulate young people’s relationships and identities (Kelly, 2000; Stevens et al., 2007; Ungar, 2004).

Young people’s relationship with school is a significant element in their relational set. With school a compulsory feature of most young people’s lives, the nature of their relationship with this institution can be highly influential in terms of the quality of their overall school experience. Young people with low bonding or connectedness to school are more likely to withdraw from school (Finn, 1989) and experience the parlous outcomes that often follow (Bloom & Haskins, 2010; Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Morison, 2006; Kortering & Braziel, 2008; Sun & Stewart, 2007).

Concern for these young people is not surprising and they have been characterised in various ways including alienated (Brown, Higgins, & Paulsen, 2003; Halas, 2002), at risk (Boon, 2008; Suh, Suh, & Houston, 2007; Wehlage, 2001), marginalised (Bentley & Gurumurthy, 1999; Britton et al., 2002; te Riele, 2007), disaffected (Craig, 2000; Parsons, 2005; Piper & Piper, 2000), vulnerable (Donlevy, 2005; Greene, Maguire, & Canny, 2001), disengaged (Deed, 2011; Hirschfield & Gasper, 2010; McIntosh & Houghton, 2005) and ‘othered’ (Borrero, Yeh, Cruz, & Suda, 2012; Emdin, 2010; Weis, 2003). While the construction of young people’s identities in such ways is not without controversy (Cooper, 2009; Dwyer & Wyn, 2001; MacDonald, 2008; Stevens et al., 2007), efforts to achieve improved social and educational outcomes for young people so described have commanded significant attention from researchers, educators and policy makers. Schools are frequently the sites where interventions are located and a young person’s relationship to school is often seen as the portal through which improved educational outcomes can be achieved (Juvonen, 2007; Marcus & Sanders-Reio, 2001; Nowicki, Duke, Sisney, Stricker, & Tyler, 2004; Woolley & Bowen, 2007).
SC is one of a variety of terms used to describe young people’s relationship with school and has attracted increasing research interest over the past two decades. As research into SC has accelerated, evidence of the reach of its protective qualities has also accumulated. Building on the findings that SC protected young people from a range of disturbed behaviours (Resnick et al., 1993) and the seminal study by Resnick et al. (1997) which found SC was protective against a range of health compromising behaviours, the weight of evidence has proved compelling for education and health professionals. Nascent understanding of the concept and little consensus on definition or measurement did not impede early enquiry, which had a strong focus on risk-taking and anti-social behaviours.

While the 1993 and 1997 studies by Resnick and colleagues launched SC as a construct worthy of attention, the Wingspread Conference on School Climate and Connectedness in 2003 bestowed a new level of gravitas on the concept and served as a clarion call for increased focus on the relational dimension of young people’s school experience. The Wingspread Declaration on School Connections (2004), developed by participants at the 2003 Conference, was included in a special issue of *The Journal of School Health* titled “School Connectedness – Strengthening Health and Education Outcomes for Teenagers” (2004, p. 229). The six articles contained in this issue are a signal collection and function much like a child’s photograph in the family album; providing information about antecedents – bonding (Catalano, Haggerty, Oesterle, Fleming, & Hawkins, 2004) and school climate (Wilson, 2004) and suggesting some developmental milestones over the next decade including the thorny issues of terminology and measurement (Libbey, 2004), the centrality of teacher support (Klem & Connell, 2004; McNeely & Falci, 2004) and its impact on health-compromising behaviours (Bishop et al., 2004; Wilson, 2004) and health-promoting behaviours (Catalano, Haggerty, et al., 2004).
As time has passed, the research gaze has broadened and more recently SC has been studied in relation to Internet use (Yen, Ko, Yen, Chang, & Cheng, 2009), suicide prevention (Whitlock, Wyman, & Moore, 2014), depression (Joyce & Early, 2014; Shochet & Smith, 2014) and transport risk-taking defined as “passenger, motorcycle, and driving-related risk behaviours (Chapman, Buckley, Sheehan, Shochet, & Romaniuk, 2011, p. 399). While excited headlines such as “School ‘connectedness’ makes for healthier students” (Bowman, 2002, p. 16) have tempered over time, the consistent findings from the research continue to be optimistic, situating SC as protective in young people’s lives against a range of health risk behaviours.

1.4 The Purpose of the Study

The burgeoning research profile of SC has not produced greater conceptual clarity (Barber & Schluterman, 2008; Chung-Do, Goebert, Chang, & Hamagani, 2015; Loukas, Cance, & Batanova, 2016; Millings, Buck, Montgomery, Spears, & Stallard, 2012) and SC research continues to deliver little consistency in either definition or measurement. The construct jostles for a position in the crowded set of terms used to describe a student’s relationship with school. Given the number of terms already in existence to describe a young person’s relationship with school it seems pertinent to ask if SC was needed and if so what new understandings it has brought to the field. Was it coined in a moment of researcher ennui with available constructs or has it captured a new aspect of a student’s relationship with school that was not contained in existing terms? This study is both a response to the persistent reproach within SC research about the lack of conceptual clarity and a search for understandings of the construct born out of a practitioner’s curiosity, an intuitive practitioner belief in the promise of this concept and an increasing practitioner
impatience with an apparent research indifference to prioritising improved clarity for the construct.

1.5 The Research Questions

This study has been framed by two research questions:

1. What are the meanings of being connected to school?
   a) How is school connectedness understood in the literature?
   b) How do students understand their connectedness to school (what makes school a place they want to be)?
   c) How do teachers and other staff understand students’ connectedness to school?

2. What factors are associated with students’ connectedness to school?

1.6 Thesis Structure

Chapter 1 introduces the study rationale and situates the research problem and the questions that frame the study.

Chapter 2 presents the conceptual landscape from which SC has evolved to better understand its origins, situating SC within the broader literature around students’ relationship with school and the larger narrative arc related to student wellbeing.

Chapter 3 sets out the key definitions and measures of concepts used to describe a young person’s relationship to school and which are often used interchangeably with SC, contributing to its conceptual ambiguity.

Chapter 4 sets out the research methodology and design which have guided the study and the methods used to address the research questions which frame this study.

Chapters 5 to 7 detail findings related to the research questions about the meanings of being connected to school as understood in the literature and among students and school staff. These findings arise from a literature audit, a student questionnaire, student and staff
focus groups and student diaries. Chapter 8 relays the findings relevant to research question 2: What factors are associated with students’ connectedness to school? These findings were sourced from data collected from the student questionnaire.

Chapter 9 discusses the research findings and locates that discussion within the research landscape to assess how this study’s findings have intersected with or diverged from current understandings of SC. New findings are also presented.

Chapter 10 summarises the study’s key findings, addresses the study’s limitations and strengths, considers practice implications, and suggests further research directions.
Chapter 2: The Provenance of School Connectedness

The way in which young people’s relationship to school has been conceptualised has changed over time. SC may be among the latest iterations, but behind it is a rich history of educational, societal, and political influences that have contributed to its emergence. From alienation to connectedness, from student “welfare” to student “wellbeing”, from preventing school failure to promoting school success, from student deficits to student assets, the evolution in the understanding of young people’s relationship to school and the school’s relationship to young people is revealing. This chapter explores that evolution as an essential first step in better understanding the antecedents of the emergence of SC.

Alienation is the point of departure for exploring young people’s relationship with school. Crossing from sociology to education, alienation provided one of the earliest conceptualisations of a student’s weak and weakening relational ties to school. In the weakening of those ties the drop-out narrative was embedded and in time concern for the debilitating impact of drop-out at an individual and societal level has given rise to a host of responses, mostly shaped at policy levels and implemented in school communities. Dropout prevention efforts target the relationship between student and school and seek to hold young people within the embrace of their school community. As part of tracking the emergence of SC, this chapter traces the history of dropout prevention through the key policy and conceptual milestones that have informed dropout prevention work. These milestones are engagement, student health, student wellbeing and resilience. Each are considered in detail in this chapter.
2.1 Alienation

The backstory of SC begins with an anti-hero, the alienated young person with a fractured and tenuous relationship with school. While the figure of the alienated teenager may rankle today as a time-worn caricature, there is recognition in educational research that adolescent alienation presents ongoing challenges for many schools (Brown, Higgins, & Paulsen, 2003; Hill, Mackay, Russell, & Zbar, 2001; Hyman, Cohen, & Mahon, 2003; Staples, 2000; Taines, 2012), affecting many young people’s lives in destructive ways, by compromising their physical and psychological health (Calabrese, 1987; Nutbeam, Smith, Moore, & Bauman, 1993; Rayce, Holsteini, & Kreiner, 2008; Sandhu, 2000).

The concept of alienation has a long research tradition in various disciplines including religion, philosophy and sociology (LaCourse, Villeneuve, & Claes, 2003; Newmann, 1981; Trusty & Dooley-Dickey, 1993; Wegner, 1975; Williamson & Cullingford, 1997), while within the literary canon one of the most famous depictions of an alienated adolescent remains Holden Caulfield in J.D. Salinger’s “Catcher in the Rye” (1951). Much of the discussion about alienation wrestles with its meaning (Brown, Higgins, Pierce, Hong, & Thoma, 2003; Galbo, 1980; Levinson, 2001; Williamson & Cullingford, 1998). Despite these definitional challenges the works of Seeman (1959, 1975) and Dean (1961) which theorised alienation as a multi-dimensional construct have been broadly adopted by educational researchers (Calabrese & Seldin, 1987; Mackey, 1978; Mau, 1992; Oerlemans & Jenkins, 1998). Mau (1992), in adapting Seeman’s conceptualisation to the school context, applied the dimensions of powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness and social estrangement. In establishing the lineage between alienation and connectedness, the dimension of social estrangement provides some shared ground. Socially estranged students have fragile or non-existent links to any peer or friendship group and low rates of participation in school
activities (Mau, 1992). Both factors have also been identified as indicators of low SC (Blum, 2005a; Brown & Evans, 2005; Libbey, 2004).

Lack of connection or a sense of belonging are themes running through many of the discussions about alienation (Bronfenbrenner, 1974a; Crisci, 1986; Johnson, 2005; Juvonen, 2006; Tarquin & Cook-Cottone, 2008). Bronfenbrenner (1986) defined alienation as having no sense of belonging to family, friends, school or work, asserting that the “essence of alienation is disconnectedness” (p. 434). He considered “creating connections or links” (p. 434) as a countermeasure to the pernicious effects of alienation on young people, and viewed schools as taking a lead role in this work. Brown, Higgins, Pierce and colleagues (2003) similarly defined alienation as “the inability of adolescents to connect meaningfully with other people” (p. 227), while Tucker-Ladd (1990) viewed it as “a feeling of separation and disconnectedness” (p.112). Newmann (1981) suggested that the opposite of an alienating school environment is one characterised by “integration, engagement and connectedness” (p. 549), while Finn (1993) proposed that alienation “is perhaps the obverse of school membership” (p.17).

Concern about student alienation is not recent. Newmann (1981) opined thirty-five years ago that “student alienation is a difficult problem facing many U.S. high schools” (p. 546). He considered that young people’s disaffection often led to other problems in schools such as violence and poor learning outcomes. Newmann’s concerns have echoed down the decades (Newmann, 1981). Outpourings about adolescent alienation and disengagement in both the academic and popular press follow any high profile incident of school violence (Böckler, Seeger, Sitzer, & Heitmeyer, 2013; Cornell & Mayer, 2010; Egan, 1998; Kohn, 1999; Rokach, Bauer, & Orzeck, 2003; Slee, 2006). Measures as diverse as peer mentoring programs (Rosenberg, 1999) and smaller school size (Capps & Maxwell, 1999; Raywid &
Oshiyama, 2000) are put forward as remedies, despite concerns that many strategies implemented in the wake of such events are often poorly considered and ineffective (Borum, Cornell, Modzeleski, & Jimerson, 2010; Brooks, Schiraldi, & Ziedenberg, 2000; Eisenbraun, 2007; Wike & Fraser, 2009). The killing of twelve students and a teacher at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado in 1999 has continued to throb in the American consciousness (Cullen, 2009; Newman, 2013). While Holden Caulfield may be the literary archetype of an alienated young person, Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris, the two young men responsible for the Columbine shootings, have emerged as enduring images of real life, alienated adolescents (Bockler & Seeger, 2013; Kostinsky, Bixler, & Kettl, 2001; Rokach et al., 2003).

Demands for greater safety in schools inevitably follow such events (Borum et al., 2010; Caulfield, 2000; Earp, 2010; Lund, 2010; Skiba & Peterson, 2000). The evidence, however, indicates that while schools internationally continue to experience concerning and persistent rates of low-level aggressive acts such as bullying and harassment (Green, 2007; Hymel & Swearer, 2015; Olweus & Limber, 2010; Rigby & Smith, 2011), the incidence of extreme crimes of violence in school settings is low (Burns & Crawford, 1999; Gladden, 2002; Kober & Rentner, 2000; Larkin, 2013; Mayer & Furlong, 2010).

A complex interplay of factors leads to adolescent alienation (Bronfenbrenner, 1974a; Calabrese & Adams, 1990; Johnson, 2005; Wike & Fraser, 2009); schools have been characterised as alienating environments both for students and staff (Calabrese & Seldin, 1987; Heath, 1970; Newmann, Rutter, & Smith, 1989; Trusty & Dooley-Dickey, 1993; Wynne, 1978). Mackey (1978) declared that “alienation thrives on the grounds of the American school” (p.363). Certain aspects of schools have been singled out as causing or exacerbating alienation, including excessive bureaucratisation (Anderson, 1973), school
organisation (Bryk & Thum, 1989; Calabrese, 1988), disciplinary measures (Calabrese, 1987),
school climate (Hyman & Snook, 2001), school environment (Tucker-Ladd, 1990), student-
teacher relationships (Williamson & Cullingford, 1998), curricula (Young, 1985), and school
size (Heath, 1970; Raywid & Oshiyama, 2000).

Discussion about alienated young people frequently occurs within the context of
care about problematic behaviours such as violence (Furin, 2009; Halas, 2002; Sandhu,
2000), gang membership (Brown, Higgins, & Paulsen, 2003; Shoho, 1996), drug and alcohol
use (Gerler, 1986; Horman, 1973; Jones, 1977), delinquency (Elliott, 1966; Hirschfield &
Gasper, 2010; Sankey & Huon, 1999), truancy (Mau, 1992; Williamson & Cullingford, 1998),
and school drop-out (Calabrese, 1988; Ekstrom, Goertz, Pollack, & Rock, 1986; Finn, 1991b;
Valverde, 1987).

2.2 Drop Out

School dropout is often the final manifestation of a young person’s fractured
relationship with school. Like alienation, school dropout or early school leaving is an issue of
ending concern for educators, researchers, and policymakers (Barclay & Doll, 2001; Doll &
Hess, 2004; Englund, Egeland, & Collins, 2008; Livingston, 1958; Natriello, Pallas, & McDill,
1986). This concern springs from the deleterious impact of dropout on the individual,
including compromised physical and mental health (Adelman & Taylor, 2009; Aloise-Young,
Cruickshank, & Chavez, 2002; Kaplan, Damphousse, & Kaplan, 1994; Liem, Dillon, & Gore,
2001), reduced labour market prospects (Barton, 2005; Johnson, 2004; Kortering & Braziel,
2008; Lamb, Long, & Baldwin, 2004), greater reliance on government assistance (Amos,
2008; Catterall, 1987; Lamb, Walstab, Teese, Vickers, & Rumberger, 2004), increased health-
damaging and risk-taking behaviours (Barrowman, Nutbeam, & Tresidder, 2001;
Freudenberg & Ruglis, 2007; McCaul, Donaldson, Coladarci, & Davis, 1992; Tresidder,
Macaskill, Bennett, & Nutbeam, 1997), reduced verbal skills in adulthood (Vaughn, Beaver, Wexler, DeLisi, & Roberts, 2011) and less overall satisfaction with life (Oreopoulos, 2007). There are also costs to society, with one estimate of the lifetime cost to Australia of each early school leaver being $74,000 (Population Health Division, 2008). In America, the Alliance for Excellent Education (2009b) calculated the monetary advantage for each state if the projected number of dropouts in the 2008-2009 graduation cohort progressed to graduation. The amounts ranged from $462 million in North Dakota to $45.5 billion in California.

In Australia, significant gains in apparent retention rates for the post-compulsory years 10 to 12 stalled or went backwards during the first decade of the 2000s. While it was an improvement on the “unacknowledged national crisis” (Smyth & Hattam, 2002, p. 375) of the late 1990s, Year 12 apparent retention rates did not break the 80 per cent threshold until 2013, rising slightly to 83.6 per cent in 2014 (Lamb, Jackson, Walstab, & Huo, 2015). Behind the figures for overall apparent retention rates are some concerning trends among certain groups of young people. Indigenous students (De Bortoli & Thomson, 2010; Hunter & Schwab, 2003; McKinley, 2017), boys (Harrington, 2008; Hodgson, 2006; Trent & Slade, 2001), students with disabilities (Bost & Riccomini, 2006; Christenson & Thurlow, 2004; Kemp, 2006), students from non-metropolitan areas (Curtis & McMillan, 2008; Watson et al., 2016), students in out-of-home care (Allen & Vacca, 2010; Bromfield & Osborn, 2007; Wise, Pollock, Mitchell, Argus, & Farquhar, 2010), and students from low socio-economic backgrounds (Johnson, 2004; Polidano, Hanel, & Buddelmeyer, 2012; White & Kelly, 2010) all have retention rates below the Australian national level. There are also significant variations per school sector, with students attending Independent and Catholic schools
having consistently higher retention rates than students in Government schools in all

The raising of retention and participation rates has preoccupied Australian policy
makers for many years. The Australian Education Council report on post-compulsory
education and training in 1992 set a participation/completion target of 95 percent among
19 year olds by 2001 (Finn, 1991a). That date has long passed and appears highly ambitious,
given only 74 per cent of 19 year olds had attained a Year 12 or equivalent qualification by
2011 (Lamb et al., 2015). Internationally, Australia’s school retention rates are lagging
(Polesel, Leahy, Rice, Gillis, & Clarke, 2017). A more recent national target of 90 percent
Year 12 or equivalent attainment rate by 2020 was set by the Council of Australian
Governments (COAG) through the National Partnership on Youth Attainment and
Transitions (COAG, 2009). The COAG Framework for Early Childhood Development and
Schools also set a series of outcomes, progress measures and targets around reducing the
educational disadvantage of children, especially Indigenous children (Department of
Education and Early Childhood Development, 2008).

The commitment by the Australian Federal Government to increasing retention rates
is mirrored in many other national jurisdictions. In the United States the National Education
Goals Panel, dissolved in 2002, set a target of at least a 90 per cent high school graduation
rate by the year 2000 (The National Education Goals Panel, n.d.). While not achieving this
milestone on schedule, the graduation rate reached a new high in 2013-14 of 82 per cent
(U.S. Department of Education, 2015). Despite this outcome, the dropout rate remains a
concern in the U.S. (Archambault, Janosz, Fallu, & Pagani, 2009; Bowers, Sprott, & Taff,
2013; Ricard & Pelletier, 2016). In England, the Department for Education (DfE) listed
achieving 100 per cent school or college completion for 19 year olds as an objective in its
2015 to 2020 plan, raising the compulsory participation age to 18 in 2015 (DfE, 2016). At the end of 2015 participation in education and work-based learning by 16 to 18 year olds in England was at a record high of 81.6 per cent with a 6.4 per cent non-participation rate (DfE, 2016).

Educational authorities worldwide have introduced various policies to increase participation and retention rates. The most widely adopted measures post World War II have been the establishment of free secondary school education and increases in the years of compulsory schooling (Dearden, Emmerson, Frayne, & Meghir, 2005; Oreopoulos, 2007). The latter measure has been continually revisited by educational authorities since its introduction as the ROSLA (Raising of School Leaving Age) program in the U.K. in 1972-3 (Waters, 1972). In Australia, the compulsory education participation age was raised from 16 to 17 in 2009 in South Australia and in 2010 in Victoria, New South Wales and the Australian Capital Territory. Plans for similar changes have been considered in other jurisdictions as diverse as New Zealand ("School leaving age may rise," 2007) and the United Arab Emirates (Ahmed, 2012). Such measures are motivated by a range of factors, including economic imperatives (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2009b; Johnson, 2004); however, concern about the impact of early school leaving on the lives of individual young people remains influential in policy formulation (Borgen & Borgen, 2015; Cohen & Smerdon, 2009; Gonzalez, Kennedy, & St.Julien, 2009; UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2012).

Despite a rich vein of research into the attributes of students who drop out and those at risk of dropout, caution is urged in how these young people are characterised and how the issue is considered. Early school leavers are not a homogeneous group (Fortin, Marcotte, Potvin, Royer, & Joly, 2006; Janosz, LeBlanc, Boulerice, & Tremblay, 1997; Rumberger, 1987; Strom & Boster, 2007) nor are their experiences of life beyond school

Data collection methods also present challenges. In the United States and Canada, variations exist in how graduation and dropout rates are calculated, which can distort the extent of the problem (Bracey, 2006; Bridgeland et al., 2006; Gunn, Chorney, & Poulsen, 2008; Heckman & LaFontaine, 2010). In Australia, concerns have been raised about how student retention is measured (Lamb & Bain, 2004; Ryan & Watson, 2006), making accurate comparison of state and territory figures difficult (Lamb & Bain, 2004). Measures such as retention, participation, graduation and attainment all carry different meanings and include and exclude different groups of young people.

Issues pertaining to terminology can also serve to obfuscate. Young people who leave school before completing their secondary education have been described in Australia as early school leavers (Australian Government Department of Employment, 2016; Marks & McMillan, 2001), non-completers (Curtis & McMillan, 2008; Harrington, 2008; Lamb, Dwyer, & Wyn, 2000; Ross & Gray, 2005), and out of school youth (Tresidder et al., 1997). In the United States, dropout is the most widely used term (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2009a; Doll & Hess, 2004; National Center for Education Statistics, 2015), although the disparaging and misleading nature of the term has been highlighted (Gonzalez et al., 2009; Woolley, Kol, & Bowen, 2009). The French equivalent of dropout, “décrocheur”, has been similarly criticised (Esterle-Hedibel, 2006). In England, the acronym NEET is used to designate young people “not in education, employment or training” (MacDonald, 2008; Maguire, 2015; Office for National Statistics, 2016). Christenson and colleagues (2001) observed that there is a difference between dropout and school completion and both
inform different responses in schools. Similarly, Wehlage and Rutter (1986) argued that responses focused on dropout prevention were insufficient and that schools must also prioritise positive educational outcomes and pathways for young people.

Effective interventions need to recognise that early school leaving is not a spontaneous decision but rather the result of a process of disengagement (Balfanz, Herzog, & Mac Iver, 2007; Lamb, Walstab, et al., 2004; Rumberger & Rotermund, 2012), often with its genesis in childhood (Ensminger & Slusarcick, 1992; Jimerson, Egeland, Sroufe, & Carlson, 2000; Vitaro, Brendgen, Larose, & Tremblay, 2005) and primary school (Alexander, Entwisle, & Horsey, 1997; Barclay & Doll, 2001; Barrington & Hendricks, 1989). Interrupting the trajectory from attendance to dropout requires interventions at all points along the young person’s educational journey (Christenson et al., 2001; Doll & Hess, 2004).

Effective interventions requiring an understanding of the profile of early school leavers is an issue that has attracted considerable research attention. Ethnicity (Barclay & Doll, 2001; Campbell, 2004; Niehaus, Irvin, & Rogelberg, 2016; Sweeten et al., 2009), grade retention (Alexander, Entwisle, & Kabbani, 2001; Stearns, Moller, Blau, & Potochnick, 2007), poor academic achievement (Battin-Pearson et al., 2000; Dunn, Chambers, & Rabren, 2004; Fitzsimmons, Cheever, Leonard, & Macunovich, 1969; Lee & Staff, 2007; Marks, 2007, low socio-economic status (Freudenberg, 2007; Robertson & Reynolds, 2010), pregnancy (Anderson, 1993; Hosie, 2007; Moore & Wertheimer, 1984; Roosa, 1986), and substance use (Ellickson, Bui, Bell, & McGuigan, 1998; Mensch & Kandel, 1988) have all been identified as contributing to school dropout.

Factors associated with dropout risk have been theorised in a range of different ways. In an historical review of research into school dropout dating back to 1911, Barclay and Doll (2001) found that the demographic features of early school leavers have been and
continue to be a strong focus in this field of enquiry. Doll and Hess (2004) suggested that risk factors can be separated into three categories – fixed, variable and causal. Rumberger (1987) identified demographic, family-related, peer, school-related, economic and individual factors, although he and Rodrigues (2002) later reduced this list to individual and institutional domains. Rosenthal (1998) identified school-related, school reform and non-school correlates. While there are differences in how risk factors are conceptualised, there is a high degree of consistency around the core domains of family, individual and school (Alexander et al., 2001; Fortin et al., 2006; Garnier, Stein, & Jacobs, 1997; Lessard et al., 2008; Phelan, 1992; Velez & Saenz, 2001). The terminology may differ slightly with some researchers including additional categories such as peer-related factors (Frymier, 1996; Vitaro, Larocque, Janosz, & Tremblay, 2001) and community (Christenson et al., 2001; Hammond, Linton, Smink, & Drew, 2007; Lan & Lanthier, 2003; Suh & Suh, 2007) or societal factors (Davis & Dupper, 2004), but family, individual and school are consistent elements in the research into risk factors for school dropout.

Rosenthal (1998) gave a useful snapshot of the family and individual factors associated with early school leaving in her review of the literature on the non-school correlates of dropout. While not minimising the role that these factors play in dropout, or that the three contexts share complex inter-relationships (Abbott et al., 1998; Jordan, McPartland, & Lara, 1999; Lee & Ip, 2003; Lessard et al., 2008; Mann, 1986), the domain of school as a risk factor has greater relevance to the focus of this thesis, therefore meriting more detailed attention.

The way in which school-related factors have been conceptualised in research relating to early school leaving and dropout has evolved over time. This category has encompassed a broad range of factors, often focused on individual students’ behavioural
and psychological characteristics within the school setting and presenting a checklist of
characteristics by which to identify ‘the dropout’ (Campbell, 1966; Campbell, 2004;
Caravello, 1958; McCaul et al., 1992; Svec, 1987; Wehlage, 2001). The checklist most often
includes features such as poor academic performance (Barrington & Hendricks, 1989;
Battin-Pearson et al., 2000; Ekstrom et al., 1986; McDill, Natriello, & Pallas, 1985),
interpersonal difficulties with teachers and peers (Barrowman et al., 2001; Cairns, Cairns, &
Neckerman, 1989; Kaplan, Peck, & Kaplan, 1997; Parker & Asher, 1987), truancy and
absenteeism (Alexander et al., 2001; Bryk & Thum, 1989; Ekstrom et al., 1986; Goldstein,
Little, & Akin-Little, 2003), aggression and disciplinary problems (Cairns et al., 1989;
Wehlage, 2001; Wehlage & Rutter, 1986), low engagement and attachment to school
(Archambault, Janosz, Fallu, et al., 2009; Caraway, Tucker, Reinke, & Hall, 2003; Janosz,
Archambault, Morizot, & Pagani, 2008), low self-esteem (Lan & Lanthier, 2003; Rumberger,
1987; Wehlage, Rutter, & Turnbaugh, 1987), lack of motivation (Jordan et al., 1999;
Rumberger, 1987; Vallerand, Fortier, & Guay, 1997), and limited participation in
extracurricular activities (Bell, 1967; Ekstrom et al., 1986; Liddle, 1962; Mahoney & Cairns,
1997; Sparks, Johnson, & Akos, 2010).

This focus on individual characteristics reflects much of the research into dropout,
which historically has taken a deficit approach (Bryk & Thum, 1989; Gallagher, 2002; Gerics
& Westheimer, 1988; Hodgson, 2007; Lee & Burkam, 2003), viewing dropping out as “a form
of social deviance” (Wehlage & Rutter, 1986, p. 375). In an analysis of how ‘dropout’
achieved problem status in America in the latter half of last century, Dorn (1993) observed
that in the 1960s, when a coherent research agenda into the issue was emerging, individual
psychological and character defects were often favoured in explaining the phenomenon.
Haley (2006) asserted that this “paradigm of deficit thinking” (p.38) has entrenched a model
of blaming the victim in research into early school leaving. Others share this point of view (Campbell, 2004; Felice, 1981; Fine, 1986; Sefa Dei, 2003; Smyth & Hattam, 2001; Zyngier & Gale, 2003).

It is interesting to compare the following two descriptions of young people who drop out of school or are at risk of dropout. Liddle (1962) described dropouts as a group that has “below average intellectual ability, as measured by intelligence tests, are retarded in reading and other skill areas, are overage for their grade, are frequently absent, are failing one or more courses and are not active in the extra-curricular life of the school” (p. 276). Janosz and colleagues (1997) described students at risk of school dropout as “low-achieving, poorly motivated, hanging out with friends, being more involved in deviant activities, and presenting psychological vulnerability” (p.753). Thirty-five years separate these two assessments and while the language has changed during that time, there are striking similarities in how dropout is conceptualised in both descriptions.

The shift, from viewing risk factors for dropout solely as a set of attributes of individual students, to a focus that also includes aspects of the school context, has gathered momentum over time. Rosenthal (1998) observed in her review of non-school correlates of dropout that the contribution of schools to the problem, including their organisation and structure, was beginning to be addressed. In fact, some researchers were asking questions of schools much earlier. Wake, in 1918, in examining the causes of student failure and dropout in a school population of 1500 students, suggested that school size, class size and “incompatibility” (p. 355) with teachers contributed to dropout. Using a business analogy, he suggested that loss of a customer would prompt a rigorous evaluation of the product, clearly implying that schools needed to show an equivalent response to the loss of each student through dropout. In 1958, Livingston, in comparing characteristics of high school
graduates and dropouts, posed questions about the contribution of school climate and philosophy to the decision of students to withdraw from school. He speculated that “this factor may be of paramount importance” (p. 202), although did not pursue any further investigation of the matter. Riendeau (1962) also singled out school curricula as contributing to dropout, calling for greater scrutiny of subject offerings as a way to increase the holding power of schools. Others similarly pointed accusing fingers at school curriculum (Caravello, 1958; Ristow, 1965), programs (Savitzky, 1963; Theus, 1971), and school size (Heath, 1970), while Chance and Sarthory (1972) asserted that “school systems and the educational practitioners within them” (p. 208) must take much of the responsibility for the dropout problem.

Such voices remained somewhat muted until the 1980s when questions about the contribution of schools to student dropout became more insistent (Bryk & Thum, 1989; McCaul et al., 1992). This increased focus can be seen within the context of burgeoning school effectiveness research (Lee, Bryk, & Smith, 1993; Purkey & Smith, 1983; Rutter et al., 1979; Sammons, Hillman, & Mortimore, 1995; Stedman, 1985), the core message of which says that “schools matter, that schools do have major effects upon children’s development and that, to put it simply, schools do make a difference” (Reynolds & Creemers, 1990, p. 1). Schools were exhorted to resist feelings of impotence in the face of the socio-economic and demographic features of their students and to embrace their capacity to make a difference for disadvantaged young people (Fetler, 1989; Frymier, 1996; Hamby, 1989). The increasing questioning of the role of schools in dropout found a natural home within this context, such that the call for the dropout research agenda to maintain this focus grew (Miller, Leinhardt, & Zigmond, 1988; Natriello et al., 1986; Roderick, 1993). Newmann (1981) in pondering ways to reduce student alienation in high schools, often seen as a precursor to dropout
Bryk & Thum, 1989; Ekstrom et al., 1986; Finn, 1989; Gallagher, 2002), identified the need for change in schools at the organisational, curricular and staffing levels. Similarly, Rumberger (1987) was critical of the lack of attention given to the influence of schools on the dropout problem, particularly their organisation, leadership and teachers. Finn and Voelkl (1993) also observed that “the history of research on school dropouts is replete with studies of the characteristics of individual students, but it is lacking in studies of institutional factors that may affect students’ decisions to remain engaged in learning activities, or indeed, to remain in school at all” (p. 266). Part of the shift in focus was in response to the immutable nature of many of the family, individual and community factors (Alspaugh, 1998; Baker et al., 2001; Lee & Burkam, 2003; Wehlage & Rutter, 1986; Wehlage et al., 1987) and ongoing concerns about the dropout problem (Hamby, 1989; LeCompte, 1987; Raywid, 1987; Rumberger, 1987). Educational research more broadly was also examining the “alterable variables” that influence student outcomes (Bloom, 1980, p. 382).

Wehlage and Rutter (1986) brought the issue into sharp focus in an article titled “Dropping Out: How Much Do Schools Contribute to the Problem?”. Bryk and Thum (1989) identified the pioneering nature of Wehlage and Rutter’s work, calling it “the only published research that has approached the problem of dropping out from a school organizational perspective” (p. 355). Despite some misgivings about Wehlage and Rutter’s findings, Bryk and Thom continued the line of enquiry by further investigating the influence of certain organisational features of schools on dropout, concluding that smaller school size, positive student-teacher interactions, committed teachers, a safe environment, and a focus on academic pursuits positively influenced student attendance and engagement.

Rumberger and Rodrigues (2002), in discussing dropout, identified analysis of school processes as the area of research most likely to yield useful insights. Similarly, Wehlage
(2001) reproached researchers for continuing to focus on “the relatively fixed attributes” (p. 20) of students at the expense of a closer examination of school structure and curricula.

While research has increasingly turned its gaze on the role of schools in the dropout process, some researchers lament the slow pace of enquiry (Ainley, Foreman, & Sheret, 1991; Alspaugh, 2000; Brown & Rodriguez, 2009; Lee & Burkam, 2003). Christie and colleagues (2007) observed that “little empirical research exists on school factors that may be associated with dropping out” (p. 236), while, as recently as 2009, Brown and Rodriguez commented that “the role of schools remains vastly unexplored” (p. 223) in dropout research.

Momentum, however, began to gather in the 1980s with research steadily accumulating into dropout in the context of a range of school features. These features included school size (Alspaugh, 1998; Fetler, 1989; Pittman & Haughwout, 1987), school structures (Baker et al., 2001; Calabrese, 1988; Newmann, Wehlage, & Lamborn, 1992), school organisation (Alspaugh, 1998; Baker & Sansone, 1990; Bryk & Thum, 1989; Lee et al., 1993; Lee & Burkam, 2003), curriculum (Ainley et al., 1991; Besharov & Gardiner, 1998; Bridgeland et al., 2006; Hamilton, 1986) (Roderick, 1993), school environment (Lee & Breen, 2007), school discipline policies and practices (Bowditch, 1993; Hemphill & Hargreaves, 2009; Jordan et al., 1999; Wehlage, 2001; Wheelock, 1986), school administration (Vallerand et al., 1997), and student-teacher relationships (Beck & Muia, 1980; Croninger & Lee, 2001; Pittman, 1986; Richman, Rosenfeld, & Bowen, 1998; Shore, 1995). In a synthesis of many of these features, Christenson and Thurlow (2004) described schools with strong holding power as having “relatively small enrollment, fair discipline policies, caring teachers, high expectations, and opportunities for meaningful participation” (p. 37).
Qualitative and ethnographic studies have also emerged (Brown & Rodriguez, 2009; Farrell, 1990, 1994; Farrell, Peguero, SLindsey, & White, 1988; Fine, 1986, 1991; Hodgson, 2007; Lessard et al., 2008; Miller et al., 1988; Smyth & Hattam, 2002; Stevenson & Ellsworth, 1991) in which the stories of young people who drop out are heard. These studies joined the debate about schools’ contribution to dropout, at times with ferocious criticism of school structures, policies and practices (Felice, 1981; Fine, 1986; Hodgson, 2007; Smyth & Hattam, 2001).

2.3 Dropout Prevention

In the face of increasing scrutiny from media, policy-makers and educators, dropout prevention efforts gained momentum. Engagement emerged as a key rallying concept shaping much of the dropout prevention work and guiding a multitude of efforts to promote successful school completion and increase retention rates (Christenson, Sinclair, Lehr, & Godber, 2001). These efforts were taking place against a backdrop of a changing societal emphasis on aspirational wellbeing goals for all age groups and increasingly included a focus on students’ health and wellbeing as legitimate areas for school attention (Willms, Friesen, & Milton, 2009). In the wake of this attention, major and enduring shifts in educational policy, program development and curricula have emerged with Social Emotional Learning (SEL), Positive Psychology, Positive Youth Development (PYD), and resilience among key influences in reshaping the work of schools. These shifts in how schools came to understand their responsibilities in the health and wellbeing space and the reauthoring of the dropout narrative to a health and wellbeing narrative are traced in the following discussion and provide the political, societal and policy context from which SC emerged. Without examining this context the reimagining of the relationship between students and their school cannot be fully understood.
As interest in schools’ contribution to student dropout developed, a greater emphasis on approaches to dropout prevention emerged (Doll & Hess, 2004; Dorrell, 1989; Dynarski & Gleason, 2002; Hamilton, 1986; Janosz et al., 1997; Larson & Rumberger, 1999; Maurer, 1982; Stern, Dayton, Paik, & Weisberg, 1989). A range of interventions has been promoted including alternative education programs (De La Rosa, 1998; Fuller & Sabatino, 1996; Harris, Hedman, & Horning, 1983; te Riele, 2007; Tobin & Sprague, 2000), increased counselling services (Barton, 2005; Edmondson & White, 1998; Stanard, 2003; Suh et al., 2007; White & Kelly, 2010), transition programs (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009), supportive adult-student relationships (Eccles, Lord, & Midgley, 1991; Juvonen, 2006; Knesting, 2008; Woolley & Bowen, 2007), increased monitoring of at-risk students (Baker & Sansone, 1990; Sinclair, Christenson, Evelo, & Hurley, 1998), and mentoring (Einolf, 1995; Lunenburg, 2000; McPartland & Nettles, 1991). While there is an array of interventions, students’ engagement in school is widely recognised as an essential factor in preventing early school leaving (Archambault, Janosz, Morizot, & Pagani, 2009; Cothran & Ennis, 2000; Finn & Voelkl, 1993; Hirschfield & Gasper, 2010; Jonson-Reid, 2010; National Research Council and the Institute of Medicine, 2004; Reschly & Christenson, 2006; Stout & Christenson, 2009; Taylor & Nelms, 2006). Kortering and Braziel (2008) observe that student engagement is “the key to improving school completion rates and other desirable schooling outcomes” (p. 461). Appleton and colleagues (2008) also view engagement as the non-negotiable bedrock of any intervention designed to promote school completion.

Interest in engagement has accelerated in the past two decades (Butler-Kisber & Portelli, 2003; Janosz et al., 2008; Li, Lerner, & Lerner, 2010; McMahon & Zyngier, 2009; Upadyaya & Salmela-Aro, 2013) amid ongoing concerns about retention rates and as part of
school improvement and effectiveness initiatives (Fullarton, 2002; Leithwood & Jantzi, 1999; McMahon & Portelli, 2004; Taylor & Nelms, 2006; Vibert & Shields, 2003; Yazzie-Mintz, 2010). In Australia, the concept has been influential in educational policy development. In Victoria, every Government school must develop a Student Engagement policy which sets out specific strategies to address attendance, bullying and behaviour and is located within multiple legislative frameworks (Department of Education and Training, 2016d). Supporting the engagement of students is also part of a package of six school improvement initiatives that Government schools are required to address in their annual implementation plans (DET, 2016c). In September 2010 the Victorian State Government released a Vulnerable Youth Framework in which engagement was a central focus “underpinned by new initiatives encouraging schools to form stronger links with parents and broader partnerships with communities, while continuing to emphasise quality teaching and inclusive learning environments – so that schools are places young people want to be” (Department of Human Services, Department of Planning and Community Development, & Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2008, p. 11). In New South Wales, student engagement and retention was one of six priority areas in the Department of Education and Training’s Office of Schools Plan 2009 to 2011 (NSW Department of Education & Training, 2010). In the Department’s Public Schools Strategic Directions strategy 2015 to 2017, engagement remains part of three strategic directions aimed at supporting learners (Department of Education and Communities, 2015a). Similarly, in South Australia the Department of Education and Children’s Services (DECS) named engagement and wellbeing as one of three goals in its Statement of Directions 2005 to 2010 (The State of South Australia, 2005). In supporting schools to achieve this goal, DECS developed a Learner
Wellbeing Framework in which engagement was defined as wellbeing plus involvement (DECS, 2007).

Educational jurisdictions in New Zealand and Canada have also focused on engagement as a pathway through which to achieve improved student outcomes. New Zealand introduced a Student Engagement Initiative in 2000 (Ministry of Education, 2009), while “What did you do in school today?: Transforming classrooms through social, academic and intellectual engagement” (Willms et al., 2009) is a multi-year research and development initiative of the Canadian Education Association designed to enhance student learning experiences. In the United States, the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act in 2002 galvanised efforts to improve school completion rates (Bost & Riccomini, 2006; Lehr, Hansen, Sinclair, & Christenson, 2003), with reporting of annual graduation statistics part of Federal accountability measures in all states (Swanson, 2004; Swanson & Chaplin, 2003). The National Dropout Prevention Center, the Schlechty Center for Leadership in School Reform and the Alliance for Excellent Education were among various North American organisations that focused on improving school retention rates using engagement as a primary strategy. In England, the release in 2007 of the Green Paper, “Raising Expectations: Staying in Education Post-16”, had a strong focus on participation and measures to “engage the kind of young people who are not currently engaged” (Department for Education and Skills, 2007, p. 15), although this paper could be regarded as part of a policy promotion campaign leading to the introduction of legislation to lift the participation age to 18 by 2015 (Ross, 2009).

The current ubiquity of the concern with engagement in educational research and school improvement and reform policies (Dunleavy & Milton, 2009) has important antecedents. The evolution of the concept of engagement has been part of a significant
shift in how young people and their relationship with school are viewed. Some elements of that shift are captured in a comparison of the Fall 1999 edition of *The Prevention Researcher* and the September 2009 edition of the same publication. Both issues are dedicated to dropout prevention. The 1999 edition contains four articles:

“Rethinking the Causes of High School Dropout” (p.1)
“Reaching Youth out of the Mainstream” (p.4)
“Dropout Prevention for High-Risk Latino Students” (p.7)
“Do Extracurricular Activities Protect Against Early School Dropout?” (p.10)

The 2009 issue carries five articles:

“Preventing School Dropout: The Eco-Interactional Developmental Model of School Success” (p.3)
“Supporting School Completion Among Latino Youth: The Role of Adult Relationships” (p.9)
“Community-Wide Systems That Promote High School Completion” (p.13)
“Staying on Track for High School Graduation: Promoting Student Engagement” (p.17)
“Why Did They Not Drop Out? Narratives from Resilient Students” (p.21).

The differences go beyond semantics. School completion and success are given prominence in the 2009 issue, with dropout prevention presented as shared work, as clearly stated in the theme title of this issue - “Preventing School Dropout: How All Adults Can Support School Completion”. Latino youth were the focus of articles in both editions; however, in the 2009 issue the adjective “high-risk” disappeared and “dropout prevention” became “supporting school completion”. The final article in the 2009 issue described how students at risk of dropping out were able to graduate from high school. The focus is on
resilience and success in the face of challenge. This change in tone and emphasis was not unique to *The Prevention Researcher*. In discussing conceptual approaches to understanding dropout, Lehr and associates (2003) noted that “a significant feature of the current framework is the shift in focus from preventing dropout to promoting school completion” (p.143). Furlong and colleagues (2003) similarly observed that “more recently, research has taken an increasingly positive perspective by examining the protective influences of social and interpersonal forces in the school itself” (p.99).

In discussing the importance of student engagement, Willms et al. (2009) ascribed its key place in school practice to a broader societal emphasis on participation and engagement in learning as pivotal influences on individual and collective wellbeing. They considered that “the rationale for student participation and engagement extends well beyond good educational practice and into social policy, social development, health, and well-being” (p.7). This far-reaching agenda has shaped significant changes in the way schools understand their role in the lives of their students. There has been an increasing awareness that schools are uniquely placed to play a key role in enhancing young people’s health and wellbeing (Desjardins, 2008; Fraillon, 2004; Greenberg, 2010; Gutman, Brown, Akerman, & Obolenskaya, 2010; Konu, Lintonen, & Rimpela, 2002; Miller, Gilman, & Martens, 2008; Victorian Auditor-General’s Office, 2009). Prevention efforts have been steadily building in these directions within schools.

### 2.3.2 Student Health

Schools have long been viewed as key sites for health interventions (Mükoma & Flisher, 2004; St. Ledger, 2004). Many of the behaviours which affect health outcomes in adulthood are established during childhood and adolescence (Carlsson, Rowe, & Stewart, 2001; Mohammadi, Rowling, & Nutbeam, 2010), and, with schools offering access to most
children and young people in a single location over long periods of time, it is easy to understand the health sector’s energetic courtship of schools (Hootman, Houck, & King, 2003; Lewallen, Hunt, Potts-Datema, Zaza, & Giles, 2015; Rana & Alvaro, 2010). In an interesting historical account of the delivery of non-educational services to children within school settings in the United States, Tyack (1992) noted that such service provision dates back to the early twentieth century, mostly taking the form of vaccinations and medical and dental inspections, and the targeting of immigrant children. In the Australian state of Victoria, similar services continue to be provided through a universal screening service to all children in their first year of school (DEECD, 2010). Throughout Australia, most schools have access to a range of non-educational services, including psychology, social work, speech pathology, nursing and chaplaincy, although the level and type of service may vary considerably according to school sector, location and different state and territory funding models. In describing school health services in the U.S., Lear (2002) made a similar observation, commenting that with few state or federal mandates school health programs across the country have inevitably developed significant differences in staffing, content and quality. These inconsistencies have not however slowed the expansion of school-based health centers in the U.S. which have enjoyed steady growth since their beginnings over forty years ago, providing a range of primary health care services to their clientele (Weist & Christodulu, 2000b).

Despite a long history of working together, the relationship between the health and education sectors has not always been amicable; it continues to present challenges (Adelman & Taylor, 2000; Sedlak, 1997; St. Ledger & Nutbeam, 2000). The struggle highlights a fundamental question concerning the purpose and objectives of education (Desjardins, 2008; Noddings, 2005; Rowling, 2009). Amidst concerns about an overcrowded
curriculum, limited resources and burgeoning and often competing demands on the education sector, there are persistent calls for a re-visioning of education beyond the traditional focus on academic outcomes (Epstein & McPartland, 1976; Greenberg et al., 2003; Harold & Harold, 1993; Ostroff, O'Toole, & Kropf, 2007; Payton, Wardlaw, Graczyk, & Bloodworth, 2000). While few would dispute that the core work of schools lies in delivering educational outcomes rather than addressing health problems, schools have increasingly sought to embrace health-related initiatives and align them with their educational goals (Rowling, 2009; Samdal, Nutbeam, Wold, & Kannas, 1998; St. Ledger, 2004). Some researchers suggest that such an alignment is essential given the impact of health on educational outcomes (Cushman, 2008; St. Ledger & Nutbeam, 2000; Vinciullo & Bradley, 2009).

Historically, school health education has been delivered using a knowledge acquisition approach (Carlsson et al., 2001; Evans-Whipp et al., 2004; Lee, Tsang, Lee, & To, 2003). This method, referred to as the “classroom straightjacket” by St. Leger (2004, p. 405) and familiar to students and teachers over generations, is heavily focused on the individual, aiming to prevent damaging health outcomes by providing information about the negative consequences of certain lifestyle choices, such as consumption of tobacco and alcohol. This approach has been criticised for its reliance on largely negative messages and for failing to fully connect with or understand young people’s developmental journey, thereby neglecting to empower them to take meaningful control of their health choices and experiences (Scriven & Stiddard, 2003; Whitehead, 2005). This instructional approach also fails to consider that school itself can be a determinant of health outcomes (Ravens-Sieberer, Freeman, Kokonyei, Thomas, & Erhart, 2009; Samdal et al., 1998). Calls for more effective and comprehensive school health education approaches to address these factors emerged,
while new ways of thinking about school health education began to develop (Allensworth, 1994; Carlsson et al., 2001; Rasmussen & Rivett, 2000).

The school health landscape internationally underwent significant change with the emergence of the Health Promoting School (HPS) movement (Mükoma & Flisher, 2004; Nader, 2000; Rowling & Jeffreys, 2000), which was formally ushered into life following the release of the Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion (World Health Organization (WHO), 1986), although its origins date back to 1950 (Lister-Sharp, Chapman, Stewart-Brown, & Sowden, 1999). The Ottawa Charter identifies schools as one of the key settings in which to address public health issues (Rasmussen & Rivett, 2000). The HPS framework takes a “settings” approach to health promotion, an approach that recognises that health is created and sustained by a complex interaction of many factors within a system or environment (Dooris, 2005; Rowling & Jeffreys, 2006). This framework extends the reach of health education in schools from within the curriculum and with a strong individual student focus to a more holistic and comprehensive approach which aims “to shape the whole school context, including the school’s ethos, organisation, management structures, relationships, and physical environment, as well as the taught curriculum and pedagogic practice, so that the total experience of school life is conducive to the health of all who learn and work there” (Weare & Markham, 2005). This approach has a strong positive focus, aimed at building individual competencies and health attributes of students, rather than an emphasis on risk reduction and disease prevention (King, 1998; Rowling & Jeffreys, 2006; St. Ledger, 2004).

The HPS approach has had an enthusiastic reception internationally with adoption of the initiative in Europe and Britain and throughout Australia, the Asia-Pacific region and South Africa (Nader, 2000). In the U.S. and Canada, the approach evolved into the
Comprehensive School Health Education model (Gardner & Ollis, 2015; Roberts et al., 2016). Such widespread uptake has inevitably led to a multiplicity of practices and at times questionable implementation approaches (Greenberg et al., 2003; Mitchell, Ollis, & Watson, 2000; Payton et al., 2000), which in turn have created challenges with measuring and evaluating outcomes (Inchley, Muldoon, & Currie, 2006; Lister-Sharp et al., 1999). Terminology can also create confusion with terms such as whole school approach, holistic, multi-systemic and multi-dimensional and health promoting school used interchangeably (Weare & Markham, 2005). Despite conceptual and practice complexities (Rissel & Rowling, 2000), there has been a proliferation of school health programs adopting the HPS framework (Catalano et al., 2003; Greenberg, 2010; Wyn, 2007).

Programs cover a range of health issues which can be broadly categorised into physical, social and mental components (Carlsson et al., 2001). Issues targeted within the physical category include obesity (Benjamins & Whitman, 2010; Lloyd & Wyatt, 2015), eating and body image issues (O'Dea & Maloney, 2000), nutrition (Rana & Alvaro, 2010), head lice control (Carlsson et al., 2001), oral health (Kwan, Petersen, Pine, & Borutta, 2005), and sun protection (Montague, Borland, & Sinclair, 2001). Inevitably there is considerable overlap between the categories. Programs addressing issues such as drug and alcohol use (Bonell et al., 2010; Evans-Whipp et al., 2004; Lynagh, Schofield, & Sanson-Fisher, 1997), sexual health (Mitchell et al., 2000), violence prevention (Smith & Sandhu, 2004), bullying (Lam & Frydenberg, 2009), and resilience (Stewart, Sun, Patterson, Lemerle, & Hardie, 2004) contain elements across each category.

In the area of mental health, Australia has gained recognition for its innovative responses in policy development and implementation (Parham, 2007; Rowling, 2007). Mental health promotion within schools has seen a number of significant and acclaimed
initiatives including MindMatters (Rowling, 2007; Rowling & Mason, 2005; Wyn, Cahill, Holdsworth, Rowling, & Carson, 2000), KidsMatter (Graetz et al., 2008; Trinder, Roberts, & Cavanagh, 2009), the Gatehouse Project (Bond et al., 2001; Patton, Bond, Butler, & Glover, 2003; Patton et al., 2000), beyondblue Schools (Burns et al., 2008; Spence et al., 2005) and the FRIENDS program targeting anxiety and depression (Barrett, Farrell, Ollendick, & Dadds, 2006).

Young people’s social and emotional health has also become a major focus for schools, addressed by the juggernaut that is known as SEL. As with young people’s mental health, their social and emotional health has become a matter of concern in both the health and education sectors (Weissberg, Kumpfer, & Seligman, 2003). A study of over 10,000 Australian children showed an increase in levels of social and emotional distress from primary to secondary school with 40% of the sample saying they worry too much and have difficulty calming down (Bernard, Stephanou, & Urbach, 2007). SEL in schools has been widely championed since its formal emergence in 1994 as a concept, although schools had certainly been active in this area prior to that time, albeit often in an ad hoc and disorganised manner (Elbertson, Brackett, & Weissberg, 2010). In a pointed reference to the 2001 No Child Left Behind Act, The New York Times ran an article by Timothy Shriver and Roger Weissberg in 2005 under the headline “No Emotion Left Behind” in which the authors emphatically put the case for federal legislative muscle to mandate SEL programming in education jurisdictions in every American state (Shriver & Weissberg, 2005). At that time both Shriver and Weissberg were Chairman and President respectively of the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), which has led much of the work in this field. Their evident enthusiasm for SEL was fuelled by a recently completed study in which Weissberg had been involved that provided evidence that social and emotional learning
significantly lifted academic outcomes. Details of the study were not provided but two meta-analyses of SEL programs (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011; Payton et al., 2008) found similar results, in addition to enhanced pro-social behaviours and reduced internalising problems among students. Zins and colleagues (Zins, Bloodworth, Weissberg, & Walberg, 2007), in a review of SEL interventions, added to the growing evidence base linking SEL programs with enhanced academic success; they were sufficiently confident of the connection to coin the term “social, emotional and academic learning” (p. 208).

In the wake of such tantalizing evidence linking improved academic outcomes and SEL interventions, the uptake of SEL programs has been enthusiastic, with SEL finding its way into educational policy in countries as diverse as Sweden and Singapore (Humphrey, 2013). In the UK, the Department of Health commissioned guides on the promotion of social and emotional wellbeing in primary and secondary schools (National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence, 2008, 2009), acknowledging existing initiatives such as the Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL) program; however, following the change of government in 2010, the then Department of Education (DfE) removed the SEAL initiative from the national education strategy. SEL programs have also been introduced in many Australian schools with national initiatives such as MindMatters and KidsMatter, both of which cover a broad spectrum of social-emotional and mental health competencies, finding support at both federal and state levels of government, and working collaboratively with key sector bodies around implementation (Rowling, 2007; Trinder et al., 2009). Programs such as “You Can Do It! Education”, the Aussie Optimism Positive Thinking Skills Program (Myles-Pallister, Hassan, Rooney, & Kane, 2014) and Bounce Back are among 109 SEL programs for use in Australian schools listed on the KidsMatter website.
Despite persistent uneasiness about implementation challenges (Elbertson et al., 2010; Lendrum, Humphrey, & Wigelsworth, 2013) and the lack of routinely conducted rigorous evaluation of SEL programs (Weare & Gray, 2003), the place of SEL as part of the broader focus on student health and wellbeing in the education agenda appears to be firmly established.

This increasing focus on student health and wellbeing within the business of schools has not been universally welcomed. Dissenting voices have characterised this development as part of a worrying colonisation of schools by therapeutic culture which ultimately disadvantages many students and dilutes the core educative purpose of schools (Ecclestone, 2007; Furedi, 2009). In a study of a SEL program used in Swedish schools, Bartholdsson, Gustafsson-Lundberg, and Hultin (2014) concluded that students were being shaped into docile and compliant citizens whose emotional register was being leached of vitality and range. These critiques also reject the construction of young people as vulnerable or at-risk and in possession of dangerous and unregulated emotions that need to be controlled and managed. While these views offer cautionary advice regarding the uncritical embrace of a health and wellbeing agenda, the appeal of schools as sites for such activities appears undimmed. The growing evidence that young people’s social and emotional competencies and personal wellbeing affect their learning also gives such activities legitimacy (Lipnevich & Roberts, 2012).

Calls for greater collaboration and cooperation between education, health and social service professionals (Marshall et al., 2000; Novello, Degraw, & Kleinman, 1992; Seffrin, 2004; Stokes & Mukherjee, 2000) and integration of service delivery (Adelman & Taylor, 1997; Butler, Bond, Drew, Krelle, & Seal, 2005; Zigler, Finn-Stevenson, & Stern, 1997) have
seen schools increasingly play host to a range of intersectoral initiatives focused on student health and wellbeing (Dryfoos, 1993). The changing understanding of health, moving from narrow definitions of absence of pathology to encompass the presence of positive indicators (Gilman & Huebner, 2006; Huebner, Suldo, Valois, & Drane, 2006) and a strengths-based approach (Brownlee et al., 2013; Pollard & Rosenberg, 2003) has shaped the educational agenda in relation to the role of schools in addressing the development of their students. Increasingly, education policies have responded to the calls of prevention researchers for greater attention to protective factors in young people’s lives, rather than a preoccupation with risk factors (Benard, 1995; Catalano et al., 2003; Howard, Dryden, & Johnson, 1999).

Health has steadily been absorbed into a wellbeing discourse in schools; however, this re-badging of the territory has been more than simply semantic - it has been accompanied by a greater focus on prevention and universal interventions (Smokowski, 1998; Wright, 2015) and a recognition that the school environment itself can act as both a risk and protective factor for students (Sprott, Jenkins, & Doob, 2005).

2.3.3 Student Wellbeing

Student wellbeing has established itself as a broad church, informed by concepts such as resilience, social capital, positive youth development and the Health Promoting School framework (HPS), but also shaped by both a growing understanding of the impact of young people’s health and wellbeing on educational performance (Deutsch, 2000; Jennings, Pearson, & Harris, 2000; Lear, 2002; Vinciullo & Bradley, 2009; World Health Organization, 2003) and by ongoing concerns about young people’s physical and mental health (Caccamo, 2000; Cooper, 2003; Dryfoos, 1993; Irwin, Burg, & Cart, 2002; Weissberg et al., 2003). While many schools now regard promoting student wellbeing as a key component of their core business of educating students (Bernard et al., 2007; Hamilton, 2004b; Lyon et al., 2016;
Wyn, 2007), delivery of social services in some form within school settings is not new (Mohammadi et al., 2010; Sedlak, 1997). In Australia, pastoral care has a long tradition in the Catholic education system with its emphasis on provision of support and care for students and attention to their moral welfare (Catholic Education Commission New South Wales, 2003; De Jong & Kerr-Roubicek, 2007). Religious orders as far back as the late 1800s were providing free schooling and other services for disadvantaged children (McMahon, 2002). Most schools have always included a caring dimension in their statements of purpose (albeit operationalised in different ways) and have worked with families, churches and other institutions and community agencies to support young people (Hamilton, 2004a; Masters, 2004). This blending of education and welfare services has had its critics, but schools have continued to be viable targets for the attention of reformers and policy-makers committed to achieving improved health and welfare outcomes for children. According to Tyack (1992), “schools have become major agencies of broad social welfare, not just academic institutions” (p.28).

The movement in many school systems from a welfare framework to a wellbeing framework has flowed from a broader shift in social policy agendas where the emphasis has moved to individual and community capabilities and skill set development and away from the more restricted welfare focus on ameliorating problems (Awartani, Whitman, & Gordon, 2008; Noble & McGrath, 2012; Wood & Newton, 2005). In the UK, a report on the impact of public policy on people’s wellbeing and resilience suggests that wellbeing is gaining influence in the shaping of many policy areas (Bacon, Brophy, Mguni, Mulgan, & Shandro, 2010). Another UK report commissioned by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs examined international wellbeing-focused policy interventions and cited projects in seven countries including Japan, Colombia, Slovenia and Australia (Levett-
Therivel Sustainability Consultants, 2007). The UK government confirmed that it was proceeding with plans to measure the wellbeing of the population, despite acknowledged challenges in arriving at effective measurement tools (Dolan & Metcalfe, 2012), and wellbeing league tables comparing countries across various wellbeing indicators are now regularly published (Office for National Statistics, 2017).

At a school level, a wellbeing focus encapsulates primary prevention and early intervention within a whole school approach, as distinct from a welfare emphasis on intervention and postvention (Catholic Education Office Melbourne, 2006). Wellbeing appears to be the term of choice in most Australian state educational jurisdictions. A browse of the five state and two territory education websites reveals widespread use of the term “wellbeing” as part of policies and school documents. The most established example is in South Australia where the Department for Education and Child Development (DECD) established the “DECS Learner Wellbeing Framework for birth to year 12” in 2007, since superseded by the “Wellbeing Framework for Learning and Life” (DECD, 2016). The Queensland Department of Education and Training has a Learning and Wellbeing Framework which does not define wellbeing but talks about resilience and belonging and the impact of school environments on young people’s wellbeing (Department of Education Training and Employment, 2012). In New South Wales the Wellbeing Framework for Schools was released in 2015, defining wellbeing as a multi-dimensional concept, concluding that “developing and fostering wellbeing is the ultimate deliverable” (Department of Education and Communities, 2015b, p. 9). This framework has three organizing principles, one of which is “Connect”. In Victoria, the state where this study was conducted, the DEECD established a set of Principles for Health and Wellbeing (DEECD, 2014); however, the department still officially refers to, and provides funding for, Student Welfare Coordinators.
and Primary Welfare Coordinators in Government schools. Similarly, in New South Wales, a close search of the department’s website leads to a policy titled “Student Welfare Policy” (Department of Education, 2017b). While wellbeing appears to have established itself as the preferred term in Australian school discourse, its adoption by education authorities seems to have occurred with little or no acknowledgement of the reasons for the change, what the change signifies in terms of philosophy and practice, or what the term encompasses. On the Australian Capital Territory Education Directorate website, the items under the Student Wellbeing category include dress standards and uniforms, the Chaplaincy Program and Counselling Support (Education Directorate, 2017). Similarly, Cyber Safety, Head Lice and Infectious Diseases are among the items within the Health and Wellbeing domain on the Tasmanian education website (Department of Education, 2017a). Consistency in how the term “wellbeing” is used and understood within the Australian education sector is clearly yet to be achieved.

On closer examination, the widespread use of the term “wellbeing” suggests that there is definitional and conceptual clarity, belying the history of the construct. As with the previously discussed concepts of alienation and engagement, efforts to define wellbeing have generated considerable debate and little consensus (Gutman et al., 2010; Hanafin & Brooks, 2005; Marshall, 2004; Seedhouse, 1995). In a review of the child wellbeing literature from 1991 to 1999, covering 1,658 articles, Pollard and Lee (2003) concluded that “inconsistent use of definitions, indicators, and measures of well-being has created a confusing and contradictory research base” (p.69). The field of enquiry is also relatively young with much of the existing research into wellbeing conducted with adults, although the wellbeing of children and adolescents is drawing increasing scholarly attention.
(Awartani et al., 2008; Ben-Arie, 2008; Graham, Powell, Thomas, & Anderson, 2016; Nickerson & Nagle, 2004; Roffey, 2016; Thomas, Graham, & Powell, 2016).

The term itself has different labels (Diener, 1994; McAllister, 2005), conflating with other concepts including wellness (Benjamins & Whitman, 2010; Doll, 2008; Spurr, 2009), happiness (Gilman, 2001; Holder & Ben, 2009; Park, 2004; Suldo & Shaffer, 2008), quality of life (Camfield, Crivello, & Woodhead, 2009), and life satisfaction (Helliwell, 2003; Huebner & Gilman, 2006; Huebner, Suldo, Smith, & McKnight, 2004). One area of agreement can be found in the acceptance of the complex and multidimensional character of wellbeing (Hanafin & Brooks, 2005; Masters, 2004; Pollard & Lee, 2003), although the number and nature of its constituent parts are contested (Gilman & Huebner, 2006). Lippman (2006) suggested there is “a rough consensus” (p. 39) that the critical domains of child wellbeing are physical, psychological, cognitive, social, and economic, although terminology differs and a spiritual domain has been included (Masters, 2004). Establishing robust indicators of child wellbeing has also proved challenging; it continues to attract scholarly attention and debate (Ben-Arie, 2008; Fraillon, 2004; Lippman, Moore, & McIntosh, 2011; Moore, Lippman, & Brown, 2004).

Narrowing the focus to wellbeing in schools, otherwise referred to as student, pupil or school wellbeing, does not bring any greater clarity. While Konu and Rimpelä (2002) have developed a conceptual model of wellbeing in schools based on the earlier work of Allardt (1976), overall there is a paucity of research into this particular aspect of young people’s wellbeing. Fraillon (2004), discussing the measurement of student wellbeing in a study commissioned by the South Australian DECS, observed that despite widespread acknowledgement of the importance of student wellbeing, no shared understanding of the concept existed. A scoping study into approaches to student wellbeing in Australia found
only three definitions specifically addressing wellbeing within school settings (Australian Catholic University & Erebus International, 2008). Drawing on existing understandings of the concept, the report developed a definition of student wellbeing as ‘a sustainable state of positive mood and attitude, resilience and satisfaction with self, relationships and experiences at school” (p.5).

Lack of definitional precision has not stopped wellbeing falling under the gaze of education policy makers. In the UK, the wellbeing of children and young people gained widespread attention after that country was ranked last in a UNICEF report (UNICEF, 2007) into child wellbeing in 21 industrialised countries (Australia was not included due to insufficient data). While the Children Act 2004 had already established a clear focus on childhood wellbeing through the Every Child Matters agenda (Eraut & Whiting, 2008), the UNICEF report accelerated policy activity (Counterpoint Research, 2008). The Scottish and Irish Governments also released policies aimed at improving child wellbeing outcomes (Department for Children and Youth Affairs, 2000; Scottish Executive, 2007).

The document “Healthy Lives, Brighter Futures” set out the UK government’s strategy for children and young people’s health, stating that “health and wellbeing is central to the concept of the 21st century school” (Department of Health & Department for Children Schools and Families, 2009, p. 7). Contributing to pupil wellbeing became a statutory requirement for UK schools in 2007. In the 21st Century Schools White Paper the last of five pupil guarantees stated that “every pupil will go to a school that promotes their health and wellbeing, where they have the chance to express their views, and where they and their families are welcomed and valued” (Department for Children, 2009, p. 97). This was elaborated in the following statement:
Schools are already expected to:

- promote the five Every Child Matters outcomes of: be healthy, stay safe, enjoy and achieve, make a positive contribution, and achieve economic wellbeing.

The new Pupil Guarantee will now also ensure:

- that every pupil receives personal, social, health and economic education (PSHE) from September 2011; and

- that every pupil should go to a Healthy School that promotes healthy eating, an active lifestyle and emotional health and wellbeing. (p.100)

Requiring schools to promote students’ wellbeing not surprisingly focused the policy makers’ attention onto defining what precisely was being asked of schools. A consultation paper on indicators of a school’s contribution to wellbeing observed, in something of an understatement, that “assessing accurately how well a school is promoting all aspects of its pupils’ wellbeing is not straightforward” (Department for Children Schools and Families & Ofsted, 2008, p. 4). The paper went on to assure schools that parents must carry the greatest responsibility for their children’s wellbeing, and that schools cannot be held accountable for outcomes over which they have limited influence, outcomes such as obesity and pregnancy. The consultation closed on January 16, 2009 and the policy became a casualty of the change of government in May 2010. The current UK government released its education strategy for 2015 to 2020, naming young people’s safety and wellbeing as one of three system goals (DfE, 2016). The vision for wellbeing in the strategy is heavily focused on the need to protect young people from harm, with extremist ideologies singled out as a threat of particular concern against which children and young people must be protected.
The title of the strategy refers to “world-class education and care” (DfE, 2016, p.1); it flags a shift in how young people are positioned and how wellbeing is understood. There appears to be a loss of focus on young people’s agency and capacity to have a voice in decisions regarding their wellbeing, considerations which were present in the earlier policy.

In the U.S. use of the term wellbeing is less evident in educational policy; however, this seems to be an issue of semantics. Terms such as health (Cooper, 2003; Deutsch, 2000; Novello et al., 1992; Scales, 2000), physical and mental health (Brown & Bolen, 2008; Meyers & Swerdlik, 2003; Miller et al., 2008), and social and emotional learning (Greenberg, 2010; Payton et al., 2008; Shriver & Weissberg, 2005) appear to have greater currency. In 2010, the Blueprint for Reform announced by President Obama included a focus on “successful, safe, and healthy students” (U.S. Department of Education, 2010, March, p. 33) and discussed the provision of grants to support schools in providing interventions to improve young people’s wellbeing and mental and physical health.

The provision of non-educational services within U.S. schools has a long tradition (Burns & Gall, 2002; Dryfoos, 1993; Tyack, 1992) which continues in the form of school-based health centres (SBHCs) and expanded school mental health (ESMH) programs (Weist & Christodulu, 2000a). The first school-based health centre was established in 1969 with the number nationwide reaching 1,909 by 2009 (Strozer, Juszczak, & Ammerman, 2007-2008) and 2,315 by 2014 (Love et al., n.d). While the original purpose of SBHCs was to deliver primary health care and reproductive health services, they now also play an important role in prevention and health promotion within their school communities (Brown & Bolen, 2008). They have been found to contribute to improved academic performance (Geierstanger, Amaral, Mansour, & Walters, 2004) and to have positive effects on the school learning environment (Strolin-Goltzman, 2010). The ESMH programs have also expanded...
from their original charter to provide a broad range of services to all students (Waxman, Weist, & Benson, 1999; Weist, Goldstein, Morris, & Bryant, 2003; Weist, Myers, Hastings, Ghuman, & Han, 1999).

In the United States the fields of PYD and positive psychology are also shaping approaches to young people’s wellbeing. In a deliberate turning away from a deficit and problem-focused perspective, both fields fix their gaze on the strengths and abilities of young people (Bowers et al., 2010; Damon, 2004; Park, 2004; Scales & Roehlkepartain, 2003). Since its beginnings in the early 1990s, PYD has consolidated its position among researchers, practitioners and policy-makers committed to enhancing young people’s health and wellbeing (Lerner, von Eye, Lerner, & Lewin-Bizan, 2009; Ramey & Rose-Krasnor, 2012). PYD has put forward a “Five Cs Model” of development in which the five Cs – competence, confidence, connection, character and caring – are used to operationalise a young person’s healthy development (Bowers et al., 2010; Lerner et al., 2009; Lewin-Bizan, Bowers, & Lerner, 2010). Connection is defined as “positive bonds with people and institutions that are reflected in bidirectional exchanges between the individual and peers, family, school, and community in which both parties contribute to the relationship” (Bowers et al., 2010, p. 720). PYD has spawned many programs (Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak, & Hawkins, 2004; Roth, Brooks-Gunn, Murray, & Foster, 1998), some of which have not necessarily maintained fidelity to the original PYD framework (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003).

Another well-established framework derived from PYD theory is contained in the Search Institute’s Developmental Assets model (Mannes, Roehlkepartain, & Benson, 2005; Scales, 1999). The framework lists 40 assets, organised into eight categories that are designated as either internal (commitment to learning, positive values, social competencies and positive identity) or external (support, empowerment, boundaries and expectations and
constructive use of time) (Scales, Benson, & Roehlkepartain, 2010). Eight of the assets relate directly to some aspect of school such as school engagement and bonding to school, while several, such as involvement in youth programs and relationships with non-parental adults, may involve school (Scales & Gibbons, 1996). Proponents argue that the more assets young people possess the less likely they are to engage in health compromising behaviours such as problematic drug and alcohol use and violence (Scales, 1999) and the more likely they are to achieve academic success (Scales & Taccogna, 2000). Asset-based wellbeing strategies are valued for facilitating a focus beyond deficits and enabling responses to local strengths within school communities (Matthews, Kilgour, Christian, Mori, & Hill, 2015).

Positive Psychology announced its arrival in the January 2000 edition of the journal *American Psychologist* which was dedicated to the subject. Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) imbued the moment with considerable gravitas, describing a crossroads for Americans as they entered the new millennium and placing on social and behavioural sciences a weighty commission in the form of articulating “a vision of the good life that is empirically sound while being understandable and attractive” (p.5). Positive Psychology seeks to identify and build the factors that enable individuals, institutions, communities and societies to thrive. It delivers a stinging rebuke to psychology’s historical preoccupation with psychopathology, while arguing that a comprehensive understanding of wellbeing must include both approaches (Gable & Haidt, 2005; Huebner & Gilman, 2003; Larson, 2000; Peterson, 2009). The application of Positive Psychology within the school context is still developing (Chafouleas & Bray, 2004; Kern, Waters, Adler, & White, 2015; Terjesen, Jacofsky, Froh, & DiGiuseppe, 2004). Its potential to enhance young people’s academic, health and wellbeing outcomes is viewed with considerable optimism (Clonan, Chafouleas, McDougal, & Riley-Tillman, 2004; Huebner & Gilman, 2003; Waters, 2011) despite some
concerns that the evidence base is yet to develop sufficient depth (Dawood, 2014). Some work applying Positive Psychology principles in schools has occurred, such as the Positive Educational Practices (PEPs) Framework (Noble & McGrath, 2008). The PEPs Framework takes Seligman’s pillars of wellbeing, remodels them into foundations, and applies them to a pupil wellbeing framework. The five foundations are social and emotional competency, positive emotions, positive relationships, engagement through strengths, and a sense of meaning and purpose (Australian Catholic University and Erebus International, 2008). Noble and McGrath further developed this model resulting in the PROSPER framework which adds the components of resilience and strengths (Noble & McGrath, 2015). A further example of the uptake of Positive Psychology within schools is at Geelong Grammar School in Victoria, Australia. This regional private school has established an ongoing collaboration with Martin Seligman and has introduced a whole school approach called Positive Education, based on Positive Psychology principles (Norrish, Williams, O’Connor, & Robinson, 2013).

In Australia in 2008, a rare display of collaboration and agreement among federal, state and territory education ministers produced the Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians (Ministerial Council for Education, 2008). Setting out an ambitious charter for education, this document states that “schools play a vital role in promoting the intellectual, physical, social, emotional, moral, spiritual and aesthetic development and wellbeing of young Australians” (p. 4). The document portrays young people as emerging from their school years equipped “to manage their emotional, mental, spiritual and physical wellbeing” (p. 9) after benefitting from a school curriculum designed “to build social and emotional intelligence, and nurture student wellbeing through health and physical education in particular” (p. 13). This last statement jars as somewhat anachronistic, assigning as it does primary responsibility for enhancing student wellbeing to
the traditional curriculum domains of health and physical education. The narrowness of this vision suggests that education policy-makers in Australia had not been keeping pace with changes in both popular and scholarly understandings of wellbeing, or with the mounting evidence of the myriad of ways in which schools can influence young people’s wellbeing beyond the confines of health and physical education classrooms. Outside the curriculum, aspects of schools such as culture, climate, structure, staffing, relationships and environment are all considered to contribute to student wellbeing (Austin, O’Malley, & Izu, 2011; Hanson, Austin, & Zheng, 2011; Konu & Rimpelä, 2002).

While the Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians (MCEETYA, 2008) provides a blueprint for school education in Australia and suggests a shared vision among all state and territories, as indicated earlier the approaches to student wellbeing vary considerably between jurisdictions in both their conceptual frameworks and their delivery (Australian Catholic University & Erebus International, 2008). In Victoria, the state in which this study was conducted, an Auditor-General’s Report on the effectiveness of student wellbeing programs and services in state government schools found the DEECD lacked a comprehensive overarching policy framework for student wellbeing and had not established any adequate method to measure the efficacy of student wellbeing programs and services (Victorian Auditor-General’s Office, 2009). DEECD responded to these concerns by developing a Health and Wellbeing Service Framework (2010) which proposed outcomes for children, young people and their families in four domains – health, learning, development and wellbeing (DEECD, 2010). When DEECD mutated into the Department of Education and Training (DET) following a change of government in 2014, a new strategic plan was released which lists wellbeing as one of four outcome areas. It is notable that the
outcome indicators for wellbeing include “students feeling connected to their school” (DET, 2016b, p. 9).

At the federal government level, wellbeing was placed in the spotlight in 2010 when Julia Gillard, prior to her elevation to Prime Minister, and then in the role of Education Minister, made the following comments:

The benefits of increased student wellbeing are well known. It has a direct impact on academic achievement through greater levels of engagement with schooling, better classroom behaviour and a greater sense of classroom ethos and togetherness. The higher the level of a student’s wellbeing, the higher their retention levels and year-12 results tend to be and this has very positive effects on economic goals like productivity, social inclusion and the building of social capital. So improving wellbeing and eliminating bullying aren’t side issues, they are major educational goals for the nation.

(Gillard, 2010)

The Federal Government had already demonstrated interest in this topic when the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) commissioned a scoping study in 2005 into approaches to student wellbeing, exploring the relationship between students’ physical and emotional wellbeing and academic achievement, mental health and lifestyle. The aim of the study was to investigate “the value of developing an overarching national framework/policy statement that encompasses a more holistic and comprehensive approach to student wellbeing as a first step to embedding student wellbeing in a school’s curriculum” (Australian Catholic University & Erebus International, 2008, p. 13). After a literature review and extensive consultations with both key stakeholders and national and international experts in the field of student wellbeing, the
study found widespread support for a National Student Wellbeing Framework. Such a framework was viewed as a way to integrate existing initiatives and frameworks in this field and to ensure a greater focus on the importance of student wellbeing within schools and within state and national education jurisdictions. This initiative appears to have lost ground amidst the turbulence of the Australian political landscape during the first half of the current decade: any next steps regarding the development of a framework have not been announced; however, the Australian Government has established a Student Wellbeing Hub with a range of resources for educators, parents and students (https://studentwellbeinghub.edu.au). This website is substantially shaped by the National Safe Schools Framework (NSSF) which resulted from collaboration between the Commonwealth and all State and Territory government education bodies, non-government school authorities and a range of interested stakeholders. It was originally developed in 2003 and revised in 2010 (Student Learning and Support Services Taskforce, 2003). The framework’s overarching vision is that “All Australian schools are safe, supportive and respectful learning communities that promote student wellbeing” (MCEECYDA, 2011, p. 3).

Australia has been a leader in policy development in some areas of child health and wellbeing, becoming the first country in the world in 2009 to collect national data on the developmental health of all children in their first year of school with an initiative called the Australian Early Development Index (AEDI), renamed the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) in 2014. The AEDC occurs every three years; to date it has been conducted in 2009, 2012 and 2015. The census collects data across five domains including physical health and wellbeing. Improving wellbeing is clearly a key driver of the initiative, with the large data sets already providing valuable insights into how children are faring across the country both at a whole population level and within sub-populations such as non-English speakers.
and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders. The 2015 census found that 22% of Australian children were developmentally vulnerable on one or more of the five domains, while 11.1% were vulnerable on two or more domains (DET, 2016a). This large-scale government initiative aims to facilitate improved child development and wellbeing outcomes through both universal prevention strategies and targeted interventions to population groups and locations with elevated risks and vulnerabilities.

As research and policy momentum have gathered around young people’s wellbeing in general, and their wellbeing within the school setting in particular, efforts to better articulate the meaning of wellbeing have made halting progress (McLeod & Wright, 2016). As Amerijckx and Humblet (2014) observed in their thoughtful review of the construct, wellbeing is “a very appealing notion” (p. 404) which has made its way into a broad range of disciplines within the research community. Its popularity in the absence of greater conceptual clarity, however, risks diluting its meaningful application as a driver for policy and practice in multiple settings. Within education, Thomas and colleagues (2016) identify the mismatch between how wellbeing is understood by teachers and students and how it is understood in policy. Their analysis of national, state and local education frameworks reveals “that despite the increased attention to wellbeing, there is little specific wellbeing-focused education policy, a lack of conceptual clarity, and a fragmented approach to implementation” (Thomas et al., 2016). This assessment certainly accords with the experiences of the current author from both the practitioner and researcher perspectives. Nevertheless, from this splintered and under-theorised policy landscape several trends can be observed: resilience has increasingly been partnered with wellbeing in policy statements, while connectedness has been increasingly named as a protective factor for young people. An example of both these trends can be found in Victoria, the state in which this study was
conducted. In 2014 DEECD partnered with the University of Melbourne to develop a health and wellbeing education program aimed at building resilience in students, with the associated literature review naming SC as “a key protective factor” (Cahill, Beadle, Farrelly, Forster, & Smith, 2014, p. 20).

2.3.4 Resilience

The construct of resilience has been the subject of enquiry across multiple areas of research over more than six decades (Garcia-Dia, DiNapoli, Garcia-Ona, Jakubowski, & O’Flaherty, 2013; Nearchou, Stogiannidou, & Kiosseoglou, 2014). Like wellbeing, resilience eludes easy definition, although many of the definitions offered in the literature contain consistent elements. Michael Rutter (2007), one of the pioneers in this field, captures these elements in his definition of resilience as “the phenomenon that some individuals have a relatively good outcome despite suffering risk experiences that would be expected to bring about serious sequelae” (p. 205). Rutter goes on to emphasise that resilience is not an innate characteristic of an individual’s personality or psychological disposition; rather it emerges from the individual’s interactions with the environment. This view of resilience as dynamic, temporal and contextual is in contrast to some earlier profiles of resilient individuals as exceptional, in possession of almost superhuman qualities enabling them to overcome adversity (Masten, 2001).

There are some faint echoes of this view in a definition that has gained popularity in Australia, particularly in some educational circles, appearing in materials on both the South Australian and Victorian education websites. Andrew Fuller (2000), an Australian psychologist, defined resilience as “the happy knack of being able to bungy jump through the pitfalls of life” (p. 25). This description suggests that resilience does in some way reside in individuals as an attribute, and that it can be summoned at will when adversity threatens.
“Happy knack” seems to ascribe a certain cleverness to individuals who can perform this magic trick of invoking their resilience and using it to escape life’s challenges unscathed. The popularity of this description may stem more from its appeal as an image, than its scholarly authority. In contrast to Fuller’s definition, Michael Ungar, Principal Investigator at the Resilience Research Centre in Canada, was invited by the Western Australian Commissioner for Children and Young People to take up the role of Thinker in Residence in May 2014. His thoughts on resilience appear on that State’s Department of Education website as part of an address by the Director General (Commissioner for Children and Young People, 2014).

Ungar (2008) regards resilience as a social ecological construct, defining it as the capacity of individuals in situations of significant adversity “to navigate their way to the psychological, social, cultural, and physical resources that sustain their wellbeing, and their capacity individually and collectively to negotiate for these resources to be provided in culturally meaningful ways” (p. 225).

Differing definitions of resilience in Australian educational discourse have not impeded its influence in shaping program delivery in schools. The complexity of the concept, as defined by Ungar (2008) and evident in a large body of scholarly enquiry (Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000; Olsson, Bond, Burns, Vella-Brodrick, & Sawyer, 2003; Waller, 2001; Zolkoski & Bullock, 2012) has presented challenges for program development in the face of an understandable clamour from schools and communities for resilience-focused interventions (Doll & Lyon, 1998; Minnard, 2002). The popularity of the concept has at times outpaced the research output (Cicchetti & Garmezy, 1993; Dulmas & Rapp-Pagliaricci, 2000). Programs often seek to “build” resilience in students, although the mechanistic tone and emphasis on the individual inherent in such approaches, seem at odds with the ecological complexity of the concept, prompting scholars to provide cautionary advice about
ill-judged program implementation (Doll & Lyon, 1998; Pianta & Walsh, 1998; Smokowski, 1998).

Risk and protection are strongly related to resilience and while early studies had a strong focus on risk, protective factors have increasingly become the subject of sustained enquiry, particularly in relation to children and young people (Benard, 1991; Howard et al., 1999; Knight, 2007). Risk and protective factors are often conceptualised in domains, and, although the names and numbers of these domains differ, they broadly encompass individual, family and community, and societal aspects (Borowsky, Ireland, & Resnick, 2002; Dekovic, 1999; Fraser, Richman, & Galinsky, 1999). Within the community context, schools are viewed as key environments, often named as a separate domain (Bond, Toumbourou, Thomas, Catalano, & Patton, 2005; Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care, 2000; Murray, 2003; Withers & Russell, 2001). Schools can be a source of risk and protection for young people. As this more sophisticated understanding of the potential for schools to impact positively or negatively on their students’ lives has developed, schools have been challenged to examine their practices and how they contribute to their students’ wellbeing.

This challenge to schools began in the context of responding to the problem of school dropout, with a gradual shift away from locating the problem solely in the individual towards recognition of how schools contribute to student alienation and disengagement. This changing narrative is captured in Kohn’s (1999) plaintive musings following a series of shootings in American high schools.

Thus, even when one high school crisis is followed by another, we concentrate on the particular people involved – their values, their character, their personal failings –
rather than asking whether something about the system in which these students find themselves might also need to be addressed.

(Kohn, 1999, p. 20)

As calls for schools to exert influence in young people’s lives beyond learning outcomes have become increasingly insistent, the relationship between schools and their students has been more closely scrutinised. As traced in the current chapter, this relationship has been heavily co-opted by policy initiatives informed by research on various concepts including health, wellbeing and resilience. One of various terms used to refer to a student’s relationship to school is SC, a construct that has steadily gained prominence in the domains of both health and education over the past two decades.

2.4 The Emergence of School Connectedness

SC has attracted substantial research interest since Resnick and colleagues’ seminal 1997 study (Resnick et al., 1997). The study’s findings were published in JAMA: The Journal of the American Medical Association, a journal whose considerable reach in terms of local and international readership is likely to have contributed to its impact. A study on school disconnectedness (Bonny, Britto, Klostermann, Hornung, & Slap, 2000), published in the journal Pediatrics, is also regarded as influential in the early years of SC research.

The next towering landmark in SC research came in 2003 when a conference on SC, drawing together key researchers and representatives from education, health and government sectors, was held in Wisconsin, U.S. The conference delegates produced the Wingspread Declaration on School Connections which simultaneously mapped out the conceptual territory around SC and provided a blueprint for action. The Declaration, along with six articles addressing different aspects of a young person’s relationship with school, was published in a special edition of the Journal of School Health in 2004. Viewed from the
vantage point of over a decade later, this collection of articles provides a snapshot of some of the key themes and researchers in the field of SC scholarship as it has developed since that time. Teacher support, peer relationships, measurement and definitional complexities, and the association between SC and health risk behaviours have all endured and developed as areas of enquiry, while Robert Blum, Heather Libbey and Clea McNeely have become authoritative voices in the field of SC research.

Publication of the research in the *Journal of School Health*, thereby positioning SC within the purview of both health and education agendas, is also noteworthy. This marked a shift from its earlier location in the medical realm and appears to indicate a broadening understanding of the concept. A review of 110 journal articles with SC in the title published between 1999 and mid-2016, drawn from the citation manager used for this study, would suggest that this repositioning was not a publishing anomaly (Figure 1). Almost a quarter of the sample (24) has been published in journals explicitly linking educational and health interests such as the *Journal of School Health, Psychology in the Schools* and *School Mental Health*, while only eight articles are in health-specific journals such as *Pediatrics* and *Public Health*. A further 19 articles are found in journals with a psychological or mental health focus, including the *Journal of Clinical Child and Adolescent Psychology, Journal of Abnormal Psychology* and *Perspectives in Psychiatric Care*. Closely linked to this group are an additional seven articles located in journals with a counselling focus, including the *Journal of Counseling and Development* and the *Asian Journal of Counselling*.

Sixteen of the remaining articles come from journals with a specific research focus on children and adolescents, such as the *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, while six are in journals with a broad educational research agenda, including *Teachers College Record* and *Australian Journal of Education*. The remainder is drawn from a miscellany of journals, some
of which have a school focus, including *Journal of School Violence* and *International Journal of School Disaffection*. A solitary article appears in *Educational Leadership*. It is worth noting the details of this article. Titled “A Case for School Connectedness”, the author was Robert Blum, as mentioned earlier a key figure in both SC research and the 2003 conference producing the Wingspread Declaration on School Connections. His article appeared in 2005, the year following the special edition of the *Journal of School Health*, thus occurring at a time when SC was undoubtedly receiving heightened research attention. Although SC research has continued apace, based on this sample it has yet to find a place in educational leadership research discussions. It remains instead spread across the domains of physical and psychological health, child and adolescent development and education. The influence of these perspectives on the domain of educational leadership appears slow to emerge, which is troubling given the central role that leadership plays in implementation of school change (Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Luppescu, & Easton, 2010; Elmore, 2004).

![Figure 1. Research focus of journals in which articles with school connectedness in titles have appeared, 1999 – mid-2016](image)
As the convergence of health and education perspectives broadened the presence of SC in the research community, schools became the locus of attention amidst growing expectations that they invest heavily in developing connectedness among their students (Howard & Johnson, 2000). This shift was happening in tandem with an increasing research focus on resilience in which young people’s relationship to school (named variously as SC, belonging, bonding, attachment and engagement) was consistently being named as a protective factor for young people against a range of negative outcomes (Blum & Rinehart, 1997; Furlong et al., 2003; Morrison, Robertson, Laurie, & Kelly, 2002; Simons-Morton, Crump, Haynie, & Saylor, 1999).

Policy was also beginning to embrace SC. In Australia, a discussion paper on children and young people’s mental health (Raphael, 2000), which formed part of the National Mental Health Strategy, a supportive school environment and connectedness to school were named as protective for young people. The Second Australian National Action Plan for Promotion, Prevention and Early Intervention for Mental Health, a joint State and Territory initiative, was launched in 2000 (Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care, 2000a), requiring improved mental health outcomes for children aged 5 to 18 to be achieved through 11 different pathways, including “connectedness to family, school and community” (p.28). The monograph accompanying the action plan defined connectedness as “a person’s sense of belonging with others” (Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care, 2000b, p.123), locating it in these three domains. The definitional ambiguity that has stalked SC since its formulation (Chung-Do, et al., 2015) was already beginning to emerge. To add to the confusion, the monograph listed a sense of belonging among protective factors in the school setting, while connectedness was named as a protective community and cultural factor. This lack of clarity was further compounded when yet
another term, poor attachment to school, was named as a risk factor. Only connectedness however was defined in the monograph’s glossary. This clumsy and uncertain embrace of SC in a national policy document was confusing but did not thwart the uptake of the concept in other policy areas.

In 2003, the Australian Commonwealth Department of Education, Science and Training produced eight monographs as part of the National School Drug Education Strategy Innovation and Good Practice Project. The first monograph, *Understanding Key Terms Used in Drug Education*, included student connectedness as one of six terms discussed in some detail. Despite using the phrase student connectedness rather than SC, the monograph offered a definition that captured the reciprocal and dynamic nature of the connections between students and their school. Monograph 7 in the series was titled *Creating Connectedness* and was unequivocal in its view that “creating, building and reinforcing connectedness” was urgent and ongoing school business (Commonwealth Department of Education Science and Training, 2003a, p.3).

Over time, most Australian State and Territory education jurisdictions have come to recognise the importance of students’ relationship with their school as a key lever for achieving improved learning and wellbeing outcomes, although the terminology may differ within and across policies and authorities. Notably, in 2006, the then Victorian Department of Education introduced the Attitudes to School Survey, which continues to be administered annually to government school students in years 5 to 12. The survey incorporates a set of questions around connectedness to school, with survey results meant to inform school planning. On the national level, the Safe Schools Framework, developed in 2003 and revised in 2011, contains nine elements, including “a supportive and connected school culture”
characterised by a young person’s connectedness to school.

The reach of SC in the policy arena has extended well beyond Australia. Some U.S. states including Alaska and California measure SC as part of broader surveys on school climate within their schools (American Institutes for Research, 2014; WestEd, 2017), while the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) provides guidance to schools on how to increase SC (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2009a), supplementing this resource on their website with fact sheets on SC targeted at key stakeholders (https://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/protective/school_connectedness.htm). The World Health Organization (WHO) called on the research by Bonny and colleagues (2000) and the Gatehouse Project team (Patton et al., 2000) in naming SC as contributing to a positive psycho-social school environment (World Health Organization, 2003) and provided schools with a Psycho-Social Environment Profile to complete in order to monitor their progress in delivering healthy environments for their students. Calls for more positive school social environments were hardly new, arising from school climate research as far back as early last century (Thapa, Cohen, Guffey, & Higgins-D’Alessandro, 2013). The place of SC in school climate debates was new however, and the interplay between the two constructs was increasingly being explored (Brookmeyer, Fanti, & Henrich, 2006; Loukas, Suzuki, & Horton, 2006; Whitlock, 2003; Wilson, 2004). In a review of school climate research, Zullig, Koopman, Patton, and Ubbes (2010) identified SC as one of five school climate domains. While the definitional complexities associated with both constructs necessarily renders such claims tentative, there is no doubt that SC has come to be regarded as a significant influence on a school’s relational climate (Berg & Aber, 2015).
Momentum around SC research continues to build while its potency as protective against a wide range of negative outcomes has accrued a solid evidence base since Resnick’s early studies (Resnick et al., 1997; Resnick et al., 1993). There is little doubt that these studies provided the catalyst for much of the research on SC that has followed. Their findings, that SC was protective for young people against pregnancy, problematic substance use, emotional distress and involvement in violence, continue to influence research in this field. In the late 1990s, suggestions about ways to reduce adolescent violence and restore safety in schools were always likely to be well received, particularly in the U.S. where 218 students had died in school-associated violence between 1992 and 1999 (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.). In an atmosphere of public disquiet and growing legislative efforts to create gun-free schools (Barrios, 2000; Cornell & Mayer, 2010), the link between higher levels of SC and lower levels of violent and delinquent behaviour provided appealing prevention possibilities for schools and policy-makers.

A substantial body of research already existed into the link between a student’s relationship with school and health-risk behaviours. Wilson (2004) observed that research into social bonding, described as “closely akin to connectedness” (p. 298), had already established that the quality of social bonds can lower delinquency rates. This research and the associated research into school bonding and delinquency (Hawkins, Guo, Hill, Battin-Pearson, & Abbott, 2001; Herrenkohl et al., 2003; Jenkins, 1997; Krohn & Massey, 1980; McBride et al., 1995) provided a firm foundation on which research into the links between SC and various adolescent problem behaviours has developed and broadened.

Despite this flourishing research record, SC has failed to distinguish itself more clearly from other concepts. This lack of clarity continues to draw scholarly comment (Loukas et al., 2016; Van Gundy et al., 2016). While now established as a construct of
serious interest to researchers, policy makers and practitioners in the fields of health and education, this lack of definitional precision threatens to attenuate its conceptual authority. Emerging from a crowded field of terms relating to a young person’s relationship to school, SC may yet founder as an under-theorised concept or be perpetually regarded as a conceptual mimic. Given its long gestation period, as discussed in this chapter, and its growing evidence base as a key contributor to young people’s wellbeing, such outcomes would represent serious scholarly negligence. There is therefore an irrefutable need to bring sustained and intense scrutiny to how SC has been and is currently understood in order for the construct’s conceptual clarity and utility to be determined.

2.5 Summary
As a first step in understanding and defining SC, this chapter has traced its antecedents and the social, cultural and political contexts that have shaped its emergence. Young people’s relationship to school has gained increased focus as notions of health, wellbeing and resilience have shaped a new and evolving discourse around the capacity of schools to be influential beyond learning outcomes; that relationship has been targeted as a lever for achieving school improvement at both the individual student and whole-school level. Freed from a corrosive blame narrative that propelled much of the early research on student alienation and drop-out, SC has required schools to rethink how they shape the relationship between themselves and their students. Research continues to consolidate the place of SC as a significant influence on young people’s mental, physical and social health and wellbeing, while over the past two decades SC has become increasingly visible within education and health strategies, and within their planning, in Australia and internationally. Surprisingly, conceptual clarity has not accompanied the growing research agenda or the sectoral interest. As a next step in seeking improved conceptual clarity, the following
chapter will examine the different terms that are used to refer to the student-school relationship, and explore the place of SC within that lexicon.
Chapter 3: Other Terms and Measures

3.1 Introduction

It is not surprising that the relationship between students and their schools has attracted considerable research interest. This relationship, the foundation on which the educational enterprise of school rests, is highly influential in terms of outcomes for students, ranging from academic to health impacts (Mouton, Hawkins, McPherson, & Copley, 1996; Prince & Hadwin, 2013; Samdal et al., 1998). The lengthy list of terms used to describe this relationship has become a focus of comment and discussion (Allen & Bowles, 2012; Jimerson et al., 2003; Libbey, 2004; O’Farrell & Morrison, 2003). As far back as 1989, Finn, in discussing identification with school, lamented the “plethora of terms for the same or similar behaviours” (p.126), exhorting the scholarly community to attend more closely to the use of terminology.

Many researchers in this field preface their work with an acknowledgement of the variety of terms and the lack of consistency in their application and measurement (Faulkner, Adlaf, Irving, Allison, & Dwyer, 2009; Frydenberg, Care, Freeman, & Chan, 2009; Furlong et al., 2003). A close examination of the meanings of the terms reveals both considerable overlap and, at times, a lack of conceptual clarity. Libbey (2004), in a welcome review of some of the key concepts and their measures, refers to “a confusing definitional spectrum” (p. 274). Anderman and Freeman (2004) also refer to “differences in terminology, as well as some differences in definitions” (p. 28), while others have labelled this situation of multiple definitions as “problematic” (O’Farrell & Morrison, 2003). On the other hand, in a review of definitions and measures related to school engagement, Jimerson et al. (2003) found that in
the 45 articles examined 31 did not provide definitions of the terms used. Meanings had to be derived from a careful analysis of the measures for each construct.

To locate the place of SC in this lexicon, it is essential to first identify the meanings that attach to some of the other key terms used to describe the student-school relationship. The terms most frequently used in the literature are discussed first. These terms are engagement, belonging, bonding, attachment, participation, identification, commitment, and sense of school membership. Discussion of less frequently used terms will follow. These terms include investment, involvement, satisfaction, affiliation, and relatedness. The place of SC in this collection of terms is then discussed.

3.2 Engagement

In the crowded field of descriptors for a young person’s relationship to school, some researchers have given engagement the status of a meta-construct (Fredricks et al., 2004; Garvik, Idsoe, & Bru, 2013; Harris, 2011; Hart, Stewart, & Jimerson, 2011; Lester, 2013). Following a close examination of the variety of terms used to describe a student’s social bonds within the school context, Furlong et al. (2003) posit school engagement as a global term, with other terms lacking in “breadth and depth” (p. 110). Regarded as an important concept in research on student alienation and dropout (Alexander et al., 2001; Balfanz et al., 2007; Christenson et al., 2001; Doll & Hess, 2004; Hunt et al., 2002; Juvonen, 2007; Morse, Anderson, Christenson, & Lehr, 2004; Woolley & Bowen, 2007), engagement is widely viewed as being multidimensional (Shernoff et al., 2016).

Agreement is less universal however on the number and names of those dimensions (Abbott-Chapman et al., 2013; Skinner, Furrer, Marchand, & Kindermann, 2008). The variation is considerable, ranging from behavioural and emotional (Finn, 1993; Raufelder, Sahabandu, Martinez, & Escobar, 2013), behavioural and affective (Leithwood & Jantzi,
1999), behavioural and cognitive (Jimerson et al., 2003), behavioural, emotional and social (National Research Council and the Institute of Medicine, 2004), affective, cognitive and behavioural (Wehlage & Rutter, 1986), social, academic and intellectual (Willms et al., 2009), academic, behavioural, cognitive and psychological (Sinclair, Christenson, Lehr, & Anderson, 2003), and behavioural, emotional, cognitive and agentic (Reeve & Tseng, 2011).

Further distinctions have been made between engagement in learning and engagement in schooling (Harris, 2011), and school and student engagement (Hazel & Allen, 2013; Hazel, Vazirabadi, & Gallagher, 2013). Drawing on the field of Positive Psychology and Flow Theory, recent European research into engagement has focused on energy, absorption and dedication as key components of the construct (Upadyaya & Salmela-Aro, 2013).

While research continues to develop on this still evolving concept (Appleton, Christenson, Kim, & Reschly, 2006; Conner & Pope, 2013; Reschly & Christenson, 2012; Ulmanen, Soini, Pietarinen, & Pyhältö, 2016; Wang & Eccles, 2011), the work by Fredricks et al. (2004), defining engagement as consisting of behavioural, cognitive and emotional components, appears to have achieved broad recognition among researchers (Archambault, Janosz, Morizot, et al., 2009; Cai & Liem, 2017; Carter, Reschly, Lovelace, Appleton, & Thompson, 2012; Conner & Pope, 2013; Estell & Perdue, 2013; Finn & Kasza, 2009; Wang & Fredricks, 2013; Yonezawa, Jones, & Joselowsky, 2009). In developing Student Engagement Guidelines in 2009, DEECD used this definition to inform its policy framework (DEECD, 2009).

The behavioural component of engagement refers to students’ participatory behaviours in their learning and school life, including extracurricular activities (DEECD, 2009). Some researchers consider behavioural engagement as an outcome of emotional and cognitive engagement (Green et al., 2012; Martin, Martin, & Evans, 2016). Emotional
engagement is broadly understood as comprising students’ affective interactions with school personnel and peers, and feelings of belonging to school (Archambault, Janosz, Morizot, et al., 2009; Griffiths, Lilles, Furlong, & Sidhwa, 2012). Cognitive engagement is associated with investment in learning and students’ capacity to self-regulate in the pursuit of learning goals (Appleton et al., 2008; Archambault, Janosz, Morizot, et al., 2009).

Given the different ways in which engagement has been conceptualised and operationalised, it is not surprising that measurement of the concept is similarly varied and confused (Glanville & Wildhagen, 2007; Samuelsen, 2012). In a review of instruments used to measure engagement between 1979 and 2009, Fredricks et al. (2011) located 156 instruments. On further analysis, and after applying various exclusion criteria, they identified 21 instruments available for use, consisting of student self-report instruments, teacher report instruments and observational measures. Fredricks and McColskey (2012), in a further discussion about the measurement of engagement, added interviews and experience sampling to the list of instruments in use. Their considered advice to engagement scholars was to employ a range of measures to fully capture the dynamic and layered nature of the construct.

The lack of consistency in defining and measuring engagement is reflected in the range of terms used to fully or partly describe the construct and its associated behaviours (Skinner, Kindermann, & Furrer, 2008). Motivation and engagement are at times used interchangeably (Darr, 2012), while terms such as school bonding, attachment, belonging and connectedness have been used as synonyms for engagement (Libbey, 2004). Identification, participation, investment and membership have also been used to describe engagement (Fredricks et al., 2004; Glanville & Wildhagen, 2007). This untidy situation
prompted Yonezawa et al. (2009) to observe that collectively researchers have “a poor understanding of engagement as a theoretical construct” (p. 194).

3.3 School Belonging

Belonging was a well-established concept in psychology before it became the subject of educational research. Baumeister and Leary (1995) propose that belonging is a fundamental human need which provides insights into behaviour and motivation, referring to the work of Donne, Freud, Maslow and Bowlby to support their claim. School belonging has been variously defined; however, the definition by Goodenow and Grady (1993) has been favoured within the literature (Slaten, Ferguson, Allen, Vella-Brodrick, & Waters, 2016). This definition describes school belonging as the extent to which students feel “accepted, respected, included and supported by others” within the social settings of the school (pp. 60-61). Interestingly, this definition has also been widely used to define SC.

Like bonding, belonging is used interchangeably with a number of other terms, including sense of school membership (Goodenow, 1993a, 1993b; Ma, 2003), a sense of relatedness (Osterman, 2000; Ryan & Patrick, 2001), and SC (Anderman, 2002; Gillen-O’Neel & Fuligni, 2013; Jose, Ryan, & Pryor, 2012; Juvonen, 2007; Newman, Lohman, & Newman, 2007; Prince & Hadwin, 2013). This lack of definitional precision inevitably leads to criticism (Faircloth & Hamm, 2005). Even when belonging is not explicitly defined as in Rosenberg’s article (1999) “The Need to Belong”, the meaning is clearly conveyed when readers are urged “to help all students find acceptable places for themselves in school” (p. 28). Morrison, Cosden, O’Farrell, and Campos (2003) propose that belonging is an “umbrella term” (p. 87) for a range of related constructs including SC, bonding and engagement.
In considering the trajectory of young people who drop out of school, Finn (1989) developed the participation-identification model. In this model, belonging, along with valuing, forms a student’s identification with school. Finn characterized belonging as a distinct feeling of being part of the school environment. In a study of the substance use of sexual minority youth, Rostosky, Owens, Zimmerman, and Riggle (2003) defined belonging as a psychosocial resource or developmental asset which can have immediate and long-term impacts on health and wellbeing. Fairclough and Hamm (2005) considered belonging across four domains: relationships with teachers, a secure place within a peer group, participation in extracurricular activities, and perceived ethnic-based discrimination. Their understanding of belonging has been adopted by others (Drolet, Arcand, Ducharme, & Leblanc, 2013).

Goodenow (1993a) investigated belonging with a focus on its links to academic motivation. She defined belonging as “students’ sense of being accepted, valued, included, and encouraged by others (teachers and peers) in the academic classroom setting and of feeling oneself to be an important part of the life and activity of the class” (p. 25). Other researchers have adopted this definition (Gutman & Midgley, 2000; Morrison et al., 2003). Goodenow (1993b) developed the 18-item Psychological Sense of School Membership (PSSM) scale to measure school belonging. This scale has been widely used to measure not only school belonging (Goodenow, 1993b; Newman et al., 2007; Ye & Wallace, 2013), but also bonding (Morrison, Robertson, & Harding, 1998; Morrison, Storino, Robertson, Weissglass, & Dondero, 2000) and SC (Crooks, Scott, Wolfe, Chiodo, & Killip, 2007; Shochet, Homel, Cockshaw, & Montgomery, 2008; Shochet, Smyth, & Homel, 2007). Based on Goodenow’s work (1993b), Hagborg (1998) developed an 11-item version of the PSSM scale,
which has been used to measure school belonging (Irvin, Meece, Byun, Farmer, & Hutchins, 2011).

3.4 School Bonding

The construct of school bonding can be traced back to Social Control Theory (SCT) (Hirschi, 1969) which defined social bonds as consisting of four components: attachment, involvement, performance, and commitment. Much of the research on school bonding has maintained these four components (Cernkovich & Giordano, 1992; Jenkins, 1997), although, as operationalised by the Social Development Research Group, it consists of two components: attachment and commitment (Catalano, Haggerty, et al., 2004). Attachment is understood as an emotional connection to school, while commitment represents a young person’s investment in the enterprise of school, including academic achievement. Abbott and colleagues (1998) define school bonding as consisting of three components: attachment to school, commitment to educational pursuits, and belief in the fairness of school rules. School bonding is also defined as a student’s connections with different aspects of their school experience, including personnel and the academic goals promoted in that setting (Maddox & Prinz, 2003; Pabian & Vandebosch, 2016). In a study on the impact of out-of-school activities on school engagement, Dotterer, McHale, and Crouter (2007) viewed bonding as the affective component of engagement.

The PSSM scale (Goodenow, 1993b) has been used to measure school bonding (Morrison et al., 2000), although Maddox and Prinz (2003) note that the non-inclusion of items addressing commitment and involvement diminishes its utility (p. 38). In a recent study, Pabian and Vandebosch (2016) used a 10-item school commitment scale to measure bonding with questions relating to enjoyment of school and relationships with teachers. A
study by Whiteside-Mansell et al. (2015) reveals the complexity and resultant confusion that the measurement and definition of young people’s relationship to school continues to generate. They reviewed three psychometrically sound measures of school bonding which they considered would address one or more of Hirschi’s (1969) four components. The instruments were the School Bond measure (Jenkins, 1997), the School Connection Scale (Brown & Evans, 2002) and the School Connectedness Scale (SCS) (Resnick et al., 1997). The researchers claimed that the latter instrument, used extensively to measure SC, “assesses attachment” (Whiteside-Mansell et al., 2015, p. 256). They drew on Libbey’s seminal 2004 work on measurement of students’ relationship to school and slightly reworked her definition of attachment, stating that students who feel attached to school feel connected to people at school, feel happy to be at school, and feel part of their school. Libbey (2004) clearly states however that Moody and Bearman, who were part of Resnick’s team which developed the SCS in 1997, adapted the scale into a three-item school attachment measure. The claim therefore by Whiteside-Mansell and colleagues (2015), that the 7-item SCS measures attachment, seems tenuous and is a clear example of the conceptual muddiness associated with the measurement and definition of young people’s relationship to school.

Some researchers suggest that SC and bonding to school are similar concepts (Anderman & Freeman, 2004). Catalano et al. (2004) have gone further and used school bonding and SC synonymously in their article in the special issue of the Journal of School Health which contained the landmark Wingspread Declaration on SC. There is a certain irony in their use of the terms, given that Libbey (2004) in the same issue was calling for improved definitional and conceptual clarity in research on young people’s connection to school. O’Farrell and Morrison (2003), in a quest to rescue school bonding from its
definitional morass, lament the inconsistent use of the term and list seven other terms, including SC, with which it has been used synonymously.

3.5 School Attachment

Bowlby’s early definition of attachment as a "lasting psychological connectedness between human beings" (Bowlby, 1969, p. 194) has resonance with the various definitions of school attachment. These definitions include “an enduring emotional bond between and among people, and among people and social institutions” (Marcus & Sanders-Reio, 2001, p. 428), a student’s sense of belonging to school (Johnson, Crosnoe, & Thaden, 2006), and close affective relationships with people in the school setting (Catalano, Haggerty, et al., 2004). Hill and Werner (2006) describe school attachment as affection towards school, and enjoyment of school life.

Hirschi’s study of delinquency (1969) introduced SCT, which included attachment as one of four components of the social bond. This theory suggested that attachment is a combination of young people caring about others and being concerned about how they are regarded by others. SCT has been influential in much subsequent research on relationships in school settings (Catalano, Haggerty, et al., 2004; Cernkovich & Giordano, 1992; Finn, 1989; Jenkins, 1995; Stewart, 2003; Wehlage, Rutter, Smith, Lesko, & Fernandez, 1989). Wehlage et al. (1989) built on this theory, developing the concept of school membership, which takes Hirschi’s four components, including attachment (defined as an emotional and social tie to school), and makes attainment of these conditions the basis for school membership.

School attachment is at times used interchangeably with other terms including belonging (Mouton et al., 1996; Voelkl, 1997), bonding (Henry & Slater, 2007; Wei & Chen, 2010), and connectedness (Dornbusch, Glasgow Erickson, Laird, & Wong, 2001; O’Farrell &
In a study by Mouton et al. (1996) of high school students with low attachment, the subjects when interviewed defined school attachment “as a sense of connectedness to the school community, through school activities as well as networks of peer and faculty support” (pp. 302-303).

Attachment is measured in different ways, ranging from response to a single item, “I like school” (Ennett, Flewelling, Lindrooth, & Norton, 1997), to two items, “I feel as if I really don’t belong at school” and “I wish I could drop out of school” (Cernkovich & Giordano, 1992), to a seven-item scale (Mosher, Rotolo, Phillips, Krupski, & Stark, 2004) which included questions addressing student academic results, enjoyment of school, effort in school, rule transgressions, and attendance at school. Wade and Brannigan (1998) used a similar set of questions to measure attachment in their study of the origins of adolescent risk-taking.

3.6 Participation

Participation appears to contain fewer conceptual nuances and variations than most of the other terms under discussion. Fredricks et al. (2004) view participation as behavioural engagement, suggesting that it is commonly understood in three ways: following classroom and whole school norms and expectations, involvement in the academic requirements of the school and its learning environment, and taking part in co-curricular or extra-curricular school activities (p.62). Finn and Cox (1992) suggest that the behaviours demonstrated when a student is participating in the classroom or broader school environment can be described as “engagement, involvement, or active participation” (p.142). In Finn’s (1989) participation-identification model, participation has four levels, ranging from being prepared for class and responding to teachers’ instructions (level one) to involvement in matters relating to school governance (level four). Finn’s taxonomy of
participation has been influential in subsequent studies (Christenson et al., 2001; Finn & Rock, 1997; Fredricks et al., 2004; Fullarton, 2002; Jennings, 2003; Marsh, 1992; Thomson, 2005; Voelkl, 1995; Willms, 2000). Like Finn (1989), others have conceptualized participation as having different levels. Holdsworth (1997) argues that in educational settings participation has been used to refer to a variety of behaviours, ranging from simply attending school to students having a voice in school-related matters. He contends that, while important, these acts do not constitute active participation which must involve activities that are valuable and have meaning for the participants, the community and the school’s academic goals (p.19). In a similar vein, Wilson (2000) contrasts tokenistic and deep participation, while Cumming (1994) identifies authentic participation and Jennings (2003) refers to meaningful participation. Newmann (1981) refers to committed and active participation. Student voice is essential for deep participation to occur (Serriere, Mitra, & Reed, 2011; Wilson, 2002). The terms are used interchangeably in some studies (Holdsworth & Blanchard, 2006; Jagersma & Parsons, 2011).

Participation is also used to refer to a young person’s involvement in extracurricular activities, and is a much-studied area within the context of a young person’s relationship with school. It has been found to have positive outcomes for individuals, ranging from involvement in post-secondary education (Mahoney, Cairns, & Farmer, 2003; Zaff, Moore, Papillo, & Williams, 2003), improved academic outcomes (Cosden, Morrison, Gutierrez, & Brown, 2004; Fredricks & Eccles, 2006b; Jordan & Nettles, 2000; Marsh & Kleitman, 2002), increased commitment to school (Marsh, 1992), reduced dropout rates, especially for at-risk young people (Mahoney & Cairns, 1997), and less involvement in health-compromising activities (Darling, 2005). Studies have also examined the relationship between participation and school size (Cotton, 1996), participation and type of activity (Coatsworth, Palen, Sharp,
& Ferrer-Wreder, 2006; McNeal, 1995), and participation and number of activities offered (Cohen, Taylor, Zonta, Vestal, & Schuster, 2007).

Measuring participation takes different approaches depending on how the concept is defined (Fullarton, Walker, Ainley, & Hillman, 2003; Willms, 2000). The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), in its Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), looks at absenteeism, although Willms (2000) acknowledges the limitations of this approach in understanding student participation. The California Healthy Kids Survey contains a resiliency module with three items related to Meaningful Participation in School (Jennings, 2003). Participation in extra-curricular and co-curricular activities is measured by student self-report questionnaire items covering number and type of activities and frequency of participation (Coatsworth et al., 2006; Darling, 2005; Fullarton, 2002), use of school yearbooks (Mahoney et al., 2003; Mahoney & Cairns, 1997), and teacher questionnaires regarding the number of activities offered within their school and rates of student participation (Cohen et al., 2007).

3.7 Identification

Drawing on research into school dropout, Finn (1989) proposed a model of student engagement that consisted of two dimensions, participation and identification. Finn defined participation as a student’s behavioural response to school in terms of active involvement in the life of the school. Identification was regarded as an affective response, seen in a student’s sense of belonging to and valuing of the school. The two dimensions interact with each other to shape a student’s engagement with school. Finn’s participation-identification model has held its place in much subsequent research into engagement (Anderman & Freeman, 2004; Perry, 2008; Voelkl, 2012), while his definition of identification has been adopted in a significant number of studies (Christenson et al., 2001;
Bizumic, Reynolds, Turner, Bromhead, and Subasic (2009) use the terms social identification and school identification interchangeably, defining them as “the psychological connection to the school” (p. 187). This Australian study found that identification had a significant impact on an individual’s psychological functioning.

Voelkl (1996) developed the Identification with School Questionnaire (ISQ) consisting of nine items measuring belonging and seven measuring the valuing of school. Other studies have used the ISQ to investigate the association between school identification and a range of variables, including peers’ beliefs (Radziwon, 2003), cheating and academic dishonesty (Finn & Frone, 2004), extracurricular school activities (Marsh & Kleitman, 2002), and vocational aspirations (Kenny, Blustein, Chaves, Grossman, & Gallagher, 2003; Wettersten et al., 2005).

3.8 Commitment

In Hirschi’s SCT (1969), commitment is one of the four elements of an individual’s bond to society. Hirschi considered that interest in achieving personal goals determines an individual’s actions and shapes conformity to societal conventions. This theory, when applied to the bond students have with school, posits that individuals who invest effort and time in their learning and the academic life of the school are less likely to be involved in delinquent behaviour (Cernkovich & Giordano, 1992; Hart & Mueller, 2012; Jenkins, 1995; Kelly & Pink, 1973; Payne, 2008).

Low commitment to school has also been linked to adolescents’ alcohol misuse (Eitle & Eitle, 2007; Hawkins, Catalano, & Miller, 1992). Catalano and colleagues (2004) view commitment, along with attachment, as a component of SC or bonding, and define it as “an
investment in school and doing well in school” (p. 252). Firestone and Rosenblum (1988) view commitment as consisting of two elements: commitment to learning and commitment to school as the place where non-academic pursuits and opportunities, including relational experiences, are located. Commitment has been measured by the School Commitment Index (Jenkins, 1995), which has also been used in an adapted form (Cavendish, 2013).

3.9 School Membership

Sense of school membership emerged as a concept in the 1980s against the backdrop of research into school drop-out (Hagborg, 1998; Wehlage et al., 1989; Wehlage et al., 1987; You, Ritchey, Furlong, Shochet, & Boman, 2011), and has continued to feature in school improvement initiatives (Hagborg, 1994; Smerdon, 2002). In documenting the features of successful drop-out prevention programs in 14 American secondary schools, Wehlage and colleagues (1989) identified young people’s desire to belong and establish bonds to the school, their peers and teachers as fundamental needs. Drawing on Hirschi’s SCT (1969), they argue that, to fully experience school membership, students must be attached, committed, involved, and have belief in the value and efficacy of education.

Smerdon (2002) developed a measure of perceived school membership consisting of belonging, commitment to the institution of school, and commitment to the academic requirements of school. Newmann et al. (1992) view school membership as consisting of a student’s affective, cognitive and behavioural bonds to school, and place the onus squarely on schools to create a caring environment marked by clarity of purpose, fairness, personal support, and opportunities to experience success for students’ sense of school membership to develop. These conditions are also named as fostering students’ feelings of SC (Glover, Burns, Butler, & Patton, 1998; Hernandez & Seem, 2004; Libbey, 2004; McNeely, Nonnemaker, & Blum, 2002).
Goodenow (1993b), who developed the PSSM scale, uses sense of school membership and belonging interchangeably (Goodenow & Grady, 1993); consequently her definition of belonging has been used as the definition of school membership by some researchers (Hagborg, 1998; Ma, 2003; Voelkl, 1995; You et al., 2011). The PSSM scale (Goodenow, 1993b) is the main instrument used to measure school membership (or belonging) (You et al., 2011). Since its development there have been a number of studies examining the scale’s factor structure (Hagborg, 1994; Ye & Wallace, 2014; You et al., 2011) with differing results. A Chinese version of the scale has also been developed (Cheung & Hui, 2003). Some researchers have modified certain items from the PSSM scale as part of their studies (Voelkl, 1997).

3.10 Investment

The concept of investment, which has its origins in motivational research, refers to behaviours that promote an individual’s future opportunities for success and reward (Jordan & Nettles, 2000; Peetsma, 2000). Within the school setting these behaviours include participation in extra-curricular activities, and commitment to learning (Nettles, 1989). Catalano and colleagues (2004) view investment as one of two components of commitment. In discussing the impact of part-time employment on student outcomes, Marsh (1991) uses investment and commitment interchangeably, as do other researchers (Catalano, Haggerty, et al., 2004; Fredricks et al., 2004).

3.11 Involvement

Involvement and alienation are constructs that have been extensively examined in both sociological and psychological research (Kanungo, 1979). Within the educational context, Newmann (1981) suggests that, in order to reduce student alienation, schools need to promote “student involvement in their work, in the people around them, and in the
physical surroundings of the school” (p. 549). Newmann refers to energetic engagement and committed participation when discussing involvement, using engagement and involvement interchangeably.

Involvement, one of the four components of Hirschi’s (1969) SCT, is defined as the time a student spends on school endorsed activities (Pratt, Gau, & Franklin, 2011). In the Social Development Model, involvement is regarded as part of the socialisation process that influences the formation of social bonds (Catalano, Haggerty, et al., 2004; Hawkins & Weis, 1985). Involvement is often understood as a form of participation or engagement (Cavendish, 2013; Cernkovich & Giordano, 1992; Finn & Cox, 1992). Maddox and Prinz (2003) defined involvement as “a behavioral or demonstrable connection to the institution” (pp. 32-33).

3.12 School Satisfaction

School satisfaction is an emerging area of educational interest, with a developing research base (Baker, Dilly, Aupperlee, & Patil, 2003; Casas, Baltatescu, Bertran, Gonzalez, & Hatos, 2013; Huebner & McCullough, 2000; Hui & Sun, 2010; Samdal et al., 1998; Verkuyten & Thijs, 2002). Coming out of the subjective wellbeing literature (Diener, 1994), the concept has more recently located itself in the field of Positive Psychology (Baker et al., 2003; Zullig, Huebner, & Patton, 2011) and has contributed to the growing demand for educational reform to give increased attention to the relational aspect of school and its impact on young people’s lives (Baker, 1998; Baker et al., 2003; Huebner, Ash, & Laughlin, 2001; Huebner & Gilman, 2003). Defined as “the subjective, cognitive appraisal of the perceived quality of school life” (Baker et al., 2003, p. 210), low school satisfaction is associated with a range of negative outcomes for young people, including early school leaving (Ainley et al., 1991),
academic failure (Epstein & McPartland, 1976), and increased health compromising behaviours (Hoff, Andersen, & Holstein, 2010; Takakura, Wake, & Kobayashi, 2010).

In 1976, Epstein and McPartland developed the Quality of School Life Scale, with a satisfaction subscale measuring students’ general reactions to their schooling. Huebner (1994) developed a Multidimensional Life Satisfaction Scale for Children, with five domains including school, while more recently Casas et al. (2013) concluded that satisfaction with school was highly related to student satisfaction with the quality of relationships with teachers. Tomyn and Cummins (2011) adapted the Personal Wellbeing Index – School Children, suggesting that school satisfaction should be included in the index as a new domain.

### 3.13 Affiliation

Affiliation is used as a synonym for a range of other terms, including engagement, involvement, identification, participation, bonding, and connectedness (Edge, 2009). Drawing on Finn’s (1989) participation-identification model, Leithwood and Jantzi (1999, 2000) suggest that affiliation captures the two elements of Finn’s definition of identification. Newmann (1981), in discussing student alienation, views communal bonds as forming through affiliation with others. Hill and Werner (2006) refer to affiliative orientation, defined as a desire to form and maintain close relationships with others. Wang and Holcombe (2010), in discussing affiliation, refer to the quality of an individual’s connection to others, and to “connectedness to teachers and peers in school” (p. 636). Watkins (2016) defines affiliation as feeling part of the organisation (school), using sense of membership and belonging as synonyms, while acknowledging that affiliation is frequently confused with other concepts, including identification. He used a brief form of the PSSM scale to measure affiliation in a study in a London secondary school.
3.14 Sense of Relatedness

Relatedness, a concept that comes out of both motivational research (Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Gest, Welsh, & Domitrovich, 2005) and developmental psychology, is viewed as one of the basic needs of young people (Davidson, Gest, & Welsh, 2010; LaGuardia & Ryan, 2002; Niemiec & Ryan, 2009). Defined as “the experience of connection and emotional security with other individuals in the school setting” (Connell, Halpern-Felsher, Clifford, Crichlow, & Usinger, 1995), relatedness is regarded as an important factor in young people’s engagement with school (Appleton et al., 2008; Goodenow, 1993a; McHugh, Horner, Colditz, & Wallace, 2013; Osterman, 2000; Wang & Holcombe, 2010). According to self-determination theory, relatedness, along with autonomy and competence, represent three pivotal needs shaping a student’s motivation (Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier, & Ryan, 1991; Ruzek et al., 2016). Ryan and Powelson (1991) suggest that relatedness involves making meaningful connections with others in ways that enhance the wellbeing of all individuals involved in the relationship. The Need for Relatedness Scale, developed for use in the workplace, has been adapted for use in a number of school settings (Cox, Duncheon, & McDavid, 2009).

3.15 Theoretical Underpinnings

The terms presented in this chapter are among the most frequently used to describe the relationship between students and school. The theoretical wellsprings of these terms, as set out in Table 1, indicate both overlap and uniqueness. The theoretical eclecticism of some constructs further underlines the conceptual untidiness of current understandings of a young person’s relationship to school and the lack of precision in the way in which terms are used.
Table 1.

*Key Theoretical Sources of Terms used to describe a Student’s Relationship to School*

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<td>Relatedness</td>
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3.16 Summary

This chapter has presented 13 terms used to describe a student’s relationship to school, yet it is questionable if this exploration of the conceptual “terroir” of the terms has yielded improved clarity. As Gillen-O’Neel and Fuligni (2013) observed in their discussion of school belonging, despite the range of terms in use to describe the student-school relationship, the concepts under discussion are essentially the same. A priority in this study has been to engage deeply with the meanings and understandings of SC within the conceptual landscape of the student-school relationship. Despite the limited gains in clarity, the mapping of definitions and measures in this chapter provides an indispensable first step in this search for understanding. This mapping is the point of departure for the study. While scholarly protocol would normally require a definition of the key concepts guiding the study, the search for the meanings of SC is the raison d’être of this research, and therefore these meanings can only emerge in the telling of the research journey. As this chapter has
revealed, the student-school relationship is understood and measured in multiple ways - Libbey’s (2004) cautionary words that SC has different meanings for different people still rings true a decade after her rueful observation. Arriving at the understandings and definitions of SC has involved a considered research structure which is described in the following chapter where the study methodology is discussed.
Chapter 4: Methodology

The purpose of this qualitatively driven, mixed methods study was to explore SC and the ways in which the construct is currently understood and experienced. In line with this purpose, the researcher explored how young people form connections with, and develop feelings of closeness to their school, and how this process is understood by students and staff, and how it is shaped by school and individual factors. This chapter describes the methodology that was implemented to achieve this purpose. The chapter begins with a description of the setting of the study and a rationale for the chosen research design. The chapter also sets out the procedures for participant selection and recruitment, the data collection instruments used in the study, and the procedures for data collection and analysis. The ethical issues associated with research with young people are addressed, and, given the researcher’s practitioner role in the school, the ethical challenges involved for practitioner-researchers are discussed. Ways in which the study worked to address questions of validity are also described.

4.1 Setting

This study was conducted within a co-educational secondary Catholic Regional College in outer metropolitan Melbourne, to be referred to henceforth as Woodlands College. Woodlands College, established in 1961, mainly draws students from its feeder parish primary schools in the surrounding suburbs. As a regional secondary school, Woodlands College is governed by the parishes that established it and not by a religious order, although it was originally administered by the Christian Brothers and began its life with 130 boys. In 1979 it became a co-educational College under lay administration with a student population of approximately 1400. Woodlands College is not a select entry school
and is committed to offering places to students enrolled in the surrounding parish primary schools from which it draws most of its student population.

A total of 1590 students were enrolled at the time of this study’s data collection (Table 2), with 167 teachers and staff members, 99 females and 68 males, employed. The student attendance rate was 88%, while enrolments of Indigenous students and students with a language background other than English were both less than 1% of the total enrolment. The My School website provides a profile of Australian schools and includes an Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA) value, which reflects the socio-educational backgrounds of students. The ICSEA value is calculated on the students’ family backgrounds, including parents’ occupation and school education, as well as school-level factors, including a school’s location and Indigenous student enrolment. The average ICSEA value is set at 1000, with values ranging from 500, which indicates highly disadvantaged student backgrounds to approximately 1300, representing highly advantaged student backgrounds. The ICSEA value of Woodlands College has moved between 1070 in 2008 to 1057 in 2014 for Woodlands College, indicating above average levels of advantage among the student enrolment. The post-school destination of Woodlands students is largely to tertiary study, either university or some form of further education and training, with the percentages fluctuating between 75% in 2009 and 84% in 2014, with the remaining students transitioning to employment or an unspecified pathway (www.myschool.edu.au).
Table 2.

*Year Level and Sex of Woodlands Students*

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Total</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>148</td>
<td>130</td>
<td>278</td>
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<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>147</td>
<td>132</td>
<td>279</td>
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<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>139</td>
<td>134</td>
<td>273</td>
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<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>118</td>
<td>142</td>
<td>260</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>117</td>
<td>112</td>
<td>229</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>210</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total:</td>
<td>777</td>
<td>752</td>
<td>1529</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Woodlands College has a junior (years 7/8), middle (years 9/10) and senior school (years 11/12) structure. Students in years 7 and 8 share a common curriculum and study a minimum of three subjects together with the same teacher. Year 9 students study a basic core group of compulsory subjects and choose from a broad range of elective subjects. All year 9 students spend two weeks at the College’s city campus where they are immersed in individual and team-based project work. In year 10 students choose from a wide range of subjects, including some Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE) subjects. In years 11 and 12 all students study the VCE. Woodlands College offers a broad selection of extracurricular activities, including performing arts, sports, volunteering opportunities and academic clubs such as computer, chess and reading groups. The College also runs camps and retreats, varying in duration and focus according to year level. All year 11 students are given the opportunity to travel to the Northern Territory for a two-week period, accompanied by staff, to participate in the life of an indigenous community with whom strong links have been established over many years. A Debutante Ball is held for year 10 students, and various social events, both formal and informal, are offered at each year level.

Pastoral care is delivered in years 7 to 9 through a home group structure, with students meeting with a home group teacher every morning for 15 minutes. The purpose of
these meetings is both administrative and pastoral, with students staying in the same home group with the same teacher for a year. According to the school’s website, the home group structure aims to develop “a sense of belonging and connectedness” among students. In years 10 to 12 students are assigned an individual mentor from a member of the teaching staff. The mentor’s role is to meet fortnightly with their allocated students, either individually or in a group, to set learning objectives and assist with any concerns that may impact upon their learning and wellbeing.

Woodlands College offers a range of student support services including two nurses, a special education unit and a careers counselling service. The researcher was employed in the school as a school social worker, although the role was described as “school counsellor”. She was located in the Youth and Family Services team that worked with students, families and staff and a range of local and state welfare and health agencies. This study was conducted in the fourth term of the school year, which in Victoria runs from early October to mid-December. This timing was carefully considered. Ultimately the decision to conduct the study at the end of the school year was based on the desire to allow all students, but particularly the year 7 cohort who arrived new to Woodlands College at the beginning of the year, to have experienced three terms of school life. Given the study’s focus was SC, this decision seems soundly based. Allowing this familiarisation period for the year 7 students however, presented some challenges with the year 12 students who were in the final term of their school careers. Their attention was heavily focused on their final examinations and their pathways beyond school. For many students this time was also intensely emotional as they participated in both formal and informal end of school rituals. These factors were likely to have influenced the availability of some year 12 students to participate in the study.
4.2 Research in School Settings

Schools are highly desirable sites for researchers, providing as they do access to large numbers of young people across a broad developmental span; however, they do not exist to promote researcher opportunities. Their raison d’être is the education of students; researchers need to keep this fact in clear sight and shape their contact with schools accordingly. The interest in school-based research, and the need for sensitivity to school operations and priorities, has generated some useful recommendations about how to conduct research within this particular setting. Farrington, McBride, and Midford (2000) and Alibali and Nathan (2010) provide guidelines based on their experiences in undertaking school-based research. Drawing on the work of these scholars, Vukotich, Cousins, and Stebbins (2014) provide a framework for conducting engaged research in institutions, including schools. This framework has been applied to the current research and is set out in Table 3.
### Table 3.

*Application of Guidelines for Building Sustainable Research Engagements to Current Study, adapted from Vukotich et al., 2014*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Guidelines</th>
<th>Specific Precepts</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>1. UNDERSTAND THE HOST INSTITUTION</strong></td>
<td>The researcher’s employment at the college ensured:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a) Understand and respect organizational structure and culture</td>
<td>• Well-established knowledge about all aspects of the school’s operation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b) Pursue the approval process at right institutional level</td>
<td>• Well-established connections with staff, students and parents</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Well-established relationships with school principal and leadership team</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Well-established awareness of other research interests within the school</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Well-established links with non-teaching staff and staff in community agencies in regular contact with the school</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>2. DESIGN RESEARCH TO SERVE THE HOST INSTITUTION</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>a) Support institutional priorities</td>
<td>• Researcher’s focus on SC was a good fit with the school’s existing priorities around student engagement, attendance and high quality teacher-student relationships as pathways to improved student learning and wellbeing outcomes</td>
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<tr>
<td>b) Develop long-term relationships</td>
<td>• Researcher had established relationships with students, staff and parents that pre-dated the research and continued until her departure from the College (five years after the research commenced)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>3. MANAGE RESEARCH PROCESS TO MINIMIZE DISRUPTIONS</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>a) Respect the rights of individuals</td>
<td>• All necessary approvals were identified and obtained</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b) Select staff compatible with host institution</td>
<td>• Consent was obtained from parents and young people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c) Secure regulatory clearances</td>
<td>• The researcher was an accredited teacher with all the associated criminal records checks and clearances</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d) Adjust research schedule to accommodate host institution’s needs and priorities</td>
<td>• Researcher consulted extensively with staff and students about timing of data collection; opportunities to reschedule were offered to students and staff</td>
</tr>
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</table>
4. **BE VISIBLE AND AVAILABLE TO THE HOST INSTITUTION**

   a) Use uniform and logos for better visibility
   b) Participate, volunteer, and build credibility

   - Researcher addressed staff meetings on multiple occasions to explain the research focus and procedures
   - Researcher placed repeated notices in the school newsletter introducing the research to parents and carers, inviting those interested to an information session about the project
   - Detailed letters about the project sent to parents of students who volunteered to participate
   - Staff, students and parents were invited to clarify any aspects of the study that were unclear and provide feedback and comment about the study, both from a participant’s and non-participant’s point of view
   - Researcher was already known within the school community due to her employment at the college for the four years prior to the beginning of the research and for five years following the research start date

5. **COMMUNICATE CONTINUOUSLY**

   Communicate progress and results through various channels

   - Thank you notes were sent to all staff and students who participated in data collection
   - A whole staff morning tea was hosted as a thank you from the researcher for staff support, interest and participation
   - Students who participated in any form of data collection were given thank you bookmarks and invited to a morning tea
   - Preliminary results were presented at staff meetings and included in notices in the College newsletter
   - A summary of the key themes identified in the focus groups was first shared with students and staff who had participated in these discussions and then with the whole school community
   - The overall study findings will be provided to the College principal, while an offer has been made to present the findings in staff and parent forums, subject to the College’s time and agenda constraints.
   - A copy of the thesis will be donated to the College library
4.3 **Research Design and Rationale**

The research questions of the study were as follows:

1. What are the meanings of being connected to school?
   a) How is SC understood in the literature?
   b) How do students understand their connectedness to school (what makes school a place they want to be)?
   c) How do teachers and other staff recognise students’ connectedness to school?

2. What factors are associated with students’ connectedness to school?

This study investigates the meanings of SC among students in Woodlands College, and the factors that shape that connectedness, by conducting a qualitatively driven, concurrent mixed methods study.

4.3.1 **Mixed Methods Research**

Hailed as “the third methodological movement” (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003) and as “a research paradigm whose time has come” (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004, p. 7) mixed methods research (MMR) has gradually established itself as another methodological research approach, alongside qualitative and quantitative methodologies, since its emergence in the 1980s, although that time frame is not universally regarded as an accurate reflection of the history of MMR (Brannen, 2009; Maxwell, 2015). While the “paradigm wars” (Gage, 1989, p. 4) pitted qualitative and quantitative proponents against each other, MMR has been characterised as the phoenix emerging from the ashes of this acrimonious period (Cameron & Miller, 2007).

MMR is defined as research combining “quantitative and qualitative research techniques, methods, approaches, concepts or language into a single study” (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004, p. 17), although debate continues about how MMR is understood and
what can be included in the “mix” (Niglas, 2009; Symonds & Gorard, 2010). While mixed methods have been used increasingly in health and medical sciences, particularly nursing, education research has also taken up this approach. In a study of the prevalence rates for MMR within the behavioural/social sciences, Alise and Teddlie (2010) found that this approach accounted for 24% of methodologies appearing in prestigious education journals.

Advantages of employing a mixed methods approach have been variously stated but include a capacity to address complex issues in greater depth, to open up different, more nuanced and layered insights, and to draw on the strengths of quantitative and qualitative approaches, thereby reducing any limitations inherent in a single method (Archibald, 2015; Caruth, 2013; Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004; Lunde, Heggen, & Strand, 2012; Salehi & Golafshani, 2010).

As discussed in Chapter 1, curiosity about SC was the amorphous departure point for this study, which subsequently crystallised into questions about the ways in which students connect with school, and young people’s and teachers’ understanding of this experience. These early questions already suggested a worldview or at least an orientation that was not about methods at all but was indicative of an ontological and epistemological stance, albeit inchoate at that time. It would be misleading however to suggest that this interpretivist stance was guided from the beginning by a sophisticated philosophical eschewal of the crude quantitative stereotype of counting and numbers in favour of the equally blunt characterisation of the qualitative approach as words and stories. Smythe’s (2012) observation that “most of us are drawn more toward some methodologies than others” (p. 46) more accurately captures the subtle inclination that was at play during the earliest stages of the project. Hesse-Biber (2015) describes the processes that shape the research
question as the “context of discovery” (p. 784) and argues that they are rarely articulated, despite their pivotal influence on the entire research endeavour.

At its most pared back, the “context of discovery” (Hesse-Biber, 2015, p. 784) for this project was an increasingly flirtatious encounter between the researcher and SC, which was beckoning through the scholarly commentary with possibilities for improved outcomes for young people. As a school counsellor the researcher had formal and casual interactions with young people and teachers on a daily basis within a school setting and these experiences provided a practice base, which was constantly shaping the reading of the SC research and the evolving research questions. This dynamic conversation ultimately delivered two areas of unresolved tension and abiding curiosity, which revolved around SC as a state or a process and SC as a multi-dimensional lived experience.

Moving from these deliberations to research questions about the ways of connecting to school and young people’s understandings of this experience was irresistible and irrefutably qualitative. The literature on SC however was the essential launching pad for this exploration and working to unravel the meanings within this context formed the first sub-question of the first research question. Straddling a space between literature review and method, the researcher interrogated the literature around meanings of SC to establish a base from which the understandings of young people and school personnel could be explored. The literature provided data on definitions and measures from which the researcher conducted an analysis, which is better understood as a literature audit and as such part of the study’s method.

Further consideration of methods followed with selection of focus groups and student diaries, however the conversation between practice and research continued to be fertile, producing a set of hypotheses that invited an irrefutably quantitative response in the
form of a questionnaire. Arriving at this point with a consistent ontological (subjectivist) and epistemological (constructivist/interpretivist) stance did not require any paradigmatic dissembling. The mixing is at the methods level and as such can be described as a qualitatively-driven mixed methods approach or qualitatively-dominant mixed research (Johnson, Onwuegbuzie, & Turner, 2007). Searching the literature for the meanings of SC lay somewhere between quantitative and qualitative approaches.

Despite Giddings’ (2006) misgivings that MMR masquerades as inclusive while maintaining an unyielding positivist grip, qualitatively driven MMR has claimed a place in the research repertoire (Cresswell, Shope, Clark, & Green, 2006; Hall & Ryan, 2011). Mason (2006) put forward an impassioned argument for the place of qualitatively driven approaches to MMR, promoting their capacity to produce new understandings of the layered complexity and contexts of social experience and to enhance the enquirer’s ability to understand and capture the multi-dimensional nature of social experience. She suggested that mixing methods in this way can free the researcher to bring a more flexible and creative engagement with issues that can result in “thinking outside the box” (Mason, 2006, p.13).

The rationale for mixing methods is “significance enhancement” or “maximising interpretation of the findings” (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2010, p. 63). In short, this researcher’s “story” of SC could only be imagined and told qualitatively, but a quantitative dimension enriched the narrative and allowed some hypothesis testing. Hesse-Biber’s (2015) advice to begin with an unwavering focus on the issue, thus decoupling the design and the question in order to avoid a possible mismatch, was instructive and captured the thinking process in this project. Arrival at a qualitatively driven mixed methods approach
was the end point of an extended period of reflection on SC, initially as a practitioner and latterly as a researcher.

4.3.2 Research Design

This study uses a qualitatively driven mixed methods approach to explore the meanings of being connected with school, how this process is understood by students and staff and shaped by school and individual factors. After selecting this approach, research design presented as the next area for consideration and mixed methods researchers have developed a number of typologies to assist in these design deliberations (Greene, Caracelli, & Graham, 1989; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2006). Despite listing five reasons why MM typologies are important, Teddlie and Tashakkori (2006) urge caution in regarding these typologies as definitive representations of all possible design permutations, indicating that designs are fluid and consequently elude neat representation. For this study these cautionary words are relevant as although the design is concurrent, one of the main MM typologies (Cresswell, 2015), the implementation of the design did not always follow the scripted sequence that the typology suggests.

Under the concurrent mixed methods design, qualitative and quantitative data collection occurs simultaneously and data are usually integrated during the interpretation phase, although integration can also occur during analysis (Terrell, 2012). The two research approaches can however be integrated at a much earlier stage beginning with question formulation and the data collection phases (Cresswell, Plano Clark, Gutmann, & Hanson, 2003) as was the case with this study. This study’s questions invited both qualitative and quantitative responses and therefore the concurrent design was chosen, as it best suited the exploratory and confirmatory questions posed by this study and allowed both generation and verification of theory, considered a notable advantage of this approach.
(Teddle & Tashakkori, 2006). Although having both qualitative and quantitative data collection methods, this is a qualitatively driven study, in which the qualitative data are dominant with the quantitative data in a secondary position in both analysis and interpretation. Giddings and Grant (2006) suggest such an approach can be represented by the equation, \textit{QUAL} + \text{quant}, with the upper and lower case letters indicating the relationship between the two data sets. In this study, the qualitative data were collected via student and staff focus groups, student diaries, and a student questionnaire with a series of open-ended questions and opportunities for additional comments, while the quantitative data were captured through single and multiple-choice items within the student questionnaire. The literature audit preceded both these data collection phases.

An important advantage of a mixed methods approach is the opportunity for young people to have different ways to participate in a study and for broader engagement with a diverse group of young people (Barker & Weller, 2003). The range of young people’s competencies and preferred ways to share their experiences was revealed when a student approached the researcher and gave her a long letter, indicating she did not want to participate in the study via any of the available methods, however she wanted to share her ideas about school and SC. Undoubtedly there would have been other students who felt uninvited into the research process and who either chose not to or felt unable to find a way to participate as this young woman did. While all research has limitations and this study could not offer an exhaustive number of ways to participate, the determination of this single student to create a space for herself within the research was a salutary reminder that research choices shape participation in ways that both include and exclude individuals.

The use of varied methods of data collection is expected to enhance the validity of the study findings and help address the research questions from different perspectives
The integration of the qualitative and quantitative data on a subject may help provide an enhanced understanding of a particular research problem. Additionally, the use of mixed methods helps bridge gaps between the two types of data collected and allows for corroboration, validation or confirmation of findings in a single study (Greene et al., 1989). For this study, the qualitative data enabled the exploration of meanings of SC as offered by students and staff, while the quantitative data through identifying factors associated with SC allowed a profile of connectedness to be generated. Results from both data sources were then triangulated.

4.4 Practitioner Research

Practitioner research, also referred to as practice-based research (McVey, Lees, & Nolan, 2015), practitioner inquiry (Mockler, 2014), research-minded practice (McBeath & Austin, 2015) and action research (Oolbekkink-Marchand, van der Steen, & Nijveldt, 2014) has been adopted within a broad range of professions including teaching, social work and medicine (Shaw, 2005). Definitions vary from Shaw and Lunt’s (2011) parsimonious description of this approach as research involving “a practitioner or group of practitioners carrying out enquiry in order to better understand their own practice and/or to improve service effectiveness” (Shaw & Lunt, 2011, p. 1548) to Ravitch’s (2014) multi-layered and complex characterisation of the practice as an inquiry stance generating social and educational transformation through critical reflection and action situated in practitioner communities.

Definitional clarity aside, the practitioner-researcher occupies a different space in the research landscape from academic or university-based researchers who are doing what Schiera (2014) calls “capital-R Research” (p.107). The differences seem less about purpose than about perspective, although what separates the two communities is often
foregrounded with practitioner research either relegated to a lower place in the research hierarchy (Lees, 2008; Ravitch, 2014) or claiming a form of methodological high ground in pointing to its location in the “real world” (Furlong & Oancea, 2005). The differences nevertheless are important and need to be understood and valued rather than used to establish the superiority of one approach over another. The “insider” view of practitioner research necessarily assigns “outsider” status to other researchers, bringing with it a polarising simplification of the two approaches and failing to recognise that practitioner-researchers themselves often move in and out of these two positions during the course of their research (Shaw, 2005). Ravitch (2014) urges all parties “to inquire into the spaces in which practitioners and academics come together” (p. 118).

In the current study the practitioner-researcher’s trajectory was a good fit for the three-step process described by Austin, Dal Santo, and Lee (2012). They suggest that curiosity about practice dilemmas and a search for new understandings, critical reflection on day-to-day practice experiences, and critical thinking about and engagement with research and its knowledge claims are the core elements of practitioner research. The beginning point for this study lay in the productive encounter between the practitioner’s curiosity about the growing scholarly interest in SC and a restless dissatisfaction with some of the findings based on her day-to-day and moment-to-moment exchanges with young people in a school setting. Curiosity and dissatisfaction were entangled with each other so that at times curiosity produced dissatisfaction and at other times dissatisfaction resulted in heightened curiosity. The relationship lacked harmony but was highly dynamic and reflexive. The number of questions about SC ultimately outstripped the answers that the research was providing and this outcome was the tipping point where the practitioner began to move into a research space. Schiera (2014) described this initially tentative
occupation of a corner of the research world as a “praxident (that is, praxis plus accident)” (p. 108); a space where the individual’s practice intersects with the research world and a courtship ensues, producing new knowledge and shaping new practice. As this courtship played out in the context of this study, the relationship between practitioner and researcher gradually became more intimate and the research process formally began. Questions emerged, ontological and epistemological territory was traversed and methods were considered.

Crotty (1998) poses four questions in his useful guided tour through the research process. The questions provide a helpful organising framework with which to order the decisions that are fundamental to any research. The questions go to the heart of the research process, revealing it as an epistemological, philosophical and pragmatic endeavour. Crotty’s questions concern methods, methodology, theoretical perspective and epistemology and require researchers to “out” themselves around the core elements that have shaped their study. While Crotty’s questions start with methods and end with epistemology (p. 2), his graphic and tabular representations reverse that order. He clearly states that the direction of the arrows and the order in which the elements are addressed in the lived experience of the research process are seldom neatly linear. He suggests the unidirectional nature of the arrows is unlikely to capture the accurate chronology of the research. Crotty’s (1998) flow chart is adapted in Figure 2 and indicates the core components of this study, although the implied unambiguous flow from epistemology to methods tells only a partial story with the arrows in fact leaving a much busier footprint with movement in all directions. Crotty describes such spirited arrow activity as methodology in the making, leaving the researcher to determine the study’s form in response to the issue under investigation. This freedom does not however legitimise
inconsistent, contradictory or incoherent research design, but serves to promote a reflective and considered engagement with the research.

*Constructionism*

Interpretivism

Mixed Methods

Focus Groups, Journals, Questionnaire

*Figure 2. Components of current study, adapted from Crotty (1998)*

This research shape with its beguilingly neat format does not capture the messiness and chaos of the research journey or the incremental and uncertain changes in identity as the practitioner and researcher roles came together. More than the sum of its parts, the practitioner-researcher identity brought what Rhodes (2013) refers to as a “new self-realisation based on the transformational learning experiences” (p. 5) that are inherent in undertaking a research project. The position of practitioner-researcher also brought with it an ethical dimension that required constant attention and reflection and was a rich source of learning about the research endeavour, particularly self as researcher.

**4.4.1 Ethical Issues for the Practitioner-Researcher**

The practitioner-researcher role immediately raised questions about positioning within Woodlands College, which had also acquired a dual identity as a school and a research site. Viewed from the researcher perspective, additional school events such as swimming carnivals, retreats and assemblies had the potential to be considered as disruptive and unaccommodating to the research endeavour, rather than important events in the life of the school and greatly anticipated and enjoyed by many students and staff (or research subjects as the researcher perspective would consider them). From the practitioner perspective, such events were highly valued as co-curricular activities that were
opportunities for student participation and occasions of celebration and acknowledgement of a broad range of student achievement: they were also regarded as providing relational spaces and experiences that could influence SC and therefore were enthusiastically endorsed.

The relationship between the practitioner and researcher positions was not only complex for the practitioner-researcher inhabiting both spaces, but also on occasions for students and staff. As noted earlier, at the time of the study the researcher was employed at Woodlands College as the school social worker and had been at the College for four years and subsequently remained at the College for a further five years after the data collection phase of the study. Although having both a practitioner and researcher role within the College, the researcher role was conspicuous within the school community only immediately prior to and during the data collection phase of the study. The researcher’s practitioner role provided the substantive identity by which students, families and staff knew her and through this role relationships had been formed with many members of the school community. The nature of the relationship with many students and some staff, was primarily therapeutic, having been formed within the context of a counselling contact. Even when that contact had ceased, the imprint of the therapeutic encounter was not erased from the relationship, as knowledge of each other within that context continued to exist within the relationship. With other students and staff at Woodlands College however, a therapeutic relationship did not exist and the nature of the relationship with these staff members was collegial, while with these students the researcher had a working relationship as a staff member in a non-teaching role with a clearly defined function (counsellor) in the school setting.
The data collection phase brought further complexity to the practitioner-researcher position within the school and ethical mindfulness (Warin, 2011) was essential for catching those moments when the roles were vying for attention. The five-week timeline over which data were collected was taut with scheduling pressures. The researcher was acutely aware that her priority around gathering data was not the school’s priority and that the data collection schedule could not take precedence over her practitioner role. The wellbeing of students was always going to trump the data collection timetable, regardless of any resultant rescheduling challenges or the researcher’s escalating anxiety. Within the demands of the data collection phase the researcher-practitioner also had to take particular care not to take advantage of her cordial working relationships with staff to avoid exerting any pressure around timetabling for the student questionnaires and focus groups. On several occasions, teachers reluctantly indicated that they could ‘fit in’ with the researcher’s suggested time, although it was not their preferred choice due to disruption to a planned teaching program. These moments required extra vigilance to ensure the researcher-practitioner’s need to collect the data was not prioritised over the practitioner-researcher’s commitment to the school’s core business of teaching and learning.

During the data collection phase an incident occurred which captures some of the complexity inherent in occupying dual roles. The practitioner-researcher was conducting a focus group with year 9 students and the discussion was in the final few minutes when a student knocked and entered the room, delivering a message from a teacher who was demanding that four of the students in the group return to class immediately. All the students had provided their own and parental (guardian/carer) consent to participate and the researcher had given advance notice to all the students’ teachers that they would be absent during this period. The four students were unconcerned and insisted they wanted to
stay until the discussion concluded, however the practitioner-researcher was acutely aware of the potential damage to a number of relationships if the message was ignored. The group concluded more hastily than would have otherwise have occurred or was desirable and all students returned to class. The teacher later shared her displeasure at the late return of her students and indicated that she did not support any students leaving class for such purposes.

This experience raised several dilemmas for the practitioner-researcher. It is disingenuous to imagine that the roles can be entered and exited, one bowing politely to the other as it withdraws and allows the other free movement. On the contrary, this practitioner-researcher’s experience was that the roles jostled for dominance and constantly overlapped in an uneasy and at times competitive manner. The researcher in the example above recognised the students’ right and ability to make a choice to remain in the focus group until its conclusion, viewing their role as research participants as momentarily foregrounded over their student role. This perspective however could be seen as dangerously self-serving, yet could also be regarded as the researcher’s commitment to respecting the decision that the young people had made about their participation in the research and not allowing the power of the teacher to negate their choice. The practitioner in this situation was also acutely aware of the need to demonstrate respect for the teacher’s point of view and not intentionally place the students in a situation where their relationship with their teacher could be compromised. The teacher’s relationship with the practitioner also needed to be treated with care as any fracture could potentially impact on the practitioner’s capacity to deliver a counselling service to students in that teacher’s class by reducing the teacher’s willingness to refer students to the counselling service, to support her students’ use of the counselling service or to allow students to attend appointments
during her classes. In this sense, the temporal dimensions of the practitioner role stretched far beyond those attached to the researcher role and required ongoing assessment of any potential impacts caused by the researcher role on the practitioner role. This single example reveals the convoluted nature of ethical practice in the research process for practitioner-researchers, requiring constant checking and interrogation of decision-making and its impacts on all aspects of the research endeavour and the practitioner role during and after the research has been completed.

The excellent framework provided by Stutchbury and Fox (2009) for ethical analysis includes a strand relating to equal respect for all persons involved in the research process. The two questions associated with this strand relate directly to the situation under discussion, asking “How will I demonstrate my respect for all participants? Have I treated pupils in the same way as teachers?” (p. 496). Stutchbury and Fox (2009) suggest that their framework, consisting of four layers and 24 strands provides a structured and logical way of thinking about the ethical implications of research as the questions associated with each strand provide a comprehensive and helpful tool for ensuring rigour and vigilance in addressing ethical issues throughout the research process.

4.5 Ethical Issues in Research with Young People

Ethical concerns are a core component of all research, however where human participants, particularly children and adolescents are involved, the ethical considerations need to be held tightly in view and remain central to decision-making. Before this study had taken any formal shape, ethical considerations were already at the forefront of the researcher’s deliberations in a way that reflected Gallagher’s (2009) characterisation of ethics in research as “an ongoing process of questioning, acting and reflecting, rather than straightforward application of general rules of conduct” (p.26). While the ethical tensions
inherent in the practitioner-researcher position have been discussed, the ethics of conducting research with young people were central considerations in this project, overlapping with the practitioner-researcher concerns particularly around power and participation.

This researcher’s view of young people as competent and capable sits within a particular paradigmatic understanding of childhood and adolescence and formed the point of departure from which key ethical questions were considered. This positioning of young people has consolidated a place in childhood and youth studies in recent years and represents an elemental shift away from a view of young people as inherently vulnerable and in need of protection (Graham, Powell, & Taylor, 2015). Such a view of young people cannot however be stripped of context and does not naively champion young people’s rights to be autonomous and independent in circumstances where their right to protection from a range of harms must be asserted. This statement alone carries a number of ethical considerations including who determines the harms and who provides (imposes?) the protection. Graham and colleagues (2013) encourage researchers to avoid the binary approach by adopting a view that children and young people’s abilities and vulnerabilities will shape the nature of their participation in research, rather than decide their inclusion or exclusion. During this research project a situation occurred which pushed the researcher’s stance regarding notions of competence and vulnerability and the associated ethical considerations for who should be offered an opportunity to participate and from whom such an opportunity should be withheld.

The ethical concern occurred when the University Ethics Committee questioned the researcher’s decision not to exclude young people in a counselling relationship with her from being offered the same opportunity to participate in the research as young people
who were not accessing the counselling services of the researcher. The Ethics Committee indicated a preference for all students who were current clients to be excluded from an opportunity to participate. Interestingly, the same requirement was not applied to teachers who were the researcher’s counselling clients (a case of age trumping any perceived vulnerability?). It would be self-serving to deny that the inclusion of young people in a counselling relationship with the counsellor was likely to be advantageous to the project. In seeking to develop an understanding of how young people form connections with school, the researcher believed that it was important that all young people, including those in a counselling relationship with her or one of the other counsellors, had an opportunity to be heard. Many of these young people were likely to experience a high level of connectedness within that relationship. In addition, some of these students may have been more likely to experience low levels of connectedness with the school as a whole and therefore constitute a population of interest in this study, given its focus on the factors that promote or hinder SC. As with so many aspects of decision-making in ethical research, the decision not to exclude these students was complex and cluttered with possibilities and uncertainties. It was not a simple case of young people’s right to be heard versus young people’s right to be protected from possible harm. Such characterisations of ethical decision-making in research are a glib over-simplification.

The disagreement with the University Ethics Committee was ultimately resolved with the Committee allowing students in a counselling relationship with the researcher to have an opportunity to be involved in the study. The researcher had argued strongly for their right to make a choice to be involved, rejecting the view that these students’ uptake of the counselling service disabled their capacity to make an informed decision or negated their right to do so. A pro-active approach to help-seeking in a school setting which had a
tradition of assertive counselling outreach to all students was seen as evidence of these young people’s autonomy and independence, rather than flagging their vulnerability. Nevertheless, the stance of the Ethics Committee required the researcher to reflect deeply and honestly about her assumptions and motivations. How easy it could have been to stridently defend the right of all students to be offered an opportunity to participate without also considering any lurking self-interest in the outcome or the possible harms that may have existed for some students.

In compliance with the standards for ethical academic research, the researcher ensured that students who were in a counselling relationship with her at the time of data collection were not targeted for inclusion. These students were however, still free to participate in the study if they wished to do so. To address possible ethical conflicts, the researcher clearly stated in all recruitment materials and in the informed consent forms that if students were currently in a counselling relationship with the principal investigator and they volunteered to participate in the project by way of inclusion in a focus group, completion of the questionnaire, or through keeping a diary, their participation in the study would not affect or influence the counselling relationship in any way. Being an advocate for their right to participate did not remove the researcher’s awareness that some students who knew the researcher through her counselling role could be motivated by a wish to please her or, as they might see it, help her in her research.

Determining any individual’s motivation to participate in research is fraught with complexity and in this project motivations in addition to those already named, may have included a desire to miss some class time, a wish to follow their friends’ decision to participate or equally some students may have had an interest in the topic and wanted to contribute. Considering motivation to participate in research and implications for the
researcher, a single aspect of the research endeavour, highlights the fact that striving for ethical research practice is less about finding answers to ethical questions and is more focused on asking questions and engaging in the questioning in a probing and scrupulously honest manner. Such questioning and reflection are not occasional acts but occur in the researcher’s everyday doing and experiencing of the research. Guillemin and Gillam (2004) call these quotidian ethical travails of the researcher “ethics in practice” (p 264) or “microethics” (p. 265) and contrast them with procedural ethics, which involve the formal university-based process for gaining ethical approval.

The distinction between the two types of ethics is useful and captures the experiential gap between the heavily stage-managed ethical approval process and the less predictable and at times less manageable fieldwork phase of research. Guillemin and Gillam (2004) describe “ethically important moments” (p. 265) requiring the researcher to make decisions and choices where “something ethically important is at stake” (p. 265).

4.6 Reflexivity

In recent years reflexivity, deemed an essential strategy for achieving rigour in qualitative research (Darawsheh, 2014; Jootun, McGhee, & Marland, 2009), has increasingly been promoted as the foundation of ethical research practice (Graham et al., 2015; Guillemin & Gillam, 2004; Warin, 2011). Requiring a deep and critical awareness and scrutiny of self as researcher, reflexivity involves self-evaluation in relation to all aspects of the research process, generating an understanding and explicit acknowledgement of how the researcher both shapes and is shaped by the research process (Berger, 2015). In a similar vein, Warin (2011) stresses that reflexivity is “relational awareness” (p. 810), highlighting the reciprocal nature of the research process with both researcher and participants influencing and being influenced by each other. Etherington (2007) views
reflexivity as a tool for making transparent the researcher’s values and beliefs and their impact on the research process and outcomes.

Bringing a critically reflexive self to this research began when the project was an uncertain, inchoate but persistent “itch” in the practitioner’s mind. Questions about positionality dominated and the relational crosshatching of connections and influence on the project was the locus of much early reflection. The potential for reflexivity to cause paralysis was evident at this stage and even after the study began reflexivity at times teetered on becoming a Gordian Knot from which the researcher could not cut herself free. Such paralysis is not the intended outcome of reflexivity (May, 2010), nor is it intended to become the showpiece of the project, spilling endless self-conscious reflections on being self-consciously reflective across the project and displacing the research quest (Denzin, 1997; Finlay, 2002). For this researcher being reflexive invited an ongoing vigilance about the meaning of self-as-instrument and an honest scrutiny of the indelible footprint this left on all aspects of the study. Keeping a journal and extensive field notes and returning regularly to their contents, peer debriefing with fellow higher degree students, inviting the gaze of experienced researchers by presenting research in progress at conferences, having searching discussions with supervisors and immersing oneself in the relevant literature were all strategies used to inhabit a reflexive position throughout this study, all the while recognising the gravitational pull towards not seeing one’s assumptions and holding too much self-regard for one’s impregnable ethical and moral standards as a researcher. Reflexivity has required an ongoing commitment to be aware of self-as-researcher and reveal that self throughout the telling of this research story; a commitment to making explicit the spectrum from unknowingness to certitude that encircled each decision and stage of the study, while avoiding turning the account into a self-indulgent parody of
reflexivity at work. In a study of the reflexive activities employed by 34 qualitative social work researchers, Probst and Berenson (2014) reached the helpful conclusion that reflexivity is not achieved by a particular activity, but “in the attitude with which it is carried out” (p. 813). Embracing this view, this study aimed to achieve and place in clear sight an attitudinal songline of reflexivity along which all participants in this study can trace the researcher’s journey.

4.7 Method

4.7.1 Participant Selection Logic

The population for this study included the students and staff members at Woodlands College. At the time of data collection there were 1590 students enrolled and 167 staff members. Recruitment efforts began by requesting the permission of the school principal to conduct the study within Woodlands College. Permission was granted by the school principal who sought assurances that disruption to student learning would be minimised, but was encouraging and supportive of the study. The researcher then started participant recruitment procedures among students and staff by promoting the study via targeted notices and classroom visits. Aside from current enrolment or employment at Woodlands College, there were no other inclusion criteria for the study. Given that all recruitment efforts were conducted within the Woodlands College campus, it was assumed that all invitees were eligible to participate in the study. Table 4 summarises the number of participants for each data collection activity.
### Table 4.

**Study Participants by Method of Data Collection**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data collection activity</th>
<th>Number of participants</th>
<th>Number of groups</th>
<th>Cohorts</th>
<th>Sex M</th>
<th>F</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student questionnaire</td>
<td>206</td>
<td></td>
<td>Year 7</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Year 8</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Year 9</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Year 10</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Year 11</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Year 12</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student focus Groups</td>
<td>118</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Year 7</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Year 8</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>9</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Year 9</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>10</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Year 10</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Year 11</td>
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<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Year 12</td>
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<tr>
<td>Student diaries</td>
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<td>Year 7</td>
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<td>Year 10</td>
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<td>Year 11</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff focus groups</td>
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<td>Teachers</td>
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<td>Executive staff</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Year coordinators</td>
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<td>Student support</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>Administrative</td>
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<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Special education</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
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<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Resource centre</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>Performing arts</td>
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<td>4</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Physical education</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. M = male, F = female*

For the quantitative aspect of this mixed methods study, the researcher determined the required sample size based on the results of a power analysis conducted using G*Power v. 3.0.1. When conducting the a priori power analysis procedures, the researcher took into account the desired medium effect size, the error probability, the desired power of the test, and the type of statistical analysis procedures that were planned (Faul, Erdfelder, Buchner, & Lang, 2009). The results of the power analysis procedures are summarized in Table 5. Based on the results of the power analysis, a minimum sample size of 200 students was
targeted for recruitment. Based on the final data collection results, a total of 206 students completed the survey questionnaire for the quantitative portion of the study, which means that the minimum number of samples required has been met.

Table 5.
Results of a priori Power Analysis for Sample Size

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statistical Test</th>
<th>Effect Size (Med)</th>
<th>Error Probability</th>
<th>Desired Power</th>
<th>Sample Size</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<tr>
<td>Correlation</td>
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<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.80</td>
<td>82</td>
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<tr>
<td>ANOVA</td>
<td>0.25</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.80</td>
<td>200</td>
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<tr>
<td>Regression</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.80</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For the qualitative aspect of the study, the determination of the minimum sample size was made based on several considerations. Firstly, the concept of diminishing returns in qualitative studies was considered (Carlsen & Glenton, 2011). In qualitative studies, the collection of larger volumes of data does not necessarily equate to the collection of more new data. Secondly, data collection and analysis for qualitative studies can be more time and resource consuming compared to quantitative data collection and analysis. The use of a large sample size is therefore often less common in qualitative studies (Mason, 2010). Lastly, the concept of saturation was also considered. Saturation refers to the point where the collection of more qualitative data does not result in significant contributions to the themes being developed for the study (O’Reilly & Parker, 2012). As Mason (2010) highlighted however in a study of 560 PhD theses employing qualitative approaches, sample size and saturation are concepts that guide researcher decision-making in widely varying ways, if at all. His concluding advice for PhD researchers suggested that samples should reflect the study’s aim and purpose and that oversampling to assuage an intrusive quantitative urging that “more is better” should be avoided.
4.7.2 Sampling Strategy

The sampling strategy in this study was guided by the research questions, which sought to understand the meanings of SC, and as such ensuring representation from the range of students and staff in the College was prioritised to gain depth and richness.

Engaging with both male and female students across year levels 7 to 12 and staff from different areas of school operations was therefore considered important. The qualitative portion of the study involved responses to 21 open-ended items in the questionnaire, focus group discussions with teachers and students and student diaries. As indicated in Table 4 the numbers of participants involved in each data collection method varied considerably but overall the goal of representation of different groups within the College appears satisfactory for the purposes of this study.

To recruit the desired number and representative range of participants, three out of the eight classes at each year level were randomly selected and all students in those classes were given information about the study. This number of classes contained approximately thirty-one per cent of the school’s enrolment and was chosen in anticipation of the challenges around gaining active parental consent (Fletcher & Hunter, 2003) and out of an awareness of the practical constraints around data collection and analysis that over-sampling was likely to present. Collecting large amounts of data that the researcher could not then capably represent in the study was an ethical dilemma best avoided and this awareness tempered any ‘data lust’.

To participate in the study students were required to provide their own and parental/carer consent. Students who provided consent were then assigned to either complete a questionnaire or participate in a focus group with allocations guided by gender and year level considerations (achieving a balance), and the desired sample size across both
forms of data collection. A small number of students requested to be allocated to a specific activity. Five students did not want to join a focus group, but were willing to complete a questionnaire and three students asked to take part in a focus group. Guided by respect for these students’ preferences and a commitment to a child/young person centred approach, the researcher welcomed these young people into the activity of their choice. Students who participated in the study by keeping a diary volunteered for this activity and therefore year levels and gender are less evenly represented in this sample and the numbers are small. Four hundred and sixty-two students were given information packages on the study and 381 returned consent forms with 347 of these students participating in one of the data collection activities. The 34 students who provided consent but did not go on to participate in the study were either absent on the day that data collection took place (29) or withdrew their consent to participate (5). While 347 students took part in the study, 11 questionnaires were not included in the final data analysis due to unusable responses (five from year 7, 4 from year 8 and 2 from year 9). In one instance, it was evident that two students had done their questionnaires together as both contained identical extended complaints about a teacher and homework requirements and neither responded to any of the questionnaire items.

The purposive sampling technique, as employed in this study, is defined as the selection of units, such as individuals or groups, based on the purpose of addressing a research question (Suri, 2011). Purposive sampling can also refer to the selection of specific groups of individuals because they can provide information that would otherwise be unattainable from others (Palinkas, et al., 2013). In this study, the purposiveness of the sampling strategy focused on ensuring that the required number of participants was acquired for each of the cohorts identified in the table shown previously and that
representation across gender and year level for students and role within the College for staff was achieved.

4.8 Data Collection Methods

4.8.1 Questionnaire

The range of data collection methods used with children and young people is broad and can include methods as diverse as art and games (Flanagan, Greenfield, Coad, & Neilson, 2015; Lambert, Glacken, & McCarron, 2013), however regardless of the methods used, sensitivity to and respect for young people’s competencies must guide decision making (Punch, 2002). Questionnaires are widely used with young people across the social sciences, offering time and budgetary efficiencies and the opportunity to collect large quantities of factual information (Bechhofer & Paterson, 2000) that can be analysed and reported with speed (Leung, 2001). In this mixed methods study, a questionnaire provided a means of collecting both qualitative and quantitative data and allowed both the exploratory and confirmatory purposes of the study to be addressed. The inclusion of a questionnaire was also an effective way to gather a targeted amount of data in a short time period, given the restrictions within the school year when data collection occurred.

The questionnaire used in this study was developed by the researcher and consisted of 109 items and eight sections (Appendix 4). The content of the questionnaire was shaped by the research on SC available at the time of data collection in late 2003 and the study’s research questions. Although research on SC has continued to accumulate since that time, some consistent findings were emerging in the early 2000s with Resnick et al. (1997), Blum and Rinehart (1997), Bonny et al. (2000), McNeely et al. (2002), and Whitlock (2003) among key early contributors. Their combined work was establishing some of the factors associated with SC including aspects of school climate, classroom management,
participation in extra-curricular activities, engagement in learning, safety, school disciplinary policies, peer and teacher-student relationships, and meaningful opportunities for student representation. These studies drew on the work by Resnick et al. (1997) and used the SC Scale (SCS) to measure SC. The SCS as first employed by Resnick et al. (1997) and widely used since then to measure SC (Furlong, O’Brennan, & You, 2011) consists of five questions pertaining to whether students feel close to people in the school, whether they feel happy to be at the school, whether they feel like a part of the school, are treated fairly, and feel safe in the school.

The researcher drew on the SCS in constructing the questionnaire for the current study. Questions relating to feeling close to people at school, fair treatment, and feelings of safety were included and the questions relating to feeling part of school and feeling happy at school were combined into a single question “Do you enjoy being part of the Woodlands community?” with answers on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from always to never. Researchers are urged to seek out and use validated instruments when available within their field of enquiry (Hutchinson & Harwood, 2009; Marshall, 2005) such as the SCS. The SCS informed the construction of the questionnaire in this study, however it was not used exactly as used by Resnick and colleagues (1997). This is not unusual with many variations on the number of items used across studies, ranging from three (Kaminski et al., 2010) to seven (Svavarsdottir, 2008). While the questionnaire constructed for this study drew on the SCS, it also fashioned a series of questions based on other known variables such as student voice, participation in extracurricular activities, health status, cigarette use and academic engagement (Bonny et al., 2000) and then set about gathering additional information about all variables through both qualitative and quantitative items. While research has reached some consistent conclusions about the factors associated with SC,
there is less focus on how those factors are experienced by students and facilitated by schools. The questionnaire for this study was therefore designed to identify factors associated with SC, but also to explore those factors in greater depth.

4.8.2 Questionnaire Design

In designing a questionnaire many elements apart from content require careful consideration including issues related to the questions (wording, language, order, response styles, length, and number), presentation and structure (Leung, 2001; Marshall, 2005; Rattray & Jones, 2007). The questionnaire for this study, consisted of eight sections and contains 64 single response items, 23 multiple response items and 21 open questions. While the total number of questions is sizeable, the questionnaire is structured into sections with a mix of question formats to provide variety and minimise disengagement with the task. The overall mix of question formats was carefully planned to avoid too many open questions that could cause participants to tire and either pass over those items or provide limited responses. The researcher conducted rigorous checking of each item to ensure they contained only one question, avoided ambiguity or negative phrasing and used clear language that could be easily understood by young people within the age range of the study participants. In addition to detailed verbal instructions about the completion of the questionnaire, each item carries simple instructions regarding the response format such as ‘circle one’, ‘mark one box only’ and ‘write your answer below’.

Piloting or pre-testing of developed questionnaires is strongly encouraged in order to identify and rectify any problems (Hutchinson & Harwood, 2009; Marshall, 2005). The questionnaire was piloted with five young people who had completed their final year of secondary education at Woodlands College in the year prior to data collection. These young people had taken up 12-month traineeships at the school and were enthusiastic participants.
when approached by the researcher for feedback on the questionnaire. While this group was older than any of the participants in the study, their experience of school was recent and their participation was easily arranged due to their relatively flexible timetables in the school. Obtaining parental consent was also not required given their ages and these two factors expedited the piloting. In addition, the researcher invited feedback on the questionnaire from two university peers who were higher degree research students. The piloting of the questionnaire and the peer feedback resulted in some changes to the wording and order of items. In five questions that listed a range of response options, additional items were suggested and subsequently included in the final questionnaire.

The first section of the questionnaire, “About You” contained questions related to students’ age, gender, year level, educational history, family structure, parental attendance at Parent-Teacher interviews, and level of enjoyment in attending Woodlands College. Section 2, “Your Views about Woodlands”, contained four open questions about what students do and don’t enjoy about being a student at Woodlands, two questions about opportunities for students to express their opinions about school matters, and questions about school disciplinary policy and the student’s history of wagging school or cutting classes, and receiving detentions or suspensions. Section 3, “Your Views about Being Safe at School”, asked questions about the student’s awareness and understanding of the school’s policy regarding student safety and the student’s views regarding bullying and their sense of safety at Woodlands. Section 4, “Your Views about the School Environment”, contained 11 questions about the student’s use of school spaces for different purposes and their preferred lunchtime activities. Section 5, “Your Views about School Work”, asked students about their enjoyment of schoolwork, their academic progress across their subjects, their teachers’ engagement with them around their learning and their intentions regarding
completing their secondary education. Section 6, “Your Views about Getting Support at School”, contained items regarding the student’s access to supportive adults and peers at school, utilisation of nursing, counselling and educational support services, and health status. The researcher was aware that despite the assurances of anonymity, some students may not have been totally frank in responding to questions regarding the counselling service at Woodlands, given the researcher’s role within the college. This consideration must be held in view when results from this section are discussed. Section 7, “Your Views about the Staff at School”, posed questions about the student’s relationships with school staff, what facilitates supportive relationships with particular staff and what makes talking to teachers difficult. Section 8, “Activities/Things You Like Doing”, asked questions about the student’s involvement in school-based activities, part-time employment, and use of cigarettes. Ten questions were targeted at students in different year levels, asking their intention to participate in key events for their cohort. The questionnaire concluded with an invitation for students to describe Woodlands to someone who was considering attending the College.

Item 26 in the questionnaire was a visual analogue scale (VAS), asking students to indicate their level of connectedness on a horizontal line. The VAS has been used extensively in health research to measure subjective experiences such as pain intensity, fatigue (Crichton, 2001), and patient quality of life (de Boer et al., 2004) and demonstrates reliability, validity and sensitivity within health settings (Gift, 1989). Although its use outside the health field appears less established, its inclusion in this study appealed to the researcher because it directly sought students’ own assessment of their connectedness to school, providing the dependent variable for analysis. One of the disadvantages of the VAS is that reimagining a subjective experience into a position on a line can be challenging for respondents and careful instruction prior to use is recommended (Gift, 1989). The
researcher therefore placed certain emphasis on this part of the questionnaire when providing instructions to classes and individuals, highlighting the two ends of the scale and explaining the descriptions that sat at each end of the line. The VAS used in this study was horizontal, 10mm long and anchored on the left-hand side with the label “Not connected at all” and on the right-hand side with the label “Very connected”.

4.8.3 Hypothesis Testing

In order to answer the second research question concerning factors associated with students’ connectedness to school, five hypotheses were tested using data from the questionnaire. Two hypotheses related to a student’s knowledge of the College prior to commencing their attendance and whether this knowledge or greater familiarity with the school positively influenced SC. Questions that tested these hypotheses included having siblings at the College currently or previously or having a parent who attended the College, and how much the student knew about Woodlands before starting school there. A third hypothesis related to a student’s involvement in the decision to attend Woodlands College and whether making the choice themselves or in collaboration with their parents positively influenced SC through enhancing a sense of ownership about the decision and commitment to the choice. A fourth hypothesis concerned having peers from primary school attend Woodlands as part of a student’s intake cohort and whether these pre-existing relationships positively influence SC through reducing the relational discontinuity that can accompany the transition to secondary school (Coffey, 2013). The final hypothesis related to whether the distance a student lives from school influences SC. The hypothesis proposed that closer residence to school may facilitate easier access to after school activities and allow contact with school facilities and spaces such as basketball courts and football grounds where casual play out of school hours may be experienced and incidental contact with other students
(not necessarily in the same age group or year level) may occur. These hypotheses have emerged from the researcher’s many years as a practitioner, observing factors that appear to influence the student’s relationship to school and from an eclectic field of disciplines including psychology, education, and sociology. The unifying factor across the five hypotheses however is a search for factors that strengthen or attenuate a young person’s connection to school. The hypotheses all have a relational dimension, a key aspect of SC (Libbey, 2004; McNeely & Falci, 2004).

The questions that have guided this study are both exploratory and confirmatory and the questionnaire was designed to serve both purposes. The inclusion of the VAS provided a means for students to identify their level of connectedness to school and this then provided the dependent variable against which a range of key independent variables as identified in the research on SC could be assessed. The instrument yielded qualitative data through the inclusion of open questions, inviting participants to provide extended responses to questions regarding their views about Woodlands College.

4.8.4 Focus Groups

This study used focus groups with students and staff to explore their understandings of SC. Despite contested origins, focus groups are now used extensively in social science research, facilitating the in-depth exploration of social phenomena from the participants’ perspectives (Fallon & Brown, 2002). In the face of the increasing popularity of this data collection method, Parker and Titter (2006) question whether its enthusiastic embrace has been at the expense of more considered critical discussion about the rationale for its use, recruitment and sampling of participants, and the ways in which data are analysed. They suggest that the cost efficiencies and capacity to generate large amounts of data associated
with focus groups have influenced research decisions in ways that may not always be methodologically sound.

In this study focus groups were methodologically a good fit for the research questions, allowing an exploration of how participants experienced and perceived SC, which allowed understandings of SC to emerge. There are numerous ‘how to’ checklists to guide every aspect of focus group practice (Krueger, 1994; Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990) and while many of these resources are useful primers, the checklist approach does not always capture the complexity and fluidity of the focus group experience from either the participant or facilitator point of view. Hollander (2004) argues in her considered discussion of the social context of focus groups that “focus groups may be best conceptualized as a research site, not a research instrument” (p. 631). From this perspective, the researcher is situated as encountering the process of meaning making as participants interact, rather than collecting participant ideas; a deep-sea diver, not an angler. This emphasis requires a heightened awareness of the group processes and the factors that shape the social context in which the processes are located. Hollander views the social context across four domains: associational, status, conversational, and relational and her analysis works across these domains to draw out how they shape the social interactions within a focus group. Her views do not discount the relevance of the ‘check-list’ approach and this study was guided by much of the advice contained in these texts, particularly the protocols set out by Stewart and Shamdasani (1990) and Morgan (1988).

4.8.5 Selection of Focus Group Participants

In this study, participants in the student focus groups ranged in number from six to 13, while the smallest staff focus groups contained five participants and the largest contained eight. Stewart and Shamdasani (1990) recommend a range between six and 12 to maximise
lively discussion and encourage all participants’ involvement, but remain manageable for the facilitator. This number was exceeded in one student group, because a year 12 participant was absent at her scheduled time and asked to attend the later group. Two staff groups contained 5 participants as this was the maximum number of staff working in those areas of the school. All student groups consisted of participants from single year levels and were composed of males and females. The gender composition of the group is an important consideration in focus group design, influencing interaction and likely to provide different insights (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990). This advantage needs to be balanced against the importance of grouping participants who will be at ease with each other, aiming to minimise any reticence to join in the discussion (Morgan, 1988). Given that Woodlands College is a coeducational school with mixed-gender classes across all subjects, the researcher decided that replicating this organisational arrangement in the focus groups was most likely to create a relaxed and comfortable atmosphere among participants. Participants’ prior knowledge of each other can also be advantageous in minimising any reticence to join in the discussion, particularly if there are disagreements; additionally prior knowledge can facilitate extended discussion around events located within the shared memory of participants (Wilkinson, 1998).

As with the questionnaire, students who returned permission forms were randomly assigned to a focus group, guided by the considerations noted earlier concerning representation across year level and gender. Two focus groups were run at each year level and as Carlsen and Glenton (2011) acknowledge, there is limited guidance in the focus group literature on considerations that should inform this decision, apart from the concept of theoretical saturation. In the absence of clear guidance around this issue, the decision to conduct two groups at each year level was informed by both methodological and pragmatic
considerations. The methodological basis of the decision was less about conducting two groups per year level than about conducting more than one group per year level. Morgan (1995) advises that conducting only one group per participant type or segment (in this case year levels) may undermine the degree of certainty about whether themes are reflective of the participants in the single group or relate to the broader segment from which they are drawn. Pragmatically, conducting more than two groups per year level would have reduced the desired number of students completing the questionnaire and would also have required additional scheduling complexity within a school schedule with limited flexibility. Another consideration was whether conducting additional groups would exceed the capacity of the sole researcher both in terms of implementation and analysis. Conducting two groups per year level required what Morgan (1995) refers to as a balance between the study purposes and resources.

Participant inclusion criteria for staff focus groups centred on the individual’s role within the school. The role shaped both the amount and nature of contact with students. This varied from teachers who had daily contact with students in classrooms and the schoolyard to administrative support staff who had less frequent and often less authority-based contact with students through tasks such as following up absences or responding to lost property requests. In seeking to uncover teachers’ understandings of SC, the researcher was interested in exploring whether these different relational encounters and opportunities influenced how different staff understood SC. For this reason the researcher issued invitations to staff to participate in focus groups with colleagues from their area of school operations.

Nine different areas were targeted: executive staff including the school principal and deputy principals, year level coordinators, physical education staff including teachers and
sports coaches, creative arts staff including music, drama and art teachers, resource centre staff, educational support staff, student support services staff including counsellors and career advisors, school support staff including campus secretaries and grounds staff, and classroom teachers from all other faculty areas outside music and sport. Physical education and creative arts staff were included in separate groupings because teachers in these faculties worked with students in both the classroom and in special events such as the annual drama production, arts festival and school concerts, and sports events such as cross-country races, swimming carnivals, and athletics competitions. The researcher considered that their role in the school differed to such a degree from the role of teachers in other faculties that conducting separate focus groups was appropriate.

4.8.6 Conduct of Focus Groups

Student focus groups were conducted in a large room adjacent to the researcher’s office, which offered privacy from passing pedestrians, was free from telephone and public address interruptions and overall met the requirements of comfort and neutrality (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990). All but one of the staff focus groups were held in the same location with the exception being the executive group, which was conducted in a meeting room in the school’s administration block. Participants sat in a circular configuration and the size of the room allowed chairs to be easily moved so that participants could adjust the spaces between the chairs if desired. All student groups were held during class time although several extended briefly into the school lunch break. Student groups ran for approximately one hour and this time frame was carefully adhered to as the researcher was acutely aware of the disruption that participation in the group was already creating for students and teachers. The researcher had stated to staff and students that student groups would conclude within an hour and felt ethically obliged to meet that commitment, despite the
truncated discussion that resulted on two occasions. All staff groups were held immediately after the end of the school day and, free from the strictures of teaching commitments, most lasted up to an hour and a half. No incentives were provided for either student or staff participants although refreshments were available prior to the commencement of staff groups and biscuits and fruit were provided at student groups. All groups were audiotaped with the knowledge and permission of participants.

The researcher facilitated all focus groups and while Halcomb, Gholizadeh, DiGiacomo, Phillips, and Davidson (2007) regard a note-taker as essential in order to capture the non-verbal and para-linguistic communication within the group, the resource constraints of the project precluded this option. The researcher took brief notes during groups and supplemented these notes while listening to the audio-recording within 48 hours of each group while memory of the discussion was still fresh. While recall of many details remained vivid, these notes can only represent fragments of the interactional complexity of each group. A note-taker would certainly have brought observational depth to the record of each group, however even a skilled note-taker’s view can only ever be partial. As a staff member at Woodlands, the researcher was known to all participants, which is in contrast to Stewart and Shamdasani’s (1990) observation that the facilitator is most often a stranger. Being known to group participants can be an advantage, reducing some of the positional distance between them and the facilitator (Hopkins, 2007). This advantage assisted in generating a relaxed and open atmosphere in both student and staff focus groups, however the researcher was aware that being known to participants could also have been a disadvantage, potentially silencing some discussion. Some students may have been reluctant to make any critical comments about school operations or school personnel or may have edited the level of criticism, anxious that the researcher may not appreciate such
comments. Any discussion critical of the delivery of counselling services in the college was at the greatest risk of being silenced due to the researcher’s location within the counselling team, although this was not a targeted area of discussion in student or staff focus groups. What was left unsaid cannot be known, however all groups had a convivial, friendly atmosphere in which discussion flowed easily and students appeared unrestrained in offering their stories about their experiences of school. In staff focus groups participants appeared thoughtfully engaged in discussions and interactions were lively. In contrast to much of the advice about required facilitator attributes, Morgan (1995) provides encouraging advice suggesting that finding a place between dominating the conversation and being passive is within the grasp of most facilitators.

4.8.7 Student Focus Group Interview Guide

The interview guide for staff and student focus groups emerged from the research questions and sought to elicit understandings of connectedness. Questions moved from the more general to the more specific and were ordered according to their relative importance to the research question (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990). All questions were open-ended, avoiding multiple parts, sophisticated vocabulary, and complex structure. The researcher began each group with a welcome, thanking all participants for their attendance and explaining how the group would be conducted, including the anticipated finish time, the value of everyone’s opinion and importance of all comments, and issues relating to confidentiality and anonymity in the final reporting of the data. Introductions were not needed in any groups, as all participants knew one another. A broad overview of the study’s focus (SC) was provided before the first question, which focused on the importance of school in students’ lives. Participants were asked what they enjoyed and didn’t enjoy about being a student at Woodlands, while further questions focused on what helps students to
feel connected to school and what Woodlands could to enhance students’ connectedness to school. Several questions drew specifically on areas that were also included in the questionnaire, namely teacher-student relationships, involvement in extra- and co-curricular activities, avenues for sharing opinions about school, and perceptions of safety at school. The final question was identical to the final item in the questionnaire and invited students to describe Woodlands to someone who was considering coming to the school. The researcher then concluded the groups by again thanking all participants and acknowledging their contribution to the study. The student focus group questions are listed in Appendix 2.

4.8.8 Staff Focus Group Interview Guide

Staff focus groups followed a similar pattern to the student groups with the researcher offering a welcome, appreciation for participants’ involvement, an explanation of the purpose of the study, and the anticipated finish time. Care was taken to explain confidentiality and anonymity in the reporting of data, as in the staff groups there was a heightened possibility of identification especially for those who were the sole occupant of a particular role in the college such as the principal or a year level coordinator. The researcher invited clarifying questions around this issue before proceeding with the first question of the focus group, which asked how staff recognise SC in a student. Questions 2 and 3 focused on what promotes and undermines a student’s feelings of connectedness to school. Questions 4 and 5 explored the relationship between teachers/staff members and students and what helps or hinders the development of this relationship. Questions 6 and 7 asked how Woodlands nurtures SC in its students and what more could be done in this regard. Question 8 was an invitation to add any final thoughts on the subject. Staff focus group questions are listed in Appendix 3. The questions for both student and staff focus
groups were used to guide not restrict discussion. The facilitator followed ideas that emerged in discussion, exploring new directions and territory, as is the purpose of focus group enquiry (Bender & Ewbank, 1994).

4.8.9 Pre-testing of Focus Group Interview Questions

To assess the content validity of the focus group questions, the researcher conducted a pre-test with five year 12 students. Pre-testing is recommended in order to evaluate the questions in terms of comprehension and capacity to generate discussion (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990). The students were informed of the basic purpose of the study and were then asked the questions and invited to make any changes to enhance clarity. Based on the feedback from the pre-test, the researcher made several minor changes to the language, substituting “help” for “assist” and “like” for “enjoy” in two questions. Ideally the pre-test would have involved students from years 7 to 12, replicating the range of year levels involved in the actual focus groups, however this was not possible due to a range of practical issues relating to timetabling. The students involved in the pre-test did not participate in the data collection phase however their own consent and parental consent were obtained for their involvement in the pre-test. The staff focus group questions were shared with three colleagues at Woodlands and their feedback was incorporated into the final composition of questions.

4.8.10 Diaries

As part of the qualitative data collection for this study, students were invited to keep a diary over a three-week period. Diaries have been used extensively in qualitative research to capture an individual’s feelings and reflections on particular experiences within the passage of their daily lives (Harvey, 2011). Ross, Rideout, and Carson (1994) while acknowledging concerns regarding the reliability and validity of this method of data
collection, conclude that diaries provide an effective and trustworthy data collection method. Although their work was based on health and more specifically nursing research and drew on studies with adults, their conclusions appear to have application to the use of diaries beyond these fields. Day and Thatcher (2009) used diaries in their study with adolescent and young adult competitive trampolinists and found that this method allowed the collection of a substantial amount of rich data that afforded a deep understanding of participants’ experiences. Within the context of this study, diaries offered the opportunity to gain valuable insights into the ways in which students experienced their school life, capturing aspects of their everyday practices within the school setting and how they ascribed meaning to those practices, while also supplementing the questionnaire and focus group data.

Students were not randomly assigned to this task, as was the case with the questionnaires and focus groups. When promoting the project to students, keeping a diary was named as one of the three ways in which they could participate, however all information clearly stated that only students who specifically volunteered for this form of involvement would be assigned to this task. The reason for this difference in protocol was influenced by a number of factors. While accepting that this approach could result in few volunteers, the researcher was aware that keeping a diary takes time and commitment and that for many students this activity would be neither appealing nor practical within impending examination schedules and out of school demands such as part-time work and extracurricular commitments. Given that poor participation is a known barrier in this method of data collection (Hayman, Wilkes, & Jackson, 2012), asking students who had neither the inclination nor the time to participate in this activity seemed ill-advised from a methodological perspective, but also disrespectful of young people and the complexity of
their lives. For some students keeping a diary was simply not an activity that held any interest. While keen to avoid the essentialising discourse that positions boys as less able writers than girls (Watson, Kehler, & Martino, 2010) or the stereotypical labelling of diary keeping as of greater interest to females than males (Heydt, 2004), the researcher was aware that this task may have limited appeal to a large number of students, both boys and girls. The final number of students who volunteered is set out in Table 3. No year 9 students volunteered, however all other year levels were represented and three of the volunteers were male, albeit in the junior years.

The researcher met initially with all participants as a group, explaining the purpose of the study and asking them to record their experiences at school over a three-week period. Students were asked to record anything that happens during the school day that has an impact on how they feel about being a student at Woodlands College. These could include events like getting the results of a test, having a conversation with a teacher, or being involved in an activity with classmates during lunchtime or recess. Instructions were deliberately left broad, to invite the widest range of comments and limit participant self-censorship around their diary entries. Students were advised that only the researcher would read their diaries and that if their entries were included in the project report, individuals would be identified only as a junior or senior student and by gender. Given the small number of participants, excluding specific year levels was necessary to reduce any possibility of identification. Students were also assured that the researcher was not marking their diaries in any way and that handwriting and grammatical correctness were not being assessed. Wormald et al. (2003) identified student concerns about being tested as an issue in the administration of diaries in their study with young people around physical activity and advised the need to ally these anxieties. Following the initial group meeting,
the researcher scheduled two individual meetings with each participant to clarify any questions about the task, to provide encouragement and, given the reflective nature of keeping a record of thoughts and feelings with possible consequent discomfort or distress, to monitor young people’s wellbeing. Three weeks was chosen as the diary-keeping period to cover the two-week timetable of the school and include an additional week during which various irregular school activities were scheduled including end of year excursions and graduation celebrations for year 12 students. The researcher was also mindful that extending beyond three weeks could make the activity excessively onerous and risk eroding the good will and motivation of participants (Corti, 1993).

Students kept their diaries in idiosyncratic ways. Several addressed their entries to “Dear Diary”, while another student addressed the researcher directly. One student created a nickname for the diary, referring to it as “dizza”. All students headed up the entries with the date, while some added the day and most signed their name at the bottom of each entry. The diaries were A5 with 200 ruled pages and a four-year planner on the second page. The covers were in a variety of colours and students chose their own journal from among the available options. All personalised the diaries in some way. Four students decorated them with stickers and drawings on the front page and cover, four wrote their name on the front page, three drew pictures throughout the diary, and one student added some photographs of herself and her friends. The length of diary entries varied, but all students made entries each school day over the three-week period and five students also recorded entries on weekends.
4.9 Data Collection

4.9.1 Role of the Researcher

In this study, the researcher was the main investigator and the instrument for all data collection. Questionnaires were completed during class time after discussion with teachers about the most convenient time for scheduling. Unfortunately the same courtesy could not be extended to students, who had no choice about the timing for the questionnaire completion. Undoubtedly some students may have missed a class that they particularly enjoyed, due to their teachers’ decisions about scheduling. Some students who were absent when the questionnaires were completed negotiated another time with both the researcher and their teacher and completed the questionnaire in a room adjacent to the researcher’s office, enabling any questions to be easily asked and answered. Although Vukotich et al. (2014) advise that researchers should minimise the disruption to the host institution, locating control for scheduling with the teaching staff was another reminder of the power differential between young people and adults in school settings. The researcher’s dance between respectful engagement with the school and its staff and championing young people as capable and having agency was not without ongoing tension.

The researcher gave verbal instructions about the completion of questionnaires to all students, advised supervising teachers about the process, stayed for the first ten to fifteen minutes and returned to collect the completed materials at the end of each class. Students who were not involved in completing questionnaires remained in the same classroom as students completing the questionnaire, but participated in an alternative activity as set by their teachers.

The researcher facilitated all focus groups and met individually with students who chose to participate in keeping a diary. Focus groups were held in a large room adjacent to
the researcher’s office, situated in a quiet area of the college with no passing student traffic. As noted earlier students who were in a counselling relationship with the researcher were not excluded from participation in the study. The researcher scheduled two meetings over a three-week period with each student keeping a diary. These meetings served to check that keeping the diary was not causing students any psychological distress, given the introspective and reflective nature of the task.

All staff members were invited, but not required to participate in the study. The researcher explicitly stated that while this study was conducted at Woodlands College, the study was conducted independently of the school and that the decision to participate or not participate in the study would not affect relationships with Woodlands College, its administration or the researcher in any way. The voluntary nature of participation was emphasized, and interested staff members were invited to contact the researcher if they had any questions, concerns, or clarifications regarding the study and its procedures.

4.9.2 Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

Recruitment procedures began only after the Human Research Ethics Committee at the University of Melbourne granted ethical approval and the principal at Woodlands College provided permission for the study to be conducted at the school. As part of this permission request, the researcher fully disclosed all procedures of the study, the number of participants that would be targeted for involvement and from which groups within the school community, researcher expectations of study participants, as well as the purpose of the study. The researcher gained approval of all recruitment paraphernalia from the University Ethics Committee prior to distribution and ensured that the principal at Woodlands viewed these materials in advance of recruitment efforts.
The researcher then started participant recruitment procedures by placing notices in the fortnightly school newsletter, the daily school bulletin, and on the year level notice boards to promote the study among students, parents, and staff. The researcher spoke about the study at a whole school staff meeting, explaining the purpose of the study and how staff could participate. She also ran a parent information evening to present the study to all interested parents/carers, explaining the study’s focus, the ways in which young people could be involved, and the consent requirements. The researcher then randomly selected three classes at each year level and liaised with teachers to organise class visits to present the study to students. During these visits, the researcher distributed information packages containing the Plain Language Statement and consent forms for parents/carers and students (Appendix 1).

All recruitment documents included the researcher’s contact details to facilitate any parent/guardian enquiries about the study, while students and staff had easy access to the researcher on site if further information was needed. To facilitate scheduling for the focus groups and questionnaires the researcher provided a two-week timeline for the return of consent forms. Once consent was obtained, the researcher assigned students randomly to focus groups or questionnaires, apart from the small number who stated a preferred activity, taking into account the targeted numbers for each method of data collection and gender and year level distribution. Students could only participate in one form of data collection.

4.9.3 Consent

In Australia, parental/guardian consent to the participation of children and young people in research is required in addition to the young person’s consent, if the individual is judged capable of making an informed decision on the matter (The National Health and
Medical Research Council, 2007). In this study all parents/guardians and young people provided written consent. While being known in the school assisted the researcher in working with parents, students and teachers to secure consent, the well-documented challenges around this stage of the research process (Nakkash et al., 2014) meant proactive measures were also needed. Fletcher and Hunter (2003) provide useful guidelines, which were partially adopted in this study. The researcher worked closely with homeroom teachers who were key personnel in collecting completed consent forms and reminding students to return them as quickly as possible.

To assist this process, the researcher placed reminders on the daily bulletin so that homeroom teachers delivered this message each morning to students as part of the home group meeting. The researcher collected completed forms each day from the campus offices where they were returned with the student attendance rolls. She also visited each of the selected homerooms every third day during the two-week period between distribution of consent forms and the start of data collection. During these visits, the researcher answered any further questions about the project, thanked students who had returned the consent forms, and distributed additional forms and information packages to students who had lost the original paperwork. These visits were highly effective in promoting return of consent forms and align with Fletcher and Hunter’s strategy of utilising a multiple wave communication procedure with parents. The researcher also made telephone contact with 28 parents as the timeline shortened and this direct contact also yielded a positive response. Several parents took the trouble to post the consent forms back to the researcher due to concerns that their children may lose them or forget to deliver them. The final response rate for parental/guardian consent was 82%, which was a pleasing result.
given the short timeline and the widely acknowledged challenges in obtaining active consent.

4.9.4 Questionnaire Data Collection Procedures

As this study used a concurrent mixed methods approach, data were collected simultaneously over a period of five weeks with scheduling of the questionnaires and focus groups dependent on school timetables, student and teacher availability, and availability of the researcher outside her work commitments within the school. To minimise disruption to students and staff, the researcher liaised closely with teachers to schedule the most convenient time for students to complete the questionnaire. After the schedule was complete, data collection began.

The researcher visited each class, distributing the questionnaire to students who had provided their own and parental/guardian consent. An explanation of the task was provided, emphasising that there were no right or wrong answers and encouraging students to be open and uncensored in their responses. Students were also reminded that the questionnaire was anonymous, therefore they should not write their name on the form. On all occasions the researcher remained in the class for the first 10 to 15 minutes after the task commenced to respond to any individual student questions. Completing the questionnaire took between 30 to 40 minutes and teachers collected the completed questionnaires and then continued with the scheduled class. The researcher, keen to avoid causing any further disruption to the class returned to collect the completed questionnaires from the teacher after the lesson. All quantitative raw data were then manually coded to correspond to the study variables and entered into an Excel spread sheet before being imported into Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). The qualitative data in the form of responses to open questions were transcribed into Microsoft Word.
4.9.5 Staff Recruitment Procedures

To invite teachers and staff members to participate in the study, the researcher distributed a copy of the invitation notice in the internal staff mail system. The researcher also presented the study during a staff meeting, distributing personal invitations to participate to all staff. As with the students, the researcher provided a two-week timeline for interested teachers and staff members to provide consent forms, although some teachers indicated their wish to participate and completed the consent forms when arriving at the focus group meeting. Some staff who had not indicated an intention to participate came to scheduled groups and provided consent at that time. Once consent was obtained, the researcher assigned the teachers and staff members to their focus groups, based on their designation or position within the school.

4.9.6 Scheduling of Focus Groups

Students, teachers, and staff members who consented to participate in the focus groups were contacted in writing regarding their respective focus group discussion schedules. Students were given a minimum of five days advance notice of the scheduled time for their focus group in order to provide an opportunity for them to advise their teacher of this arrangement and check if their absence from class at that time was acceptable. The researcher also advised all staff at morning briefings of the student focus group schedule for the day and the names of participating students. This advice was in addition to advance notice via letters to all teachers who had students scheduled to attend a group. The researcher prioritised keeping teachers informed in a timely manner about arrangements impacting on their students, aware of the need to guard against any shortcuts in this regard due to her familiarity and positive working relationship with staff.
4.9.7  Focus Group Procedures

All focus groups, except the executive staff group, were held in a large room adjacent to the student support services offices and music rooms at Woodlands College. For all focus group discussions, the researcher served as the moderator, using the focus group discussion guide. All focus group participants were required to attend just one session. Each student focus groups lasted for an hour, while staff groups did not exceed 90 minutes. As communicated to the participants through the invitation notices, all focus group discussions were audio recorded for data collection and analysis purposes. After each focus group discussion, the researcher transcribed the recordings using Microsoft Word and added to the notes taken during the groups.

4.9.8  Recruitment of Diarists

Recruitment of diarists followed the same procedures as used for other participants, although this form of participation was clearly stated as voluntary. Students who volunteered for this activity met individually with the researcher so that the task was fully described and any questions could be clarified. One student decided not to proceed after meeting with the researcher and reflecting more deeply on her commitments and the time she would have available for this activity.

After consent forms were received, the 12 students who volunteered for this task attended a group meeting with the researcher at which the task was again discussed and the same broad instruction was given about this activity. The researcher met with each student on two subsequent occasions but encouraged students to make contact at any time over the three-week period if there were any issues they wished to discuss or clarify in relation to the task. At the end of the three-week period, the researcher collected all the journals and transcribed all entries into Microsoft Word. As the diaries could not be
returned immediately to all students due to the requirement for data analysis and the date of return was unknown, the researcher photocopied each diary and assembled the pages into a book with an accompanying thank-you letter for participants.

4.10 Data Analysis Plan

To understand the meanings of being connected to school and ways to nurture students’ connectedness to school, a literature audit was conducted and qualitative data were produced from student and staff focus groups, student diaries, and open items in the student questionnaire. The questionnaire was also the source of quantitative data. Buoyed (naively?) by the large amount of data these sources yielded, the researcher contemplated the mounting pages of transcribed text and spreadsheet displays with a budding sense of self-as-researcher. The data somehow legitimated the study in a way that the preceding years of thought, reading, and discussion did not. An entry from the researcher’s journal reflects this experience.

An exhilarating step on the journey today. The first set of questionnaires in my hands, I feel it’s all underway, research in action, it’s so tangible, answers to questions, the trace of the young person on the page. More tomorrow. Can’t wait.

Data however, have no meaning outside the interpretive gaze (Beins, 2001) and the emotional rush that collecting the data produced was quickly tempered as the researcher pondered this stage of the research process. Describing analysis in this linear fashion is of course misleading, as the researcher had begun analysis much earlier while listening to the first sentence of the first focus group and in the hurried reading of the first completed questionnaire and the first returned diary. A formal analysis plan however entails more than the researcher’s visceral reaction to collecting data, however memorable the experience has been.
In this mixed methods study, the literature audit was conducted first and then the qualitative and quantitative data analysis occurred concurrently using five of the seven phases suggested by Collins and O'Cathain (2009): 1) data reduction; 2) data display; 3) data transformation in which some qualitative data were quantitized and analysed using quantitative methods; 4) data comparison in which data from different sources were compared; and 5) data integration in which quantitative and qualitative data were integrated, and analysed and interpreted simultaneously. The researcher acknowledges that separating the discussion of the literature audit and the qualitative and quantitative data analysis is an expository contrivance to facilitate clarity of presentation and discussion, however approaches for analysis were not conceived, carried out or interpreted in isolation from each other but figured jointly in deliberations from the earliest stages of the study's planning.

4.10.1 Literature Audit

To address the research question regarding how SC is understood in the literature the researcher used her citation manager, Endnote X7, as the source from which materials were selected for analysis. The materials were gathered over the period of the research and were drawn from a range of databases, mainly covering education, health, and psychology. The databases are listed in Table 6. In addition, a range of grey literature was searched, including Australian and international education departments; youth focused research, policy, and interest groups; Australian and international health departments; and theses and dissertations. Australian Policy Online and the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare were useful sources of Australian grey literature, while the Bielefeld Academic Search Engine (BASE), OpenDOAR, and OpenGrey assisted in searching international grey literature.
The citation manager continued to be updated until shortly prior to the study’s completion. Materials were selected for inclusion in the data set according to whether the titles contained “school connectedness”, “connectedness”, or some variation on “connectedness”, such as “dis/connection”, “dis/connect” or “dis/connected”. Selection was made on this basis, as documents with these terms in their title, were judged likely to have a focus on connectedness and/or SC in their discussion. In addition, the researcher’s collection of materials relating to SC was kept up to date through frequent searches of relevant databases and subscribing to EBSCO alerts for the term ‘connectedness’.

All the material was organised according to year of publication and then analysed to extract any definitions, components, and measurement instruments of SC. If the material contained a definition of SC and a reference to the source of that definition, these details
were also noted. The aim of this exercise was threefold; firstly to trace the ways in which SC has been understood; secondly to identify the most influential sources of those understandings; and thirdly to establish the most frequently named components and measures of SC. The time span covered in the data set was 33 years from 1983 to 2016 with scholarly interest in the concept of SC gathering momentum from 2000.

4.10.2 Quantitative Analysis

In seeking to develop an understanding of SC this study used a questionnaire to collect data to identify factors that influence students’ connectedness to school (research question 2). The study aimed to identify factors significantly associated with or correlated to SC and to determine which factors have a statistically significant effect on SC. This section contains details of the data analysis procedures that were conducted to address this research question.

To facilitate the quantitative data analysis, the researcher used SPSS v. 22.0. Within the SPSS spread sheet, the raw data were organized to correspond to the study variables. Prior to conducting the inferential statistical analysis to address the research questions, the data were first processed for descriptive statistics. The descriptive statistical analysis was focused on providing a demographic profile of the sample of the study. This included frequency statistics for the categorical variables and measures of central tendency for the continuous variables of the study.

A Pearson’s correlation analysis was conducted to determine the existence of statistically significant relationships between the continuous variables of the study. The results of the Pearson’s correlation analysis were also used as the basis to quantify the type and strength of relationship between the study variables, based on the r-coefficient. For the categorical variables, an analysis of variance was conducted to determine whether the
participants’ characteristics were associated with differences in their SC scores. A linear regression analysis was conducted to determine which study variables were statistically significant predictors of SC. In the linear regression analysis, the study variables identified to be significantly correlated with SC were used as the independent variables, while SC was used as the dependent variable. For all analysis procedures, statistical significance was set at $p = .05$.

Factors associated with SC were also identified through cross-tabulating the study’s independent variables and the students’ self-rated SC levels from the VAS. The students’ self-rated SC levels were converted into five categories ranging from very low to very high. For some analysis where numbers were too small to produce meaningful results, the five SC categories were converted into three (below average, average, and above average). The cross-tabulations produced a profile of connectedness and disconnectedness, in which contrasts and similarities between students with low SC and high SC could be identified. This comparative profile generated by converting quantitative data from the questionnaire into qualitative data, a process known as qualitizing, is one of five approaches to qualitative profiling (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003) and is regarded as a useful technique in MMR (Sandelowski, 2000).

4.10.3 Operationalization of Quantitative Variables

SC is the dependent variable in this study with a range of independent variables used to identify associations between SC. Demographic variables include age, gender, year level and household composition. Five variables, extracurricular involvement, health status, visits to school nurse, cigarette use, and academic engagement, have been previously identified as associated with SC (Bonny et al., 2000; Whitlock, 2004). An additional five variables, prior knowledge of Woodlands, involvement in the decision to attend Woodlands, present or past
family connections with Woodlands, peers from primary school, and distance lived from school provided data for hypothesis testing as described in section 4.8.3.

**School connectedness.** SC was operationalized as a continuous variable, and was used as the dependent variable in this study. Based on the SCS as used by Resnick et al. (1997) and many subsequent researchers, SC scores were derived by summing the scores attributed by the participants to five questions approximating those used in the SCS. These questions pertained to whether the student feels close to people at Woodlands, whether the student feels happy to be at Woodlands, whether the student feels like a part of Woodlands, whether the students at Woodlands are treated fairly, and whether the student feels safe at Woodlands. Each of the items is scored on a scale of 1 to 5, which means that the scores for the SC variable range from 5 to 25.

Students also rated their level of connectedness on a VAS by placing a mark on a 10mm horizontal line anchored on the left-hand side by the descriptor ‘not connected at all’ and on the right-hand side by the descriptor ‘very connected’. An exact connectedness score was then produced for each student by measuring the place of the mark on the VAS. This exact connectedness score was then converted into a category as set out in Table 7.

**Table 7.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School Connectedness Scores and Categories derived from the VAS</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0-2</td>
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<tr>
<td>3-4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5-6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7-8</td>
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<tr>
<td>9-10</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**Extracurricular involvement.** Extracurricular involvement is operationalized as a continuous variable and was used as an independent variable in this study. To measure this variable, the participants were given a list of nine extracurricular activities available in
Woodlands and they were asked to specify how many extracurricular activities they were involved in. As such, the scores for extracurricular involvement may range from 0 to 9.

**Student voice.** Student voice is defined in this study as the student’s perception of how his or her opinions about current issues affecting the school are received by the school administration. The scores for student voice are scored on a scale from 1 to 5, ranging from very seriously to not at all. It is operationalized as a continuous variable and was used as an independent variable in this study.

**Health.** In this study, health pertains to the student’s self-reported general state of health. Students were asked to rate their current state of health on a scale of 1 to 6 ranging from ‘excellent’ to ‘poor’. This variable is operationalized as a continuous variable and was used as an independent variable in this study.

**Visits to school nurse.** Visits to the school nurse is operationalized as a continuous variable in this study, and was used as an independent variable. This was quantified on a scale of 1 to 5, where students were asked to indicate the number of times they visited the school nurse within the past month ranging from once to more than 10 times.

**Cigarette use.** Cigarette use is operationalized in this study as a dichotomous variable. Students were asked to respond to the question with “yes” or “no”. Cigarette use was used as an independent variable in this study.

**Academic engagement.** Academic engagement is defined in this study by the students’ enjoyment of the subjects they are currently taking ranging from ‘none’ to ‘all’ and how many of their subjects they are passing, also ranging from ‘none’ to ‘all’. Students were asked to rate the two questions on academic engagement using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 to 5. The scores for the two questions were summed up to derive the score
for academic engagement, which was operationalized as a continuous variable, and used as an independent variable.

**Prior knowledge of Woodlands.** Prior knowledge of the school is operationalized as a continuous variable and used as an independent variable in the study. This variable was quantified based on the students’ response to the question regarding how much they knew about Woodlands prior to starting at the school. The responses were scored based on a five-point Likert scale ranging from ‘lots’ to ‘nothing’.

**Involvement in the decision to attend the school.** The involvement in the decision to attend the school is operationalized as a categorical variable and used as an independent variable in the study. This variable was quantified by asking the students to identify from a set of choices who made the decision to enrol them in the school. These choices included the student, parent/s, other family members and the student with their parent/s.

**Family connections with school.** The variable of family connections is operationalized as a dichotomous variable and was used as an independent variable in the study. Students were asked whether their parents and/or siblings attended Woodlands and this variable was drawn from their responses.

**Peers from primary school.** This variable pertains to the number of peers from the student’s primary school also attending Woodlands, ranging from ‘20 or more’ to ‘none’. This variable is operationalized as a continuous variable and was used as an independent variable in the study.

**Distance lived from school.** This variable pertains to the distance of the student’s home to the school. This variable was operationalized as a continuous variable and was used as an independent variable in the study. The distance ranged from less than 2 kms to more than 10 kms from Woodlands.
Demographics. The students were also asked to provide data on their demographic characteristics. They were asked to specify their age, their gender, their year level, and the composition of their household. Among these demographic variables, only age was operationalized as a continuous variable. Gender, year level, and household composition were operationalized as categorical variables. The demographic characteristics were also used as independent or predictor variables.

4.10.4 Qualitative Analysis

In seeking to crystallise the qualitative data analysis plan for this study, the researcher’s ponderings about next steps found an echo in the somewhat plaintive title of chapter one in Kuckartz’ 2014 book on qualitative text analysis, “Analysing Qualitative Data – But How?” (p. 1). Kuckartz goes on to criticise the flimsy description that many qualitative studies provide around their data analysis procedures and urges researchers to pursue a more rigourous and systematic approach. Attride-Stirling (2001) shares this view and encourages qualitative researchers to provide detailed and robust accounts of their methods of analysis to contribute to knowledge and skills within the field. In a similar vein, Bazeley (2009) is highly critical of the shallow application of a frequently used qualitative data analysis techniques, thematic analysis, which she argues is too often reduced to little more than a simple listing of themes. St.Pierre and Jackson (2014) go further still and deride the whole notion of coding and theming of data, proposing a new approach, post-coding analysis, born out of the ontologies of post-modernism, post-structuralism, and other “post” discourses. Their advice that this approach is a non-method, “without a beginning or end, without origin or destination” (p. 717) provides few starting points for the task of analysis. Their argument does however cogently raise the issue of what constitutes data and the
ways in which much analysis manipulates, extracts and triumphantly holds aloft the findings.

At the risk of paralysis in developing the qualitative data analysis plan, the researcher returned to the research questions. This study is not a search for a single truth about SC, but a search for meanings and understandings: in a sense making sightings of SC across multiple contexts, as a bird-watcher might seek to catch glimpses of a certain species in different woodland and bush settings. The researcher assembled those sightings/meanings from both SC research and the quantitative and qualitative data collected in this study. The process was a form of bricolage research, conceptualised by Denzin and Lincoln (1999) as an eclectic approach working across theories, perspectives, and methodologies in recognition of and respect for the complexity and contradictions of meaning-making within a shifting and unstable world. Denzin and Lincoln name five types of bricoleurs and in this study the researcher most closely occupied the position of an interpretive bricoleur or rather bricoleuse; a usage which Wheeler (2015) argues for in her commentary on the positioning of bricoleur as gender-neutral in qualitative research, despite the availability of the word bricoleuse within the French language from which the term is taken. The interpretive bricoleur “understands that research is an interactive process, shaped by his or her own personal history, biography, gender, social class race and ethnicity, and by those of the people in the setting” (Denzin & Lincoln, 1999, p. 6). Reflexivity is indispensable for interpretive bricoleurs, inviting ongoing reflections not only on how they create knowledge but also from which vantage point that knowledge is generated.

The study’s data analysis plan, shaped by these considerations, used multiple analytical methods to explore the meanings of SC. This hybrid approach has found favour among social researchers who argue that the use of multiple analytic strategies can produce
rich insights that may otherwise go unnoticed (Barbour, 2014). The analytic approaches used for the qualitative data are consistent with the study’s constructionist epistemology, which rejects the notion of objective facts or a single truth awaiting discovery (Burr, 2015) but views young people’s relationship with school as in a constant state of flux, constituted and reconstituted, negotiated and renegotiated within the socio-cultural and historical context. Multiple approaches have facilitated exploration of this complex context through engaging with the data in different but complementary ways. Detailed discussion of the analysis of each data set follows.

4.10.5 Analysis of Focus Group Data

In 1998 Wilkinson observed that the abundance of advice on how to conduct focus groups was not matched in the literature by guidance on data analysis. Since that time, discussion of ways to analyse focus group data has continued to develop with an increasing emphasis on analysis of interactions among focus group participants, in addition to the analysis of content of focus group discussions (Duggleby, 2005; Halkier, 2010; Hollander, 2004). Attending to both aspects of the data aligned with this study’s approach; the researcher was not only interested in what participants said about their relationship with school, but also in how they talked about that relationship. During a year 9 focus group discussion the researcher had noted ‘lots of talk about teachers, there’s an edge, scornful, playful, teachers as good sorts, but also objects of ridicule’. This layered account about teachers was repeated in other groups and about other topics and the meanings contained in these accounts lay in the social interaction in the groups, the ways in which participants co-constructed meaning about their experiences of school.

In considering a data analysis plan that addressed both aspects of focus group data Belzile and Öberg (2012) suggest that in most studies the mix of content and interaction sits
along a continuum of use from low, where the content is emphasised, to high where interaction is the main focus. Situated at the mid-point is the approach taken in this study where content and interaction are blended. The analytic approaches available for analysing focus group data are multiple and selection should be consistent with the study’s aims and epistemological stance (Barbour, 2014; Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990). This study is seeking to explore participants’ meanings of connectedness to school through their understandings of their relationship to school. The study privileges the participants’ accounts of their relationships to school and within those accounts lie multiple, subjective and divergent understandings shaped by the social world in which participants (and the researcher) are located. This social constructionist lens is compatible with thematic analysis, an approach that claims no epistemological or ontological loyalties and offers the researcher an accessible and flexible approach to qualitative data analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

**4.10.6 Thematic Analysis**

Thematic analysis, described as the identification, analysis, and reporting of patterns within data is widely used by qualitative researchers but often poorly delineated from other approaches (Clarke & Braun, 2013). Its appeal however lies in its capacity to invite the researcher to attend to the unique and common themes within the “languaged data” (Polkinghorne, 2005, p. 137) that the study has produced. According to Braun and Clarke (2006) “a theme captures something important about the data in relation to the research question and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set” (p. 82). In this study, the researcher conducted the thematic analysis using the six steps identified by Braun and Clarke. The researcher was also mindful of Bazeley’s (2009) blunt criticism of the ‘garden path’ approach to thematic analysis that contents itself with naming themes without any deeper analytic engagement with the data (p. 9). The researcher
incorporated Bazeley’s strategy of “describe, compare, relate” (p. 10) into Braun and Clarke’s six phases of thematic analysis.

The first step involves familiarization with the data. An associate of the researcher did a broad first cut or rough draft transcription (Riessman, 1993) which captured participant’s conversational turns, easily audible non-verbal sounds such as laughing or coughing, unintelligible passages, and overlapping talk. The researcher then listened to all tapes and used the initial transcription as a base from which to add detail and correct errors in the rough draft. This process was an invaluable way to become immersed in the data and freed from the labour of the initial transcription task, the researcher listened deeply to the recorded talk. Using field notes as an aide-memoire this deep listening allowed the researcher to fill in some missing words, note pauses, and indicate areas of emphasis.

Transcription however is more than processing sounds into a written text. Hammersley (2010) describes transcription as “a process of construction” (p. 556), while Poland (1995) refers to transcription as “an interpretive activity” (p. 305). Decisions made about what to include and exclude and how to represent what is heard are two of the more straightforward decisions involved in transcribing data. Hammersley lists nine decisions involved in transcription and this list is not exhaustive. For the purposes of this study, the transcribed material indicates missing or garbled words, overlapping speech, pauses, and emphases. In some passages the tone of voice is also described, as such detail was an intrinsic performative feature of the participant’s delivery. This occurred on several occasions where students mimicked the speech of a teacher or student. The transcription symbols used are presented in Table 8. Speakers are given a number according to their order of entry into the discussion and are labelled in the transcript as ‘Male 1’ or ‘Female 1’ to identify the source of utterances and allow gender to remain visible within the
discussions. The researcher decided that this level of detail was sufficient for the purposes of this study, remaining aware however the transcripts were the result of both researcher judgement and interpretation.

Table 8.

*Transcription Symbols adopted from Poland (1995)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Symbol</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(...)</td>
<td>Pauses less than three seconds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(pause)</td>
<td>Pauses longer than three seconds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(laughing)</td>
<td>One person laughing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(laughter)</td>
<td>Several people laughing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(coughing)</td>
<td>Coughing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(overlapping)</td>
<td>Interrupted speech</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(xxxx)</td>
<td>Garbled speech</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A hyphen (-)</td>
<td>Emphasis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quotation marks and/or (mimicking voice):</td>
<td>Paraphrasing Others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When participants adopt a tone that indicates they are parodying someone else</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

After completing the transcriptions, the researcher reread the data on multiple occasions, taking notes on initial impressions and interesting aspects of the data set. To facilitate the qualitative data analysis, the researcher used NVivo v.8.0, a qualitative data analysis software package. Such programs expedite the management of large amounts of data, however the researcher did not make use of this option until late in the analysis process, preferring to work with printouts of the focus group transcripts using “the cut-and-paste technique” (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990, p. 104). This decision was shaped by the researcher’s reluctance to lose connection with the data, as early use of the program had provoked strong feelings of separation from the material and a sense that the already muffled voices of participants were being further dimmed. Carey (2016) observes that “software analysis is “tone deaf” to deep meanings and context” (p. 732) and the researcher
found that use of the software program did not meet her need to be embedded in the data so use of this technology was delayed until the latter stages of analysis.

The second step in the Braun and Clarke (2006) framework involves the generation of initial codes. During this step in the procedure, the researcher worked from the notes made in stage one and manually produced codes for all the focus group data. An example of coding is presented in Table 9. Notes were written beside the transcripts indicating points of interest and different coloured highlighters were used to draw attention to any patterns that were detected. As an example, a student’s description of a teacher’s different response to male and female students experiencing headaches was circled and notated with the words ‘influence of gender? gender shapes school experience?’. As analysis was focused on both what participants said and how they said it, notes were also made about areas of disagreement, debate, challenge, and solidarity (Farnsworth & Boon, 2010). All data extracts associated with a code were then collated and placed within their associated codes. Notes about issues of interest were also collated. Researchers are encouraged at this stage to invite independent coding of the data in order to guard against their biases and evaluate the reliability of the coding schema (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990). In this study, the researcher was assisted by a colleague who independently coded two randomly selected student focus group transcripts and two randomly selected staff focus group transcripts. While not achieving the rigour suggested by Stewart and Shamdasani (1990), this consultation generated helpful feedback regarding a number of codes which resulted in several changes.
Table 9.

Data Extract, with Codes Applied, adapted from Braun and Clarke (2006)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data extract</th>
<th>Coded for</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| I think as you get older and like you’re in year 11 and year 12 you find out that school’s more important than some like other stuff that used to ah have a high priority like it comes down to your future and it’s important and that. (F2, Year 11, Focus Group 1) | 1. School is important  
2. School is about your future  
3. School becomes more important in the senior year levels |

The third step requires searching for themes. In this step, the researcher sorted the different codes into broader themes. Braun and Clarke (2006) consider this stage to involve analysis of the codes in order to start combining them into themes and also start searching for relationships between codes, themes and sub-themes. A miscellaneous category was also generated to house data, which did not clearly fall within any one theme. The researcher made multiple photocopies of the transcripts and cut out the sections of transcript associated with each code, thereby creating theme packs, which could be easily displayed and arranged. Care was taken to ensure the context of each extract was preserved in order to avoid distorting the content of the utterance (Burnard, 1991). The year level and number of the student focus group was clearly marked on each transcript section and transcript sections from the staff focus groups were also labelled according to the composition of the group. This categorisation allowed trends and differences across year levels and staffing groups to be more easily identified.

The fourth step involves a review of themes. In this stage, the researcher reconsidered all themes to identify those that could be grouped together and those that could be further broken down into sub-themes. This phase required careful reading of all transcript extracts within a theme pack to check for coherence and goodness of fit. The researcher revised
several themes at this stage and relocated some transcript extracts into different themes (recoding) until satisfied that a thematic map had been established which told a coherent story about the data.

The fifth step was focused on defining and naming the themes. In this step, the researcher concentrated on capturing the essence of each theme by providing an appropriate label for the themes. Braun and Clarke (2006) advise against creating overly complex themes but suggest that each theme should tell a unique story that is clearly delineated from the stories contained in other themes. At this stage theme names are also reconsidered and both brevity and clarity are required so that the reader is quickly and unambiguously aware of the theme’s essence. It was at this stage that the researcher renamed several themes.

The sixth and concluding step was conducting the final analysis and generating the report (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The challenge at this stage was to draw on the data in sufficient detail to convince the reader of the validity of analysis, while ensuring the participants’ voices were vividly present in the account without confusing analysis with the pedestrian listing of endless quotes (Bazeley, 2009; Pavlenko, 2007). The interpretive lens of the researcher was again foregrounded in deciding what voices were given a place in the final account. Braun and Clarke (2006) advise selecting vivid extracts which convincingly showcase the points under discussion and coherently address the research question. This advice demonstrates that data has no meaning when stranded on a page but only comes to life when called to serve a research agenda. Aware of the biases that can shape this stage of the analysis and the pressure to present an authoritative self, the researcher took extra care to return to each data set, checking in particular the contents of the miscellaneous theme. This label can lend convenient cover and spurious research credibility to what Weiner-Levy
and Popper-Giveon (2013) refer to as “dark matter” (p. 2177) in qualitative research. This sinister label refers to all the material that is excised, suppressed, and shrouded in the final research account. Reflexivity provides no guarantee that the researcher will honestly appraise how data was used, misused or abused, given the multiple persuasive pressures that can silence a researcher’s reflexive candour (Weiner-Levy & Popper-Giveon, 2013). Their suggested remedy is to amplify transparency in the report, drawing attention to any inconvenient or uncomfortable aspects of the data and using these revelations to strengthen the research findings rather than diminish them.

4.10.7 Narrative Inquiry

Thematic analysis was the main analytic approach adopted in working with the qualitative data in this study, however as the researcher read and re-read the focus group and diary transcripts in the earliest stages of analysis, she became aware of the stories that participants were telling within the texts. While stories are not surprising features of diaries where the individual and the blank page meet in what approximates a semi-confessional space, the detail and frequency with which stories were woven into the focus group discussions was less expected. Interspersed throughout the conversational interactions within focus groups young people and staff engaged in talk about school through the telling of stories. On each re-reading of the transcripts, stories become more visible and thematic analysis, while identifying themes across stories, did not adequately facilitate engagement with the storying of school experiences. Narrative inquiry provided a way to supplement the thematic analysis and interact with and analyse these stories, bringing greater depth to the researcher’s own storying about the data.

Narrative inquiry does not lend itself to easy definition, as it is a field that is located across disparate disciplines and encompasses multiple and contrasting understandings.
Smith (2007) proposes that narrative inquiry is “an umbrella term for a mosaic of research efforts, with diverse theoretical musings, methods, empirical groundings and/or significance all revolving around an interest in narrative” (p. 393). Despite this characterisation of narrative inquiry, there appears to be solid consensus that narrative provides a core means by which people make sense of their lives (Pavlenko, 2007). Narrative inquiry provides a way to understand human experience and has increasingly found a place in educational research (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). The focus of this study, how young people experience their relationship with school and the meanings given to that experience, is well suited to narrative inquiry, allowing the researcher to pay attention not only to students’ storying of their selves in relationship with school, but also focus on the institutional, social, and cultural contexts influencing what stories they could tell and how they told those stories.

Narrative inquiry has no single method of analysis (Riessman, 1993), but uses a variety of approaches and combinations of approaches to interpret the stories that individuals tell (Esin, Fathi, & Squire, 2013; Ezzy, 2002). Thematic analysis is often used within narrative analysis to provide initial coding and an organisational framework from which further analysis can be conducted (Baughman, Aultman, Ludwick, & O'Neill, 2014).

While the narratives contained in the focus group discussions and diaries in this study were contained and brief and substantively different from grand biographies or life stories, they were nevertheless acts in which participants were making sense of their lives, particularly their lives within the space of school (Woodlands College) and School (the discourse of education). As such, these stories were of great interest to the researcher and narrative inquiry provided another lens through which participants’ relationship with school could be explored.
4.10.8 Analysis of Diaries

Analysis of student diaries followed the same procedures as described for focus group data analysis, using both thematic and narrative analyses, with some minor differences. The researcher transcribed the diaries using a word processing package, taking care to set out the text in a similar way to the lay-out that the diarists had used in their entries. This included representations of drawings and inclusion of emoticons and other symbols. The names of the diarists were omitted and any names of students or teachers that were included in diary entries were substituted with [student name] or [teacher name]. The researcher kept returning to the diaries in preference to working solely from the transcripts. Transcripts could not capture important features such as the diarists’ handwriting, their spatial use of the page, the density of their writing, or their decorative flourishes. The researcher did not make any notes on the students’ diaries but worked on the transcripts and photocopies of the diary entries with the diaries close at hand for ongoing reference. Diaries were analysed after the focus group analysis had been completed.

4.10.9 Analysis of Open Questions in Questionnaire

The researcher transcribed all responses to the open questions in the questionnaire, first ordering them according to year level, then gender. Thematic analysis followed and the data were then organised according to theme, year level, and gender. These categories facilitated comparison of themes across and within groups and allowed qualitative data to be converted into quantitative data so that areas of agreement and divergence could be identified. Narrative analysis was not used on this data set due to the absence of any developed stories within the brief responses.
4.10.10 Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Findings

Integration of the qualitative and quantitative perspectives of the current study was present from the earliest stages of planning. Integration of findings was therefore a much-anticipated phase of the research, promising to yield a fine grained and layered view of SC. Integration is not however without its challenges as Bryman (2007) discovered in his interview with 20 mixed methods researchers. Barriers to integration included the researchers’ methodological preferences, audience expectations and publication requirements, and managing the epistemological and ontological division between the two paradigms. A pragmatic approach that looks though or beyond these barriers has found some favour with mixed methods researchers, however Bryman (2007) urges an energetic dialogue between the qualitative and quantitative findings, which goes beyond a pedestrian triangulation exercise in which areas of convergence and divergence are simply named.

In the current study the use of mixed methods allowed the relationships between the dependent variable, SC, and associated independent variables (safety, student voice, relationships, health status, academic engagement, extracurricular participation, sense of belonging) to be explored. Using these independent variables as organising topics in the questionnaire and in the student focus group discussions enabled two questions to be answered. Firstly, were these variables significant factors in this study and secondly, what did they mean to this study’s participants? For example, if supportive teacher-student relationships were important, how did young people and staff understand these relationships? How did they play out in their lives? The study’s purpose was therefore both confirmatory and exploratory and the conversation between the two sets of data provided the space in which the meanings of SC for the participants in this study could be detailed and elaborated, allowing “a negotiated account of what they mean together” (Bryman,
2007, p. 21) to form. This is akin to Siddiqui and Fitzgerald (2014) view of integration in mixed methods as involving both reasoning and interpretation. Integration of the data in this study involved a constant movement between the qualitative and quantitative findings, asking questions of the data and constructing an elaborative account addressing the research questions.

4.11 Study Validity

In mixed methods studies, validity and credibility are contested concepts and serve as a looking glass into the broader struggle over paradigmatic perspectives that features within the mixed method research literature. As a research method that is gathering momentum, mixed methods practitioners have been at pains to establish quality criteria as part of their push towards legitimacy in the research space. The semantic and conceptual awkwardness that has characterised efforts to establish criteria for qualitative studies is also present in mixed methods and efforts to define frameworks for evaluating mixed methods studies have been slow to develop (Onwuegbuzie & Johnson, 2006). Nevertheless, criteria are necessary for any research to be appraised in terms of its place within the scholarly and practice communities within which it is located and to guard against any sleight of hand by the researcher in making claims about the phenomenon being studied (Whittemore, Chase, & Mandle, 2001).

In the current study the criteria proposed by Shek, Tang, and Han (2006) were followed and are set out in Table 10. Although relating to qualitative evaluation studies, these criteria provided a helpful framework for this mixed methods study, given its emphasis on the qualitative perspective.
Table 10.
Framework for Enhancing Trustworthiness in Qualitative Studies (adapted from Shek et al., 2006)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criteria</th>
<th>Application in Study</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Criteria 1  Explicit statement of the philosophical base of the study</td>
<td>Stated explicitly in Chapter 4 and evident throughout the study.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Criteria 2  Justifications for the number and nature of the participants of the study</td>
<td>Stated clearly in Chapter 4.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Criteria 3  Detailed description of the data collection procedures</td>
<td>Stated clearly in Chapter 4.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Criteria 4  Discussion of the biases and preoccupations of the researchers</td>
<td>Stated clearly in Chapter 4.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Criteria 5  Description of the steps taken to guard against biases or arguments that should or could not be eliminated</td>
<td>A reflexive stance adopted throughout the study; the researcher’s reflexive journal provided a forum in which her biases and fragilities were noted, however biases cannot be eliminated but can only be foregrounded for both researcher and reader.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Criteria 6  Inclusion of measures of reliability, such as interrater reliability and intrarater reliability</td>
<td>Not included.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Criteria 7  Inclusion of measures of triangulation in terms of researchers and data types</td>
<td>Triangulation of data types included; triangulation of researchers not possible (sole investigator)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Criteria 8  Inclusion of peer-checking and member-checking procedures</td>
<td>Restricted use of peer-checking due to constraints of the study and the solo status of the researcher; limits to the demands that the researcher felt able to make on colleagues’ time and expertise. Member checking occurred only with student diarists when the researcher met with them during the 3-week period of their diary keeping. Member checking with focus group participants was not feasible given the constraints of the school timetable and the disruptions caused by the study in the data collection phase.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Criteria 9  Consciousness of the importance and development of audit trails</td>
<td>Audit trail evident throughout the study; a full account provided of all research decisions and activities undertaken in the study aided by a detailed research journal and field notes. Linkages between the findings and the data are made as clear as possible. Raw data in the form of participant accounts are included and details about qualitative and quantitative analysis procedures are provided.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Criteria 10  Consideration of alternative explanations for the observed findings</td>
<td>Alternative explanations for the observed findings considered in most cases.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Criteria 11  Inclusion of explanations for negative evidence</td>
<td>Explanations for negative evidence included for some findings.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Criteria 12  Clear statement of the limitations of the study</td>
<td>Clearly stated in Chapter 10.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4.12 Ethical Procedures

The researcher ensured that this study was conducted in compliance with the standards for ethical research. Central to this aim is the protection of the human research participants. The researcher acquired the approval of the Human Research Ethics Committee at the University of Melbourne and only commenced recruitment and data collection procedures after receiving this approval. The researcher also sought and gained permission from the principal at Woodlands College to conduct the study within the school.

As in any research with human participants, there is a potential risk to the individual’s wellbeing and in this study the researcher was keenly aware that for some students, talking and thinking about their relationship with school, particularly students keeping a diary, could cause some level of distress. This concern was addressed by explicitly informing potential participants during the recruitment process that if their involvement in the research process raised any issues they would like to talk about, they could talk to either the principal investigator, one of the other school counsellors, or a counsellor external to the school. Arrangements were made with a counsellor at another school to be available if any student requested contact, although no requests were made. Likewise, students were informed during the recruitment stage that they were free to withdraw from the study at any point.

To preserve participant confidentiality and anonymity in the reporting of the study, all names were excluded from the focus group and diary transcripts, and responses in the questionnaire. This applied not only to the respondent’s names but also any names of teachers and students that were included in student responses. Questionnaire respondents are referred to only by their year level and gender. All students in the focus groups are
referred to as “Student # X” accompanied by their gender. Likewise, staff members are referred to as “Support Staff # X” or “Teacher # X” and their gender. Their specific role designation within the school is not indicated. Diarists are referred to only by gender and a junior or senior school descriptor.

All materials relating to the study including schedules of data collection, consent forms, lists of participants, researcher field notes and journal, diaries, questionnaires, and focus group audiotapes were kept in a locked file at Woodlands College when not being accessed by the researcher. As focus group discussions were transcribed and printouts generated, these were also stored in the locked filing cabinet. Electronic copies of all data were secured in password-protected files. A back-up copy of the electronic files was stored in a password-protected flash drive, which was also kept in the locked filing cabinet. A locked filing cabinet for data storage was also available at the researcher’s home when data and materials were used away from the workplace. Only the researcher had access to all the data. The data will be stored for a period of five years after the publication of the study. After this time, all paper data will be shredded, and all electronic files will be permanently deleted.

4.13 Summary

This chapter has described the research methodology of the current study. Detail has been provided regarding the epistemological and ontological positioning of the researcher in order to provide clarity around the methodological choices that followed including the reasons for utilising a MM approach as a good fit for addressing the research questions. The research setting and data collection activities have been described and the data analysis plan for both qualitative and quantitative components has been presented in detail to provide a clear account of the researcher’s decision-making during these stages. The
researcher’s reflexive voice is also present in the chapter when discussing ethical issues pertaining to research with young people and research as a practitioner-researcher. The following chapter will present the study findings.
Chapter 5: Findings

5.1 Introduction

Research Question 1 (a) How is school connectedness understood in the literature?

This chapter addresses the research question regarding the meanings of SC as contained in the literature and reports the results of the audit conducted on a sample of documents to elicit these meanings. Definitions and measures of SC were the focus of the literature audit.

5.2 Literature Audit

5.2.1 Defining SC

To elicit the meanings of SC from the literature, materials from the author’s citation manager were selected for analysis. From 2,984 documents in the citation manager, 270 materials including articles, book chapters, and theses were selected according to whether the titles contained “school connectedness”, “connectedness” or some variation on “connectedness”, such as “dis/connection”, “dis/connect” or “dis/connected”. Table 11 presents the composition of the sample.

Table 11.
Sources of Materials used in Literature Audit

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source Description</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“School Connectedness” in Title (journal, book, or book chapter)</td>
<td>124</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Connectedness” in Title (journal, book or book chapter)</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Variation on “Connectedness” in Title (journal, book, or book chapter)</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>270</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All the material was organised according to year of publication and then analysed to extract any definitions, components, and measures of SC. The time span covered was 33 years from 1983 to 2016 with scholarly interest in the concept of SC gathering momentum
from 2000. The years from 2010 to mid-2016 contain over 52 percent of the 270 documents in the sample. Table 12 contains details of the sample across the 33-year period.

**Table 12.**

*Composition of Sample used in Literature Audit according to Year and Title Content*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>School Connectedness in Title</th>
<th>Connectedness in Title</th>
<th>Variation on Connectedness in Title</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2105</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>13</td>
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<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>11</td>
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<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>12</td>
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<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10</td>
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<tr>
<td>2001</td>
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<td>7</td>
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<td>1999</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td>2</td>
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<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>1989</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1983</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>124</strong></td>
<td><strong>91</strong></td>
<td><strong>55</strong></td>
<td><strong>270</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Ninety of the documents in the sample offered no explicit definition of SC. Forty-four were materials containing connectedness in their title, 29 contained a variation on connectedness in their title, and 17 contained SC in their title. Twenty-six documents were excluded from the sample, as they contained no discussion relevant to building an
understanding of the definition of SC. These included articles about teachers’ and students’ use of technology and social media (Broadley, 2012; Grieve, Indian, Witteveen, Tolan, & Marrington, 2013; Tell, 2000; Walsh, White, & Young, 2008; Wolak, Mitchell, & Finkelhor, 2003), disconnected young people (de Souza & McLean, 2012; Fernandes & Gabe, 2009; Hendrickson, 2012; MacDonald, 2008) and articles with a focus on other forms of connectedness such as pedagogic (Beutel, 2009), community (Telleen, Maher, & Pesce, 2003), family-school (Serpell & Mashburn, 2011), cultural (Kiran & Knights, 2010), parent-adolescent (Beyers, Goossens, Vansant, & Moors, 2003), connectedness to nature (Zelenski & Nisbet, 2014), and “connected education” (Zyngier, 2003). Three articles (Black, 1999; Masterson & Kersey, 2013; Taylor & Adelman, 2000) were excluded because they used connectedness or a variation of the term in a generic way and a further two were excluded as they both reviewed the Check & Connect program (Anderson, Christenson, Sinclair, & Lehr, 2004; Sinclair et al., 2003), designed to promote student engagement.

The remaining 64 documents, despite containing no explicit definition of SC, offered views of the construct, albeit oblique, that contributed to an understanding of the definition in some way and therefore were retained for further analysis. The 180 documents containing definitions of SC were then analysed and the components of those definitions were captured across a set of descriptors. Two hundred and forty sources of the definition were named and these were also recorded. From the 240 named sources, 90 different authors were cited as contributing to the definition of SC. Sixty-five of these were cited once, while the remaining 25 sources were cited 161 times. The names of the sources and the number of times cited are listed in Table 13.
Table 13.

Most Frequently Named Sources of School Connectedness Definitions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Times Cited</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Goodenow</td>
<td>1993</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wingspread Declaration (Blum &amp; Libbey)</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resnick et al.</td>
<td>1997</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CDC</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Libbey</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>McNeely, Nonnemaker &amp; Blum</td>
<td>2002</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whitlock</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blum</td>
<td>2005a, 2005b</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catalano et al.</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barber &amp; Schluterman</td>
<td>2008</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jimerson, Campos &amp; Greif</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>McNeely &amp; Falci</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rowe, Stewart &amp; Patterson</td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wilson</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deci &amp; Ryan; Ryan &amp; Deci</td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fredricks, Blumenfeld &amp; Paris</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karcher, Holcomb &amp; Zambrano</td>
<td>2008</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maddox &amp; Prinz</td>
<td>2003</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baumeister &amp; Leary</td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bonny et al.</td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Osterman</td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ozer</td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Townsend &amp; McWhirter</td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Waters, Cross &amp; Runions</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Witherspoon et al.</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>161</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Goodenow (1993b) is both the earliest and most frequently cited author, despite her work referring to belonging and psychological sense of school membership and on no occasion using the term SC. A more nuanced analysis however reveals that Blum (2005b) and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2009), which together were cited 17 times, derived their definition of SC from the frequently cited Wingspread Declaration.
(2004). This factor combined with the frequency with which the Wingspread Declaration’s definition of SC has been cited, establishes this document as highly influential in the way in which SC has been understood and defined since that time. It is surprising that Resnick and colleagues (1997) are the third most frequently cited source within the sample, given that their research is widely regarded as formally claiming a place for SC in education and health agendas and that their work remains a seminal study for scholars in the field (You et al., 2008).

These five sources of the SC definition represent 37% of the 240 cited sources in the sample under analysis. When the 65 authors cited only once are removed from the sample, the five sources represent 51% of the remaining 175 citations. They have also endured over the 33-year period covered in this exercise. Between them, these five definitions appear in 20 of the thirty-three articles published between 2014 and 2016.

The components contained in the five most cited definitions have been extracted (Table 14) and while the categorisations are not exact, similar elements have been grouped together to identify areas of overlap and difference. The single common element among the five definitions is the relational quality of a student’s experience at school, whether expressed through support, care or feelings of closeness. Learning is mentioned only in the Wingspread Declaration (2004), although Resnick et al. (1997) populate a student’s relational world with teachers from which a learning relationship can be assumed to exist. Goodenow (1993b) refers to “others” in the student’s school environment, while the Wingspread Declaration refers only to “adults”. The CDC (2009) definition, while drawing heavily on the Wingspread definition, adds “peers”.
Table 14.

Sources and Components of Five Most Cited School Connectedness Definitions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Connectedness Components</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Goodenow (1993)</td>
<td>Feel personally accepted by others at school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Feel respected</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Feel included</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Feel supported</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resnick et al. (1997)</td>
<td>Feel part of school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Feel close to people at school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Teachers treat me fairly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wingspread (2004)</td>
<td>Adults in the school care about me as an individual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blum (2005a, 2005b)</td>
<td>Adults in the school care about my learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CDC (2009)</td>
<td>Adults and peers in the school care about me as an individual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Adults and peers in the school care about my learning</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

With 180 definitions, shaped by 90 sources, it would be easy to characterise SC as a construct in search of a coherent and consistent meaning. Its theoretical foundations certainly lie in a number of research fields, which may account for some of the untidiness around its definition regularly noted by scholars (Chapman, Buckley, Sheehan, & Shochet, 2013b; Lohmeier & Lee, 2011). Whitlock et al. (2014) in discussing connectedness and suicide prevention in adolescents identify nine conceptual frameworks, and name seven, that have shaped the definition of connectedness. An analysis of the cited sources of the 180 definitions contained in this author’s sample would support their conclusions and add social control theory (Hirschi, 1969), motivation theory (Maslow, 1962), self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1987; Ryan & Deci, 2000), human relatedness theory (Hagerty, Lynch-Sauer, Patusky, & Bouwsema, 1993) and ecological theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1977) to the list.
Flowing from these frameworks are various constructs, which populate the complicated family tree of SC. Tracking the sources of the 180 definitions in the current sample reveals some distinct influences on how SC has evolved although evolution implies a degree of accretionary change, which is not the case. While SC has developed new meanings over time, it has simultaneously maintained its earlier definitions resulting in fragmentation rather than coherence. Based on the 90 sources, understanding of SC has been shaped by belonging (Anderman, 2002; Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Goodenow, 1993b; Osterman, 2000), bonding (Catalano, Haggerty, et al., 2004; Hawkins et al., 1992; Maddox & Prinz, 2003; McBride et al., 1995; Simons-Morton et al., 1999), engagement (Akey, 2006; Archambault, Janosz, Morizot, et al., 2009; Fredricks et al., 2004; Fullarton, 2002; Jimerson et al., 2003), relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Hagerty et al., 1993; Ryan & Deci, 2000), relational support and caring (McNeely & Falci, 2004; McNeely et al., 2002; Ozer, 2005), social capital (Kawachi & Berkman, 2001; Putnam, 1995; Rowe & Stewart, 2009; Waters, Cross, & Runions, 2009), and social connectedness (Barber & Schluterman, 2008; Karcher, 2005; Townsend & McWhirter, 2005; Wyman, Brown, LoMurray, Schmeelk-Cone, & Petrova, 2010). These constructs form part of SC’s complex ancestry and continue to inform research in this field, despite their disparate origins.

The definitions of SC that emerge from these frameworks and constructs range from the simplicity of Libbey’s (2004) statement referring to SC as “the study of a student’s relationship to school” (p. 274) to more complex understandings which view SC as multidimensional (Tighezza, 2014) and generated by interactions among all members of a school’s ecology (Rowe & Stewart, 2011; Waters et al., 2009). Libbey’s definition at least provides grounds for consensus, as there is little disagreement that SC captures some aspect of a student’s relationship to school. Using this pragmatic definition as the foundation for
the pursuit of definitional clarity, 35 components were extracted from the 180 definitions in the current sample to isolate the most consistently named elements of SC. After similar components such as ‘relatedness to others’ and ‘positive social relationships’ were coalesced into a single descriptor, 26 components remained. Ten of these were named only once and one was named twice (Table 15). None were a logical fit with any other descriptor and given the rarity of their use, they were eliminated from inclusion in further analysis.

**Table 15.**

*Least Frequently Named Components of School Connectedness Definitions*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Component of SC definition</th>
<th>Times named</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Trust school administration</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A feeling of fitting in with important others at school</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feel a sense of pride and satisfaction regarding school</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feel autonomous</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feel close to the school environment</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feel efficacious</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feel trusted</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interactions of the individual with the school environment</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opposite of alienation</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived relational value</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student and staff perceptions of their school</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The remaining 15 components are listed in Table 16. Not surprisingly, the components of the most favoured definitions feature prominently. Although a definition is beginning to take shape, the analysis in incomplete without scrutinising the ways in which SC has been measured. In studies where SC is not clearly defined, the measurement tools utilised often yield key information about how the concept is understood. Further claims about the definition will therefore be delayed until measurement of SC has been examined.
Table 16.

*Most Frequently Named Components of School Connectedness Definitions*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Component of School Connectedness Definition</th>
<th>Times Named</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Feel cared for (academically and/or personally)</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feelings of/sense of belonging at school</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feel supported by teachers and/or peers</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feel close to others (peers and/or teachers)</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feel respected/valued</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feel accepted</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feel included/ a part of school</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feel involved in school</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commitment to school</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engagement/participation with school (academic and extracurricular)</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feel safe at school</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enjoy/like school</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Treated with fairness/fair discipline</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behavioural, affective and cognitive dimensions</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ecological concept (characteristic of whole school environment)</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5.2.2  Measuring SC

The congested conceptual space surrounding the definition of SC is almost eclipsed when examining the ways in which it is measured. The number of tools and the array of constructs and items within those tools contribute to the lack of clarity noted by researchers when discussing SC (Libbey, 2004; Whitlock, 2006). A return to the 270 materials analysed earlier amply demonstrates this point. From the 270 materials, 147 studies contain a measure of SC. These measures are listed in Table 17.
### Table 17.

**Measures of School Connectedness and Times used in Studies in Literature Audit**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure of School Connectedness</th>
<th>Times Used</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>School Connectedness Scale (Add Health)</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Researcher developed instrument adapted from/combining other measures</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychological Sense of School Membership Scale</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Hemingway: Measure of Adolescent Connectedness (Karcher, 2005)</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus groups</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instrument not specified</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>California Healthy Kids Survey</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feelings About Yourself and School</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communities That Care Youth Survey</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connectedness survey (Thorpe, 2003)</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Connection Scale (Brown, Leigh &amp; Barton, 2000)</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adolescent Health Survey</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adolescent School Connectedness Survey</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baltimore City Safety Survey</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child and Adolescent Social Support Scale (People in School Subscale)</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classroom Climate Scale</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ecological indicators</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education Longitudinal Study of 2002</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational Quality Assessment</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health Behavior in School aged Children</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health Behavior Questionnaire</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Junior High/High School Questionnaire</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mobile Youth Survey</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Carolina Student Learning Conditions Survey</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Transition Plan/Leadership Survey</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Development School Climate Survey</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School as a Caring Community</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Climate Survey and Student Satisfaction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Connection Scale (Lohmeier &amp; Lee, 2011)</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schoolagers’ School Connectedness Scale</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smiley Face Scale</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Belonging Scale (Bollen &amp; Hoyle, 1991)</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Questionnaire for Secondary Students</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Questionnaires with 4 domains including school-related attitudes</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vaux Social Support Record</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>147</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Further analysis reveals that 64 different measures of SC were used within the 144 materials. Twenty-five researchers developed new instruments adapted from or combining other measures, five studies did not name the instruments used, and the remaining 117 studies drew on 33 existing measures, with the School Connectedness Scale (SCS) from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health) and the Psychological Sense of School Membership (PSSM) scale the most frequently utilised. Despite dating from the 1990s the SCS and PSSM have shown remarkable consistency in being measures of choice. This current study contains 36 materials published between 2013 and 2016 with SC in the title and of those, 13 used the SCS (or some items from the SCS) and eight used the PSSM scale or an adapted form of the scale. Even when using these tools however, there was a lack of uniformity with the number of items in the SCS ranging from three (Kaminski et al., 2010) to seven (Svavarsdottir, 2008). There is even disagreement among researchers about the number of items in the original Add Health SCS with Libbey (2004) describing an 8-item measure, Chung-Do, Goebert, Chang, et al. (2015) refer to it as a 6-item measure, while Furlong et al. (2011) state that the measure contained five items. The PSSM scale is also applied with varying degrees of fidelity. While the extended version including all 18 items is used (Govender et al., 2013; Shochet & Smith, 2014), brief versions of the scale vary considerably from 13 items (Abubakar, van de Vijer, Mazrui, Murugami, & Arasa, 2014), to 11 items (Zhao & Zhao, 2015), to 10 items (Witherspoon, Schotland, Way, & Hughes, 2009) to eight (Millings et al., 2012). There are also two measures within the 147 materials, which use items from both scales to create new measures (Crespo, Jose, Kielpikowski, & Pryor, 2013; Jose et al., 2012).
Variation in the number of items used across all instruments, not only the SCS and the PSSM scale is substantial, ranging from a single item (Atkins, Fertig, & Wilkins, 2014; Thomas & Smith, 2004) to 42 items (Sugar, 2012). Measurement approaches also utilise different formats with surveys (King, Vidourek, Davis, & McClellan, 2002), focus groups (Chhuon & Wallace, 2014; Shulkind & Foote, 2009), ecological indicators (Rowe & Stewart, 2011) and interviews (Martin, 1990) used across the 147 studies.

Given the range of measures and the inconsistency with which the same measures are at times applied, a more pertinent question in the pursuit of a clearer understanding of SC is not what tools are used to measure the construct, but what variables are used within those tools. A template for adopting such an approach exists in Libbey’s (2004) influential work on SC in which she scoured the lexicon on student relationships with school and identified 11 different terms in use. From these terms, she identified 22 different measures and the variables contained in each measure; an analysis, which then yielded nine key themes relating to SC. Libbey’s work has significantly shaped scholarly enquiry into SC and continues to provide an important point of departure when considering both how it is defined and measured.

Adopting Libbey’s (2004) approach for this study, variables from the 64 different measures utilised in the 147 materials were analysed and placed into themes or components with the number of times items fell within each theme also recorded (Table 18). Eight of the themes from Libbey’s (2004) work and their order in her analysis in terms of number of variables within a theme are noted. Teacher support however, has been subsumed into a new category of teacher-student relationships. Libbey’s theme suggests an individual problem-solving focus within which items such as “There’s at least one teacher or other adult in this school I can talk to if I have a problem ” (Goodenow, 1993) and “If you
need advice on something other than school work you would go to one of your teachers” (Nickerson, Hopson, & Steinke, 2011) clearly fit, but which is too narrow for items such as “When I am at school most of my teachers really listen to what I say” (Niehaus, Rudasill, & Rakes, 2012) and does not fully encapsulate the broader relational gaze of items such as “Teachers are interested in students at my school” (K. M. Rudasill, personal communication, September 28, 2014). The new theme of teacher-student relationships therefore captures the breadth of interactions that characterise this aspect of a young person’s school experience. This adjustment may be more semantic than conceptual, as Libbey included items such as student perceptions of good teaching and students’ experience of feeling close to and liked by their teachers as well as helping interactions such as responding to student concerns in the teacher support theme.

The current analysis reveals that Libbey’s (2004) themes continue to find a place in measures of SC, occupying five of the top six places in the list. An obvious difference however is the small increase in the number of themes from nine drawn from 21 measures in Libbey’s work to 11 drawn from 64 measures in the current study. Although teacher-student relationships (teacher support) and peer relations occupy the same places in both studies, there is some divergence thereafter in the ordering of the same themes. The consistent inclusion and changed order of the nine themes from Libbey’s study and the two additional themes drawn from this study provide an interesting snapshot of how SC has evolved conceptually over the past decade. In the current analysis five of the top seven themes are affiliative in nature, placing the young person in relationship with adults, peers and the school. Two of these themes – respectful, caring and inclusive relational climate and adult-peer-student relationships – do not feature in Libbey’s analysis but a substantial number of the 64 materials interrogated within this study have included items in their
measures which thematically belong to these areas therefore resulting in their formulation and inclusion.

**Table 18**

*Thematic Components of School Connectedness Measures and Times used*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Thematic Components of 64 School Connectedness Measures</th>
<th>Times Used</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teacher-student relationships (includes teacher support) (1)*</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Likes school (3)*</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respectful, caring and inclusive relational climate</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belonging (feeling part of school) (6)*</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer relations (4)*</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adult-peer-student relationships (includes feeling close to people)</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic engagement (2)*</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discipline and fairness (5)*</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Safety (7)*</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extra-curricular activities (6)*</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Voice (6)*</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Themes and their order as identified by Libbey (2004)

Adult-peer-student relationships includes items such as “Adults in my school listen to what I have to say” (Whitlock, 2006), “I feel comfortable with others in this school” (Frydenberg et al., 2009) and “People in my school understand me” (Lemberger & Clemens, 2012). This category represents a shift away from a teacher-centric focus and recognises that students interact with many individuals apart from teachers within the school environment. Two of the most frequently used measures of SC include items that situate students within this broader relational context in their schools. The item “You feel close to people at school” is drawn from the SCS (Resnick et al., 1997), while “People at this school are friendly to me” and “People here know I can do good work” are items from the PSSM scale (Goodenow, 1993b). Given the range of individuals from social workers to parent volunteers who increasingly provide a range of services within many schools, this theme embraces the changing reality over the past decade of relational opportunities that are
accessible to students in school settings. With the increasing popularity of peer mentoring programs (Roach, 2014) and peer support initiatives (Cowie & Hutson, 2005) this category can also accommodate peer relationships, although any item which specifies a relationship with teachers or peers has been included under the themes teacher-student relationships and peer relationships respectively.

Respectful, caring and inclusive relational climate includes items such as “I can really be myself at this school” (Goodenow, 1993b), ”When I am at school I feel cared about” (Niehaus et al., 2012), “I feel welcome at school” (Lapan, Wells, Petersen, & McCann, 2014) and “I feel respected and valued at this school” (Morales-Chicas, personal communication, October 29, 2014). This theme is qualitatively different from the other themes that situate the student in a relationship with a particular individual or group of individuals in the school such as adults, teachers or peers. In contrast, this theme captures the broader relational context of school life as experienced by students in their everyday interactions within their school community and which shapes their affective response to that school community and their sense of themselves as a member of that community. It also includes the wider relational reach of the school with items addressing involvement of parents in the life of the school and students’ education (Lapan et al., 2014).

In considering the themes of the SC measures drawn from both Libbey’s (2004) work and the current study, it is clear that despite the proliferation of measurement approaches, there has been remarkable consistency over the past decade in the key components of most of those measures. Consistency however is only part of the story and a more considered analysis of the material reveals a drift away from certain themes such as safety and extra-curricular activities while themes such peer relations and liking school have consolidated their positions. Taken as a crude popularity contest this analysis would suggest that the
theme of teacher-student relationships is the major winner with student voice clearly falling out of favour. This interpretation however is misleading, overlooking as it does the frequency with which measures have been used. When the 144 measures are considered individually and the thematic components from each are collated, a different picture emerges.

This approach results in sizeable increases in the number of times that themes from the SCS and the PSSM scale, the two most frequently used tools, appear (Table 19). Components such as discipline and fairness, safety (SCS) and belonging (PSSM scale) gain prominence, although teacher-student relationships and enjoyment of school remain the two most frequently occurring themes in both analyses. Using this approach also reveals there has been a slight cooling in enthusiasm for the themes of academic engagement and peer relations since Libbey’s (2004) study, however overall the measurement of SC has been remarkably consistent in its components. While extracurricular activities and student voice are less frequently included across all measures, they still sit within the mix of components of SC. Libbey after all identified safety as one of the themes from her analysis based only on its inclusion in a single measure, the SCS.
Table 19

*Themes and their order as identified by Libbey (2004)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Thematic Components of School Connectedness Measures</th>
<th>Times Used</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teacher-student relationships (includes teacher support) (1)*</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Likes school (3)*</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belonging (feel part of school) (6)*</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adult-peer-student relationships</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discipline and fairness (5)*</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Safety (7)*</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respectful, caring and inclusive relational climate</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer relations (4)*</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic engagement (2)*</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extra-curricular activities (6)*</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Voice (6)*</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Summary

The measurement of SC over some 30 years presents a cluttered profile, which belies the consistency that this analysis has revealed. While there is considerable variation in the number of items, subscales and measures used, the 64 instruments utilised in the materials in this study largely measure the same components, albeit with differences in emphasis and terminology. When these measurement themes are linked with the components of the SC definitions discussed earlier, much of the confusion around the concept is reduced. Not surprisingly the conceptual footprints of the SCS and the PSSM scale are evident and there is a high degree of interrelatedness between the components of the definitions and the measures, allowing some claims to be made about the concept with increased confidence. This discussion is contained in Chapter 9.
Chapter 6: Findings

6.1 Introduction

Research Question 1(b) How do students understand their connectedness to school (what makes school a place they want to be?)

This chapter further addresses the study’s first research question concerning the meanings of connectedness to school. While the last chapter focused on the meanings of connectedness as contained in the literature, this chapter explores how students understand their connectedness to school. Findings are drawn from focus group discussions, diary entries, and the student questionnaire. Thematic analysis and narrative analysis were used to examine the data with a single meta-theme and three themes identified.

6.2 Identification of Themes and Sub-themes

Following Braun and Clarke’s (2006) guidelines for thematic analysis, coding of the data from focus group discussions, student diaries, and open questions in the questionnaire yielded 48 codes. These codes were then organised into 13 broad themes (Table 20).
Table 20.

Themes from Initial Coding of Student Focus Group Discussions, Diaries, and Questionnaire Items

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Sample Codes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>School is important</td>
<td>School becomes more important in the senior years; school is important but not the most important thing; school is about having options in the future</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School is about socialising</td>
<td>Doing things together as groups; Meeting new people; Hanging out with different people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends are the most important part of school</td>
<td>Friends are what school is about; being able to see my friends every day; friends are always there for you</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunities to do things</td>
<td>Broad range of interesting extracurricular activities; broad subject offerings enabling choice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunities are available to everyone</td>
<td>Something for everyone; inclusive range of opportunities; interest not ability guides participation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Availability of support</td>
<td>People to go to when upset; school nurse is always kind; pastoral ministry is always there for us</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People care for each other</td>
<td>A caring atmosphere between people at Woodlands; students look out for each other; staff genuinely care, not just because they are paid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student-teacher/staff relationships</td>
<td>Effective teachers can control their class; getting to know teachers as people; good teachers do more than teach</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Well-resourced school</td>
<td>Performing arts space is well equipped for major productions; computer labs have up-to-date equipment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School as a place of community</td>
<td>Rituals are important; whole school activities gave a sense of belonging; being a student at Woodlands is like being part of a big family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The school size impacts areas of school life</td>
<td>Meet lots of new people; not too big, not too small; enough people for range of subject offerings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School is part of a system</td>
<td>Woodlands is different from government schools; Woodlands is different from elite private schools; Woodlands has a place within an education system that is different from other schools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being a Woodlands student means something</td>
<td>Being a Woodlands student is different from being a student at another school; being a Woodlands student brings different opportunities from other schools</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These themes and their codes were then reviewed and reworked, resulting in five themes with sub-themes (Figure 3). After returning to the data on multiple occasions and holding the student accounts within the gaze of each theme, further refinements were made resulting in a single meta-theme, school is a place of opportunities, with three themes. Each theme has two sub-themes (Figure 4).
Figure 3. Initial thematic map
Figure 4. Developed thematic map
Relational opportunities were conceptualised as consisting of interpersonal and institutional relationships. In considering the earlier themes of *school as a place of community, and school as a place of identity* and returning to the students’ accounts from which these themes had been drawn, they were clearly relational experiences within the institutional orbit of school life, and as such were brought within the relational sphere under institutional relationships. The extracurricular and learning spheres of opportunity were kept separate, despite the researcher’s initial inclination to incorporate them. Again, a return to the students’ accounts clearly demonstrated that while linked, young people understood them as different. This thematic map represents how students in this study understood their relationship to school. Each sphere of opportunity will be discussed to elicit these understandings in detail. The transcription symbols used in the focus group excerpts are set out in Table 8.

### 6.2.1 Meta-theme: School is a Place of Opportunities

This meta-theme captures a perception of school that was voiced in all year levels and in all forms of data collection. Students used the word *opportunities* to describe what they liked about Woodlands, locating those opportunities within the three spheres of school life; relational, learning, and extracurricular with each of these spheres interconnected. The following exchange among year 8 students is a typical example of how students talked about opportunities:

Facilitator: Are there things you like about Woodlands?

F#4: Friends (-)

F#3: (Overlapping) Having a lot of choices for like jobs when you get older or when you (-)

F#5: (Overlapping) Opportunities.
Facilitator: What do you mean by opportunities?

F#5: Like there’s music and art and stuff like that, drama.

Facilitator: A variety?

M#1: Um I like the extra-curriculum activities sort of thing they’re got here like musical and um guitar lessons, musical lessons all sorts of stuff like that and there’s a lot more here than at some schools.

Facilitator: So I’m guessing music is important to you.

F#6: Sport and technology are good (-)

F#2: (Overlapping) And dance (…) definitely dance

(Year 8 Focus Group)

In responding to item 27 in the questionnaire asking students to name what they liked most about being a student at Woodlands, the three spheres of school life, relational, learning, and extracurricular, were prominent (Figure 5). A selection of comments relating to each of these spheres is listed in Table 21.

![Figure 5](image)

*Figure 5. Number and sex of student responses to questionnaire item 27*
### Table 21.

**Student Responses to Question 27; What do you like most about being a student at Woodlands?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Relational Sphere</th>
<th>Learning Sphere</th>
<th>Extracurricular Sphere</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I like the friends I get to see every day because they make life enjoyable. <em>(Male, Year 10)</em></td>
<td>I like knowing that I am getting a good education being a student here <em>(Male, Year 11)</em></td>
<td>The opportunities that I have. Woodlands offers so much to every student. <em>(Female, Year 11)</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More people to meet here. <em>(Female, Year 7)</em></td>
<td>I enjoy using the facilities that Woodlands has such as the computer rooms and library, which I find useful. I also enjoy my classes. <em>(Year 12 male)</em></td>
<td>I like the sporting activities we are involved in. <em>(Male, Year 8)</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honestly I’m not all that fond of having to attend Woodlands, however I like the people and relationships I have at this school. <em>(Female, Year 9)</em></td>
<td>I really enjoy some subjects such as sport, drama, English and DAT. <em>(Female, Year 7)</em></td>
<td>The opportunities to do things like music performances. <em>(Male, Year 10)</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I like being at Woodlands because I connect well with the people here. <em>(Male, Year 9)</em></td>
<td>Getting a better education and chance of getting into Uni. <em>(Female, Year 8)</em></td>
<td>Having the ability to be part of great extracurricular activities. <em>(Female, Year 11)</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My friends are the best groups of people that encourage me to always be at school to spend time together. <em>(Female, Year 11)</em></td>
<td>It’s a good form of education with good facilities and good opportunities. <em>(Male, Year 10)</em></td>
<td>I think this school has many great activities to do <em>(Female, Year 7)</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My friends and classmates and everyone’s warm attitude to each other. <em>(Male, Year 12)</em></td>
<td>Doing the subjects I want to do. <em>(Female, Year 9)</em></td>
<td>It’s a great performing school with endless opportunities. Most schools seem to have extracurricular activities but not as interesting as Woodlands. <em>(Male, Year 9)</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The opportunities that school provided across these three spheres contributed to how young people understood the importance of school in their lives. There was consensus among students across all year levels that school was important, albeit to varying degrees and for different reasons. Many students regarded an education as offering a pathway to
life beyond school. These students saw school providing opportunities in the learning sphere as shown in this exchange between two year 7 students:

Facilitator: So when you think about everything that goes on in your life how important is school in all of that?

F#1: I think it’s fairly important cos we’ve kind of need, if we want to get somewhere in life we kind of need a good education.

F#2: Yeah like (-)

F#1: (Overlapping) Instead of working in like Safeway or Coles.

F#2: We need a good education to actually get somewhere.

(Year 7 Focus Group)

These sentiments were echoed across all focus groups with phrases such as ‘getting a good job’, ‘it’s going to help in the future’, ‘important for future paths’, ‘get better jobs’, ‘open more doors’, and ‘important for where you go after school’ stated.

School was regarded however as providing more than a portal to options in the future. The importance of school for many students lay in the relational sphere where opportunities to interact with friends, peers, and staff members trumped other factors in how school was valued. This exchange between year 10 students captures the layered texture of how school was viewed by many young people:

M#2: School’s important for like when we get a job (pause) but like it’s good to socialise at school and stuff, meet new people (…)

Facilitator: mmm

F#1: Become connected (-)

F#2: (Overlapping) School’s not top of the list for me.
Facilitator: No?

F#2: Family, friends (…)

F#3: Socialising, school’s first important for me cos of my friends.

(Year 10 Focus Group)

The opportunities offered within the extracurricular sphere of school life were also highly valued by many young people and contributed to how important school was in their lives. The diversity of offerings was referred to repeatedly although certain activities such as sport, music, and drama were frequently singled out for special mention. Overall, the range of options was viewed as broad and there was a strong sense that there was something for everyone. The interrelationship of these three spheres of school life was evident and the importance of school for many students existed across the three spheres with differences in emphasis, rather than valuing one to the exclusion of the others.

There were dissenting voices however who viewed school as ‘boring’, ‘a drag’, ‘it sucks’, and as one year 7 boy commented ‘I think it’s a pain in the bum’. Even for these students however, there was often a begrudging admission that school was important for their future as captured in this year 8 boy’s observation that ‘school’s important because of the schoolwork to get like a good job and everything but it’s very annoying’.

Dissenting voices also called attention to the role of the school as a gatekeeper of opportunities. Although many students saw the diverse range of subjects and extracurricular activities as encompassing opportunities for all to be involved, this view was certainly not universally shared as demonstrated in this diary entry:

I believe I hate school so much because there is only one thing that interests me and that is anything to do with food, debating also used to interest me but that stopped after year 8 because there wasn’t a debating group. If there was one I would happily keep going to it because I love to express how I feel on certain things, really if there
was anything a student could join that would freely let a student express themself on any subject matter I would be in their head first because I like to raise my view on things that I care about.

(Senior Female)

For this student and some others Woodlands was a place of opportunities denied, rather than opportunities given. Opportunities in the school setting are mostly determined and regulated by the school authorities at the local and system level and are contingent on a host of factors, which in practice translates into opportunities being heavily controlled and stage-managed. Decisions such as what opportunities are offered, who has access, and who has priority have already undergone a series of judgements before opportunities are offered and these judgements shape and often narrow the nature of those opportunities. This shadow side of opportunities exists within each of the spheres in this study and is an important part of some students’ experience of school.

In summary, a prevailing view among the participants in this study was that school was important because of the opportunities offered and those opportunities were located within relational, learning, and extracurricular spheres. This view was not however universally endorsed and for some students the school’s gatekeeping role denied, limited or withdrew their access to desired opportunities. Students valued opportunities differently, although opportunities in one sphere were inextricably linked with opportunities in another. Each of these spheres will now be discussed further.

6.2.2 Theme 1: Relational Sphere of Opportunities

Friends, peers, teachers, and other school staff populated the relational sphere for young people in this study. Opportunities in the learning and extracurricular spheres were frequently also relational opportunities, bringing young people into contact with each other
and staff members. The relational sphere consists of two sub-themes, interpersonal and institutional relationships, and each will be discussed in detail in the following sections.

6.2.3 Sub-theme 1: Interpersonal Relationships - Relationships with Friends and Peers

The lead interpersonal relationship for students was friends and peers. In answering item 29 in the questionnaire, asking what students would miss most if they left Woodlands, 192 out of the 206 respondents, named friends and peers. The year level and gender composition of the respondents is shown in Figure 6. By contrast 42 students (F = 26, M = 16) indicated they would miss their teachers.

![Figure 6. Sex and year level composition of respondents to question 29; What would you miss most about Woodlands if you left?](image)

Friends, also frequently referred to as mates, were pivotal to how students understood their connection to school and this applied to males and females and across all year levels. In focus groups and diaries young people proclaimed the importance of friends, attesting to their central role in how they experienced school as revealed in these diary entries from two senior female students:
Great to see all my mates again after five days. Everyone was so happy and had loads of stories to share. Makes you feel good when your friends laugh and joke with you. I look forward to school because of my mates, because they make me feel so alive.

(Senior Female)

I know I’ve been going on about my social life, but because I felt it was really important for you to understand how the whole social side of things works. I have a great relationship with every teacher and really excel academically but that doesn’t mean a thing unless you’re happy socially. It is so what it’s about. Woodlands is an amazing place, but it’s all about the relationships.

(Senior Female)

The relational net was cast wider however and peers also featured as populating students’ relational set. Peers were also referred to as ‘other students’, ‘my year level’, ‘my class’, ‘my home group’, and ‘the people I get to hang around with’.

The terms socialising and social life were popular among participants to describe spending time with friends and peers and often conveyed unstructured relaxed situations outside formal classroom settings in which students could mingle with each other, as revealed in the following comments from item 55 in the questionnaire asking students about their favourite places at Woodlands:

I love being anywhere outside where you don’t feel as though you’re at school, where you can take time out with friends away from the stresses and restrictions school can sometimes bring.

(Female, Year 11)

Socialising at lunch in the school ground, there’s so much space for walking and talking.

(Female, Year 12)
Places where there is sun, shade and shelter and somewhere to sit with people and just hang out together.

(Female, Year 8)

The gym would be my favourite because of all the fun stuff that’s in there and we can use at lunchtime.

(Male, Year 8)

The size of the school was named on a number of occasions as contributing to the relational opportunities available to students. Having access to large numbers of peers was seen as creating more possibilities for friendships to form and less constrained interpersonal options. Comments highlighted that the size of the school meant ‘having so many more people around to mix with’, ‘lots of different people’, and ‘meeting heaps of friends and cool people’. The following observation from a year 10 male captures the relational possibilities associated with the size of the school:

There’s lots of people so you kind of got more options (...) more friends to choose from if you don’t like somebody, you choose someone else.

(Male, Year 10)

While friendships were the source of enjoyment and pleasure and central to the experience of school for most young people in this study, relationships could also generate a range of negative emotions. A diary entry from a senior female student eloquently captures the double-edged nature of relationships:

I have an awesome extensive network of friends, with one closest friend, a tight knit group containing 2 other amazing girls ... a wider group of about 7 or 8 guys and girls and then I get along with everyone else. I love school because of the people. To me that’s what it’s all about. And for many who don’t enjoy school, I’d say that’s what it’s all about too.

(Senior Female)
When students were asked in the questionnaire what they didn’t like about being a student at Woodlands (Q. 28), 31 young people named ‘other students’, ‘other people’, or some aspect of their interpersonal relationships with peers or friends. These comments are set out in full in Table 22.
Table 22.

Responses to Question 29; What don’t you like about being a student at Woodlands?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year 7</th>
<th>Year 8</th>
<th>Year 9</th>
<th>Year 10</th>
<th>Year 11</th>
<th>Year 12</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The teasing or bullying (M)</td>
<td>Teasing (F)</td>
<td>There’s a lot of annoying people that go to Woodlands (M)</td>
<td>Some students (M)</td>
<td>Some of the other students who think they are above others (M)</td>
<td>Some of the other people in the year level (M)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You sometimes get teased for being in a smaller grade (M)</td>
<td>Some of the students are bullies (F)</td>
<td>I don’t like the way people are treated here. I guess it’s the same everywhere but I can’t stand the fact that to fit in you need to be cool (M)</td>
<td>Some of the people (M)</td>
<td>I dislike those students who disrespect the school property and the staff (F)</td>
<td>Having to put up with other students who obviously don’t want to be here and play up all the time (F)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The bullying and teasing (M)</td>
<td>The bullying (M)</td>
<td>People that aren’t nice (F)</td>
<td>Mean people (F)</td>
<td>Everyone has secrets and feels like they can’t trust you. Everyone is quick to judge you (F)</td>
<td>I don’t like the fact that some people form their groups of cliques and so you never get to know them (F)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People bag everyone easily and some students are snobs and annoying (F)</td>
<td>Fighting with friends (F)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>The different ‘groups’ ie. Friendship groups (F)</td>
<td>No-one includes you if you’re left out – they laugh and point the finger (F)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kids in my class (F)</td>
<td>Other students (F)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>I don’t like the fact that some people form cliques and so you never get to know them (F)</td>
<td>Because it’s majority Anglo Saxon, it sometimes causes tension for other culture students (F)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sometimes having fights with friends (F)</td>
<td>Some boys are mean, nasty (F)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some people are mean (F)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some students (F)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other students (F)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As these comments demonstrate, the school’s relational sphere can be a place of victimisation, isolation, conflict, and exclusion, as well as satisfying emotional connection.
Students can simultaneously be involved in negotiating both experiences; enjoying the company of friends and peers and confronted and wounded by the actions of others. The relational sphere is a volatile space in which relationships are continually forged, damaged, restored, reshaped, and extinguished. The following extract from a senior female student’s diary reveals the rollercoaster of emotions that can exist within relationships:

Oh… I almost freaked out this morning. I got an aggressive text message from my friend which I thought was so unlike her, but the words she used were words she only uses when she’s mad! I sent her a message back, say ‘you sound mad, so give me a call when your not pissed off and I’ll explain’. She didn’t respond and for the 17 years I’ve been friends with her I’ve never had a fight with her! I was so scared she was mad and we were going to have this huge yelling match! I waited all day and felt so worried then as I got into bed she called! It turns out she wasn’t mad at me but couldn’t call me all day cause she was busy and the choice of words were because… oh I can’t remember!

(Senior Female)

6.2.4 Sub-theme 1: Interpersonal Relationships - Relationships with Teachers and Other Staff

Teachers occupied a significant place in students’ experience of school, although a more peripheral and transient place than friends and peers. Other staff members, apart from teachers, did appear in students’ accounts, including the school nurse (11 times), counsellors (14 times), music tutors (17 times), and sports coaches (23 times). The researcher was particularly aware that given her role as a staff member, students might have censored some of their comments about teachers and other staff, uncertain and wary of the researcher’s allegiances despite her assurances of confidentiality. In a year 10 focus group, one student began to tell a story about a teacher and another student quickly interrupted to advise ‘no names’. This comment was a sharp reminder that some student talk about teachers may have been rendered anodyne or completely withheld due to
uncertainty about the researcher’s trustworthiness and ambivalence about her reassurances of confidentiality.

Despite this possible restriction, students frequently told stories about particular teachers and much of this talk placed teachers as villains, although this changed noticeably as students reached years 11 and 12 with more temperate descriptions emerging. In general younger students appeared to have more distant and formal relationships with their teachers, shifting to more adult-to-adult relationships by the time students entered their senior years. This shift in relational quality is the focus of the following exchange between year 12 students:

M#2: I think we’re all that much older now you know, half of us are adults now, so because you know we’re at that maturity level we can just sort of approach the teachers more easily and stuff. Not many teachers go up to year 7 kids and ask like how’s your weekend cos you know year 7s are in bed by 8.30 or something.

(Laughter)

M#4: With us, like just being that bit older and a little bit more mature it’s probably easy to find even some common interest and things like that.

Facilitator: OK

M#2: There’s still teachers you get along well with in year 7.

M#4: Yeah, still (…)

M#2: Like oh you could say a handful that you got on really well with that you still can.

F#2: I think in year 7 um your sort of friendship with your teacher was more out of respect and stuff you looked up to them whereas now it’s more both teachers and student stand on the same level kind of thing.
M#3: Yeah, year 7, 8 and 9 you’re still classed like a little kid sort of thing.

(Year 12 Focus Group)

These senior students traced out the movement from ‘kid’ to ‘adult’ status as a temporal progression from year 7 to year 12 in which seniority in the hierarchy facilitated different relational possibilities between teachers and students. Not only senior students were aware of the hierarchy’s influence on relationships; a year 7 male student complained when discussing teachers’ responses to his complaints about other teachers that ‘teachers don’t believe us because we’re kids’. A year 9 female student similarly observed that she ‘hated it when teachers treat us like, like babies’, while another year 9 female student commented favourably that ‘as you get older teachers give you more respect’.

Teachers were a topic of keen interest in focus groups and diaries and most students had strong opinions about the subject. Students’ negative stories of encounters with teachers were often animated and told in detail, with the student frequently positioned as the victim of unfair treatment. Although positioned as subject to teachers’ actions in these stories, students also told stories where they opposed and subverted teacher authority, finding ways to readjust the imbalance of power and resist teacher control. The following diary entry demonstrates this point:

Tuesday 18/11

Today started shocking. I rode to school to find the bike shed was now closed. Those who ride to school now risk both rain damage and vandalism. My bad mood spread to my learning. In Vis Com I got tired of being ignored by the teacher and sick of being told my work could be better. I walked out of class and went to the library for the remainder of the lesson. The day picked up, though, and I had sport later on, which picked up my mood. I sorted out the problem with teacher; it’s all fine now.
**Wednesday 19/11**

I followed up on the bike shed thingy by ‘stealing’ my own bike seat to prove how easy it was. My teacher is now following it up.

*(Junior Male)*

This junior student had claimed authority on his own behalf within a classroom interaction with a teacher and on behalf of his fellow students in relation to the arrangements for the secure storage of bicycles. Another male diarist from the junior school describes his encounter with a teacher with great relish and positions himself as brave and masculine in challenging the teacher:

Today was an OK day, nothing too special, me and Mr (teacher name) had a big confrontation, it was great. I wasn’t going to be a girl and not stand up for myself, so I let him no how I felt and he cracked it. He’s such a faggot. I don’t think anyone stood up to him before he really shat he’s pants.

*(Junior Male)*

Students also found ways to resist teacher authority as a group. In a year 10 focus group, participants recounted how the year 12 students had selected a particular song as their end of year anthem. The year level coordinator had rejected the selected song, replacing it with another. The story is continued in the following exchanges:

F#4: So the whole year level like refused to learn to sing the new song and stuff and he ended up changing it back.

Facilitator: So people power?

F#2: Yeah, if you’ve got more people you can actually go somewhere (...)

Facilitator: mmm

F#2: But one person’s not going to do much.

*(Year 10 Focus Group)*
An interesting aspect of this discussion was that the students telling the story did not carry out the act of resistance, however they were full of admiration for their senior peers’ defiance. The year 12 cohort’s actions were lauded in two other focus groups (years 9 and 11) with a prevailing view of their pushback as noteworthy and even heroic.

Challenging a teacher’s authority however was not always seen in this light. On several occasions students talked about teachers who were unable to effectively manage their classes and the subsequent classroom control that students took, almost reluctantly, is revealed in this exchange in a year 10 focus group:

F#4: Mrs. (teacher name) yeah we used to have food fights cos she couldn’t control the class.

F#1: I heard about that.

F#2: It’s her first year out of uni and she didn’t know like she didn’t have anyone’s attention or anything (…)

Facilitator: OK.

F#2: We kind of felt sorry for her in the end (pause) we made her cry.

M#2: That’s a bit rough.

M#1: That’s pretty mean.

F#4: That was pretty mean, I felt bad.

M#2: Did you all stop when she started crying?

F#2: Yeah but it started getting better by the end of the year (…) we realised what we were doing to her.

(Year 10 Focus Group)

Students in a year 9 focus group talked about ‘taking advantage’ of a teacher who they regarded as ‘too nice’. The difference between teacher as an authority and teacher in authority is played out in these comments. As students’ talk attests, the power dimension
between teachers and students in this study was far from fixed; rather it was transacted between both parties in the course of school life and was ceded and claimed at times reluctantly, opportunistically, or strategically, by both sides.

Overall, students had clear views about teacher characteristics that influenced the quality of the student-teacher relationship. Age, attitude, and sense of humour were all named as influences while trust and respect were frequently mentioned as contributing to the quality of relationships. Younger teachers were named in six of the focus groups as being easier to relate to than older teachers. The following exchange from a year 10 focus group is typical of students’ comments on the age of teachers:

M#3: I reckon it’s good if a teacher like they can joke around with you and stuff like that’s good (-)

F#2: (Overlapping) As long as the joke’s not offensive (laughing)

F#1: And it always seems to be the younger ones though (-)

M#2: (Overlapping) Like Mr. (teacher name) he’s funny as, he’s so funny.

M#3: Yeah.

F#1: That you can talk to because they just seem to talk to you more than the older teachers say.

M#1: Ageing teachers yeah like Mr. (teacher name) (-)

F#2: (Overlapping) He can’t relate to us at all.

M#1: They expect too much of us the older ones like the younger ones remember school a bit better than the older ones cos they’re younger (-)

F#2: (Overlapping) Or they let on they remember it (laughing).

M#3: They just remember what they went through and they kind of like help us try and make it better for us.

(Year 10 Focus Group)
While age was the lens through which students were viewing teachers in this exchange, the underlying issue was around the ability of teachers to communicate effectively and show understanding. Descriptors such as ‘laid-back’, ‘relaxed’, and ‘understands us’ were frequently used across all year levels to describe teachers who could create the relational space in which connections could form. When asked what ‘laid-back’ meant, a year 7 male replied ‘not always giving us homework and talking, letting us play games and you can just relate to them’. A number of students identified a teacher’s sense of humour as contributing to a more relaxed atmosphere in which teachers and students could relate less formally. Sense of humour was described as ‘joking around’, ‘can take a joke’, ‘has a laugh’, and ‘not too serious’.

Other qualities such as ‘respect’ and ‘trust’ were also named across the data sources. Respect and trust were seen as transacted between teachers and students with students describing a set of relational moves between both parties which could result in respect and trust being conferred or withdrawn at any time, as revealed in this exchange in a year 10 focus group:

F#3: They (teachers) have to be able to communicate with you, um, put it this way a teacher will respect you the way they want to be respected (-)

F#1: (Overlapping) Yeah

F#3: And they will treat you the way they want to be treated so if you want, if you want to on the same level of say Mrs. (teacher name) you’re got to treat her with respect and she’ll treat you back with respect.

(Year 10 Focus Group)

Another exchange from a year 9 focus group contained a definition of respect:

F#3: Our teacher (teacher name) hates us.

M#2: She DOES hate us (-)
M#3: (Overlapping) I reckon she doesn’t respect us enough.

F#1: Like some teachers make an effort to know you and some are like (voice raised and finger pointing) ‘I’ll teach you so sit down and work’.

M#2: That’s not respecting us.

(Year 9 Focus Group)

There was also a strong view among students that relationships take time to form and require effort on the teacher’s part. Students placed particular value on teachers taking this time and making this effort to get to know them. In their talk students frequently conceptualised their identities as having two distinct aspects, a student identity and a personal identity. When talking about teachers who knew them, students often called into view their personal identities and singled out for comment those teachers who had gone beyond the student identity to explore these personal identities. This was a highly valued quality in teachers and a key factor in facilitating relational closeness. In responding to item 87 in the questionnaire asking students what has helped them get to know a staff member, the following comments were made:

There are some teachers that make a point, make an effort to get to know you better.

(Male, Year 11)

Some teachers are actually interested in knowing me.

(Female, Year 10)

They’re (teachers) friendly and tried to get to know and understand me, show particular interest, not just school stuff.

(Female, Year 12)

Talking about everyday issues, my weekend and having a laugh.

(Female, Year 11)
Chatting about personal stuff, not just school.  
(Female, Year 12)

Being able to have a casual chat, talk to them about other things than school eg. Weekends.  
(Female, Year 11)

A lack of fairness in how students were treated was the single experience that was most likely to sour students’ relationships with teachers and close down relational opportunities. In many respects the young people in this study were quite forgiving of teachers, citing ‘naughty’ students, the pressures of teaching, the large numbers of students, and family worries as reasons why teachers were sometimes less than engaged with their students. Being treated unfairly however was widely viewed and reported as causing the most extreme rupture to the affiliative connection between teachers and students. The unfair treatment was often in relation to the amount of homework given (‘they put too much on you’), the inconsistency with which rules were applied (‘Sometimes teachers will just automatically blame certain students when it wasn’t them’), the arbitrary wielding of authority (‘some teachers are honestly on like a full power trip’), and academic expectations (‘they think that there’s nothing else in your life apart from school’).

The area of greatest grievance however was that teachers too often treated students differently because of who they were. This discussion was mostly focused on differences in the way males and females were treated, but also related to students who had a reputation for being in trouble. The following extended excerpt from a year 12 focus group discussion covers both of these areas:

M#5: I’ve been treated, yeah, like um in my whole time at Woodlands I never got detention, got a couple of yard duties and then some people just get, like um they get more picked on if they do something wrong (...) they start off bad.

F#2: I think it’s your reputation.
M#4: If the teacher has it in for you’re screwed.

F#2: From year 7 to year 12.

Facilitator: So how does that happen?

F#22: Because they shape your image, like they see you yeah they just think of you as a bad type for life.

M#1: Some kids don’t have a chance um if the teacher doesn’t like you and you’re not doing anything you get in trouble.

F#1: And I think also with boys as well I reckon our boys notice more that girls can get away with pretty much murder (-)

M#3: (Overlapping) Yeah (-)

M#2: (Overlapping) Especially with the male teachers.

(Laughter)

F#2: Like even if girls are just chatting or something like it’s ‘quiet girls’ but then when it’s a boy like ‘get out’ straight away sort of thing.

(Year 12 Focus Group)

These discussions were frequently framed up with the phrase ‘it depends’ and students’ dislike of this contingent, unpredictable, inconsistent, and highly subjective approach is clearly demonstrated in the following year 12 male student’s comments:

It depends on the individual and that individual’s teacher um like the individual teacher’s opinion of the student. Like you know some teachers will be objective, like I know a couple that I have respect for they you know treat the situation on its own merits but some will just have a look at the student and go ‘have a detention’ or ‘go home and don’t worry about it’ just depending on who it is. So it really depends on if you’re lucky enough to get a good teacher or not. It’s not really how it should be.

(Male, Year 12 Focus Group)
Students’ sense of fairness was seriously affronted by this style of teacher decision-making and this student’s comments suggest that respect is a casualty of such an approach. This issue is echoed in the institutional relationship between students and school regarding the fair and consistent application of school rules and policies. At the interpersonal level however the ‘it depends’ approach to decision-making was repeatedly identified as taking a serious toll on the quality of student-teacher relationships, fragmenting trust and respect and creating animosity towards teachers.

As with relationships with friends and peers, relationships with teachers were a source of connection and disconnection with constant and at times volatile movement between both points. Students talked about disliking certain teachers and then encountering them in a different year level or in a different situation and establishing a less antagonistic relationship:

I thought she was a bitch until she took our group on camp.

  (Female, Year 8)

One minute she was yelling at us and then she was really concerned about what happened to my mum and was being kind.

  (Female, Year 7)

I hated her because my sister had her and she was so mean um but then she took us for English and she’s OK, sort of cares about you.

  (Male, Year 11)

The most dramatic example of this relational flux is contained in a senior female’s diary entry. The student begins by describing her relationship with one of her teachers in an extract dated Friday 17:

  (Teacher name) has been fantastic over these past few weeks coming up to exams. During the holidays we spent an hour together just going over food and technology work that I didn’t understand. Today she was going over work that I had done to see
if it was correct and then she gave me extra work to do so I understand things better. She’s a great teacher. Having support from teachers is really important to me. It encourages you to do your best and it makes you want to try harder.

The student’s diary entry four days later charts a dramatic transition in her relationship with this teacher:

Today was a good day until the end of it. I went to (teacher name) period three and asked for some answers to the practice exam because I wasn’t sure if some of my answers were correct. She told me she was busy and if I could go over it with her tomorrow during food. So that was all fine.

Then at the end of the day I saw her and told her that I was giving up and she cracked it at me and told me that she wasn’t going to baby me along any more.

What a bitch! After everything she has done for me and helped me with and this is the way she feels the whole time about me. She did tell me she was having a bad day but she still doesn’t have two treat me like that. I am so mad now and tomorrow I’m going to show her how bad it made me feel.

(Senior Female)

In summary students viewed their relationships with teachers and to a lesser extent other staff members as influential in their experience of school. Talk about teachers was animated and vividly related in focus group discussions and diary entries. The teacher-student relationship was portrayed as fluid, changing over time and marked by less social distance as students reached the senior years, although still susceptible to affective upheavals. Students had a clear view of the qualities that facilitated connection with their teachers, while recognising that relationships required effort to establish, although the onus for making the effort was largely seen to rest with teachers. Students positioned themselves as having some agency in their relationships with teachers, claiming this agency in different ways from strategically and opportunistically to reluctantly. Most students deeply resented being treated differently by teachers, particularly differential treatment
based on gender and previous reputation. This treatment deeply offended their sense of fairness and posed the largest single threat to the quality of their relationship with teachers.

6.2.5 Theme 2: Institutional Relationships

The second sub-theme within the relational opportunities theme is institutional relationships. These relationships exist between students and the school’s institutional identity. This identity is complex and contested (Berg, 2007) however in the context of this study the school’s institutional identity is understood to encompass both the purpose and process of providing education to students. From this perspective the institutional identity is the site of policy making and policy enactment (Harkins & Roth, 2008). Two areas of emphasis emerged from the data analysis in relation to this sub-theme; school as a place of identity and school as a place of community. These were relational experiences in which students encountered the school’s institutional identity through policy, resourcing, rules, and sanctions. Each area will be discussed in detail.

6.2.6 Sub-theme 2: Institutional Relationships - School as a Place of Identity

Students’ views of school as a place of identity were strongly located in the meanings they attached to being a Woodlands student. A clear sense of Woodlands as part of a broader education system was evident across the data sources. Notions of class and privilege surfaced in these descriptions with Woodlands seen as occupying a place superior to government schools (also referred to as public and state schools) but inferior to elite private schools. A year 12 male student succinctly portrayed this positioning in his description of Woodlands as ‘like a mixture between a really rich school and a really poor school, sort of like half way’. Similarly, a year 11 male student observed that ‘it’s a good school, I think it’s a bit of a mixture sort of, a sort of balance between all the different
schools’. Notions of image and reputation were part of this positioning as discussed in a year 10 focus group:

F#2: They want to live up to be like one of the best schools (-)

M#4: (Overlapping) Which is fair enough cos we want to get a good name.

F#2: I know it’s a good thing but like you can take it too far, like when we had subject meetings and they were talking about how they want our school to get up there (pause) um in the top 20 percent.

F#5: They want to get higher and higher but they can’t just push everyone like that.

M#2: I know.

F#5: That means we’ll be like (name of two elite independent schools) and they’re like (-)

F#2: (Overlapping) But we don’t want to turn out like them (xxxxx)

M#4: They’re like 12,000 bucks a year or something.

M#2: That’s shocking.

F#3: I think ours is already rising anyway.

(Year 10 Focus Group)

This sense of ‘them’ as being different from ‘us’, that is Woodlands students, was also evident in this year 12 focus group exchange:

M#2: I know my (Catholic school name) mates have so much a different lifestyle to what I have. Like I go to parties around here and stuff, they go in the pub in the city and they seem so different, like their outlook on life and stuff like they all have to have this rich clothing and stuff. I suppose it depends on what you want but this is better. I wouldn’t change cos like there’s good people here and not the same pressure.

M#5: I really agree with that (…) we’re good here.
M#2: Because if you go to one of these rich schools it’s sorta like so much pressure and like um I don’t know, it’s real hard core pressure, but public school’s like laid back, ours is sort of half way.

(Year 12 Focus Group)

While understandings of elite private schools were strongly tied into notions of privilege and high academic expectations, government schools were talked about in terms of student behaviour and educational standards. The following extract from a year 11 focus group covers both points:

F#1: I reckon our school’s got a good reputation. Yeah it’s a pretty good school.

Facilitator: What do you mean by a good reputation?

F#1: Um, just the way the school holds itself, like students and stuff, we’re all um (xxx) sort of care about who we are.

F#2: Like you can always tell a Woodlands student from public school, whatever, like they’re always (_)

M#4: (Overlapping) Yeah you can.

F#2: Students from public schools hang around the station type of thing, where (-)

F#1: (Overlapping) Smoking, doing drugs.

F#2: Yeah like we just hold ourselves better (...) 

M#2: That’s because we’re in (name of suburb) and the public schools here are trash.

(Laughter)

F#2: You know we walk better and stuff like that. I just think that we um students get a better education. It’s just a good school.

(Year 11 Focus Group)
The view of student behaviour in a government school also surfaced in a year 9 focus group discussion with student talk verging between condemnation and admiration. The context of the discussion was around the so-called ‘muck-up’ day, which marks the final day for year 12 but is often a day of celebration for all students:

M#3: Other schools have muck up day and it’s like our last chance to have fun and they just go NO (student stands up and frowns, pointing his finger, pushing his hair back in the style of a senior teacher)

(Laughter)

F#2: It’s disgraceful.

M#2: It’s like ‘can we bring a balloon?’ NO.

M#4: Why can’t we like go around and throw eggs and throw flour and stuff.

M#3: No like we wouldn’t do that but we want to have fun like run around and go crazy.

F#1: They do at (name of government school). I know people who do stuff to teachers and they’re cool with it.

F#2: Yeah at (name of government school) they throw eggs at you. They go wild.

M#1: We don’t want to go too far. We can’t break things or do damage and stuff.

(Year 9 Focus Group)

This exchange was echoed in other groups where the perceived behavioural excesses of government school students were linked to a lack of strictness and a less caring relational climate. While some students railed against the strict rules imposed by Woodlands, other students viewed this strictness as contributing to a safe and ordered environment in which learning and relationships were supported:
Woodlands is a good school because they’re strict on the work a lot more than like say (name of government school) or somewhere like that, they’ll actually make you get the work done as with other schools they’ll just leave it up to you, it’s your problem if you don’t get it done.

(Male, Year 12)

You get a better education here unlike if you’re at (name of government school) I think the teachers teach more, teach more well than say a school like that because the teachers there just don’t care about anything. It’s strict here but it’s going to work out better.

(Male, Year 7)

They’re tight on the rules but that means you don’t get turkeys running round messing you up.

(Male, Year 9)

State schools are a little bit more violent, like kids can kind of just walk around, walk in, walk out whenever they want to cos I know people that go to state schools and they’ve got punishment except that if they don’t show up it doesn’t matter.

(Female, Year 7)

Everyone gets on well with everyone else. There’s a good attitude and not like real hard gangs and stuff that you have to worry about. We can relax cos it’s safe.

(Male, Year 12)

Compared to a public school or places like that we are safe here.

(Male, Year 10)

I’m going to get a better education than people who are at state school.

(Male, Year 7)

I would say it is controlled better and more stable than state schools.

(Female, Year 9)
My cousin got beaten up by this year 12 at (name of government school) because he was in his way, but that wouldn’t happen here cos there’s rules and I feel pretty safe cos my teachers care.

(Female, Year 7)

Like the teachers here actually give a shit about the students, they don’t just turn up for their pay um not like in public schools where they don’t really care about teaching the students or not.

(Male, Year 11)

My brothers went to public schools and they’re a different crowd, like the problems that they have at school I don’t see here. I’m grateful I came here, it’s like you can stay on track.

(Male, Year 12)

Implicit in students’ views was an identity as a Woodlands student. This identity was negotiated between students and the institutional authority of the school. Looking upwards to a perceived elite schooling experience and down towards a perceived anarchical school experience, the Woodlands identity emerged as a product of institutional decision-making that valued care, safety, and order. Students regarded the school experience that was possible in this context as providing opportunities that were particular to Woodlands. Noteworthy by its absence in this context was any extended mention of the school’s Catholic identity. Only two students specifically referred to this aspect of Woodlands. A year 8 female student on the questionnaire stated that ‘people who don’t go to Woodlands usually think that only snobs go to Catholic private schools’ and a male in a year 10 focus group commented ‘we’re such a religious school’. While religion was discussed in several groups, the discussion was mostly about the teaching of religious education, rather than the Catholic identity of the school. Comments such as ‘RE is boring’ and ‘religion classes are tedious’ were voiced in several groups, particularly among younger students, however the
Catholic identity of the school did not feature in how most students understood their membership of the Woodlands community.

6.2.7 Sub-theme 2: Institutional Relationships - School as a Place of Community

Sitting within the sub-theme of institutional relationships, school as a place of community was evident in all data sources as an aspect of students’ understanding of their relationship with Woodlands. While students’ talk implied that community was a naturally occurring phenomenon, community is understood to be a product of a school’s ethos and values, and organisation (Bryk & Driscoll, 1988). For this reason, sense of community is located within the institutional relationships sub-theme.

In responding to item 24 on the questionnaire, 121 students (59%) indicated they enjoyed being part of the Woodlands community most or all the time, while 60 (29%) indicated sometimes, and 24 indicated (12%) rarely to never. In responding to item 27 on the questionnaire asking what students liked most about attending Woodlands, community was named in the following ways:

- Having a friendly accepting community
- The real sense of community in all facets of school life
- I like the Woodlands community the most
- I like being a part of the Woodlands community
- Being in a happy friendly community
- Thinking that I am safe with the community
- I like the community in which I participate in school
- Woodlands has a GREAT atmosphere and feeling of community
- I like being in a friendly community and environment
In responding to item 109 on the questionnaire, asking students to describe Woodlands to a prospective student, 82 students (40% included community in their response. A sample of their answers is set out in Table 23, including year level and gender.

**Table 23.**

*Sample Responses to Questionnaire item 109; How would you describe Woodlands to a prospective student?*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year 7</th>
<th>Year 8</th>
<th>Year 9</th>
<th>Year 10</th>
<th>Year 11</th>
<th>Year 12</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Caring people and friendly community <em>(F)</em></td>
<td>People care about each other and work together as a community <em>(F)</em></td>
<td>Lots of support, a caring community to be in <em>(F)</em></td>
<td>Good community, friendly and very social <em>(F)</em></td>
<td>Caring community, almost like a family – looking out for others <em>(F)</em></td>
<td>Friendly warm atmosphere and community <em>(F)</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>So friendly and social, a great community to get to know <em>(M)</em></td>
<td>People are accepted for who they are, friendly people and kind people, a caring community <em>(M)</em></td>
<td>Friendly people and community feel <em>(M)</em></td>
<td>Friendly welcoming warm community <em>(M)</em></td>
<td>Supportive community <em>(M)</em></td>
<td>Sense of community in shared celebrations <em>(M)</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The images of community that are present in students’ responses were echoed in focus groups where relational warmth and care were recurring features in talk about community, as one year 12 male observed ‘school’s school but this is a great community, people care about each other’. A senior student also conveyed her understanding of community in the following diary entry:

The one thing that I truly love about my school is that we are just like a large family that are here to support and help us through our high school life. The community is 100% there for us.

*(Senior Female)*
Community emerged as a complex crosshatching of factors including safety, atmosphere, and environment with qualities such as friendliness, care, acceptance, and support. Largely described as a relational experience located in the associative networks between individuals, sense of community contributed to students’ connection to school and enjoyment in being a Woodlands student.

6.3 Theme 2: Learning Opportunities

Learning opportunities forms the second theme beneath the meta-theme of school as a place of opportunities. Consisting of two components, *access to a high quality education* and *capable teachers and engaging teaching*, learning opportunities were discussed in all focus groups and formed part of all diarists’ accounts. They also feature in the qualitative responses in the questionnaire. The two components were inextricably linked and influenced each other; that is students’ sense of experiencing quality learning opportunities and gaining a high standard of education was influenced by their relationship with the teacher and the relationship with the teacher could influence their sense of being in a quality learning milieu.

6.3.1 Sub-theme 1: Learning Opportunities - Access to a High Quality Education

A prevailing view among students was that gaining an education was important. Eighty-six percent of students in years 7 to 11 who completed the questionnaire planned to continue to year 12, while 11 percent were unsure. While intention to complete secondary school may not necessarily equate to valuing education, the discussion in the focus groups would suggest that this was a factor for many students. There were many general comments about the quality of the education and a sample is listed below drawn from the questionnaire:
You’ll get the best education possible.

(Male, Year 11)

A school that helps the build-up of knowledge and intelligence.

(Female, Year 12)

Lots of education opportunities.

(Female, Year 7)

It has a good education, you will have a good future ahead of you because of what you have learnt at Woodlands.

(Female, Year 8)

Offers a good education.

(Male, Year 9)

I’m getting a good education and chance of getting into uni.

(Male, Year 7)

Good education at Woodlands, which is important.

(Female, Year 12)

I know I will get a good education here.

(Male, Year 8)

Good learning opportunities.

(Male, Year 10)

I feel that I am receiving the best education possible for my level.

(Year 11 Female)

Given this general commitment to a quality education, the Woodlands students spoke as engaged consumers of the education that the school provided. The range of subjects and the facilities and resources that supported the teaching of these subjects were frequently named as key factors contributing to the quality of education. The variety of subjects was seen to provide sufficient choice for students to pursue particular interests. Some students named certain subjects as their favourites while many simply referred to the
breadth of subject choice. The following exchange from a year 7 focus group captures both elements:

F#2: Everyone gets to choose like what they want. Like there’s all these different subjects like music and (-)

F#1: (Overlapping) and we’ve got a variety of languages you can learn French or Indonesian.

F#2: At other schools you only get one, you have to learn just one language.

M#5: We have music and drama and we make food too.

M#2: My favourite is sport.

(Year 7 Focus Group)

Choice of subjects was named by a number of students in responding to item 27 in the questionnaire about what they liked best about being a Woodlands student. Typical comments included ‘I get to do subjects I like’, ‘doing the subject I want to do’, and ‘the variety of subjects we can do’. A year 11 male simply stated ‘the best thing about Woodlands is being able to do the subjects I enjoy’. Choice appeared to enhance students’ enjoyment and enthusiasm for their subjects.

The resources and facilities supporting the learning experience were often named as contributing to the quality of education. Students frequently were excited about the facilities and in focus groups often talked about learning spaces with enthusiasm and appreciation. While this may have been an anticipated reaction among year 7 students who were coming from smaller primary school settings with more limited resources, the appreciation of the facilities was evident across all year levels. The following comment was shared in a year 11 focus group:
There are heaps of facilities, like, we have a gym, different sporting ovals, we have the library which is pretty good and even we have the pastoral ministry centre to come to, like there’s something for every person.

*(Female, Year 11 Focus Group)*

In a year 12 group a male commented ‘we have fabulous facilities’, which was met by nods of agreement from the rest of the group and a further comment from a female about the quality of the theatre and music rooms.

Certain spaces were named frequently as particularly valued, including the theatre, ovals, and resource centre, but *facilities* was a word that was widely used to cover the general amenity of the school’s learning and recreational spaces. Some spaces and facilities were also singled out for criticism. Lack of air-conditioning in the senior classrooms was raised in three focus groups and the girls’ toilets were also criticised in one group. The criticism surfaced twice in the same group and was discussed with humour initially but took on a more rancorous tone when the topic was revisited:

F#2: I hate the toilets here.

(Laughter)

F#5: The toilets, they’re disgusting. I hate them too. I hate going there.

F#2: You know, you have to try and hold on or something. It doesn’t help you concentrate in class.

(Laughter)

F#5: No they are HORRIBLE. I hate them.

F#3: They’re gross. The doors, people don’t flush.

F#2: They’re terrible.
Although this discussion was punctuated by laughter two of the students appeared less amused and returned to the topic some minutes later in the context of the building program that was then underway in the school:

F#5: They fixed a door for us and they fixed a lock and that’s about all.

F#2: It’s been brought up so many times.

F#3: And they just think well there’s other more important things but (-)

F#2: (Overlapping) but you need hygienic toilets.

F#3: Yeah, exactly. I mean they’re working on making the school better and building new amenities (-)

F#1: (Overlapping) they can at least start down low and fix the toilets.

(Year 11 Focus Group)

Overall, Woodlands was regarded as providing access to a quality education, which most students valued. The quality of the education was assessed both in terms of the daily experience of learning and the study and career possibilities it provided beyond school. The breadth of subject offerings was recognised as allowing choice so that students could pursue not only areas of interest but be exposed to new subjects and learning experiences. The facilities also emerged as an important factor in how students regarded the quality of their educational experience and many students noted the high standard of facilities at Woodlands.

6.3.2 Sub-theme 2: Learning Opportunities - Capable Teachers and Engaging Teaching

While subject choice and facilities shaped students’ learning experiences, teachers were fundamental to how they perceived their relationship to school, particularly their educational relationship. Teachers appeared in all data sources and were discussed with varying degrees of animation from highly critical to admiring to disinterested. While
students’ relationships with teachers formed one of their key interpersonal experiences at school, the focus here is on teachers’ role in delivering a quality education. The interpersonal aspect of that role cannot be ignored, however the emphasis is on the learning relationship between student and teacher.

Students were forthright in expressing their opinions about ‘good’ and ‘bad’ teachers, which were the broad brushstroke categories they frequently used. In analysing the questionnaire data, a view of a ‘good’ and a ‘bad’ teacher can be discerned from across students’ responses to items 27 to 30 and item 109. Responses that invoked a specific teaching relationship and carried some detail about that relationship were identified. Comments such as ‘good teacher’, ‘nice teacher’ and ‘bad teacher’, ‘crap teacher’ were excluded, although these and similar brief comments did occur frequently. Comments that described a quality such as ‘approachable’, ‘friendly’, ‘helpful’ were also excluded unless that quality was situated within a specific learning relationship or context. Themes were then identified across the remaining comments and a profile of students’ understanding of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ teachers was generated. This profile is set out in Table 24 and contains three sample comments demonstrating each theme.
Table 24.
Profile of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ Teachers drawn from Student Responses to Five Questionnaire Items

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>‘Good’ Teachers</th>
<th>‘Bad’ Teachers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Helpful</strong></td>
<td><strong>Inflexible</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Getting help from teachers on a regular basis so that you can understand.</td>
<td>Some teachers are rigid and unable to change the work even by the slightest amount to make it more interesting.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers are willing to help and make sure you keep pace with the subject.</td>
<td>I don’t like when teachers don’t let you have any fun in the class.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The teachers try to help if you have problems with understanding stuff.</td>
<td>Those teachers who it’s just my way or the highway and are like prison guards in the class.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Supportive</strong></td>
<td><strong>Lacking Passion about Teaching</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very supportive and understanding particularly at this stage in year 12 where being ready for exams really matters.</td>
<td>Teachers who think their only job is to teach and not interact with students.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The teachers are all very supportive and encourage us to always do our best in class.</td>
<td>Some teachers don’t want to be here and are not passionate about teaching or have a teaching method I can’t relate to.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The support the teachers give to students is very good, they want us to do well.</td>
<td>Some teachers treat school just like a job, it’s like just going through the motions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Committed and competent</strong></td>
<td><strong>Lacking classroom management skills</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Passionate about what they teach.</td>
<td>Teachers who can’t control their class and then we can’t learn.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good at their profession; friendly and well educated.</td>
<td>No control over some so the rest of the class miss out.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The teachers try to make Woodlands a happy environment for learning.</td>
<td>Teachers who spend more time with the ones who don’t care about learning, the ones who muck up in class, then we are left to do our own thing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Caring</strong></td>
<td><strong>Unhelpful</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Care about our education which makes me happy to go to class.</td>
<td>Some teachers aren’t very helpful if you don’t understand something.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>They care if we learn and will spend time explaining stuff, motivates me to want to hang in there even when I don’t like the subject and just want to give up.</td>
<td>Teachers who view you as a problem and don’t help when you need it so you keep falling further behind with subjects.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Willing to put in a lot for us, care that we do well in class so I want to try harder.</td>
<td>Not willing to help you learn if you’re not smart.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
These themes were also evident in focus group discussions, although an additional theme was identified which was not present in the questionnaire responses. This theme related to excessive and unreasonable pressure and expectations from teachers about schoolwork. Year 7 students were particularly strident in their complaints about this issue, reflecting their ongoing adjustment from primary to secondary school:

M#2: Everyone’s giving us tests (-)

F#2: (Overlapping) We’ve got a science test with (teacher name)

M#3: I was away when he gave that out and he still said it’s due tomorrow.

M#2: Yeah we have to have a narrative by tomorrow and he’s given us barely no class time (-)

M#3: (Overlapping) Yeah that’s true

F#2: But it’s still due tomorrow

M#3: You can’t be sick or else you miss out on too much.

(Year 7 Focus Group)

This issue of too much pressure was also evident among year 12 students who were at the end of their secondary education and facing impending examinations. One year 12 male captured the mood across both year 12 focus groups around this issue in the following comment:

I was just going to say, like being that it is real big at this point but it’s not the end of the world, so many people are so fussed about it, the teachers are going on and on about how this is the rest of your life at stake, the pressure is out of control, people are so worried about exams. It is a big deal but it’s not the end of the world and people need to calm down.

(Male, Year 12 Focus Group)
Focus group discussions provided additional detail around the factors that influenced the student-teacher relationship within the learning environment. Certain subjects such as Physical Education, Music, and Drama were singled out for particular comment as facilitating different relational climates:

In Drama you tend to form a close bond with the teacher and in music as well, say with the Biology and Chemistry teachers we don’t really form that kind of bond because you don’t spend as much time together.

(Female, Year 11)

You have more class activities, like say in PE and the teacher comes and helps and stuff, you’re just more relaxed.

(Female, Year 11)

Our band teacher, he’s really nice and sometimes he like just lets us talk a little bit, have a little bit more fun and play silly notes and make lots of noise and he pretends to be this crazy conductor.

(Male, Year 7)

PE and Music it’s like more hands on work and that’s better, more practical work than theory is better.

(Female, Year 10)

In Drama you get to do excursions and stuff so instead of the teacher just getting up there and saying read the book and work, they actually do something and it works better.

(Female, Year 10)

In music (teacher name) he’s like the best bloke ever, he doesn't just like teach to the back wall. He comes and plays the music with us.

(Male, Year 10)

While certain subjects may have created more favourable conditions for relational closeness, the teacher’s attitude and engagement with the subject and the class were also significant influences. In several groups students talked about the teacher’s method of
teaching and the impact of different pedagogical approaches on their learning. The following discussion is from a year 9 group:

M#1: I’d rather really strict teachers cos you learn heaps more.

F#2: We had (teacher name) last year and she was really nice but we hardly did anything and I learnt nothing.

M#3: Yeah, (teacher name) is really strict but he’s strict with everybody and he taught me heaps. He lets us talk but you can’t push it too far.

M#2: I don’t really like copying stuff into my book like writing paragraph after paragraph (-)

M#1: (Overlapping) That’s annoying.

M#2: I don’t find that I learn anything from that.

F#3: I learn heaps when I’m having fun while I’m doing it.

M#1: When you can talk about it it’s so much easier.

M#2: Yeah like if you discuss it with other people or if you’re doing a word search or something like that I find if you’re doing something that you enjoy or you’re having fun doing it you learn better.

(Year 9 Focus Group)

These comments regarding the teaching approach and the impact on student learning were echoed in the following discussion from a year 10 focus group:

F#3: My maths teacher she’s like a really nice person but she’s a shocking teacher she doesn’t um she like reads it all from the text book there while she teaches it (-)

F#1: (Overlapping) And students aren’t going to like you know enjoy a class or like a teacher that just walks in and writes pages of stuff on the board rather than one who’ll sit there and actually do something practical and actually teach.
M#4: There’s nothing more frustrating than having a bad teacher that can’t teach what they’re trying to teach.

The idea of ‘fun’ in the classroom was also linked to the style of the teacher and students frequently named teachers who made learning fun. Fun was a word mostly used by junior students while older students favoured words such as ‘laid back’ and ‘relaxed’. A sample of these comments are listed below:

You learn so much because (teacher name) makes it fun and comes down to our level.

(Male, Year 7)

Like it’s good when teachers make it fun. Like I know (teacher name) makes religion fun, if religion can be fun.

(Female, Year 9)

We actually get the work done because the class is fun and we enjoy doing it.

(Female, Year 8)

With the more relaxed type of teacher the more likely you are to learn and remember things, you don’t have to be persuaded to work.

(Female, Year 11)

If the teacher’s more relaxed with the class, you can have a joke, it just sort of plays better.

(Male, Year 12)

In sharp contrast to these descriptions were some of the diary entries of four of the junior students where ‘boring’ was frequently used to describe their day at school. One male student wrote ‘Schoooool is soooo BORING’ when describing his day. The term ‘boring’ when used by diarists was specifically applied to class experiences, not to their social encounters.
In summary, learning opportunities were highly valued by most students and the learning opportunities at Woodlands were seen as facilitating access to a quality educational experience which in turn was seen as providing post-secondary pathways. Breadth of subject choice and well-resourced facilities and learning environments were frequently named as key factors shaping the educational experience, while teachers were also highly influential in terms of students’ engagement with and enjoyment of their learning.

6.4 Theme 3: Extracurricular Opportunities

The third theme, extracurricular opportunities, consists of two sub-themes: a wide variety of activities and something for everyone. The extracurricular opportunities offered at Woodlands were mentioned in every data source and by large numbers of students. As with learning opportunities, students valued the range of offerings available, which was seen to provide sufficient choice to cater for everyone. In describing the activities available at Woodlands, students spoke in general terms such as ‘extracurricular activities’ and ‘extracurricular opportunities’ and also named specific activities. Because sport, drama, music, and art were offered as formal subjects within the school curriculum and also as extra-curricular activities, this sub-theme only includes those instances when students were clearly talking about extracurricular activities. As activities were frequently simultaneously talked about in terms of their variety and wide appeal, the two areas will be discussed together.

6.4.1 Sub-themes 1 and 2: Extracurricular Opportunities - A Wide Variety of Activities and Something for Everyone

Students in all focus groups spoke enthusiastically about the activities offered at Woodlands and at times spoke at considerable length about their involvement in different
options. Nine of the twelve diarists also specifically mentioned in a positive way some activity in which they had participated on a particular day or which they were anticipating at a later time. Seventy-eight of the questionnaire respondents (48%) included mention of the variety of extracurricular activities when asked to describe Woodlands to a prospective student. As mentioned earlier this number did not include the large number of occasions when students simply wrote ‘lots of opportunities’. The enthusiasm that was frequently evident among students when discussing activities is demonstrated in the following extract from a year 7 focus group:

F#3: The school has so much like they have um they are always doing something like they have the surf lifesaving club and the basketball team, they have (-)

F#2: (Overlapping) They have everything.

F#3: There’s like something for like everyone.

Facilitator: OK. So it sounds like you are saying that most people would be able to find something they want to get involved in?

Voices: Yes

M#1: Definitely. I’m playing drums, it’s great.

F#2: Yeah the musical the people made was awesome.

F#1: Yeah.

M#2: There’s the computer club (-)

F#1: (Overlapping) The homework club if you’re having trouble with your homework.

Facilitator: mmm

F#3: Everything.

M#3: I’m in the swimming team.

F#2: Flute.
M#1: Don’t forget drums.

F#2: Me and (student name) are into the music and he’s in the band (pointing at another student in the group).

(Year 7 Focus Group)

The enthusiasm of these year 7 students was very apparent, however discussion about activities frequently elicited this level of engagement in senior levels as well as junior. One year 11 male observed that ‘there’s so many things to do here, extracurricular activities and stuff, like I mean they have roller key, I don’t know any other school that has that’, which was followed by another listing of favoured activities by other members of the group and concluded with a female’s comment that ‘there’s such a variety of things to do’.

One of the year 11 focus groups coincided with a free-dress day, which meant students were not wearing uniforms. Such days were held once a term and raised funds for different causes. The free-dress day was a focus of some discussion in the group when the facilitator asked what they enjoyed about attending Woodlands:

F#4: The dress-up.

(Laughter)

F#4: It’s like that we’re given a chance to have a bit of fun.

M#2: Yeah it just relaxes people and everyone gets into the mood, even some of the teachers are wearing jeans.

F#1: It’s just another way to get people together.

M#4: Like all the other stuff we can do, all the extracurricular activities are pretty good, like the musical, the different sports squads and (-)

F#3: (Overlapping) And how everyone gets involved.

F#1: It’s like the school spirit.
F#3: It’s fun when everyone gets involved like today and especially with the musical and everything and you see every night booked out, you just wanna get involved.

*(Year 11 Focus Group)*

Activities also included school camps, retreats, and excursions. Woodlands offered a well-established program of camps and retreats at each year level and also a long-standing annual trip for year 11 students to Central Australia. A debutante ball was also an annual event for year 10 students. The Central Australia trip and debutante ball were optional activities for students and as cost was a barrier for some students, the school provided some financial assistance for those who wished to participate but could not afford to do so. Despite being optional, these occasions were extremely popular with students and planning for participation often began well in advance of the scheduled events with many students taking up part-time work to save sufficient funds to cover the costs. Fifty-six of the sixty-six year 11 and 12 students (84%) who completed the questionnaire had been part of the Central Australia trip and fifty-nine of the same group (89%) had attended the debutante ball. At the time of data collection for this study, the year 10 debutante ball was imminent and 34 of the 37 year 10 students indicated on the questionnaire that they were participating in the event.

Many students and parents saw these occasions as two of the signature events in the life of the college, along with the year 12 graduation dinner and associated celebrations. Many junior students looked forward to and anticipated these occasions as points on the horizon that marked their progression towards school completion. Certainly they were well known among students with 86 of the 103 junior students (83%) aware of the Central Australia trip and when asked what they had heard about it offered comments such as ‘it’s great fun’, ‘it’s awesome’, and ‘that it’s a great experience and one I’m looking forward to’.
Apart from the Central Australia trip students referred to retreats, camps, and excursions as valued activities. In a year 10 focus group students spoke with regret about the cancellation of the camp due to weather conditions:

F#3: We have so many things we can join in.

M#4: Yeah like bands and stuff.

M#2: And sport, all the fun side of school.

M#1: Yeah.

F#2: And camps.

M#3: Camps are good

F#2: Camps are GREAT.

M#1: Yeah camps are awesome.

F#2: We didn’t do one this year though.

M#1: Yeah we missed out, there should be more of them cos when you come back to school you’re a bit happier.

M#4: And I reckon at camps you sort of get to know teachers more (-)

M#1: (Overlapping) Yeah have better relationships (-)

M#4: (Overlapping) As a person not as a teacher like as a friend.

F#2: Camps really help with that cos you’re talking to teachers differently.

Facilitator: In what way different?

F#2: They’re not really teachers at camps, they’re like people.

M#1: Everyone mixes and stuff.

F#1: And everyone talks normally and you like talk about stuff at home or talk about what you did on the weekend and stuff so (-)
M#2: (Overlapping) And you can bag them or complain to them and they’ll just laugh.

F#2: They won’t really mind.

(Year 10 Focus Group)

This discussion not only captured students’ enjoyment of camps, but also their appreciation of the different relational experiences that such occasions provided. This was repeated in other groups with comments emphasising the more relaxed nature of such occasions, including retreats and class excursions. Students talked about ‘the chance to get to know people’, ‘mucking around and talking about other stuff’, ‘the teachers are not so uptight’, and ‘teachers can be more themselves away from school’. A junior male student’s diary entry reveals his enjoyment of a class excursion:

*Wednesday 3/12 Day Thirteen*

Today was great, except for the first two periods (Maths and English). After that we went bowling. We had a great time. I’m hopeless at bowling, but it was still fun. We had lunch at McDonald’s, not exactly a healthy dine-in, but we went to the park afterwards. The excursion took four periods and we arrived back shortly before the final dismissal. Things like this are great activities for everyone. It’s fun for students and teachers alike and brings the two together, even if the time is short lived.

(Junior Male)

While most students indicated their appreciation of the extracurricular opportunities offered at Woodlands, this was not a universally endorsed perspective. For a small number of students such occasions were far from valued experiences. The diary entry of a senior female student provides an insight into this view:

The only things that we do beside your average day in school would have to be in your sport related events, your swimming, cross-country and your athletics carnivals, where I spend my time sitting around in the stands or on the grass because I don’t
want to make a fool out of myself. Then there is your school camp where I spend most of the time by myself because nearly actually everyone doesn’t like me. I would rather spend my time at home where I can sleep all day, but my parents think it is a good opportunity for me to go. So they pay the money and send me off.

*(Senior Female)*

Despite the variety of activities offered at Woodlands and the frequency with which students drew attention to this aspect of school life, 83 students (40% of the questionnaire sample) nominated a new activity they would like to see made available. The additional activities largely fell into two categories: sport and music. Fifty-eight of the students who suggested new activities were male and of these 55 were in years 7 to 9; fifty-two from this group nominated some form of sporting activity. Some of these activities were unlikely to ever be offered in a school setting such as boxing, wrestling, cage fighting, and go-karting, however there was a clear interest among the younger males for more active and adventure-style activities. The majority of females from all year levels and students in years 10 to 12 suggested some form of musical activity, such as ‘talent quests, dance and singing concerts’, ‘more frequent band days where everyone interacts so well’, and ‘more bands and live music days’. Although students suggested these new activities, there was no indication that they felt that the College did not cater for their interests in terms of current extracurricular activities. When asked about current and past participation in extracurricular activities, 20 students (9% of the questionnaire sample) indicated that they had never been involved in any extracurricular activities or groups because nothing offered by the school interested them.

The extracurricular activities offered at Woodlands were valued by most students for their variety and their broad reach in terms of catering for most people’s interests. The relational climate generated on such occasions was considered to facilitate welcome
opportunities for students and teachers to interact in ways that were markedly different from their usual classroom interactions. For some students however these occasions were relationally isolating and uncomfortable. While the school provided a range of extracurricular activities, students suggested some additional musical and sporting offerings they would like to see included in the school’s extracurricular program.

6.5 Motifs

Through the multiple readings of the qualitative data from focus groups, diaries, and the questionnaire, the students’ perspectives and stories moved from being fragments to forming a web of interconnected ideas and increasingly resonant accounts. While the themes that gave form to the students’ words captured the key elements in how participants understood their connection to school, two additional ideas moved through the students’ accounts, demanding attention, yet sitting outside the ordered conceptualisation of a thematic map. School as a journey in space and time and stories of gender identity tracked through all the data and therefore demand acknowledgement. Both will be briefly discussed.

6.5.1 Motif 1: School as a Journey in Space and Time

Students’ accounts of school were spatially and temporally anchored. School had a geography and a chronology. As one year 9 male observed ‘everyday I’m making history here with my mates’. The chronology of school was most pronounced in the talk of year 7 and year 12 students. The year 7 students were at the start of their secondary school journey and were simultaneously glancing backwards to their primary school days and looking forward to their movement through the years ahead. Much of their talk was anticipatory, reaching deep into the future in comments such as ‘when we get to year 12’, and more immediately into the next year ‘I’m nearly in year 8, just think …’ (extracts from junior students’ diaries). In contrast the senior students were looking back, nostalgically
recalling moments over the previous six years, and glancing nervously forward as they
approached the end of their time at Woodlands. This extract from a senior student’s diary
captures this mood:

There is only one week of classes left and I’m excited about the future but I’m also
scared as well. I never thought I would say this but I’m not really in a hurry to leave
Woodlands. I’ve made great friendships with students as well as teachers and I don’t
think that’s something I want to let go of just yet. School at Woodlands has given my
life structure. I spose whilst at school I always thought it was a drag but looking back
the school has been a huge part of my life. It has given me fun times and sad times
but most of all it has given me an education that I will keep with me forever.

(Senior Female)

The temporal nature of students’ talk was also evident across other year levels.

Many accounts were anchored in memories of past events, which linked to present events,
which in turn called into view the future as this exchange in a year 9 focus group reveals:

F#3: It’s like they tell us how to do our hair.

M#5: Well last year I had my hair spiked right (-)

F#3: (Overlapping) The good old days.

(Laughter)

M#5: And (teacher name) pulled me aside, said my hair was too radical (-)

F#2: (Overlapping) I reckon it’s ridiculous to cut it.

M#5: And to cut it.

F#3: We know what happened.

M#5: I didn’t cut it. I didn’t listen to him and I went on my own way and still had it
like that.

F#1: And now you’re not allowed to have plaits all over your head, why not?
M#4: When we get to year 12 we can bring in a new rule – free hair week (...) no wait free hair term (laughing) and we can even shave our heads (-)

M#5: (Overlapping) or at least a number 2.

(Laughter)

(Year 9 Focus Group)

School emerged in students’ talk as a series of episodic stories anchored in the present but textured by memories and imaginings. These stories were also firmly located in the geography of the school and spaces provided the backdrop or stage setting for the action. School was a series of spaces and different spaces were symbolic of status and year level such as the year 12 study centre, the year 10 quadrangle, and the year 7 hall. Other spaces were favoured places in which to learn or socialise. Spaces such as the theatre, ovals, and the resource centre featured frequently in student talk as highly regarded places. A year 11 female commented ‘I don’t know what it is about the theatre but I just get a good vibe there.’

Space was also highly regulated and students were aware that surveillance limited how they could use spaces. Rules and teacher supervision determined who had access to certain spaces and acceptable behaviour within those spaces. In the junior focus groups, a number of students commented on the rules around use of the ovals:

M#3: I used to love going on the ovals at lunchtime (-)

M#1: (Overlapping) Me too, it was (-)

M#3: (Overlapping) the place we’d all go as the bell went.

M#2: Now you’re not allowed on there unless you’ve playing a ball game.

F#2: You can still sit on the sides.

M#3: That’s not the same.
M#1: There’s too many ridiculous rules.

M#2: We love to play British Bulldog but the teachers stop you because you’re not allowed contact sport.

(Year 8 Focus Group)

The geography of the school was demarcated with boundaries around year level spaces, which limited or blocked access to all but the residents of that particular space. A number of students talked about having siblings or friends in different year levels and the difficulty in seeing them during the school day. Transgressing the restrictions on free travel across the year level borders of the school could expose students to risky encounters:

Like a year 11 student told me to get lost and all this stuff because I didn’t realise I wasn’t allowed in their area.

(Female, Year 7)

When I was in year 7 I came up to the 9/10 quad to get a can of coke because our canteen sold out and I was told where to go by some students.

(Male, Year 9)

Another student commented in the questionnaire ‘they don’t let us go anywhere at lunchtime, everywhere is out of bounds’. Some students claimed their own spaces, escaping teacher surveillance and school boundaries by ‘going right up behind the caretaker’s house where no one can see you there’ or leaving the grounds completely to go to ‘the park for a smoke’.

The temporal and spatial dimensions of students’ school experience were a recurring motif in student talk about school. They located students’ talk in specific frames of reference, much like a storyboard in filmmaking, and were integral to how students experienced their school life.
6.5.2 Motif 2: Stories of Gender Identity

A second motif that tracked across and through every focus group discussion was gender identity. The influence of gender was evident in students’ stories around many aspects of their school life and to observe that students’ experience of school was a gendered experience is akin to saying their experience of school was a human experience. The statement is stripped of meaning because it offers such a conspicuous truth. Undoubtedly gender shaped students’ experiences at school, influencing teacher interactions and decisions. The stories of gender identity being considered here however were stories in which masculinities and femininities were constructed and tested out in the discussions. The frequency with which this talk occurred demanded attention. The following exchange in a year 12 group demonstrates the way in which talk positioned male and female identities. Students were talking about opportunities available at Woodlands:

M#2: Everyone’s given opportunity, it’s whether they take them or not. I mean they’ve got cooking classes (looking towards the girls and smiling).

M#6: They have woodwork classes like the majority of guys do that (-)

F#4: (Overlapping) There are a couple of girls that do that as well.

M#6: Yeah I know, there was but there aren’t now.

M#2: How about a dishwashing class for the girls.

(Laughter)

(Year 12 Focus Group)

In a year 10 group students were discussing support available at the school when again masculine and feminine identities were called into view:

M#1: Boys don’t show they’re upset.

M#2: No we’re tough, we can get through it.
F#2: Yeah they can handle it but girls are more emotional, they’re like, they (xxx) take things more to heart.

M#1: They have a sook and run to the toilets (-)

M#5: (Overlapping) to fix their make-up (-)

M#1: (Overlapping) No to talk about us (pointing at himself).

(Laughter)

(Year 10 Focus Group)

In a year 9 group students were discussing a teacher’s classroom management when again the talk moved into talk of gender identities:

M#5: She sets us boring work, like guys have shorter attention spans, they’d rather be doing something else instead of writing for a whole lesson or whatever so they try and just like talk.

F#3: I think we’ve both got the same attention spans but it’s just girls will write notes and you guys will talk too loudly.

M#1: Yeah like girls talk a lot too.

F#3: No we write notes and you just scream.

(Laughter)

Facilitator: So girls write notes and boys talk?

M#1: Girls still talk a lot.

F#1: But they’re quieter you can’t hear girls as much as you can hear guys.

M#5: Yeah, like in our classroom nearly every day we throw stuff around just coz we’re boys.

(Year 9 Focus Group)

In these extracts, students were engaged in identity work, evoking their sense of what it means to be male and female. These identities were not separate from their
identities as Woodlands students, but while this talk was in school, it was not about school. The discursive purpose of the talk was broader than defining their student identities.

6.6 Summary

This chapter addressed the research question regarding how young people understand their connectedness to school. Data sources included focus group discussions, a questionnaire, and diaries. Using thematic analysis, supplemented by narrative analysis, a single meta-theme emerged with three sub-themes. School is a place of opportunities was the meta-theme with relational, learning, and extra-curricular opportunities as the sub-themes. Students’ accounts of their experiences at school shared many similarities and differences. Some aspects of school life were described in noticeably different ways by students in different year levels and by male and female students. In focus groups students ranged across a variety of issues, moving in and out of the facilitator’s topic areas, which served as a guide rather than a format. The talk across all groups was animated and convivial, although areas of disagreement surfaced and these were noted. These disagreements were frequently associated with the gendered nature of the school experience, however differences of opinion appeared mostly good-natured and often playful around this topic. Other areas of interest that framed many of the discussions were also noted including the temporal and spatial nature of the school experience. These sat within and across themes as recurrent motifs in students’ talk and text and after much consideration and unsatisfactory efforts to house them in a theme, they were retained as motifs or dominant and recurring ideas that were part of participants’ understanding of school. The following chapter will consider how school staff understand a young person’s connectedness to school.
Chapter 7: Findings

7.1 Introduction

Research Question 1 (c) How do staff understand students’ connectedness to school?

This chapter explores how teachers and other staff in this study understood students’ connectedness to school. Data from 11 staff focus groups were analysed for themes using thematic analysis. Seventy-one staff participated in 11 focus groups. Eight focus groups consisted of staff from different areas of school operations, while three were mixed staff groups. Five themes were identified and these are discussed in detail.

7.2 Themes

Five themes were identified from the staff focus group discussions in relation to how staff understood and recognised school connectedness in students. These themes are set out in Table 25. Talk across groups was animated and engaged and staff frequently told stories about individual students to demonstrate points they were making. Some small differences in perspective were evident in how staff in different roles within the school understood connectedness, although overall there was a high degree of agreement across the groups with differences more in emphasis than in content. While Table 25 lists some sample codes and significant statement examples attached to each theme, additional details about each theme are presented in the following sections.
Table 25.
Themes and Associated Codes Identified from Staff Focus Groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Sample Codes</th>
<th>Significant Statement Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Likes being at school</td>
<td>Enjoys school; happy at school; feels comfortable at school; school is part of their life</td>
<td>It can be a quiet child or a boisterous one, you can just see they’re telling you ‘Yep I want to be here’ and they enjoy being here and enjoy what they’re doing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive relationships with teachers and staff</td>
<td>Engages with teachers; can approach teachers easily; feels OK about asking for help from staff</td>
<td>Their relationships with teachers play an important part, so whether it’s talking about work or even their private life or them just knowing they can come up to teachers, they value these interactions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belongs to a peer/friendship group</td>
<td>Having friends; being included in a group; having a place in their peer group; they don’t feel alone</td>
<td>They’re very comfortable within their groups and don’t struggle to form relationships in their year level</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engagement in learning</td>
<td>Wants to learn; participates in class; hands in work; wants to do their best</td>
<td>They enjoy succeeding in their subjects, even if they aren’t the best in the class, they want to be the best they can so they are always trying and striving</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Involvement in extracurricular activities</td>
<td>Gets involved in some of the extra activities; is fired up about something outside of class; finds a place in the non-academic life of the school</td>
<td>There are so many different programs and opportunities to be involved and I worry about students who aren’t doing something extra, they usually are on the periphery of school life</td>
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</tbody>
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7.2.1 Theme 1: Likes Being at School

Staff across all groups understood the most fundamental expression of a students’ connectedness to school was simply wanting to be there, enjoying being at school, and being happy to be present each day. An exchange in a mixed staff group exemplified this theme:

F#1: It’s just their general countenance, they’re quite happy, they look happy.
M#2: They seem energised about you know what they do, they’re enthusiastic and excited to be here.

M#4: They see it as part of their life. They’re happy to be here not only do they know they have to come, but there’s something behind that happiness so they really enjoy what they’re doing and that helps teachers as well.

*(Mixed Staff Focus Group)*

Phrases from other groups included ‘there’s enthusiasm’, ‘a sense of joy’, ‘they’re eager to be part of the school, and ‘connected students just have this desire to attend school and it matters to them’. Several staff members observed that missing school was a possible sign of disconnection. This absenteeism was a source of concern for these teachers as is evident in this exchange:

F#4: Sometimes kids who are disconnected are staying away not because they’re sick.

F#2: Which heightens it doesn’t it. The more you’re away (-)

M#1: (Overlapping) yeah it makes it worse, they come back and don’t know what’s going on.

F#3: Yeah they are behind in their work and sometimes their friends have moved on and that’s really crunch time.

M#1: That’s when they can start to disappear and don’t want to be here at all.

*(Student Support Services Focus Group)*

Staff seemed to understand that liking school and wanting to be at school formed the baseline for connectedness and that in their absence, connection with school was likely to be fragile and compromised. There was also an understanding among some staff that liking school enabled students to access a range of positive experiences at school. One staff
member explained that ‘students who are happy to be here feel free and comfortable, they can go up to teachers, have a chat, they often get involved in things because they’re happy to be part of school’ (Male, Mixed Staff Focus Group).

### 7.2.2 Theme 2: Positive Relationships with Teachers and Other School Staff

This theme was the focus of considerable talk in every focus group. The energy behind much of the talk appeared to come from the deeply felt personal satisfaction that staff experienced when ‘getting the relational settings right’ (Male, Year Coordinator Group). Most staff appeared to derive pleasure and enjoyment from warm and harmonious relationships with students and many had stories about certain students with whom they had positive or fragile connections. Staff repeatedly talked about the central place of relationships in the educational enterprise and most regarded forming positive relationships with students as part of effective teaching practice as demonstrated in this exchange in a mixed staff group:

F#1: I think there’s a very friendly relationship between students and staff.

Voices: Yeah.

M#3: We don’t have any of the storm trooper tactics that some schools apply where really you’re discouraged as a student from forming a relationship with teachers because they’re teachers and that’s all there is to it.

M#2: And curriculum is the dominant item.

M#3: Yes.

M#2: Well I’ve found curriculum may empower people but if that connection with the teacher and the student isn’t there the curriculum is falling way short of the distance anyway.
M#3: Right because a lot of our kids achieve really well because they have good relationships with teachers rather than because the curriculum is delivered in the most magnificent way.

(Laughter)

M#2: It’s funny you give kids some work back and they haven’t done that well and they say ‘I’m sorry’ like they don’t want to disappoint you and that’s usually because we get on well.

(Mixed Staff Focus Group)

Positive relationships with teachers were seen to be particularly important for students who were isolated in their peer group. In the Resource Centre staff group participants reflected on those students who frequented the centre at recess and lunchtime:

F#2: I think we’re fairly sensitive to the fact that a lot of the students we deal with aren’t connected particularly and we need to be a little more lenient with them and let them have a recreational space in here.

F#1: Sure, you see these kids come in and they’re sitting by themselves but then they get to know us (-)

F#3: (Overlapping) They actually attach themselves to a staff member in here quite often as a particular friend.

F#4: They tell us all sorts, other kids picking on them quite a lot.

F#2: They feel they can come in here and talk to us and over time they seem to get a bit more confident.

F#3: This is a safe place for them and they actually can find friends in here as well, not just be hanging out with us.

(Resource Centre Focus Group)
While fragile or volatile relationships with staff were regarded as a sign of a student’s disconnectedness, there was a prevailing view across the groups that for some students a single close relationship with a staff member could be protective even in the face of disconnection from other aspects of school life. This single relationship could develop through interest in a certain subject, which may then result in a link with a teacher in that subject area. However, the relationship formed, staff recognised the importance of these single, highly valued relationships for students who were marginalised for whatever reason within the school community, as the following comments demonstrate:

There certainly is a group of students here who are connected to a particular staff member rather than necessarily to the school.

*(Male, Mixed Staff Focus Group)*

There are students who find a single staff member they can relate to and that really does make a difference in term of what they do and how they feel about subjects and things like that.

*(Female, Physical Education Focus Group)*

I think we work hard to get those kids who are really disconnected on side. I know I take it as a personal challenge and when it works it makes a difference for them, just to feel even one teacher is there for them.

*(Male, Year Coordinator Focus Group)*

There’s one teacher who is able to get around him a lot of kids who may not be feeling connected but I’m thinking of one boy who is quite a different person because of that contact with just that one person. That’s been enough to improve his sense of being wanted, you know, of being part of it.

*(Female, Mixed Staff Focus Group)*

I see two levels, first of all there’s a general school connectedness which means they enjoy being here, they enjoy what they’re doing and so on and then there are kids who are connected to particular members of staff for example music or whatever is
their field and they may not be connected in a whole sense with the school but they do link up over a particular subject or a particular personality or a particular person and that’s the only thing that gets them through or keeps them coming.

(Male, Mixed Staff Focus Group)

Staff clearly regarded the quality of the teacher-student relationship as highly influential in a student’s experience of school and a key marker of connectedness. Staff also understood that for some students their relationships with teachers could form the single point of connection with school and provide a base from which other aspects of their school experience, including learning and peer relations, could be influenced.

7.2.3 Theme 3: Belonging to a Peer/Friendship Group

The quality of students’ relationships with peers and friends was considered a significant indicator of connectedness across all staff groups. Staff talked about ‘the visibility’ of students who did not have a place in a peer or friendship group. They were described as ‘sitting apart’, ‘on the periphery’, and ‘separate from everyone’. Their visible isolation caused concern and staff repeatedly flagged this separation from the peer group as undermining the students’ overall experience of school:

I think often where they don’t actually have a close friend or a group of friends that concerns me and I would see that as being a child who is not really connected.

(Female, Support Staff Focus Group)

There was a student who didn’t have any friends and at lunchtime she would hang around outside the room pretending to read the bulletin or sitting by herself always at lunchtime and she wasn’t involved in anything and looked quite lonely. She left school before year 12 so the ultimate disconnection.

(Female, Educational Support Focus Group)
You see those students, the ones always sitting on their own, you worry about them. I think these are the students who are not connected to school.

(Female, Year Coordinator Focus Group)

You can see some kids are just physically separate from everyone. Like they’ll always be sitting by themselves and that is tough and the longer it goes on the more they and everyone else knows it. It’s hard to find a way out of that.

(Female, Performing Arts Focus Group)

The first sign of disconnection for me would be when I see kids having problems with their peer group, um really struggling to form any close relationships. There’s a boy I’m aware of who is really struggling I mean there’s absenteeism and lots of calls home. That really strong foundation for feeling connected just isn’t there.

(Male, Executive Staff Focus Group)

While being part of a friendship or peer group was regarded as important, some staff were also aware that peer groups and friendships could be volatile and membership in a group could quickly be terminated as this exchange from a mixed staffing group reveal:

M#4: Well peer groups can cut both ways can’t they?

F#1: For sure.

M#4: They can send kids into disconnection (-)

F#1: (Overlapping) Yeah.

M#4: From connection.

F#1: They can isolate them.

(Mixed Staff Focus Group)

This loss of peer group connection was considered as potentially pushing students into a fragile space or as a teacher commented ‘peers can actually send kids over the edge’.

Conversely for some students, relationships with peers and friends provided their sole source of connection to school as this female year coordinator described:
I’ve noticed there are quite a few students who are sort of disconnected but they rely a lot on their friends. When I say disconnected I mean disconnected from school but not from their peer group and that peer group is so important.

*(Female, Year Coordinator Focus Group)*

This idea was also discussed in the Executive staff focus group:

M#2: For some students the connection with friends is the most important part of school and for some the only reason they come.

M#1: Some of those who are disconnected are only going on to year 12 because of the difficulty in moving away from their friendship groups. They aren’t really interested in the work.

F#1: For some students friends are the only thing school’s about. It’s what keeps them coming.

*(Executive Staff Focus Group)*

All staff considered peers and friends to be pivotal in a student’s relationship to school and viewed isolation in the peer group as a concern. This isolation was considered a serious threat to a young person’s connection to school, although the fluctuating nature of relationships meant students could cycle in and out of connection depending on the embrace or rejection of peers and friends. Students whose friends and peers were the only point of connection to school were particularly vulnerable during periods of relational volatility.

7.2.4 Theme 4: Engagement in Learning

Staff across all groups named student engagement in learning as a sign of connectedness. Engagement in learning was recognised in a variety of ways including ‘handing in work’, ‘an ability to undertake the work demands that are associated with learning’, ‘asking for help from teachers’, ‘participating in class’, and ‘interested enough to
listen and be involved in the subject area’. Staff talked about an attitude towards learning that connected students demonstrated, described as ‘an orientation to work’, ‘love of learning’, or as a resource centre staff member described ‘they have a focus on their work and they want to achieve’.

Not surprisingly, students who did not have this orientation to work were regarded as vulnerable in terms of their connection to school. Staff in several groups described the boredom and frustration that can ensue when students are not engaged in their learning:

They get turned off from the work and if they can’t do it they find ways to avoid it, like getting to school and then spending all their time in the nurses’ station.

(Female, Educational Support Focus Group)

Some students find any opportunity to be out of class and then that makes it harder because the work makes even less sense.

(Male, Mixed Staff Focus Group)

There are students who just want to be with their friends and the academics are secondary so they are sometimes the ones who get chucked out of class because they’re not fitting into the classroom.

(Female, Resource Centre Focus group)

I’ve got a lower group for maths in year 8 this year and like before the year even started, a lot of these kids were already disconnected and that’s been a real chore to get them to try and improve their attitude, I mean it’s all about attitude and their attitude has been wrong from the word go, if they couldn’t do it straight away they said they couldn’t do maths so they just tune out and that’s the start of disconnection.

(Male, Physical Education Focus Group)

Staff also understood that engagement in learning for some students was highly subject specific. Subjects such as drama, music, and sport were mentioned across most groups. One of the female music teachers made the following observation:
Lots of kids have to give up instrumental music at year 11 and 12 because they really love it but academically they can’t cope but they still come back and visit, like they haven’t left the department. They’ll come and tell me they’ve found a piece of music or ask ‘have you heard this?’ so they really have that commitment, it’s a real sense of belonging to the music department. Kids who do music are usually 100 percent into it.

*(Female, Performing Arts Focus Group)*

The following exchange from the Performing Arts focus group further highlighted the particular connection some students made with this subject:

M#3: If only we could get more staff to show that the kid that’s being a pain in the bum in year 9 plays saxophone or something and the maths teacher could see that kid just doing something else, it could open up the door.

M#1: For sure, how often have we heard someone talking about a kid like an at-risk or muck around kid and I’ll go ‘you’re joking, is this kid being a pain in your class?’ whereas in our class they’re so tuned in because they have an opinion on Bon Jovi’s latest album, their music assignment is on something they’re listening to or they’re playing a C sharp and it’s the same one we all play. There’s real chances to be equal with them and they just love it.

*(Performing Arts Focus Group)*

Drama and sport were talked about in similar ways with staff frequently describing certain students and their engagement, not only with these subjects but also with the staff members in those subject areas. The following comment from a mixed staffing group demonstrates this point:

F#2: I’m thinking of a boy in year 10 disconnected on a lot of levels but connected beautifully for drama you know I just found that quite amazing when he, in so many things, just wouldn’t work but then I found he was in there supporting one of the theatre groups and absolutely committed and following through on that level.
F#1: There’s another boy like that. I was talking to a staff member in the music department and the same thing, this young boy was disconnecting from all aspects of his learning and the only thing he could relate to and connect to was this staff member and the instrument that he was learning to play and that’s the only thing he looked forward to in his week, the opportunity to meet up with this person and play music.

*(Mixed Staff Focus Group)*

This blend of relational connection and focused interest was seen to be sufficient to hold some students at school, despite tenuous bonds elsewhere in their school experience.

The teaching style was also regarded as shaping some students’ engagement in certain subjects. Working alongside students in subjects such as music and sport was seen to remove some of the relational imbalance that was more obvious in other subjects and there was a sense that connectedness to both the subject and teacher could develop in that space:

F#2: I know when I’m making times for students to come and see me, so often they’ll say, mainly the boys, don’t make it in PE. That’s the subject they don’t want to miss.

M#1: I think for lots of kids, probably boys as you say, that they have a chance of success in PE, like you can have a kid in maths who just doesn’t get it and they keep getting C and D on their test but if a kid can throw a ball and it goes in the vicinity of something like there’s a pretty good chance of success.

M#3: I think in PE too you sort of work together as well, there’s teams and you’re not standing out as behind.

M#1: It’s also a more relaxed space, outside the classroom and you can be so positive like you say ‘how did cricket go on the weekend?’

F#2: That’s it, you can build a relationship with them and pick up on all their aspects because it’s not like they’re sitting at their desk.
M#2: And I think in PE and sport part of the connectedness is that they get to see what you can do, like demonstrating a skill, how to hit a golf ball say and once they see me hit a golf ball everyone’s like OK I can do that. I can have a go.

F#2: It’s also, a bit like in drama and music as well they’re got a chance to be more expressive in what they do, they sort of, they’re not bound in the same way as in some other subjects and you can do things in a lot of different ways and still achieve success. It’s just more of a level playing field because you’re all participants or you’re all learners, whereas in a structured English or Maths class you’re the teacher and they’re the learner.

*(Physical Education Focus Group)*

Teachers understood engagement in learning as an indicator of connectedness, but also recognised that for some students engagement was heavily focused in a single subject area. Drama, music, and sport were identified as subjects where this occurred more frequently than in other curriculum offerings. In the absence of a more global engagement in learning, this partial but often enthusiastic engagement in a single area was regarded as an important point of connection for students who may otherwise drift further away from school.

7.2.5 Theme 5: Involvement in Extracurricular Activities

Staff in all groups regarded the extracurricular aspect of school life at Woodlands as providing many opportunities for student involvement. Staff talked in both general terms about the variety of options available but also about certain activities including camps, retreats, musical and drama performances, and sport. Involvement in extracurricular activities was considered a sign of connectedness and was talked about in terms of ‘participation’, ‘enthusiasm to get involved’, ‘being part of the community through having a go’, and ‘openness to taking part in activities outside the classroom’. A female participant in
a mixed staffing group observed ‘a lot of connectedness happens outside the classroom in all the other options and groups that go on’.

Staff repeatedly commented on the range of extracurricular activities available at Woodlands and saw the number and variety of opportunities as catering to the interests of most students. This broad range was considered a strength and essential in order to provide meaningful choice to students and be inclusive in the opportunities offered, as reflected in the following comments:

There’s such a variety of activities offered here. It’s not just academic, it’s not just sport, it’s not just music but there are options from a lot of different faculties and not so much the standard choices, you know some school are purely sports but that’s not the case here and I think that way it connects a lot more kids.

(Female, Student Support Focus Group)

For most students they can find something that would appeal to them, different programs and groups in different areas, making it easy for students to get involved.

(Male, Mixed Staff Focus Group)

There’s all the extracurricular stuff like the musical with the older students working with the younger students and a range of other things like that and so many other activities that happen around the place.

(Female, Executive Staff Focus Group)

It’s so important not to be prescriptive about the extracurricular program. If we want kids to get involved, and ah, well, we do, we have to make sure there aren’t barriers, like cost, or timing, or just nothing there they want to do. Fortunately, we’re not a school that thinks boys only want to be jocks and girls only want to do drama.

(Female, Year Coordinator Focus Group)

Staff considered students who were not involved in any extracurricular programs to be ‘sitting outside the life of the college’, as a member of the Executive group commented.
Staff in several groups talked about involvement in activities as providing a pathway out of disconnection to connection for some students:

F#4: The year 11 talent show was a great activity and there were some quite disconnected students who came in there and became a focus and did some very talented stuff that I think I didn’t ever recognise that they had.

M#2: It was similar to the year 9 trivia competition and a student represented each homeroom and they were not the students that teachers might automatically have said that’s the smartest or the kid with the broadest general knowledge and they had a play off at the end and it was hysterical, the kids were very appreciative of the chance to be in the spotlight, kids that don’t usually stand out.

M#2: That’s what happens with the musical too (-)

F#3: (Overlapping) Definitely, the best example.

M#2: There’s students who are so isolated and academically not great, but they have this passion and if you can get their confidence up and they have a go they can find a point of contact, somewhere they can shine and you see all sorts of spin-offs from that.

M#1: Yeah, I’ve seen some kids who would have been lost to the system manage to keep going because of finding that program or group that gives them a reason to be here.

(Mixed Staff Focus Group)

Involvement in extracurricular activities was considered an important way in which students could connect to the life of the college. Involvement was regarded as both a sign of connectedness and a means to achieve connectedness and there was a strong view across all groups that the college had a responsibility to ensure that all students had a viable option in the smorgasbord of extracurricular activities.
7.3 Summary

This chapter explored how staff at Woodlands College understood students’ connectedness to school through thematic analysis of staff focus group discussions.

Seventy-one staff participated in 11 focus groups with eight groups consisting of staff drawn from different areas of school operations and three groups of teachers and other school personnel. Five themes were identified: likes being at school, positive relationships with teachers and other school staff, belonging to a peer/friendship group, engagement in learning, and participation in extracurricular activities.
Chapter 8: Findings

8.1 Introduction

Research question 2: What factors are associated with students’ connectedness to school?

The hypotheses related to this research question are comprise:

- Having parents or siblings who had attended Woodlands, or siblings who currently attended Woodlands, would positively influence SC;
- A student’s involvement in the decision to attend Woodlands College would positively influence SC;
- Starting secondary school with peers from primary school would positively influence SC;
- The more knowledge a student had about Woodlands prior to attending the school would positively influence SC; and
- The distance a student lived from school would influence SC (closer residence would positively influence SC and more distant residence would negatively influence SC).

This chapter presents the results of the analysis of data collected via a student questionnaire as part of this study. Data were analysed using both descriptive and inferential data analyses. SC was the dependent variable and was derived from two sources. SC was derived by summing up the scores attributed by the participants to four questions in the questionnaire from the SCS (Resnick et al., 1997). Each of the items was scored on a scale of 1 to 5, resulting in scores for the SC variable ranging from 5 to 25. This measure of connectedness enabled inferential statistical analysis to be applied. Additionally, each student's connectedness response on the VAS was converted into a rating from very low (0–2) to very high (9–10); this rating was crosstabulated against the independent
variables in the questionnaire to identify significant associations. These analyses also enabled the five hypotheses to be tested.

8.2 Description of Sample

A total of 206 students completed questionnaires as part of this study. The results of a frequency analysis revealed that there were more female participants than male participants, and ages ranged from 12 years to 18 years. Table 26 shows the frequencies and percentages of key demographic variables of the students.

Table 26.

Frequencies and Percentages of Demographic Variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic Variables</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>44.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>115</td>
<td>55.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 – 13 years old</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>23.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 – 15 years old</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>36.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16 – 17 years old</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>33.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>18 years old</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>6.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Year Level</strong></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 7</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>18.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 8</td>
<td>29</td>
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<tr>
<td>Grade 10</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>18.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 11</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>13.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 12</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>18.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Living Arrangements</strong></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>With immediate family</td>
<td>194</td>
<td>94.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With immediate family and friends</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>5.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No response</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Most students (196, 95.1%) had been attending Woodlands since Year 7. Of the 168 students in years 7 to 11, 144 (85.7%) planned to complete Year 12. One hundred and forty-nine (88.6%) of the 168 students in years 7 to 11 indicated that all or most of their friends intended to completed Year 12. Over half the students had siblings who were also currently
attending Woodlands (108, 52.4%); however, only 24 students (11.6%) had a parent who had attended Woodlands. Most of the students reported that their parents did attend parent-teacher interviews on the last occasion on which they were held (173, 84.0%). The majority of students lived within 10 kilometres of Woodlands (135, 65.5%), with cars the most popular form of transport to school (116, 56.3%). Just under half of the sample (101, 49%) had part-time employment, and, of these, 70 (69.3%) worked under 10 hours per week.

Students’ self-reported connectedness scores according to gender are presented in Table 27. There was no significant difference in connectedness between males and females ($p = .282$). Over half of the sample (121, 59%) reported that they enjoyed being part of the Woodlands community all or most of the time. There was an association between connectedness and enjoyment, with students with low to very low connectedness indicating less enjoyment in being part of the school community ($p = .001$). The decision to attend Woodlands was made together with their parents for the majority of participants (124, 60.2%). Only 21 (10.2%) respondents had no peers from primary school accompany them into their first year at Woodlands, while 126 (61.2%) started at Woodlands with over ten peers from their primary school.
Table 27.
Students’ Self-reported School Connectedness Scores by Sex

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Connectedness</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very Low</td>
<td>10 (11.0%)</td>
<td>8 (7.0%)</td>
<td>18 (8.7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>17 (18.7%)</td>
<td>18 (15.7%)</td>
<td>35 (17.0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>18 (19.8%)</td>
<td>38 (33.0%)</td>
<td>56 (27.2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>34 (37.4%)</td>
<td>36 (31.3%)</td>
<td>70 (34.0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very High</td>
<td>12 (13.2%)</td>
<td>15 (13.0%)</td>
<td>27 (13.1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>91 (100%)</td>
<td>115 (100%)</td>
<td>206 (100%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean Score</td>
<td>5.51</td>
<td>5.60</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Students were asked a series of questions about safety at school, and in particular about their knowledge of the Woodlands Safe School Policy. While 113 (54.9%) of the students were aware of the policy, 93 (45.1%) indicated they had no knowledge of the policy, with 58 (62.0%) of these students in years 7 to 9. Most students (131, 63.5%) would not tell a staff member if they were being bullied. This was the case across each category of connectedness, although the percentages were higher among students with low to very low connectedness (p = .034). Most students (157, 76.2%) had never felt unsafe at Woodlands.

Students responded to a series of questions about absenting themselves from class or school without permission, and about any disciplinary measures to which they had been subject, such as detentions or suspensions. Missing a class was a widespread phenomenon, with 127 (61.6%) students having done so but with no significant associations between this practice and self-rated connectedness (p = .148). Missing school for a day was less common, but was associated with students’ connectedness to school. Fifty-four (26.2%) students indicated they had taken an unauthorised absence from school (called “wagging”
in the Australian vernacular), with 20 (37.0%) falling into the low to very low connectedness clusters and 18 (33.3%) in the medium connectedness cluster \( (p = .008) \).

Over half the sample (115, 55.8%) had received a detention; notably, 16 of the 18 students with very low self-rated connectedness had received a detention. Overall there was a significant association between connectedness and detentions \( (p = .041) \). Eighteen students (12.6%) had been suspended from school, a much more serious disciplinary measure than detention, and of those 18 students, 12 had very low to medium connectedness \( (p = .033) \). When asked if they thought the suspension was a fair punishment, 10 of the 18 students said no.

Students’ responses to questions about getting support at school revealed that 196 (95.1%) respondents had visited the school nurse, while 87 (42.2%) had accessed the school counselling service. Students were asked if there was an adult they would feel comfortable talking to if they arrived at school upset. 86 (41.7%) students said no, with 30 (34.8%) of these students situated in the low to very low connectedness clusters \( (p = .030) \). This response regarding adult support contrasts with the response to the more general question asking students if someone would notice if they arrived at school upset; 180 (87.3%) students said someone would notice, and, of those, 176 (97.7%) indicated that friends would notice.

When students were asked if they had come to know a staff member well during their time at Woodlands, 157 (76.2%) said yes; however, of the 49 students who said no, 23 (46.9%) had low to very low connectedness, while only 1 student (2%) had very high connectedness \( (p = .001) \). Subject teachers were the frequently named staff members (114, 76.5%), followed by homeroom teachers (78, 52.3%). Most students (181, 87.8%) said there were opportunities at school to ask teachers for help \( (p = .378) \). Only 35 (16.9%) students
were not currently and never had been involved in any school-based activities or groups. The most popular school-based activities were sports (74, 43.2%), followed by creative arts (58, 33.9%) and community action and volunteering groups (38, 22.2%).

In responding to a series of questions about their views on their school work, 40 (75.4%) of the 53 students with low to very low connectedness indicated that they enjoyed none, one or a few of their subjects, in contrast to 55 (56.7%) of the 97 students with high to very high connectedness enjoying most or all of their subjects ($p = .003$). There was also a significant association between connectedness and respondents’ perceptions of whether teachers cared if students liked their subject ($p = .002$). Similarly, a significant association was evident between connectedness and participants’ perceptions of whether teachers cared if students passed their subjects ($p = .001$). Higher levels of connectedness were associated with greater academic success as defined by passing most or all subjects ($p = .019$).

### 8.3 Inferential Statistical Analysis

The means, standard deviations, and correlations of the study variables are presented in Table 28. The correlations show that age ($r = .144, p = .039$), extracurricular activities ($r = .247, p < .001$), student voice ($r = .207, p = .003$), general health ($r = .187, p = .007$), and academic engagement ($r = .334, p < .001$) are significantly positively correlated with SC. For SC, the dependent variable in the study, scores ranged from 5 to 24 ($M = 14.45, SD = 3.90$).
Table 28.

Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations for School Connectedness

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>r</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Age</td>
<td>15.09</td>
<td>1.67</td>
<td>.144</td>
<td>.039</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Extracurricular Activities</td>
<td>1.05</td>
<td>1.08</td>
<td>.247</td>
<td>.000</td>
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<td>3. Student Voice</td>
<td>2.72</td>
<td>1.03</td>
<td>.207</td>
<td>.003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. General Health</td>
<td>4.56</td>
<td>1.15</td>
<td>.187</td>
<td>.007</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Visits to School Nurse</td>
<td>2.38</td>
<td>.94</td>
<td>-.096</td>
<td>.169</td>
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<tr>
<td>6. Academic Engagement</td>
<td>7.92</td>
<td>1.07</td>
<td>.334</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Knowledge of School</td>
<td>3.28</td>
<td>1.02</td>
<td>.054</td>
<td>.444</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Peers from Primary School</td>
<td>3.67</td>
<td>1.34</td>
<td>-.011</td>
<td>.876</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The categorical variables of the study were also analysed to determine whether these independent, grouping variables were associated with differences in the SC scores of the participants. Based on the results of the ANOVA shown in Table 29, year level (F (5) = 4.026, p = .002), involvement in the decision to go to Woodlands College (F (5) = 2.598, p = .027), and cigarette use (F (1) = 9.617, p = .002) were significantly associated with differences in the SC scores of the participants. Students from the higher year levels had higher mean scores of SC compared to those from lower year levels. Similarly, students who made the decision to attend Woodlands collaboratively with their parents had higher scores for SC. Students who reported cigarette smoking also had significantly lower SC scores than students who did not smoke cigarettes.
Table 29.

*Results of ANOVA*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>C.I.</th>
<th>d</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>13.98</td>
<td>[13.08,14.88]</td>
<td>.22</td>
<td>2.420</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>14.83</td>
<td>[14.18,15.47]</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Year Level</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7th grade</td>
<td>13.95</td>
<td>[12.65,15.25]</td>
<td>.18</td>
<td>4.026</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>.002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8th grade</td>
<td>14.69</td>
<td>[13.39,15.99]</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9th grade</td>
<td>13.89</td>
<td>[12.41,15.36]</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10th grade</td>
<td>12.70</td>
<td>[11.48,13.92]</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11th grade</td>
<td>15.57</td>
<td>[14.29,16.85]</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12th grade</td>
<td>16.18</td>
<td>[14.99,17.38]</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Parents from Woodlands</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>15.43</td>
<td>[13.78,17.09]</td>
<td>.29</td>
<td>1.732</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.190</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>14.30</td>
<td>[13.73,14.87]</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Siblings from Woodlands</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>14.61</td>
<td>[13.80,15.42]</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.171</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.680</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>14.37</td>
<td>[13.64,15.10]</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Involvement in school choice</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student’s</td>
<td>12.20</td>
<td>[10.75,13.65]</td>
<td>.32</td>
<td>2.598</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>.027</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>13.61</td>
<td>[12.52,14.70]</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students with parents</td>
<td>15.02</td>
<td>[14.33,15.70]</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other family members</td>
<td>11.00</td>
<td>[11.00,11.00]</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family decision</td>
<td>15.63</td>
<td>[12.53,18.72]</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cigarette use</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>14.85</td>
<td>[14.26,15.44]</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: $p < .05$

A linear regression analysis using SC scores as the dependent variable and the variables found to be significantly associated with SC as the independent variables was conducted. The results of the analysis, as shown in Table 30, indicate that the proposed model is a significant predictor of SC ($F (8) = 6.837, p < .001$), accounting for 21.8% of the variance in the dependent variable ($R^2 = .218$). Among the predictors included in the model, extracurricular activities ($\beta = .515, p = .036$), student voice ($\beta = .607, p = .016$), academic engagement ($\beta = .626, p = .021$), and cigarette use ($\beta = 1.603, p = .015$) were found to be significant predictors of SC.
Table 30.
Results of Linear Regression Analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>Std. Error</th>
<th>Coefficients</th>
<th>Unstandardised</th>
<th>Standardised</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>(Constant)</td>
<td>1.077</td>
<td>4.116</td>
<td>.262</td>
<td>.794</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Age</td>
<td>-.338</td>
<td>.523</td>
<td>-.145</td>
<td>-.646</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Extracurricular</td>
<td>.515</td>
<td>.243</td>
<td>.143</td>
<td>2.114</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Voice</td>
<td>.607</td>
<td>.249</td>
<td>.160</td>
<td>2.442</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Health</td>
<td>.245</td>
<td>.230</td>
<td>.072</td>
<td>1.068</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>AcadEng</td>
<td>.626</td>
<td>.269</td>
<td>.171</td>
<td>2.329</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Year</td>
<td>.658</td>
<td>.494</td>
<td>.296</td>
<td>1.331</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>CigUse</td>
<td>1.603</td>
<td>.653</td>
<td>.162</td>
<td>2.455</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Decision to attend</td>
<td>.368</td>
<td>.208</td>
<td>.115</td>
<td>1.773</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a. Dependent Variable: School connectedness
b. Model = F (8) = 6.837, p < .001, R² = .218

8.4 Hypothesised Associations

Three of the five hypotheses were supported by this study. As indicated above, students who made the decision with their parents to attend Woodlands had higher connectedness (p = .027). Students who knew “quite a lot” about Woodlands prior to entering Year 7 had higher levels of connectedness than students who knew “a few things” or “very little” (p = .030). Distance lived from school was also associated with connectedness, with students living within 10 kms of Woodlands having higher connectedness than students residing over 10 kms from the college (p = .026). Having siblings or parents who had attended Woodlands and entering Woodlands with peers from primary school were not associated with connectedness.
8.5 Summary

This chapter presented the results of descriptive and inferential data analyses conducted on questionnaire data collected as part of this study. The research question guiding these analyses was focused on identifying the factors associated with students’ connectedness to school. To address this question, a Pearson’s correlation analysis was conducted to determine the existence of statistically significant relationships between the continuous variables of the study. The results of the correlation analysis indicated that age, extracurricular activities, student voice, general health, and academic engagement were positively correlated with school connectedness, implying a direct relationship between these variables. Additionally, an analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted using the categorical variables of the study as the grouping variables. The results of the analysis indicated that the students’ year level, cigarette use, and involvement in the decision to attend Woodlands school were associated with statistically significant differences in the students’ SC scores. A linear regression analysis was also conducted using the factors found to be significantly associated with school connectedness as independent or predictor variables in the proposed model, with SC as the dependent variable. Based on the results of this analysis, extracurricular activities, student voice, academic engagement, and cigarette use were statistically significant predictors of SC scores.

Students’ self-rated SC scores were also used as the dependent variable to determine any associations with a series of independent variables. Connectedness was positively associated with a number of variables, including enjoyment of subjects, achieving academic success in subjects, getting to know a staff member well, beliefs that teachers cared about whether students passed or enjoyed their subjects and negatively associated with receiving detentions and unauthorised absences from school. Three hypotheses were
supported with distance of residence from school, prior knowledge of school, and shared
decision-making between parents and their children regarding selection of school all
positively associated with levels of connectedness to school.
Chapter 9: Discussion

9.1 Introduction

This study has explored the meanings of SC using a mixed methods qualitatively-driven approach. Two research questions guided the current study: 1) What are the meanings of being connected to school; 2) What factors are associated with students’ connectedness to school? Five hypotheses were also tested as part of this research. Drawing on the study’s findings as presented in the previous four chapters, this chapter will locate those findings within the context of past and current research.

The first research question posed by this study focused on the meanings of SC, as revealed in the literature and within data gathered from a sample of young people and school staff from Woodlands College. The meanings contained in the literature were elicited from an analysis of 270 materials drawn from the researcher’s citation manager, while focus groups, student diaries, and a student questionnaire provided the data from which student and staff understandings were explored. The findings associated with each data set will be discussed separately, beginning with the literature audit.

9.2 Research Question 1a: How is SC Understood in the Literature?

In exploring how SC has been defined and measured in the literature, familiar patterns of inconsistency, overlap, and ambiguity were evident, however the literature audit also enabled a view of the elements within the definitions and measures that have endured and been favoured within the research community. In some ways, the frequently expressed exasperation about the lack of clarity surrounding SC may have disguised the conceptual profile that has been building over time. The literature audit conducted as part of this study has yielded the core components of SC definitions and measures and thereby allowed the
focus to shift from ruminations about its ragged profile to a more considered appreciation of its conceptual essence.

In examining 180 definitions of SC contained in 270 materials, 15 components emerged and the transactional pathways contained in the components suggest that SC consists of affective (I feel cared for), behavioural (engagement in school) and cognitive (commitment to school) dimensions, which place the individual in relationship with others, are multi-directional and dynamic in nature, and shape and influence the individual’s and others’ experience of SC. This definition captures Whitlock’s (2006, p. 15) notion of SC as “something not merely received ... but reciprocated as well”. Whitlock (2006) gives the example of a student experiencing and receiving care in the school setting and that same student demonstrating care for the school.

The multi-directional nature of the transactional pathways pushes the notion of reciprocity further, establishing the individual not only as an active agent in influencing their own connectedness but also others’ connectedness. This idea is best demonstrated through the provision of a safe school environment. Certain conditions need to exist in order for a student to feel safe at school. At the organisational level, the school must regard the provision of a safe environment as a priority and have clearly established policies and procedures to that effect. At the relational level, students, staff, and visitors to the school, must act safely in order for others to feel safe and in the process their own sense of safety is influenced. “I feel safe because you and others act safely”, “You feel safe because I and others act safely” and “we all feel safe because the school values our safety and actively safeguards it” is how the transactions may play out in the school setting. It is not difficult now to draw in the ecological strands (Bronfenbrenner, 1974b) of this scenario and imagine how safety is impacted in schools within zones of conflict and war or urban areas with high
crime rates, regardless of the actions at the individual or school level. Similarly, the influence of social capital (Putnam, 1995) can be easily introduced into this scenario. Resource-rich and resource-poor schools will have different capacities to address issues of safety and consequently the individual’s experience of safety will be shaped accordingly (Musial, 1999). Indeed Roffey (2011) claims that there is “a symbiotic relationship between the level of social capital in a school and how connected people feel” (p. 20).

Although an understanding of SC as co-constructed and transactional is beginning to take shape, the analysis is incomplete without scrutinising the ways in which SC has been measured. From the 144 SC measures, 11 components were identified, with five of the first seven being affiliative in nature. Combined with the findings about the core components of SC definitions, the relational climate of the school emerges from this analysis as the powerhouse of SC, generating an environment in which relationships between all members of the school are shaped. This analysis indicates that SC is sensitive to the quality of a school’s relational environment and is more likely to occur in contexts characterised by respect, acceptance and inclusion, in which students feel a sense of safety and belonging and have opportunities to participate and make connections with members of the school community. This analysis invites an understanding of SC as more than students’ perceptions of their relationship with school, which is how it has most frequently been conceptualised (Rasmussen, Damsgaard, Holstein, Poulsen, & Due, 2005). In many ways, this broad definition has done SC a disservice, wedging it among a host of other terms and casting it at times as a pastiche of other concepts such as engagement, belonging, and bonding.

The analysis in this study is drawn from a substantial number of materials and from three decades of research, thus allowing some confidence in challenging this somewhat shallow understanding of SC. What emerges from this analysis is a more complex and
dynamic concept, describing a student’s relational experience of school in which the school’s relational climate influences their cognitive, behavioural and affective responses which in turn shape their and others’ SC. The school’s role is pivotal in providing an environment in which the relational climate is compatible with SC. As students and staff so clearly stated, leadership and decision-making regarding curriculum, staffing, policy formulation, organisation and allocation of resources directly influence SC outcomes by shaping a student’s relational opportunities which in turn influence the school’s overall relational climate.

The ecological nature of SC is also fundamental to understanding the concept. The school’s relational climate settings are influenced by many factors including education policy and community and cultural expectations, which on occasions demand certain actions, which may or may not be compatible with SC. School responses to student misdemeanours is one such example, where actions such as suspension and expulsion sit within the school’s repertoire of sanctions and often prove popular with parents and the community, yet increase a young person’s disconnection with school and undermine the sense of safety among other students (Costenbader & Markson, 1998; Hemphill & Hargreaves, 2009). The ecological dimension of SC gives the concept a dynamism and a volatility that are key to understanding the fluctuating nature of a young person’s experience of SC.

Informed by the literature audit, SC is defined as a multi-dimensional ecological concept, situating the individual in relationship with others. The transactional pathways of these relationships are multi-directional, shaping and influencing the individual’s and others’ experience of SC. The individual shapes their own and others’ SC through multiple reciprocal transactions that are influenced to a greater or lesser degree by the school and
broader societal ecologies within which the individual is located. SC is the individual’s relational experience of school and therefore dynamic and fluid in nature, responsive to the relational opportunities or barriers that occur within the school context.

This definition moves away from notions of SC as an individual attribute, signifying an important shift in the concept’s evolution and mirrors the changing narrative that was discussed earlier regarding school dropout. Barber and Schluterman’s (2008) insightful review of connectedness provides a salutary rebuke of the enthusiastic but often fragmented and broad brush approach to connectedness in education and health research, observing that many representations of the construct are inconsistent “with its grounding conceptualization as a dyadic, systemic property” (p. 214). Clearly an ecological understanding of connectedness, the overarching construct from which SC developed, is integral to its definition yet SC research has taken some time to embrace its conceptual origins.

Locating precisely when the concept did begin to incorporate an ecological understanding is difficult, however Blum, a key scholar in the field, stated in 2005 that SC was influenced by the interplay between individuals, environment and culture, despite defining SC as a student’s belief about the care they receive at school. Whitlock’s (2006) definition marked a clear departure from earlier understandings, introducing the idea of SC as both given and received. Rowe, Stewart, and Patterson (2007) continued this shift, championing the ecological nature of SC with a firm rejection of the prevailing view and its emphasis on the individual student’s perspective. Rowe and Stewart (2009, 2010, 2011) went on to use a whole-school approach, informed by the Health Promoting School Model, to identify ways in which SC could be enhanced and firmly located SC in the multiple ecologies of the school. Waters et al. (2009) describe SC as “a function of the dynamic
interactions between individuals and their social and ecological environments” (p. 521). Exploring this understanding of SC further, Waters, Cross, and Shaw (2010) drew on data from 5,158 students to examine the individual and school-level variables that impact on SC and concluded that both influence SC outcomes. Furthermore, in a recent publication on influences on student achievement (Hattie & Anderman, 2013), SC was listed under school influences, not individual influences.

It would be misleading however to suggest that the individualist understanding of SC has completely lost favour. It continues to have currency (Morales-Chicas & Graham, 2014; Moscardino, Scrimin, Capello, & Altoe, 2014; Shochet & Smith, 2014; Vidourek & King, 2014; Zhao & Zhao, 2015), however in the light of new ecological understandings of SC, it seems partial and insubstantial. The emerging understanding may finally allow SC to escape from the shadow of other constructs and claim its unique place in the lexicon of student relationships with school. To answer an earlier question, SC has not been an indulgent creation of bored scholars, however its identity has often been fragmented and its meaning etiolated in the shadow of other constructs. Since its formal arrival in Resnick et al.’s (1997) study it has gained a substantial research profile, despite the confusion and imprecision that has dogged its definition and measurement. This study aims to bring further clarity to these areas.

9.3 Research Question 1b: How do Students Understand their Connectedness to School?

Focus groups, a questionnaire, and diaries provided data for the exploration of young people’s understandings of their connectedness to school. School was regarded as a
place that provided opportunities within relational, learning, and extracurricular domains
with considerable overlap between each and which were situated within spatial and
temporal dimensions. Young people understood the opportunities presented by
Woodlands as both instrumental for their future pathways (Beach & Dovemark, 2005) and
as shaping their everyday lived experiences of school and their connection to school. Each
domain will be considered in detail, beginning with relational opportunities.

9.3.1 Theme 1: Relational Opportunities

Relational opportunities consisted of interpersonal and institutional relationships.
The interpersonal relationships were with friends and peers, and teachers and other school
staff, while the institutional relationships were with the school as the provider of a sense of
identity and community. Interpersonal relationships will be considered in the following
discussion.

9.3.1.1 Sub-theme 1: Interpersonal Relationships - Peers

The lead relational experience for young people in this study was with their friends
and peers. Their experience of the other dimensions of school life was heavily influenced,
both positively and negatively, by these peer relationships. Relationships with teachers also
influenced their connection with school, however were less central to their school life.
Young people’s peer relationships are widely regarded as influencing their school
experience in a variety of ways (Lynch & Cicchetti, 1997; Oldfield, Humphrey, & Hebron,
2016; Osterman, 2000; Rutter et al., 1979; Wentzel, Barry, & Caldwell, 2004), yet they are
not consistently included in how SC is defined and measured.

Early SC definitions and measures tended to place greater focus on students’
relationships with their teachers rather than their peers. In 1993 Resnick, Harris and Blum
talked about schools as being “the primary source of connectedness with adults” (p. S6),
however by 1997 Resnick et al. included “feeling close to people at school” (p. 825) as a component of the SC measure, although peers were not specifically named. Blum (2005b), one of the key scholars in the field of SC, observed that “The relationships formed between students and school staff members are at the heart of school connectedness” (p. 4) with the only mention of peers referring to peer pressure. Similarly, the influential study by Bonny et al. (2000) defined SC as feeling close to school personnel.

The shift away from school staff as the sole relational focus for young people within definitions of SC is often obscured in non-specific terms such as ‘significant others’ (Rasmussen et al., 2005), ‘people’ (McNeely et al., 2002), and ‘caring relationships’ (McNeely & Falci, 2004). While peers have been named along with teachers and/or other staff members as part of the relational mix in definitions of SC (Santos & Collins, 2016), the focus either remains heavily weighted towards teacher-student relationships or the inclusion of peers is impossible to discern under the umbrella relational terms mentioned earlier. Peers are even less present in SC measures with the most frequently used instrument, the SCS, containing no specific mention of peer relationships, although they may be present in the item measuring feelings of closeness to people. The recently developed SC measure by Chung-Do, Goebert, Chang, et al. (2015) however does include peer relations as one of five factors along with teacher support.

The situation is further complicated by approaches which separate SC and peer connectedness (Carter, McGee, Taylor, & Williams, 2007; McGraw, Moore, Fuller, & Bates, 2008; Yang, Tan, & Cheng, 2013), presenting them as different constructs with different measures, although this approach at least clearly includes peer relationships as a point of attention. Waters et al. (2009) present a more integrated model of adolescent connectedness to school following a systematic review of the SC literature. Their model of a
school ecology which promotes SC contains an interpersonal domain consisting of peer, teacher, and family relationships.

Despite the inconsistencies and ambiguities around the place of peers within SC studies, the threat to connection to school posed by bullying peers (La Salle, Parris, Morin, & Meyers, 2016; Lester, Cross, Dooley, & Shaw, 2013; You et al., 2008), and risk-taking peers (Carter et al., 2007; McNeely & Falci, 2004; Rudasill, Niehaus, Crockett, & Rakes, 2014; Scal, Ireland, & Borowsky, 2003) has attracted research scrutiny. While peers are widely recognised as becoming increasingly influential as young people enter adolescence (Woolley et al., 2009) and can be a source of stress (Murray-Harvey & Slee, 2007) and negative influence (McDonough, Jose, & Stuart, 2016), this view of peers presents an incomplete account of the role of peers in young people’s relational set. Viewing peer relationships as an asset for many students in their experience of school invites a deep consideration of the factors that promote this aspect of the school’s social ecology (Roffey, 2012).

This alternative view of peer relationships as a resource that builds connectedness to school has been identified in a small number of studies. In their qualitative study of factors influencing SC among a sample of 52 Chinese high school students, Yuen et al. (2012) found that students identified peer relations as a central component of their connectedness to school. Despite the cultural differences between the students in this study and the Woodlands students, comments from the young people in both studies share similarities. Students in both groups talked about the time spent with their peers as influencing their connection to school. The majority of students in the current study commented that their friends and peers were the main reason they enjoyed being at school. This sentiment is echoed in Yuen et al.’s (2012) study in the observation of a student who commented that ‘For me, the source of feeling connection to school does not come from the teacher but
from the students. ...’ ” (p. 59). Jørgensen (2016) also found that young people in her study named peers as the most important aspect of their educational experience and drew on the concept of social capital with the term peer social capital to describe this key resource.

With a focus on resilience rather than SC, Fuller, McGraw, and Goodyear (1999) consulted 1147 Victorian year 11 students in a mixed methods study on factors that promote resilience. Over ninety-six percent identified having good friends as the most important factor, while having good teachers and feeling respected by teachers were ranked at five (78.6%) and six (76.8%) respectively. The researchers concluded that peer connectedness, defined as having good friends, and SC, defined as fitting in at school and having good teachers, were key factors in enhancing resilience. While not specifically researching SC, this study nevertheless highlighted the importance young people place on their peer relationships.

Similar results were found in a study by Gristy (2012) exploring the importance of peer relationships for student engagement in a remote rural secondary school in the United Kingdom. Through a case study methodology including interviews with students, Gristy found that the young people’s experience of school was almost exclusively social and that this social experience was overwhelmingly with their peers. These students were from a socio-economically disadvantaged community and most had fractured connections to school, yet their descriptions of seeing mates and social activity as their central motivation for attending school resonates with both the opinions and language used by Woodlands students to describe their peer relationships. Student and teacher understandings of wellbeing in schools were also the subject of a large scale mixed methods study by Graham, Powell, and Truscott (2016). They found that both groups identified relationships as central elements of wellbeing. Of particular interest however in the context of the current study is
their finding that students placed more emphasis on their relationships with friends and peers, while teachers prioritised the teacher-student relationship. The NSW Commission for Children and Young People (2005) also asked young people about their understanding of wellbeing and found that for many of the study participants, friendships were the most valued aspect of school life.

Peer relationships can also inflict distress and impact young people’s wellbeing through bullying and harassment (Agoston & Rudolph, 2016; Mitchell & Borg, 2013; Osterman, 2003; Rigby, 1999; Strand, 2014) and association with risk-taking peers (Fredricks & Eccles, 2005; Traylor, Williams, Kenney, & Hopson, 2016). A small number of Woodlands students did speak of the pain associated with being teased and excluded. Such experiences do impact young people’s connection with school (McGrath & Noble, 2010; O’Brennan & Furlong, 2010; You et al., 2008), however this aspect has been heavily canvassed by scholars (deservedly so), in contrast to the insistent message of young people about the joys of their relational connection to friends and peers and the meaning such connection gives to their experience of school. A rare exception is a study by Gorard and See (2011) in which they examined factors which enhance young people’s enjoyment of school. Approximately 3,000 secondary students were involved in the mixed methods study and they named the social aspect of school life and having friends at school as pivotal to their enjoyment. Similarly Goswami (2012) found that that positive peer relationships impacted young people’s subject wellbeing. These findings resonate with the current study. When Woodlands students were asked what they would miss most if they had to leave the school, 95 percent named friends and peers. Of the 11 students who did not list friends, six had self-rated high SC, clearly indicating that among this sample, peer relationships were of major importance regardless of level of connectedness.
The gathering voice of young people regarding the importance of their peer relationships to their experience of school invites closer attention within SC research. Pianta, Hamre, and Allen (2012) acknowledged in their study on student engagement in the classroom that peer interactions are central to students’ experience of the social environment of school, observing that the intensity of students’ peer interactions outside the classroom are dynamic, brimming over with “youthful energy, excitement, and enthusiasm” (p. 369). Most Woodlands students conveyed a similar message of exuberant delight in their peer interactions and were unequivocal in naming peer relationships as the most valued aspect of their school experience. As discussed, this view aligns with a number of studies, however the influence of peer relationships on SC has to date been under-considered with definitions and measures of the concept too often either placing peer-peer relations in a subordinate position to the teacher-student connection or subsuming them in a catchall relational milieu that is unyielding to more nuanced analysis. This teacher-centric emphasis has obstructed a more robust exploration of the influence of peer relationships on SC. The adolescent social world has long been subjected to heavy adult scrutiny, producing characterisations that both demonise and romanticise this world (Crosnoe, 2011). While neither and both contain elements of the adolescent relational world, the voices of adult researchers and commentators have overwhelmingly told the story (Schall, Wallace, & Chhuon, 2014). This study invited Woodlands students to tell their own stories about their connection with school and they foregrounded their peer relationships as central to their experience of school. Both the method and this finding have implications for future SC research.
9.3.1.2 Sub-theme 1: Interpersonal Relationships – Teachers

Teacher-student relationships (TSRs) are widely recognised as influencing young people’s school experiences in both wellbeing and learning domains and occupy a central place in educational research as a key lever for achieving an array of desirable outcomes for students (Martin, Marsh, McInerney, Green, & Dowson, 2007; Roorda, Koomen, Spilt, & Ooort, 2011; Rosenfeld, Richman, & Bowen, 2000). They also are consistently named as a key component of SC (Libbey, 2004; Vidourek & King, 2014). With relationships with non-parental adults recognised as a protective factor for young people, the TSR has increasingly emerged as a pivotal relational connection for young people, given the significance of school in their lives (Rishel, Sales, & Koeske, 2005; Scales & Gibbons, 1996). For the young people in this study, teachers were key figures in their educational experience, capable of enhancing or diminishing their connectedness to school, yet this already complex relationship emerged from discussions, diary entries, and questionnaire responses as more nuanced and volatile than much of the research suggests.

Woodlands students approached relationships with their teachers with a mix of cautious interest, ready to engage yet adopting a restrained ‘courtship’ until the teacher demonstrated a commitment to them as learners and individuals. In this sense Woodlands students were not passive recipients of teacher initiated overtures, but wielded a level of discerning control within the relationships between them and their teachers. This finding is in contrast to much of the substantial literature on TSRs which positions the relationship as a deliverable or gift from the teacher, evident even within the symbolism of the heavily favoured term ‘teacher-student relationship’ (Korthagen, Attema-Noordewier, & Zwart, 2014). The hierarchical nature of the relationship is implicit in this conceptualisation and fails to capture the co-constructed, dynamic, and fluctuating nature of interpersonal
exchanges which make up the totality of any relationship. Riley (2009) refers to the “common attachment model” (p. 626) in education where teachers provide care and students seek care, however challenges the usefulness of this unidirectional conceptualisation, favouring instead a dyadic model in which care-giving and care-seeking are reciprocal.

This dyadic view of relationships between students and teachers as ever-changing shared work is thoughtfully explored by Cooper and Miness (2014) who place heavy emphasis on students’ agency in co-creating their relational connection with teachers. They also comment tellingly that many of the survey and interview questions used to measure these relationships conflate all affiliations into a single item which unhelpfully assumes that the complex and layered relational experiences of students with multiple teachers can be described in a single response. This charge could certainly be directed at the most frequently used measure of SC, the School Connectedness Scale (Resnick et al., 1997), with two questions of its five questions relating to ‘people’ and ‘teachers’. Miness and Cooper (2014) go on to observe “that neither students nor teachers have a uniform type of relationship with everyone they meet” (p. 286), which is clearly borne out in the comments of Woodlands students, who not only had different relationships with different teachers but relationships with the same teacher were also subject to episodes of discontinuity. Pomeroy’s (1999) qualitative study with students excluded from school also captured these at times extreme variations in relational experiences with teachers which were evident among the Woodlands students.

Adding to the relational volatility was the willingness of some Woodlands students to subvert and challenge teacher authority, both as individuals and in groups. Students were acutely aware of the power differential between themselves and their teachers and its
influence on the relational dynamics, however many students also had a sense of themselves as having agency within the relationship (Raby, 2008). In one focus group students described targeting a teacher who was regarded as “too nice” and with insufficient control of the class. Marquez-Zenkov, Harmon, van Lier, and Marquez-Zenkov (2007) describe a similar situation in their study of urban youth in Chicago and Cleveland in which the anarchic behaviour of students towards their homeroom teacher is explained by one student as happening because “he’s too nice” (p. 411). Other challenges revolved around the perceived lack of fairness of teacher responses to issues of student concern. The familiar ways of viewing such student challenges would be to label the behaviour as defiant or resistant (McFarland, 2001), however neither tag provides a satisfactory or sufficient description of the students’ conduct. While the sociological reading of defiance and resistance as responses to the legitimacy of the school’s power and culture (McLaren, 1985) are helpful up to a point, few if any of the Woodlands students were engaged in the relentless trench warfare with the school or moving towards the total disaffection and alienation from their education that these theories regard as features and endpoints of student resistance.

Acts of resistance do not necessarily make resistant students and student voice theory with its focus on students being heard and pursuing their democratic rights (Cook-Sather, 2014; Rudduck & Demetriou, 2003) provides an alternative understanding which better fits the behaviour of students in the current study. As Furlong (1991) observed, students do not resist abstract notions of class or culture, rather they oppose teachers in the daily transactions of school business, which offers a more accurate description of the actions of Woodlands students. Resistance was mobilized over particular grievances and with particular teachers, however the relational damage in most instances appeared
contained and in some cases short-lived. TSRs for the students in this study were not gifted to them by teachers, but were forged together during each school day, at times unstable, at times steady, but always mercurial in nature (Stevens, 2009).

While the relational dynamic between Woodlands students and teachers was volatile in nature and in contrast to much of the literature, students’ views of teacher qualities contributing to positive TSRs were substantially in step with many studies. Students spoke about respect (Cook-Sather, 2002; Graham, Powell, & Truscott, 2016; Krane, Ness, Holter-Sorensen, Karlsson, & Binder, 2016; LaRusso, Romer, & Selman, 2008; Lee, 2007; Martin, Romas, Medford, Leffert, & Hatcher, 2006) and trust (Gregory & Ripski, 2008; Meltzer, Muir, & Craig, 2016) as essential in facilitating relational connection. These two qualities have long been recognised as core elements in the intensely personal endeavour of teaching (Macmurray, 1964) and Woodlands students certainly understood trust and respect as providing the relational bedrock from which TSRs could develop. Taking time to establish (Wooten & McCroskey, 1996) and mutually developed by student and teacher (Goodman, 2009; Jones, 2002; Krane et al., 2016), Woodlands students regarded trust and respect as the sources from which relational connectedness could flourish.

Consistent with other research (Benard & Slade, 2009; Bernstein-Yamashiro, 2004; Frymier & Houser, 2000; Krane et al., 2016; Stipek, 2006; Suldo et al., 2009; Wilson, 2002), Woodlands students highly prized teacher efforts to get to know them beyond their student identities by taking time to explore their interests, their recreational pursuits, and their more personal motivations and priorities. Ozer, Wolf, and Kong (2008) describe this distinction as between being known as a “student versus a person” (p. 462), while McHugh et al. (2013) refer to “self as learner” and “self as person” (p. 28). Certainly Woodlands students, like students in other studies (Horner, Wallace, & Bundick, 2015) understood their
identities as having two parts with aspects of their personal or private identity made available or public to teachers who made an effort to discover it. Dobransky and Frymier (2004) locate these more informal exchanges between teachers and students at the person to person level as mainly occurring outside of class settings and refer to them as out-of-class communications. Students in the current study also referred to such exchanges as often happening in the context of less structured teaching environments including some physical education and performing arts classes and extra-curricular programs such as school camps, retreats, and sports carnivals. Breaks between classes and recess and lunch-times also provided opportunities for more casual interpersonal exchanges between students and staff with one student characterising such conversations as ‘stairwell chat’.

Woodlands students also valued humour as part of a teacher’s communicative repertoire, regarding being able to ‘joke around’ as part of a relaxed or ‘laid-back’ interpersonal style which teachers could employ both in and outside the classroom. Humour was transacted between teachers and students and was seen as a conversational gambit that either party could use in pursuit of a more relaxed and engaging relational connection (Aylor & Oppliger, 2003; Gorham & Christophel, 1990). The phrase ‘take a joke’ captured the reciprocal nature of humour (Poskitt, 2011), in which students often saw themselves as being the jesters and delivering a joke which teachers either accepted and returned with their own humour, or rejected.

As students moved out of the junior years of school, there was a shift in how they related to teachers. Younger students, particularly those in their first year in secondary school, described more distant and contained relationships with teachers, while for many of the senior students their relationships with teachers had become increasingly relaxed with a more adult-adult register in their interactions. For some Woodlands students this maturing
of the relationship resulted in friendship-like qualities in their connection with teachers or as Bernstein-Yamashiro (2004) described ‘teacher-friend’ exchanges (p. 57). These relationships were also enacted with increased levels of equity and reduced hierarchical boundaries (Meltzer et al., 2016; Wilson, 2002). This contrasted with the frustration voiced by some younger students who at times resented their treatment as ‘babies’ and ‘kids’.

Some research on transition from primary to secondary school addresses this frustration (Bernstein-Yamashiro, 2004; Mackenzie, McMaugh, & O'Sullivan, 2012; Yates, 1999) as well as the sense of loss of the close relationships with their primary school teachers experienced by many students in the transition to high school (Ashton, 2008). This loss of teacher-related social capital (Darmody, Robson, & McMahon, 2012) appeared to influence the perception of a number of Woodlands year 7 students regarding their relationships with their secondary school teachers, with some expressing a yearning for the closeness that these primary school relationships had provided and missing the easy availability and accessibility of their primary teachers and the familiarity that was shared between both parties (Bafumo, 2006; Coffey, 2013; Tobbell & O'Donnell, 2013).

Woodlands students named several other teacher characteristics that influenced relationships including age and experience. These factors were linked, with a number of students referring to young teachers who were in the early stages of their teaching careers, although opinions were divided about the impact of these characteristics. Some students saw young and less experienced teachers as being more understanding and easy to relate to, while others described these teachers as having less control of classes which undermined the relational connection between teacher and student. The relational climate in well managed classrooms appears to influence the development of more positive
teacher-student relationships (O'Connor, 2010), while the impact of factors such as age and experience have not yet been extensively studied (Roorda et al., 2011).

One factor amongst all others stood out as exerting the most influence on the quality of TSRs for Woodlands students. Unfair treatment by teachers was a potent destructive source on relationships, on occasions causing irreparable damage or leaving a simmering legacy of distrust that for some Woodlands students endured long after the teaching relationship with a particular staff member had ended. While young people dislike unfair treatment from any adults in their lives (Goswami, 2012), fairness is named in a large number of studies as a quality which students value highly in their relationships with teachers (Bryk & Thum, 1989; Certo, Cauley, & Chafin, 2003; Darmody et al., 2012; Debnam, Johnson, Waasdorp, & Bradshaw, 2013; Hascher, 2008; Juvonen, 2006; McLaughlin & Clarke, 2010). Fair treatment by teachers is also an item in the ADD Health School Connectedness Scale which is a widely used measure of SC (Resnick et al., 1997).

The abstract concept of fairness presents definitional challenges (Smith & Gorard, 2012), however for Woodlands students their understanding was firmly based in the relational dimension of school life. These relationships fell into two categories: students’ relationship with the organisational machinery of the school in terms of rules governing their membership of the school and students’ relationships with individual teachers and staff members. Notions of distributive, procedural and interactional fairness are present in both categories (Wendorf & Alexander, 2005), highlighting the complex pathways operating when questions of fairness surface. Focus group discussion on this topic was energetic and opinionated across all year levels in contrast to other research (Kupchik & Ellis, 2008), which found older students had more negative perceptions of fair school processes.
Rules governing students’ school membership were often talked about as emanating from the anonymous ‘they’, which ranged from the principal, other members of school leadership, teachers collectively, or some combination of these sources. Similar to students in other studies, Woodlands students were more accepting of certain rules, particularly those relating to safety and the orderly conduct of the school, (Raby, 2008; Thornberg, 2008), however rules relating to uniform and dress code challenged many participants’ sense of fairness and provoked often lengthy and impassioned discussion in focus groups (Raby & Domitrek, 2007). These etiquette rules (Thornberg, 2008) were seen as inconsistently applied and undemocratically developed (Schimmel, 2003), and some students regarded the elaborate rules relating to uniform as indicative of the school’s emphasis on image over learning. Other research (Greenhalgh-Spencer et al., 2015) finds that while students do not necessarily see the balance tipping in this way, they do regard uniform requirements as symbolic of school prestige and a marker of identity. Regardless of student sentiment about the Woodlands uniform code, students voiced strong opinions about the inconsistent and arbitrary way in which many teachers enforced uniform regulations. Reduced levels of acceptance for the rule seemed to compound students’ resentment of its unfair application.

Among Woodlands students, even those who had not experienced unfair treatment themselves spoke of witnessing it and felt a sense of injustice at the capriciousness of some teachers in their application of rules and in their dealings with certain students. This awareness of fairness as unevenly applied is consistent with the views of students across five European countries in Smith and Gorard’s (2006) study and in Gorard’s (2012) study. These students, like Woodlands students, showed themselves capable of making discerning
judgements about fairness, which contradicts a popular view that young people have an overly developed and often self-interested view of fairness (Schimmel, 2003).

Students in the current study also understood the subtleties at play in justified differential teacher responses to students and unfair differential treatment. In several groups students talked approvingly about students with additional needs who were given favourable treatment in terms of additional teacher assistance, leniency around behavioural transgression, and modifications to academic requirements. Such equanimity regarding differential treatment for students with additional needs is not shared by all students (Raby, 2008; Smith & Gorard, 2006; Stevens, 2009). Students in these studies showed reduced hostility or ambivalence to these circumstances, but fell short of the acceptance shown by Woodlands students.

Consistent with other studies however, students in the current study were particularly affronted by differential treatment based on gender (Morris, 2005; Myhill & Jones, 2006; Stevens, 2009) and past history of misdemeanours or reputation (Raby & Domitrek, 2007; Smith & Gorard, 2006). While some researchers use the terms favouritism and scapegoating to describe similar teacher behaviour (Hamill & Boyd, 2002; Krane et al., 2016; Smith & Gorard, 2012; Stevens, 2009), the impact on TSRs is the same across studies, resulting in an erosion of two of the essential enablers of relational connectedness: respect and trust.

Wendorf and Alexander (2005) refer to a classroom justice climate marked by fairness and rapport between teachers and students and while students in the current study also considered the classroom as a key forum in which fairness was experienced, they spoke about fairness beyond the walls of teaching spaces, describing exchanges with teachers and staff in settings across the school. A vision of a whole school justice climate emerged from
their discussions, with relationships between teachers and students characterised by fairness and equitable treatment for all. This relational climate is similar to the ‘desire for equity’ described by students in Wilson’s (2002, p. 93) study. In their study of school climate, Bradshaw, Waasdorp, Debnam, and Johnson (2014) assess the school’s ‘culture of equity’ as part of the overall school climate measure, finding it to be a strong indicator of student engagement. The current study has also found that when students experience or witness unfair treatment by teachers, the quality of the student-teacher relationship is placed under stress which in turn appears to weaken some of the key connection points to school such as trust and respect.

In summary, consistent with SC and related research, Woodlands students regarded their relationships with teachers as a key point of connection with school, however unlike much of the research, these relationships were less influential in their experience of school than peer-peer relationships. Both sets of relationships were regarded as providing opportunities through which connectedness to school could be enhanced, although the relational world of school was fluid and at times volatile with shifts in peer and teacher relations working on occasions to also dismantle connection.

9.3.2 Sub-theme 2: Institutional Relationships

Students’ relationship with Woodlands as an institution formed the second sub-theme within the relational opportunities theme. Institutional relationships are understood as existing between students and the school’s institutional identity which is enacted through the school’s policies and practices (Harkins & Roth, 2008), and ethos (Bonell et al., 2010; McLaughlin, 1999). The enactment of that identity is experienced relationally or as Whitlock (2006) describes through “the institutional extensions of adult power” (p. 26). This sub-
theme consists of two aspects: school as a place of identity and school as a place of community.

9.3.2.1 Sub-theme 2: Institutional Relationships – School as a Place of Identity

Identity formation has been theorised as a key developmental task of adolescence (Erikson, 1968) and school provides a central setting within which this task is carried out (Bernstein-Yamashiro, 2004). This view of identity formation although highly influential has yielded some ground to more recent views of identity as fluid, co-constructed, multiple, and inventive (McCarthey & Moje, 2002). This view resonates with the voices of students in the current study who did not fit the Eriksonian image of young people entering adolescence with ‘finding an identity’ as a pressing priority on their ‘To Do’ list. In contrast, during focus group discussions, participants developed a collective identity narrative from which emerged a set of meanings about being a Woodlands student. These meanings drew on understandings of who am I? and who are we? with the two clearly linked and working together to influence connectedness to school. Within this identity narrative students’ personal visions of self were sculpted from their collective or organisational understandings of self (Alvesson, Ashcraft, & Thomas, 2008).

Students talked about Woodlands both as their school with site-specific practices and personnel and a school located within the wider educational landscape. There was broad consensus across groups regarding the positioning of the school within that educational landscape, with crude notions of class and privilege underpinning much of the discussion and generating a pecking order of sorts with elite independent schools at the top, government schools at the bottom, and Woodlands “half way” (Year 12 male). This ranking, anchored in talk about school fees, school image and material resources available to students, did not reveal aspirational yearnings among Woodlands students, who considered
the elite package to exert unwelcome added academic and social pressure on students. The talk in focus groups moved quickly away from the elite schools to focus on government or public schools which were regarded as under-delivering on student safety, academic standards, and teacher quality. A perceived lack of order and poor regulation of student behaviour in government schools were contrasted unfavourably with the stricter rules and expectations of Woodlands. Even students who railed against these tougher standards were not desirous of all the perceived freedoms enjoyed by their government school peers and cautious riders such as “We don’t want to go too far” (Year 12 male) brought a more temperate tone to the discussion in several groups.

A Woodlands student identity emerged from all data sources and although the pen pictures of both independent and government schools teetered on caricature with designer clothes and gang fights populating descriptions, the positioning of the Woodlands student was more nuanced than simply “not like them” (Year 8 female). Safety, order, and a supportive relational and learning climate were regarded as products of deliberate decisions made by the school which in turn enabled a particular Woodlands identity to emerge. Woodlands was not a source of identity but a place of identity in which the school’s institutional authority charted its own identity parameters or who we are as a school within which students then established who I am as a student at this school. Some elements of this situated identity are present in a recent study (Butler, Kane, & Morshead, 2015) in which students reflect on their school as a space which allows them to be a certain kind of student.

The Woodlands school identity and the student identity were far from mirror images of each other with only two students commenting on the Catholic ethos of the school, despite it being the raison d’être of Woodlands. While enjoying many of the rituals and
tradi
tions that accompanied being in a Catholic school, most students in this study did not see Catholicism as an essential part of their Woodlands identity. Casson’s (2011) study on English Catholic students’ understanding of their Catholic identity found similar contradictions, with many students not active members of the church yet enthusiastic participants in religious events at their schools. Both studies accord with the view that individuals are not passive captives of the institutional discourses, however powerfully transmitted, within which they are located but bring considerable volition to their identity making in the organisational context (Watson, 2008).

The malleable, shifting, and jointly constructed identity that emerged from this study was a valued aspect of how students saw themselves both in relation to their peers in other schools and in relation to who they could be as individuals at Woodlands; the who are we? and who am I?/who can I be? identity positions. This study found that connectedness to school was shaped by these deliberations on identity situated within the relational interface between students and Woodlands as an educational institution within a system and Woodlands as a stand-alone school setting; the a school and my school contexts. This finding is not captured in SC research and brings a new dimension to the current understanding of the construct. While feeling part of school and having a sense of belonging to school are well established dimensions of both SC definitions and measures and intersect to some degree with this finding, neither satisfactorily maps the new conceptual terrain of school as a place of identity. Identity scholarship offers enticing possibilities for SC research to explore this aspect of young people’s relationship with school/their school.
9.3.2.2 Sub-Theme 2: Institutional Relationships – School as a Place of Community

The concept of school as a community features prominently in effective schools research (Bryk & Driscoll, 1988; Sammons et al., 1995), despite scholarly recognition of the elusive nature of its meaning (Mannarini & Fedi, 2009; Reich, 2010) and a complicated reform agenda urging schools to embrace multiple forms of community including learning, moral, and caring (Shields, 2000). Not surprisingly, Moje (2000) describes community as “a messy construct” (p. 78), yet consistent underpinnings are evident, clustering around feeling valued and accepted, shared norms, and having meaningful opportunities to contribute and participate (Battistich & Hom, 1997; Battistich, Solomon, Kim, Watson, & Schaps, 1995; Vieno, Lenzi, Santinello, & Scacchi, 2013). These elements resonate with the four components of community proposed by McMillan and Chavis (1986): membership, influence, fulfilment of needs, and emotional connection. Similarly, Solomon, Watson, Battistich, Schaps, and Delucchi (1996) suggest that high levels of relational care and support, and opportunities for active participation in key aspects of school life are the markers of schools that are experienced by their members as communities.

Sense of school as community also overlaps with the concept of school membership, composed of attachment to others, commitment to the school ethos, involvement in school life, and belief in the legitimacy of the organisation (Wehlage et al., 1989). Differing slightly, Smerdon (2002) lists three components of perceived school membership: feelings of belonging, commitment to learning, and commitment to the institution. Goodenow (1993b) defines the psychological sense of school membership as a student’s sense of belonging in school which includes feeling “accepted, respected, included, and supported by others in the school social environment” (p.80). The PSSM scale is frequently used to measure SC and both terms are often used interchangeably.
Furthermore, feeling part of school is a core aspect of many definitions of SC and is also an item in the SC scale and could be considered to share some common ground with these other constructs. Unravelling the conceptual entanglements across definitions and measures of SC, sense of community, and school membership reveals a set of overlapping components: sense of belonging, supportive and caring relational climate, and participation and involvement in school life.

These elements are visible in Woodlands students’ understanding of school as a place of community with this understanding firmly centred in their experience of school as a place of care and support. Friendliness, acceptance, and cooperation were frequently named as qualities underpinning the caring and supportive relational climate. Community resided in the physical places and social spaces within Woodlands where the giving and receiving of care and support captured the mutuality of the community experience, aligning with students’ voices in McKillip, Godfrey and Rawls’ (2012) study who spoke of working together to support each other particularly when school pressures became overwhelming.

Woodlands students’ understanding of community also matched the psychological, geographical, and social dimensions of community as conceptualised by Dunham (1986), McMillan and Chavis (1986), and Wise (2015). Community was overwhelmingly experienced communally which seems self-evident, however most of the items in the PSSM scale and the SCS scope the individual gaze on self, rather than the individual gaze on the other/s. In contrast the measure of students’ sense of the classroom as community (Schaps, 2003; Solomon et al., 1996) includes the item *my class is like a family*. This idea of school as family was expressed by a number of Woodlands students (‘we are just like a large family’, ‘almost like a family’) and tapped into a widely shared perception of readily available support and
care. These views were also expressed by students in Schaefer’s (2016) study who equated their nurturing and supportive school relationships with the experience of family.

The reach of many definitions and measures of SC does not fully encompass the view of school as a place of community expressed by students in the current study. Their views captured core SC components of belonging and support within their understandings of community but went beyond individual notions of community to embrace the reciprocal nature of the social bonds within the school. This view more closely aligns to Rowe and Stewart’s (2011) understanding of SC as the cohesive linkages between all school members. This definition taps into the concept of social capital (Crosnoe, 2004; Virtanen, Ervasti, Oksanen, Kivimaki, & Vahtera, 2013) which also captures the understanding of community as a resource for students which was evident in the descriptions offered by Woodlands students. Phrases such as “looking out for others” and “people care about each other” clearly demonstrate this understanding. The view of school as a place of community expressed by Woodlands students further consolidates the broadened understanding of SC discussed earlier in this chapter.

9.4 Theme 2: Learning Opportunities

Learning opportunities is the second theme within the meta-theme of school as a place of opportunities and consists of two components: access to a high quality education and capable teachers and engaging teaching. Both were evident in all data sets and were intertwined. Given the core purpose of schools is the delivery of education, students’ interest in learning opportunities was not surprising, with most adopting a consumer perspective on the quality of service and the service-providers.
9.4.1 Sub-Theme 2: Learning Opportunities—Access to a High Quality Education

Woodlands students understood education as a prescribed feature of their adolescent lives, shaping their present and linking to their future, and as an experience indelibly shaped by a particular place and space: a perspective that embraced both an education and a Woodlands education. This binary understanding was similar to students’ view of school and my school as discussed earlier. Students regarded education as providing a passport to vocational choice and career possibilities which would otherwise be delayed or denied them, even if the daily lived experience of schooling was not always enjoyed. This passport notion of education appears in other studies (Brown, Kanny, & Johnson, 2014; Farrell, 1994) in which students voice similar understandings of education as a gateway to future career opportunities. In a U.S. survey of 81,499 high school students’ engagement Yazzie-Mintz (2006) found that 73 percent named getting a degree in order to attend college as the reason for going to school. Not all young people however view school in this way and the biographies of youth in MacDonald’s (2008) and Hollingworth and Archer’s (2010) studies provide salutary reminders that school is experienced through the filters of history, class, and culture and for some young people and communities, school provides a dead end to a diminished set of possibilities, rather than an opportunity-laden freeway to a welcoming labour market and limitless future choices.

From their more privileged position, students in the current study talked appreciatively about Woodlands offering ‘a good education’ and ‘a quality learning environment’. Like students in other studies (Brown et al., 2014; Schaefer & Rivera, 2016), Woodlands students embraced their school as a place of academic opportunities. This positive orientation to school (Jessor, Van Den Bos, Vanderryn, Costa, & Turbin, 1995) is similar to the valuing school dimension of Voelkl’s (1996) identification with school
measure, and the emotional component of engagement (Archambault, Janosz, Fallu, et al., 2009; Fredricks et al., 2004). The SCS, the most commonly used measure of SC, does not however contain an equivalent component with being happy to be at school and feeling part of school not matching the meaning contained in these other measures. This does seem to be a gap in how SC is widely understood and measured, as learning opportunities provided at Woodlands appeared influential in shaping students’ connection to the institution.

Beneath the broad statements about having access to ‘a good education’, Woodlands students named the breadth of subject choice and the school facilities and resources as contributing substantially to the quality of their educational experience. Students from the junior to senior years commented enthusiastically on the range of subjects available, enabling them to tailor their studies more to their interests which appeared to enhance their enjoyment of their learning, captured succinctly in a senior student’s comment that ‘the best thing about Woodlands is being able to do the subjects I enjoy”. Clearly there are two factors at work: students’ appreciation of the depth of curricular offerings and students’ appreciation of having the freedom to choose. Broad subject range no doubt increases the likelihood that the academic enthusiasms of more students will be covered, enabling the course architecture for students to more closely match their interests. Research on the construct of interest suggests that motivation and engagement in learning are influenced when individuals have interest in a subject, topic area, or task (Ainley, 2006; Schiefele, 1991), while Hidi (1990) suggests that interest serves as ‘a mental resource’ for learners (p. 556). Additionally, boredom or lack of interest affects the overall quality of the learning experience (Skinner, Furrer, et al., 2008). Possible pathways to connectedness/disconnectedness can be hypothesised, with some support
from Martin and Dowson (2009) who claim that alienation (a construct sharing some conceptual ground with SC) is a relational and academic concept with academic alienation springing from a student’s inability to relate to subject content or teacher delivery of that content.

A broad range of subject offerings enabled student choice which was viewed favourably by Woodlands students. This ability to more closely match their interests to their course and subject selection was widely appreciated. Choice was also appreciated for the opportunities it offered to explore beyond an existing interest area. This was most evident among year 7 students who commented on the opportunity to learn two languages (‘at other schools you only get one’) and other subjects which were new to them. Being offered choice seemed to be valued as intrinsically positive regardless of the experience that lay beyond the individual’s act of choosing. This finding appears to tap into the notion of autonomy which features prominently in self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Deci et al., 1991), located within the broader body of motivational research. There are also links with the stage-environment fit approach which suggests that the adolescent need for autonomy is often obstructed within the controlled environments of secondary schools (Eccles et al., 1993; Eccles & Roeser, 2006). The current study does not allow any claims to be made about the impact of student choice within Woodlands on sense of autonomy or motivation, however there does seem to be a lightly drawn pencil line between students’ valuing of subject choice and an appreciation and enjoyment of the choice consequently made. Other students have made similar observations about diminished enjoyment of school when rigid timetabling restricts choice (Gorard & See, 2011).

The availability of resources and the quality of facilities also contributed to the perceived standard of education provided at Woodlands. Students in Gorard and See’s
(2011) study also valued these aspects of their schooling, however the weight of research on school facilities appears preoccupied with the impact of buildings and spaces on student safety (Bosworth, Ford, & Hernandez, 2011; Wilcox, Augustine, & Clayton, 2006) and behaviour (Earthman & Lemasters, 1996; Grana et al., 2010). In the current study school spaces seemed to enable connection to school with certain facilities such as the theatre and ovals being frequently named as favoured places. Facilities not only supported learning but the delivery of care with a number of students mentioning the counselling spaces in the school. Students conveyed a sense of ownership about certain areas which seemed to more closely reflect a fondness for the space than a territorial guarding of that space against the intrusion of others. Lack of amenity was criticised, with the disrepair in the senior girls’ toilets heavily condemned across data sets, although the criticism did not stem from a sense of compromised safety, but due to distaste when using them and frustration that their repair had not been prioritised.

In summary, students in this study valued education and the particular educational opportunities and experience provided by Woodlands. Broad curricular offerings enabled choice which allowed students to pursue existing interests and explore new subjects. The educational experience was enhanced by access to high quality facilities and resources which further contributed to students’ perception that Woodlands was meeting their educational needs. Students’ relationship with school was a clear beneficiary of these perceived high quality educational experiences.

9.4.2 Sub-theme 2: Learning Opportunities – Capable Teachers and Engaging Teaching

Capable teachers and engaging teaching forms the second dimension of the learning opportunities sub-theme. This component returns to the student-teacher relationship, but unlike the earlier discussion on the non-academic relationship, the
emphasis here is on the instructional relationship or “pedagogic connectedness” (Beutel, 2009, p. 508). While acknowledging that such distinctions are somewhat contrived, given the intertwining of the teaching and non-teaching aspects of the relationship, there is a substantial literature on teacher-student relationships (TSRs) within the classroom (Cornelius-White, 2007; Corso, Bundick, Quaglia, & Haywood, 2013; Pianta et al., 2012; Wubbels & Brekelmans, 2005) and much of the Woodlands students’ talk and text focused on this aspect of their relationships with teachers.

This topic attracted attention in all data sets and many students held strong opinions about the qualities of capable educators with discussion often constructed around the prototypes of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ teachers. Good teachers were helpful, supportive, caring, and committed to and competent in their teaching practice. Bad teachers lacked flexibility, passion for teaching, classroom management skills, and were unhelpful. While avoiding the cartoonish categories of good and bad, TSR research provides substantial profiles of the qualities of capable and effective teachers and there is considerable alignment between much of the research and the views of Woodlands students.

The qualities of helpfulness, support, and caring appear consistently in the TSR research as attributes that enhance relational closeness, however the interrelationships between these qualities are less clearly defined. Researchers have differing views on whether care (Baker & Bridger, 1997; Hedge & Mackenzie, 2012; Rivera-McCutchen, 2012) or support (Klem & Connell, 2004; Ozer et al., 2008; Wentzel, Battle, Russell, & Looney, 2010) is the overarching concept. Brion-Meisels (2014) provides a thoughtful account of how students in her mixed methods study conceptualised teacher support, finding they used help and support interchangeably with both meanings located in a problem narrative. This contrasted with her understanding of support as “provided to bolster one’s social,
emotional, or cognitive capacity” (Brion-Meisels, 2014, p. 322) and is the meaning which more closely accords with how Woodlands students understood the concept. Their descriptions of support positioned teachers as well-wishers or members of an educational cheer squad, wanting the best for their students and providing encouragement along the school journey. Support, help, and care emerged from the data sets as linked but different, with help provided within a problem-solving context while care was described as teachers valuing students as learners, which was experienced as teacher commitment to each student’s learning and educational progress. Other students (McKillip et al., 2012) have expressed a similar understanding of care as teacher vigilance over their progress and achievement, and a refusal to give up on them as learners.

It would be negligent to raise the concept of care in educational settings without referring to Nel Noddings whose name is synonymous with the construct (Noddings, 1988, 2003, 2005, 2006, 2012) and who has elevated its place in educational debate (Owens & Ennis, 2005). In her discussion of the caring relation in teaching (Noddings, 2012), she conceptualises the relation as only complete when the cared-for, in this case the student, responds. This understanding of care was evident in the reflections of Woodlands students, for whom teacher care was a stimulus as revealed in comments such as “she cares about our education which makes me happy to go to class” and “they care that we do well so I want to try harder”. Caring elicited a response in a way that help and support, as discussed by Woodlands students, did not. Wentzel (1997) made similar findings in her study of pedagogical caring, concluding that when students experienced teacher care in the form of feeling supported and valued, their engagement in classroom activities increased. Students in other studies (Foster, 2008; Ozer et al., 2008; Wallace, Ye, & Chhuon, 2012) have also
identified the experience of care as situated within a teacher commitment to their learning and academic achievement.

Woodlands students understood helpful teachers as being responsive to students’ learning needs and making themselves available inside and outside the classroom setting to assist if students encountered problems. Unhelpful teachers pathologised students who were struggling with their learning, viewing them “as a problem”. These views of Woodlands students are echoed across studies (Bernstein-Yamashiro, 2004; Krane et al., 2016; McHugh et al., 2013; Whittle, Telford, & Benson, 2015), in which qualities of teacher availability and understanding of individual needs are named as attributes of helpful teachers.

The competence of Woodlands teachers was understood as emanating from assorted sources: professionalism, passion for teaching, and classroom management skills. Professionalism related to qualifications, with students expecting that their teachers were well-credentialed and “good at what they do”. This idea of professionalism linked to teacher capacity to teach their subjects in ways that connected with students; there was a clear expectation among Woodlands students and others that competent teachers had a pedagogical repertoire that engaged and held students’ interest (Certo et al., 2003; Gorard & See, 2011; Poskitt, 2011; Suldo et al., 2009; Whitlock, 2004; Whittle et al., 2015).

Students frequently singled out certain subject areas including Physical Education and Sport, and the Performing Arts (drama and music) as facilitating higher levels of engagement and interest in learning, and fun in the moment. These outcomes seemed to be shaped by a combination of a differential set of relational opportunities and possibilities in these classes and more frequent use of participatory pedagogy by teachers. Project-based learning (Blumenfeld et al., 1991), outdoor education (Robinson, 2013), and Drama (Stokes, 2003)
have also been shown to promote relational connection between students and teachers and improved engagement in learning.

Competent teachers also had effective classroom management skills. For Woodlands students, teachers lacking these skills were placed in the ‘bad’ teacher category and student disquiet centred around a perceived lack of fairness in how the teacher resource was allocated when classrooms lost good order; there was a recurring grievance that learning was impacted and those who wanted to learn were “missing out”. Certainly the impact of well-managed and orderly classrooms and school environments on student wellbeing (Engels, Aelterman, Van Petegem, & Schepens, 2004; Holfve-Sabel, 2014) and learning (Blank & Shavit, 2016; Emmer & Stough, 2001; Van Petegem, Aelterman, Rosseel, & Creemers, 2007) are well documented. Passion about teaching was another element impacting on teacher quality, with Woodlands students valuing teachers who brought enthusiasm to their work and showing disdain for teachers whom they perceived as just going through the motions or ‘teaching for the paycheck’ (Foster, 2008, p. 112).

Students also had an expectation that teachers would be mindful of the stress generated by excessive workload and adjust their expectations and demands accordingly. This concern surfaced among students at both ends of the school structure with year 7 students lamenting a lack of coordination of homework among their teachers and both year 7 and year 12 students looking to their teachers to better understand and contextualise the pressure of the workload within their overall lives. Pressure of work has been named as a focus of student concern in other studies (Certo et al., 2003; Whitlock, 2004) and was found to attenuate students’ connection to school. Woodlands students certainly looked to their teachers to assist them to manage workload demands and to filter out some of the pressure
by more coordinated workload allocation. Teacher action in this regard was deemed part of a competent teacher’s duties.

In summary, students’ view of learning opportunities as central to their experience of connection to school adds elements which deepen current understandings of SC. As identified in the audit of existing definitions and measures of SC conducted as part of this study, some elements (feeling cared for academically, feeling supported by teachers, commitment to school, engagement with school) invoke a learning relationship between students and school, however the exact nature of that relationship remains vague. The learning relationship described by students in this study was detailed with both institutional and interpersonal dimensions. Education was viewed as a commodity and a process; instrumental and relational. Students were not docile recipients of a neatly packaged product, but active participants in a dynamic educational transaction which was situated within a particular place and set of relationships. Students had a finely grained understanding of a high-quality education and the teaching practices required to effectively deliver that education. Being a Woodlands student was about the present and the future, as participants in the study located their understanding of connection to school in current narratives of student life which were in turn located within a big picture narrative of imagined future selves.

9.5 Theme 3: Extracurricular Opportunities

Extracurricular opportunities forms the final theme within the school is a place of opportunities meta-theme and consists of two sub-themes; wide variety of activities and something for everyone. The two sub-themes are closely linked, as was evident in student talk about the topic. For this reason, they will be discussed together in the following section.
9.5.1 Sub-Themes: Extracurricular Opportunities – Wide Variety of Activities and Something for Everyone

Extracurricular opportunities appeared in all data sets and the tone of students’ discussion on the topic was often enthusiastic and approving. In speaking about these opportunities, students named particular activities and clubs in which participation was voluntary, as well as class, year level, and whole school opportunities such as subject excursions, school camps, retreats, and sporting carnivals. These events were a mixture of compulsory and optional. Participation in voluntary activities was high and students repeatedly highlighted the number of options available, although more options were desired including extended music and sporting offerings. Similar to student appreciation of the range of curricular offerings, a wide choice in the extracurricular program meant existing interests could be pursued and new interests could be explored (Darling, 2005), which may have satisfied the increasing adolescent need for autonomy (Wang & Eccles, 2011). The inclusive nature of the program was widely noted by participants, who valued the breadth of activities on offer not only for themselves but also for their peers. There was a strongly expressed view among students that the Woodlands extracurricular program was a school asset for all. In light of previous research (Brown & Evans, 2005; Mahoney & Cairns, 1997) highlighting the challenges for schools in creating an inclusive extracurricular program, the emphasis given to the inclusive nature of the Woodlands program by its users (students) is noteworthy.

Discussion also focused on certain opportunities that were regarded as part of a Woodlands tradition (although many schools offer similar events), such as the debutante ball, the senior trip to Central Australia, and year level retreats and camps. These events attracted high levels of student interest and due to their long-established inclusion in the
school calendar, they appeared to operate as a form of institutional rite of passage. Younger students looked to these future events with anticipation and students who had participated in them recalled them with fondness. Most of the year 7 students in the sample were aware of the Central Australia trip even though it was four years away in their school journey, suggesting the power of the narrative around the event. One year 7 student’s observation that he would stay at school ‘at least until I’ve been to central’ illustrates the significance of the occasion. The linguistic slide into the abbreviated form of ‘central’ contained in this student’s comment was widely used by staff and students and provided a further indication of the positioning of the event in the school’s operation and the identity building that was involved; the idiosyncratic expression was a marker of group membership, defining insider and outsider positions (Hodge & Kress, 1988). Such events connected with the school’s overall ethos, a complex interweaving of school culture, climate, and values (McLaughlin, 2005), and were understood by many in the current study as pivotal to the experience of being a Woodlands student. They contributed to a Woodlands identity which appeared to consolidate the students’ understanding of what it meant to be a Woodlands student with an associated strengthening of the institutional bond. Other school events such as retreats and camps seemed to operate in a similar way, facilitating an accrual of further detail around the Woodlands identity and serving to strengthen connection to school. This finding resonates with previous research which supports the influence of extracurricular participation on students’ relationship to school (Eccles, Barber, Stone, & Hunt, 2003; Finn, 1989; Marsh, 1992) and connectedness to school in particular (Martinez, Coker, McMahon, Cohen, & Thapa, 2016; Ozer et al., 2008).

A key aspect of the extra- and co-curricular Woodlands schedule which drew frequent comments from students was the different interpersonal climate that such
opportunities provided. There was a keenly felt relaxation of the relational constraints that applied in the usual classroom and broader school environment. The social atmosphere on such occasions facilitated a noticeable loosening of the rigid boundaries contained in the set piece roles of teacher and student (Hargreaves, Earl, & Ryan, 1996) and enabled students and teachers to reveal more of their personal/private selves to each other. Students valued this opportunity to be known beyond their student identity and to get to know teachers beyond their professional identities. As discussed earlier, such encounters can result in strengthened TSRs and are broadly welcomed by students across a number of studies. Student-student interactions were also experienced differently in the changed social climate produced within extra- and co-curricular activities. Woodlands students appreciated the opportunity to get to know their peers in such settings and move beyond their immediate friendship groups. Other studies have also identified contact with a broad peer group as an outcome of extracurricular participation (McGee, Williams, Howden-Chapman, Martin, & Kawachi, 2006; Zaff et al., 2003), although the benefits of this contact are mixed depending on a range of factors (Fredricks & Eccles, 2006a; Youngblade & Curry, 2006). For most students in the current study however the opportunity was viewed favourably.

The voice of the small number of students for whom participation in extracurricular events was a negative experience must also be given attention. For these Woodlands students (two females) compulsory extra- and co-curricular activities in the school calendar such as sporting carnivals and camps were a source of distress, highlighting a perceived lack of athletic ability or social ease which exposed them to ridicule and alienated them from their peer group. This social exclusion sabotages the need to belong and ‘fit in’, which are core elements in the developing adolescent sense of self (Crosnoe, 2011; Schall et al., 2014) and undermines connection to school (Gilman, Meyers, & Perez, 2004; Juvonen, 2007). The
challenge for schools is to identify socially supportive opportunities for all students, avoiding a deficit narrative for those young people who do not welcome all that the school offers. As the two young women in this study have indicated, one student’s opportunity can be another student’s torment.

The voices of those not included are critical to informing a blueprint for creating a school culture which connects with and includes all students. While the voices of most Woodlands students were content, such contentment can exclude others and be commodified by the school and proffered to the community as part of a success narrative, particularly to prospective students and their parents/carers. Roffey (2011) talks about “exclusive belonging” (p. 16) in which certain groups move against others who are deemed not to fit in. Similarly, in an excoriating critique of engagement, Valee (2017) claims that this heavily endorsed educational concept works to exclude certain students and privilege others, most of whom claim membership of the neurotypical, white, middle-class ranks. These points of view deliver a cautionary message to schools committed to creating connecting and inclusive cultures with opportunity rich environments. Accessing opportunities cannot be allowed to create Darwinian-style competitions whereby marginalised young people are further excluded. The challenge for schools therefore is to commit to creating inclusive learning environments as part of their educational mission. Such a commitment removes any risk of complacency in the face of a contented majority, such as was found at Woodlands, and requires organisational arrangements which avoid or minimise ad hoc responses and which prioritise equitable access for all (Callingham, 2017) and embrace the accountability which then follows.

In summary, most students in the current study embraced and appreciated the opportunities provided by the school’s extracurricular program, naming learning,
experiential, and relational benefits. These findings add to a substantial body of research regarding the influence of extracurricular participation on students’ connection to school (Libbey, 2004; McNeely et al., 2002; Thompson, Iachan, Overpeck, Ross, & Gross, 2006; Whitlock, 2006; Yuen et al., 2012) and are consistent with the findings from the literature audit conducted as part of this study.

Given the known benefits of extra- and co-curricular involvement the challenge for schools is to provide a diverse program which provides participation opportunities for all students, mindful that such opportunities are socially supportive and inclusive. Most schools have extra- and co-curricular programs (Guest & McRee, 2009), however availability does not guarantee participation (Cohen et al., 2007). In the face of non-participation, schools can mistakenly blame students, expressing disappointment and even amazement at their lack of appreciation of and gratitude for the institutional largesse. The test for schools in the face of non-participation or low participation rates is to shelve their wounded pride and work with students to build an extra-curricular program that includes and excites all students and operates within a relationally and socially supportive milieu. The task requires careful consideration of what is offered and how it is offered; content and context are important dimensions although context is under considered in research and school planning (Guest & McRee, 2009). The counter voices of the two young women in this study lend support to support this claim. Sports carnivals and camps are standard fare in most schools and the context around young people’s participation in those events is critical to how those occasions are experienced. Enabling the non-athlete, the shy or socially awkward to participate in such events without experiencing embarrassment or isolation requires careful analysis of the context of such occasions. With mandated school events the context becomes even more influential as students have few legitimate options around non-
participation. Given the evidence-base and the voice of the overwhelming majority of students in this study, both attesting to the benefits of extra-curricular involvement, the press for schools to evaluate current program offerings is strong. Variety, student choice, and flexibility are key criteria for structuring the program, while barriers such as cost should be reduced or eliminated. Effective extracurricular programming facilitates “creative student engagement” (Whitlock, 2006, p. 27) and requires imaginative and creative decision-making and planning so that human, physical, and financial resources are used to best effect.

9.6 Summary

The role of schools as providers of opportunities to students is a broad-brush remit that features widely in educational discourse. The Victorian Department of Education and Training promotes itself on its website as “providing high quality learning opportunities for all Victorians” (www.education.vic.gov.au). While the exact nature of those opportunities is not stated, opportunities as described in scholarly discussion include “educational” (Porter, 1991), “social” (Roeser, Eccles, & Sameroff, 2000), and “learning” (Petty & Green, 2007). The talk of opportunities is frequently marked by a sense of moral purpose in which schools are regarded as the means by which young people can access future opportunities or what Bryk (2010) calls “the American dream of opportunity for every child” (p. 30). Similarly, in the local context, the South Australian Department for Education and Child Development states its commitment “to giving every child the opportunity to improve their chances for future success” on its website (www.decd.sa.gov.au).

Despite its widespread use in educational discourse, the term opportunities is semantically promiscuous and serves as a melting pot for diverse and often unstated meanings. Students in this study however were more specific about their understanding of
the term and spoke about an opportunity-rich environment, providing both future and current possibilities, marked by choice, flexibility, and variety and operating over relational, learning, and extracurricular domains. These opportunities acted as a pathway to building interpersonal and institutional relationships which served to strengthen their connection to school.

Relational, learning, and extracurricular opportunities were nested like Babushka dolls with a dynamic interplay across permeable boundaries. Learning and extracurricular opportunities always had a relational dimension with peers and teachers populating these spheres of school life. Peer relationships emerged as the lead relational experience for Woodlands students which challenges the conventional teacher-centric view of the school’s relational hierarchy. Relationships with teachers were nevertheless still central to the school experience, particularly the learning relationship, although the learning relationship is of course an interpersonal relationship. Students expected teachers to safeguard their learning opportunities by providing engaging teaching founded on the qualities of trust and respect, managing the learning environment effectively, and being invested in their own teaching practice. Opportunities for reduced relational distance between teacher and student were appreciated and were often located in the extracurricular and co-curricular domain where a more relaxed relational climate was possible. Participatory pedagogy within the learning domain allowed similar opportunities with some subjects regarded as more facilitative of less rigid relational encounters.

Relationships with the institution of Woodlands were the site of identity building in which students experienced and responded to the parochial boundaries of life in their school, negotiating who they could be in that setting. The contours of Woodlands identity as understood by students were constantly in flux and multiply situated within the
institution, the neighbourhood, and more distally within state and national education systems. Students had a finely tuned understanding of the identity parameters at Woodlands and confidently articulated identikits of student identities located in other schools. These understandings were anchored in an awareness that schools gave life to and denied access to certain identities; the identity possibilities at Woodlands were not replicated in all schools. The relationship between institution and student was far removed however from a Geppetto and Pinocchio relationship. Woodlands students were active participants in the shaping of the Woodlands identity, straining against certain boundaries and shifting others through acts of resistance and protest. Sense of school as a community was another strand in how students experienced their relationship with Woodlands, generating more identity positions as community members with family-like relational ties.

Woodlands students understood their connectedness to school through the experiences of a dynamic and complex crosshatching of opportunities within relational, learning, and extracurricular spheres of school life. Their understanding of SC broadens and deepens current understandings of the concept, confirming and consolidating the importance of student-teacher relationships, extracurricular participation, and commitment to learning, elevating the importance of peer relationships, and establishing the role of institutional relationships and the associated identity work as key elements. Finally, SC emerges from this study as a process with frequent shifts and tilts against and into relational and organisational currents. The term school connectedness does not capture the staccato rhythm of students’ descriptions and connecting to school provides a more satisfactory entry point for understanding the concept.
9.7 Research Question 1 (c) How do Staff Understand Students’ Connectedness to School?

The voice of teachers in SC research is largely absent with an extensive literature search yielding only a small number of studies (Chapman et al., 2013b; Vidourek & King, 2014; Vidourek, King, Bernard, Murnan, & Nabors, 2011; Vidourek, King, Nabors, Bernard, & Murnan, 2012). Among these studies, only Chapman and colleagues (2014) employ a qualitative approach in their exploration of teachers’ perceptions of SC and its influence on student behaviour. This gap is surprising, given the important place teachers occupy in the lives of students; they are well positioned to provide instructive insights into their understanding of SC.

In the current study eleven focus group interviews were conducted with 77 teachers regarding how they recognised SC in students. Analysis of the discussions yielded five themes: (1) likes being at school; (2) positive relationships with teachers and staff; (3) belongs to a peer/friendship group; (4) engagement in learning; and (5) involvement in extracurricular activities. Participation was engaged and considered across all groups with frequent appreciative comments from staff about their inclusion.

9.7.1 Theme 1: Likes Being at School

There was widespread agreement across all staff focus groups that a key indicator of SC was student enjoyment in being at school. Words and phrases such as happy and feels comfortable were used to describe this characteristic and discussions attested to the ease with which staff could recognise the uncomplicated nature of a student’s pleasure in being at school. Staff described students’ joy in coming to school and enthusiasm in being at school, which were evident in their eagerness to be part of school life. Liking school, defined as a student’s favourable attitude to school (Eggum-Wilkens, Valiente, Swanson, &
Lemery-Chalfant, 2014; Ladd, Buhs, & Seid, 2000) was regarded by focus group participants as an enabling factor which served as a point of departure for various other behaviours such as extracurricular participation and confidence in negotiating social relationships with students and staff. This view has some points of overlap with research into students’ attitude to school, which although widely acknowledged as a complex concept (Seker, 2011; Stern, 2012) has found that a positive attitude towards school is associated with a range of desirable outcomes (Cheng & Chan, 2003). Of relevance in this discussion is that most measures of attitudes to school include items related to enjoyment of school or liking school (Holfve-Sabel & Gustafsson, 2005).

Liking school is also frequently included in measures of SC. The results of the literature audit conducted as part of this study revealed that this variable was the second most frequently included component of the 144 SC measures analysed. Libbey (2004) made a similar finding in her study of measures of students’ relationship to school and included likes school as one of the nine constructs consistently used across multiple measures.

The clearest behavioural indicator of liking school identified by staff was attendance and there was broad agreement that missing school was a sign that a student’s connection to school was under stress. Liking school was regarded by staff as the bedrock of connectedness to school and absenteeism was a sign that fault lines were appearing in this foundation. This view accords with substantial research indicating absenteeism is frequently a marker of disengagement and disconnection from school life (Archambault, Janosz, Morizot, et al., 2009; Attwood & Croll, 2006; Balfanz, 2016; Bonny et al., 2000; Ekstrand, 2015; Şahin, Zeynup, & Kılıç, 2016).
9.7.2 Theme 2: Positive Relationships with Teachers and Staff

Supportive relationships with teachers and school staff were identified across all focus groups as a key indicator of a young person’s connection to school. This view accords with a substantial body of research which consistently foregrounds the student-teacher relationship as pivotal in a young person’s academic and relational experiences of school (Kortering & Braziel, 1999; Lynch & Cicchetti, 1997; McHugh et al., 2013; Murray & Greenberg, 2001; Tillery, Varjas, Roach, Kuperminc, & Meyers, 2013; Wentzel, 2002). While recognising the value for students of multiple positive relationships with teachers, the staff in this study also reflected on students who may otherwise be relationally isolated in the school setting, yet have a strong connection to a single teacher, often established through an area of deep academic or extra-curricular interest such as sport or creative arts.

This single positive relationship was considered sufficient to often hold more vulnerable young people in school and is consistent with research that has identified such relationships as of particular importance for more marginalised young people including those with disabilities (Granot, 2016; Murray & Pianta, 2007), those from ethnic minorities (Brewster & Bowen, 2004; Decker, Dona, & Christenson, 2007; Ford & Harris, 1996; Woolley et al., 2009) and those at risk of dropping out (Davis & Dupper, 2004; Knesting & Waldron, 2006; Kramer Schlosser, 1992). Teacher-student relationships are a core component of both definitions and measures of SC and scholarly opinion continues to find these relationships highly influential in shaping a young person’s connection to school (Graham, Powell, & Truscott, 2016; Johnson, 2008; Roffey, 2012; Theron & Engelbrecht, 2012; Whitlock, 2006).

As teachers in the current study reflected on their relationships with students, it became evident that most derived satisfaction from this aspect of their work, despite the
sometimes stressful and challenging nature of this relational labour. This view of teaching as emotional labour and a source of both positive and negative emotional experiences has been widely recognised (Day & Hong, 2016; Isenbarger & Zembylas, 2006). Teachers at Woodlands viewed building a young person’s connectedness to school as value-adding, over and above the satisfaction they derived from their personal relationships with students. The relational rewards of teaching are an important source of job satisfaction for many teachers, meeting a fundamental need for relatedness and interpersonal bonding (Spilt, Koomen, & Thijs, 2011) and for many of the staff in this study this aspect of their work was highly valued.

9.7.3 Theme 3: Belonging to a Peer/Friendship Group

Peer relationships are among the most frequently named components of both SC definitions and measures as discussed in the literature audit within this study and focus group participants placed a similar heavy emphasis on peer group belonging as a key indicator of a young person’s connectedness to school. They did however also recognise that peer relationships and friendships could occasion rejection and distress. This understanding of peer relationships as capable of providing both interpersonal connection and disconnection accords with research which recognises the influence of these social relationships on young people’s wellbeing (Agoston & Rudolph, 2016; Goswami, 2012; Graham, Powell, & Truscott, 2016; Osterman, 2003) and relationship to school (Gristy, 2012; Hamm & Faircloth, 2005; Kiefer, Alley, & Ellerbrock, 2015; Lessard et al., 2008).

Staff recognised the corrosive impact of peer conflict and relational isolation on students’ enjoyment of school, also acknowledging that some students may find themselves outside the embrace of any peer group for reasons not necessarily linked to conflict. Whatever the cause, staff regarded fragile or dismantled peer connections as heightening
students’ vulnerability to a weakening of their relationship to school. The loneliness that may accompany an impoverished peer or friendship network can place young people at risk of adverse mental health outcomes (Corsano, Majorano, & Champretavy, 2006; Houghton, Hattie, Carroll, Wood, & Baffour, 2016; Spithoven et al., 2017) and reduced enjoyment of school (Rönkä, Sunnari, Rautio, Koiranen, & Taanila, 2017) which in turn can attenuate the connection to school. Regarded in this way, peer relationships are a source of social capital (Jørgensen, 2016) and a significant influence on young people’s wellbeing (Hall-Lande, Eisenberg, Christenson, & Neumark-Sztainer, 2007).

Woodlands staff considered the volatility of many peer relationships as posing a threat for students whose primary connection to school was through their peers. In the absence of strong links to other aspects of school life, these students were regarded as highly vulnerable to losing connection to school during times of peer conflict. While staff in this study saw peer isolation or low peer social capital as posing a threat to school connection, the converse can also be true, with Moses and Villodas (2017) finding that for young people who had experienced adverse childhoods, high quality peer relationships were protective against the effects of their earlier trauma and promotive of school engagement.

The views of Woodlands staff regarding the place of peer relationships in a young person’s relationship to school are echoed in a remark from a teacher in the study by Kiefer et al. (2015). The teacher observes when commenting on the influence of peer relationships that it is ‘“Connection, connection! They make friends and they build relationships, and that’s what brings them to school.”’ (p. 12).
9.7.4 Theme 4: Engagement in Learning

Focus group participants recognised young people’s engagement in learning as an indicator of SC. They described behavioural (handing in work), cognitive (focus on their work) and emotional (love of learning) dimensions of engagement in learning which match the scholarly understanding of the construct (Fredricks et al., 2004). They also described a general orientation to learning and valuing of learning which share similarities with concepts such as identification with school (Voelkl, 1997) and commitment to school (Jenkins, 1997). Academic engagement was one of the nine constructs that Libbey (2004) identified as a component of SC based on her analysis of measures of a young person’s relationship to school. The literature audit conducted within this study reached a similar conclusion with academic engagement a favoured component of the SC definitions and measures analysed.

Woodlands staff regarded engagement in learning as tied to certain subjects for some students. Sport and the performing and creative arts were mentioned across groups as areas in which this subject-specific engagement was more frequently observed. Intrinsic interest has been named as part of engagement in learning (Akey, 2006; Poskitt, 2011) and Newmann (1981) identified the provision of meaningful work for students as one of six strategies to overcome young people’s alienation from school. It is likely both intrinsic interest and meaningful work intersect in subjects in which students have a heightened commitment and curiosity. The outcome for students in subjects and classrooms where their interest and the provision of meaningful work converge may result in intellectual engagement (Willms et al., 2009) and combat the corrosive effects of boredom on young people’s connection to school (Certo et al., 2003; Ekstrand, 2015; Larson & Richards, 1991; Macdonald & Marsh, 2004).
Staff in the current study also described the connection to school for some students as both subject and teacher-specific. This combination of a strong relational bond and focused interest in a subject was regarded as sufficient to hold some students within the orbit of school and was considered a particularly potent mix for young people who otherwise had limited and fragile links to school. These views find support in a recent study (Niehaus et al., 2016) examining SC and valuing of school as predictors of school attendance and completion among Latino young people, a group at-risk of early school leaving (Delgado, Ettekal, Simpkins, & Schaefer, 2016). The research found that when Latino students experienced heightened interest and value in their learning and perceived closer student-teacher relationships, their academic engagement within the classroom was enhanced with a resultant impact on attendance and school completion. In studying Physical Education classes, Ntoumanis and Blaymires (2002) also found that student interest and motivation could be highly subject-specific.

Woodlands staff singled out sport and subjects within the performing and creative arts domain as more frequently engaging young people with tenuous connections to school. Some participants attributed the different teaching styles in these disciplines as contributing to a changed relational climate in these subject spaces which in turn facilitated and nurtured positive student-teacher relationships. These staff perceptions match research linking an active participatory pedagogy to increased student engagement and enhanced relational connections in the creative arts (Burnard & Dragovic, 2015; Stokes, 2003) and sport and outdoor education (Kamau, Rintaugu, Mumiu, & Amusa, 2015; Robinson, 2013; Wachob, 2017) with particular benefits for marginalised young people (Elliott & Dingwall, 2017; Hanrahan & Banerjee, 2017; Haudenhuyse, Theeboom, & Skille, 2014; Thompson & Tawell, 2017).
Teachers partly attributed the reduced relational distance within these subjects to subtle shifts in the teacher and student roles whereby the expert-novice relationship was often reversed or replaced by novice-novice or expert-expert positions. This view is echoed in a study on outdoor learning (Scott, Boyd, & Colquhoun, 2013) which found that in such settings a blurring of the teacher/student roles occurred with teachers commenting on the relational benefits of a loosening of the expert teacher role.

9.7.5 Theme 5: Involvement in Extracurricular Activities

Student involvement in the extracurricular life of the school was identified in all focus groups as a marker of SC and is a consistent component of SC definitions and measures as revealed in the literature audit conducted as part of this study. Like students in the current study, teachers appreciated the broad suite of extracurricular offerings, seeing it as enabling all students to find an activity to match or extend their interest and accruing various benefits in terms of peer and staff connection and school enjoyment. This view of extracurricular participation as providing benefits for young people’s positive development has been endorsed in numerous studies (Eccles et al., 2003; Holland & Andre, 1987; Im, Hughes, Cao, & Kwok, 2016; Larson, 2000; Mahoney et al., 2003; Marsh, 1991; McGee et al., 2006). In her mixed methods study, Whitlock (2006) found “creative engagement outside the classroom through extracurricular activities” (p. 27) influenced SC. Furthermore, a recent study on extracurricular participation in sports, arts and clubs found that involvement in each activity was associated with increases in SC (Martinez et al., 2016).

Interestingly this study also found that while students involved in arts activities reported higher levels of SC than non-participants, arts participation weakened the positive effects of sports participation. Martinez and colleagues (2016b) speculate that students participating in arts activities are more likely to receive negative attention from peers which
undermines any connectedness boost gained through participation in sports. This view was not supported among staff in the current study who emphasised the capacity of participation in performing arts to facilitate a pathway from disconnection to connection for some students. While anecdotal in nature, teachers recounted stories of students gaining confidence and peer and teacher acclaim through roles in the Woodlands musical production. These teacher perceptions are supported in studies which have found gains for young people in self-esteem, empowerment, relational connection and sense of identity through arts-based performances (Burnard & Dragovic, 2015; Elliott & Dingwall, 2017; Hanrahan & Banerjee, 2017; Stokes, 2003). The education policy context in Victoria in which this study took place has also embraced a view of performing arts as promotive of positive student outcomes. In its Education State policy initiatives relating to learning for life, DET includes excellence in the arts as a target and champions student participation in a state-wide musical showcase, which is enthusiastically endorsed as promoting “student engagement and educational outcomes by boosting motivation and student attendance, building confidence and self-esteem, leadership skills, cooperation, collaboration, forging friendships and a sense of belonging” (Department of Education and Training, 2017, p. 2).

9.7.6 Summary

Woodlands staff identified five indicators of SC which they could readily recognise in students. Enjoyment of school was the base from which relational closeness with peers and teachers, engagement in learning and extracurricular participation were added. SC emerged from discussions as fluctuating in response to relational changes, particularly within peer and friendship groups, and learning opportunities in areas of interest. Certain subjects such as sports and the performing arts were identified as spaces in which many young people found connection to the subject and/or the teacher and for marginalised students this
experience could be the sole point of connectedness in an otherwise alienating school experience. Participatory pedagogy and changed relational climates in these subject classrooms contributed to the connectedness enhancing processes that teachers identified.

Worth noting are some points of similarity and difference between how teachers in this study recognised SC and how participants in a study by Chapman et al. (2013b) understood SC. The latter study is one of few seeking teacher perspectives regarding SC. Interviews were conducted with 14 teachers and four themes emerged which framed their understanding of SC. Three of the four themes, feeling valued and teacher support, feelings of belonging and successful engagement in school and school activities, overlap with the perspectives of Woodlands teachers. A fourth theme, fairness and discipline, was an area of difference. A further point of difference relates to belonging to a peer/friendship group which was named by Woodlands teachers but was not identified in the Chapman et al. (2014) study. Overall the teacher perceptions of SC align closely in these two studies but with two key areas of difference, underscoring the importance of consulting teachers in future SC research to further explore their understanding of the construct.

9.8 Research Question 2: What Factors are Associated with Students’ Connectedness to School?

This research question was addressed through analysis of data obtained from a student questionnaire. Five hypotheses were also tested through analysis of the questionnaire data. A total of 206 students completed the questionnaire with ages ranging from 12 to 18 years. Sex was not associated with SC. As indicated in Table 27, there were no significant differences in students’ self-rated connectedness scores with the mean score for males being 5.51 and for females 5.60 (p = .282). This finding is consistent with some studies (Langille, Asbridge, Kisely, & Rasic, 2012; Langille et al., 2014) and inconsistent with
other studies which have found positive associations between male sex and SC (Bonny et al., 2000; McNeely et al., 2002) and female sex and SC (Bolland et al., 2016; Chung-Do, Goebert, Hamagani, Chang, & Hishinuma, 2015; Loukas et al., 2016; Tomek, Boland, Hooper, Hitchcock, & Bolland, 2017). Older students had higher mean SC scores than younger students and this finding differs from much previous research which has found that SC dips as students reach the senior years of their schooling (McNeely et al., 2002; Monahan, Oesterle, & Hawkins, 2010; Thompson et al., 2006). Whitlock (2003) makes the association clear in her unequivocal statement that “the relationship between age and school connectedness is quite consistent and persistent: the older youth are, the less connected they feel to school” (p. 1). There is unlikely to be a single explanation as to why older Woodlands students had higher levels of SC. Longevity may have consolidated and strengthened relational bonds; students may have developed coping skills to navigate the middle school slump in SC which then facilitated renewed connection in the senior years; Woodlands may have provided a good stage-environment fit for its senior students (Eccles et al., 1993; Eccles & Roeser, 2006). A definitive explanation is impossible to determine, however given the weight of previous research that counters this finding, it is noteworthy.

Other associations were more consistently supported in the literature. Skipping school (Ekstrand, 2015; McNeely et al., 2002; Strand, 2014), receiving sanctions such as detentions and suspensions (Anyon, Zhang, & Hazel, 2016; Butler et al., 2005; Costenbader & Markson, 1998; Hemphill & Hargreaves, 2009), relational distance from teachers (Chung-Do et al., 2013; Marcus & Sanders-Reio, 2001; Morse et al., 2004; Tillery et al., 2013; Zullig et al., 2011), and lack of perceived sources of adult support (McHugh et al., 2013; Murray & Greenberg, 2001; Osterman, 2000; Ozer et al., 2008; Whitlock, 2006) have been found to
negatively impact a young person’s relationship with school and in the current study all these factors were associated with lower SC.

In relation to adult support it is worth noting that in the current study this variable was determined by a question regarding whether students could comfortably approach a staff member when upset. Another question related to the availability of teachers for help with school work and there was no association between student perceptions of teacher availability for assistance with school work and SC. There is of course a difference between perceiving that teachers are available to help and accessing that help, although there are likely to be relational contours that are different between seeking support when distressed and academic help-seeking behaviour. Martin and Dowson (2009) refer to connective instruction consisting of three levels of connectiveness, including interpersonal connectiveness and Beutel (2009) names pedagogic connectedness as the connection between students and teachers which influences student learning. Both concepts foreground the teacher-student relationship within the learning context, however the influence this relationship has on relationships outside the classroom in the social and recreational school spaces and vice-versa would benefit from further enquiry. Another finding in the current study identified an association between SC and whether a student had come to know a teacher well enough to feel comfortable talking to them. Again, students with low connectedness emerged as more relationally distant from teachers although support from peers was a more universal experience which accords with a convincing body of research on the central place of peer relationships in young people’s lives (Graham, Powell, & Truscott, 2016; Gristy, 2012; Osterman, 2003; Tew, 2010). Concerns linger however for young people whose relational web has only shallow adult connections given their protective influence, particularly for more vulnerable youth (Croninger & Lee, 2001;
Tillery et al., 2013). The challenge for schools is in enabling a relational climate that encourages both peer and adult connections to flourish.

Academic engagement as captured in this study’s questionnaire through items about the number of subjects students were passing and enjoying revealed a positive association with SC, which has also been found in other studies (Beatty & Brew, 2005; Eisenberg, Neumark-Sztainer, & Perry, 2003; McNeely et al., 2002; Thompson et al., 2006). The current study also found an association between SC and student perceptions of whether teachers cared if they liked or passed their (students) subjects. A search for studies that capture this association located no results, although the association is clearly situated within the domain of student-teacher relationships and appears to tap into student perceptions of teacher support and availability. Students who do not perceive teacher interest in their learning may experience a relational distance from the teacher which has a motivational push-back on their academic engagement. As Hattie’s meta-analysis found, a positive teacher-student relationship can establish the platform from which student learning can flourish (Hattie, 2009). Studies have also found that students equate good teaching with teacher enthusiasm for and interest in their subject area (Keller, Goetz, Becker, Morger, & Hensley, 2014; Raufelder et al., 2016), an opinion that Woodlands students also expressed in their profiling of good teachers.

Correlations were also found between health and SC and student voice and SC. Woodlands students with poorer self-rated health status had lower SC and this finding is consistent with previous studies (Ashley, Ennis, & Owusu-Ansah, 2012; Bonny et al., 2000), although these two studies and the Woodlands study do not separate health into physical or psychological domains. Researchers have shown a growing interest in the interplay between SC and mental health (Joyce & Early, 2014; Millings et al., 2012; Pate, Maras,
and the protective influence of SC against risk-taking behaviour, potentially resulting in compromised health, is well established, dating back to Resnick’s ground breaking study (Resnick et al., 1997). In the current study cigarette smoking, a health-compromising behaviour, was associated with lower SC and other studies have made similar findings (Bonny et al., 2000; Rasmussen et al., 2005). In addition Azagba and Ashbridge (2013) found SC protective against smoking susceptibility amongst a large sample of young people who had never smoked. The path leading away from health is complex and the interplay between young people’s health and school-based factors, including SC, is multi-factorial (Shochet & Smith, 2014). For this reason, the inclusion of more nuanced questions regarding health status in future SC research would enable clearer insights into its association with health outcomes, which in turn could shape more informed and targeted responses.

Linked to health, the seminal study by Bonny and colleagues (2000) on student disconnectedness also found an association between increased visits to the school nurse and SC, which differs from the current study in which 95.1% of the sample had visited the school nurse. Certainly, school nurses play a key role in identifying young people who may be detaching from school (Bohnenkamp & Stephan, 2015) and can provide a trusted source for young people to seek support around physical and mental health concerns (Davis-Alldritt, 2012; Spratt, Philip, Shucksmith, Kiger, & Gair, 2010). The high level of usage of the nursing service at Woodlands is noteworthy and indicates the widespread student acceptance and recognition of the team within the school. From a practitioner point of view, the researcher worked closely with the nursing team in her school social worker role and found that the nurses were often aware of young people who were losing connection to
school before teachers or other support staff. In this sense, the nurses had a “canary in the mine” role, providing an early alert to students who were experiencing significant challenges in their lives (Pavletic, 2011). Although not consistent with Bonny’s study (Bonny et al., 2000) which found both health status and frequent nurse visits associated with SC, the Woodlands experience may indicate that in schools where a nursing service is well-established, highly visible and accessible to students, and integrated into other support services in the school, use of that service is likely to be normalised among students so that usage rates are high among all students, not just those with lower connectedness to school.

The role of the school nurse in influencing SC would merit further research.

Student voice was identified as a significant predictor of SC in the current study and was derived from participant responses to a question concerning their perception of how seriously the school regards student opinion and who they might talk to if they had a strong opinion about a school matter. While acknowledging that the term “student voice” has many different understandings and definitional complexities which have been thoughtfully addressed by Cook-Sather (2006, 2014), the items used in this study nevertheless capture an important association between SC and the perception that students’ opinions are valued in school life. Whitlock (2006) made a similar finding and Papageorge (2008) champions the impact of a Student Representative Council on SC. Other research has also identified the positive influence of opportunities for student voice (in its various definitional guises) on students’ experience of school life (Dureau, 2016; Mager & Nowak, 2012; Mitra, 2004) and their overall wellbeing (Anderson & Graham, 2016).

In total this study identified four significant predictors of SC: involvement in extracurricular activities, student voice, academic engagement and cigarette use. These findings should be treated with some caution as the data was drawn from a combination of
questionnaire items that have not been validated in other studies. Nevertheless, the findings are noteworthy as each of these factors has been reported in numerous previous studies as either predicting or associated with SC. They therefore continue to present as important areas for attention in efforts to enhance young people’s connectedness to school.

9.9 Hypotheses

Five hypotheses were tested in this study. Two related to the impact of strong relational connections on SC either through having family members (parents or siblings) who had attended or were attending (siblings) Woodlands and transitioning to secondary school with peers from primary school. Neither hypothesis was supported. Given the anxiety about loss of friends and disruption of peer groups that can characterise transition from primary to secondary school for some students (Coffey, 2013; Topping, 2011; Zeedyk et al., 2003) the lack of any association between SC and number of primary peers transitioning together is surprising. Some research (Rice, 1997) has also indicated the positive influence that having older siblings at the school can have on transition experiences, however this study found no association between this factor and SC.

A hypothesis concerning the amount of information students had about Woodlands before starting at the college was supported with more prior knowledge positively associated with SC. This finding is not replicated in any SC research identified during this study, however many transition programs include induction activities aimed at familiarising the incoming students with the new school context and providing as much information as possible about the new environment (Anderson, Jacobs, Schramm, & Splittgerber, 2000; Flitcroft & Kelly, 2016; Mackenzie et al., 2012). The rationale behind these programs is that successful transition is facilitated by preparing students, and young people themselves have identified that they want to spend more time in their new school and meet students and
teachers prior to their transition (Ashton, 2008). This study’s finding supports the attention that many schools now place on the primary-secondary transition in the educational experience.

The hypothesis that a young person’s involvement in the decision to attend Woodlands would influence SC was also supported, with students who shared this decision with their parents having higher SC. This association has not been identified in any previous SC research and raises interesting questions about how such decisions are made. Much of the research into school choice is from the parental perspective (Reay & Lucey, 2000) with the student point of view disconcertingly absent despite young people being the most active stakeholders in the choice. One study (Coldron & Boulton, 1991) discerned the students’ views on school choice through parent questionnaires, finding that the parents’ selection of school in almost 90 percent of the sample of 220 families, accorded with their children’s school choice. There is no way of knowing however the degree to which the young people’s preferences were influenced by their parents’ preferences. In the dynamic of family discussion, it is possible that parental preferences had already set in place the preferred option, including and excluding a broader set of possibilities that their children may have held in view. The finding in the current study may indicate that collaborative decision-making around school choice signifies active parental interest and involvement in their child’s education which is known to influence the young person’s relationship to school (McIntosh & Houghton, 2005), providing a form of social capital (McNeal, 1999). Thompson et al. (2006) found greater parental involvement at school was associated with higher SC. Joint decision making may also result in increased investment in the decision and satisfy some of the young person’s increasing desire for autonomy and loosening of parental regulation over their lives (Pérez, Cumsille, & Martínez, 2016). Whatever the pathway from
involvement in selecting a school to SC, the finding raises important questions for schools
and parents regarding inclusion of young people in this key decision.

A third hypothesis regarding distance of residence from school and SC was also
supported in this study. Students who lived within 10 kms of the school had higher mean
connectedness scores than students living beyond a 10-km radius of the school. Proximity
of home to school is known to influence school choice for some families (Altenhofen,
Berends, & White, 2016; Goldring & Phillips, 2008). In Victoria where this study was
conducted a number of high performing government schools have geographic zones within
which students must reside in order to attend the school, which regularly prompts
overexcited newspaper headlines about the impact on property prices as families seek to
move within these zones (Landy, 2016). Conversely some students travel long distances,
passing other schools, to attend a particular school. In the educational marketplace, many
schools now energetically court enrolments with little or no consideration of the proximity
of the students’ home to school and parental choice can be influenced by perceptions of
school image and prestige rather than convenience (Goldring & Phillips, 2008; Tatar, 1995).

The elevated SC shown by students living within 10 kms of Woodlands College is an
interesting finding that requires further research. Many students travel long distances to
attend school and it would be misleading to suggest that their connectedness is imperilled
as a consequence. It is possible that closer residence to school facilitates participation in
extracurricular activities, which is known to influence SC (Brown & Evans, 2005; Whitlock,
2006). There may also be relational opportunities through increased contact with other
students also residing in the area. Some of this contact, gained through accessing school
facilities out of school hours such as basketball courts and sports ovals, may be incidental
and not necessarily restricted to peer or friendship groups. Living close to school is also
likely to increase familiarity with various aspects of the school environment and operations and increased awareness has been shown in this study to be associated with increased SC. Further research is needed to better understand how close residence to school influences SC.

9.10 Summary

This chapter has considered the study’s findings within the context of previous research, addressing the research questions relating to how SC is understood within the literature and among young people and school staff and the factors associated with SC. Some of the findings are consistent with previous research including the associations between SC and extracurricular participation, academic engagement, student voice, health status and cigarette use. Some new findings have also emerged with three hypothesised associations with SC supported; joint decision making with parents about school selection, proximity of residence to school, and prior knowledge of the school were all associated with SC. The understandings of SC gained through a literature audit and student and staff views have facilitated fresh perspectives on SC as transactional, co-constructed and ecological in nature. The final chapter will address the strengths and limitations of the study and consider the study’s implications for school practice and policy and further research.
Chapter 10: Conclusion

The origins of this study are located in the researcher’s practice experiences as a school social worker in a secondary school in outer metropolitan Melbourne. The practitioner became aware of SC in the early years of its conceptual development; that serendipitous encounter resulted in the current study. This research has been guided by a single (and single-minded) purpose – to reach deeply into the construct of SC, below its confusing definitional surface, in the pursuit of the meanings of this concept which has become increasingly influential in both education and health studies. To achieve this purpose, two research questions were formulated: the first relates to the understandings of SC within scholarly research and among young people and school staff; and the second research question concerns the factors associated with SC. To address these questions this study adopted a qualitatively-driven, mixed methods approach which generated data from student and school staff focus groups, student diaries and a researcher-developed student questionnaire. This chapter will summarise the key findings of the study, address the study’s limitations and strengths, consider practice implications, and suggest further research directions.

10.1 Key Findings

10.1.1 Meanings of SC

Searching for the meanings of SC as contained in scholarly research revealed a construct which continues to be characterised by definitional ambiguity and lack of clarity. Both of these features, emphasised in Heather Libbey’s opening words in her landmark article on definitions and measures of students’ relationship to school (Libbey, 2004), have continued to shadow many subsequent discussions of SC. Nevertheless, the literature audit
conducted as part of this study provided rewarding insights into the most frequently included components of SC definitions and measures, thereby affording a way to achieve improved clarity regarding areas of scholarly emphasis in understandings of the construct.

A close analysis of 270 documents in the researcher’s citation manager revealed a consistency in how SC is understood, a consistency belied in the scholarly discourse (Pate et al., 2017). This analysis yielded a view of SC as multi-dimensional, consisting of affective, behavioural, and cognitive components. These components are multi-directional, locating the individual in dynamic relational exchanges with others and influencing the individual student’s and other students’ connectedness to school. SC emerges as co-constructed and transactional, a product of the ecologies within which the individual is located, both at the school and societal levels. This view dismantles any understanding of SC as an individual attribute with its associated blame discourse. Given the well-established benefits of SC for young people’s educational and health outcomes, it situates the concept firmly within the purview of school influence and core school business (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2009b; Chapman et al., 2011; Langille, Rasic, Kisely, Flowerdew, & Cobbett, 2012).

The understandings of SC gained further texture through consulting with young people and school staff via focus groups, student diaries and a student questionnaire. Thematic analysis of data gathered from student sources located SC within the relational (peers and teachers), learning, and extracurricular domains of the school, with substantial overlap across the three areas. Woodlands students understood school as offering (or denying) opportunities within each of the domains, overwhelmingly viewing their connection to school through the lens of these relational, learning and extracurricular experiences.
The lead relational experience for students in this study was the peer relationship. Although relationships with teachers were important, they did not have the intensity, the endurance, or the influence of peer relationships. This differs from much previous research which has focused heavily on the teacher-student relationship and its influence on a student’s experience of school. In the present study, the student-teacher relationship emerged as more transitory and less influential than students’ relationships with peers which were repeatedly characterised as central to life at school.

Teachers were nevertheless important figures in young people’s experiences of school, having the capacity to enhance or diminish the connection to school, although students were not passive recipients of teachers’ relational approaches. Young people in the current study exercised considerable agency in their relationships with teachers; at times they initiated, resisted and even terminated teacher connections. The volatility and fluctuations that characterise most relationships were evident, providing a salutary reminder that teaching young people’s relationships with teachers of all movement and intensity produces an incomplete picture of this influential relational experience in students’ school lives. Students valued respect, trust and humour in their relationships with teachers, but most highly prized was fairness in how they were treated, with differential treatment based on gender and a student’s history of misdemeanours generating heightened and often simmering resentments among students, while inflicting damage on their connection to school.

Institutional relationships were another source of students’ connection to school, influencing students’ identity and sense of community. The surprising findings regarding identity formation related to students’ dual sense of Woodlands as located within an educational system, and Woodlands as a stand-alone entity - or the ‘a’ school and ‘my’
school dimensions. Sense of community was deeply felt, pivoting on notions of care and support experienced within the social bonds within the school.

Learning opportunities encompassed access to a high quality education, capable teachers, and engaging teaching. Students valued the broad curricular choices, the physical amenity of Woodlands, and the resources available to them in the pursuit of their education. Students also understood the capacity of teachers to shape their learning, valuing teachers who were available and interested in assisting students with their learning, and those who were competent and capable educators. Notions of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ teachers surfaced readily, with good teachers possessing effective classroom management skills and demonstrating care and support towards students, while bad teachers lacked passion for their work and showed rating inflexibility and limited understanding and care in their encounters with students. Students drew particular attention to certain classes such as music, drama and physical education as frequently creating more engaging and active learning experiences through the use of participatory pedagogy, which in turn shaped a different relational classroom climate.

Extracurricular opportunities, emphasised in all student data sets, intersected with relational or learning opportunities, frequently encompassing both. Broad choice of activities was valued in that the range of offerings appeared to maximise the likelihood that all students could find an extracurricular option to match their interests. Extracurricular opportunities covered sporting activities, creative and performing arts classes and productions, school camps, and established events in the school calendar. The changed social climate that extracurricular activities facilitated was a source of particular enjoyment among students, affording opportunities for different student-student and student-teacher interactions which often resulted in reduced relational distance between individuals.
Staff understandings of SC were gained through focus groups, with thematic analysis of these discussions yielding five themes. Teachers understood enjoyment of school, positive relationships with staff, belonging to a peer group, engagement in learning, and involvement in extracurricular activities as markers of SC in students. They regarded their role as pivotal in establishing and nurturing their students’ relationship to school such that positive relationships with students became a source of job satisfaction for many of the staff in the study.

Quantitative analysis was conducted on data obtained from a researcher-designed questionnaire aimed at identifying factors associated with SC. Associations were found between SC and previously identified factors, including missing school, limited adult support within the school setting, academic engagement, school voice, and extracurricular participation. Associations between cigarette use and poor health status were also found. Some new findings emerged. Three hypothesised associations between SC were supported: collaborative decision making with parents about selection of school, prior knowledge of the school, and proximity of residence to the school.

10.2 Strengths and Limitations

The qualitatively driven, mixed methods approach adopted by this study contains inherent strengths and limitations. In keeping with qualitative enquiries, the study makes no claims about generalising its findings, although this methodological reluctance is undergoing revision among some qualitative researchers who urge more audacious approaches in the interests of influencing social change (Groleau, Zelkowitz, & Cabral, 2009). Questions of validity also surround qualitative enquiry and can intimidate researchers who may feel pushed into an apologetic stance regarding their findings, although work also continues on this methodological front (Dellinger & Leech, 2007).
Polkinghorne’s understanding of validity in narrative research resonates with this study’s author when he states that “what makes for a valid knowledge claim is dependent on the kind of claim that is made” (Polkinghorne, 2007, p. 476). The implicit advice to avoid both over-claiming and excessive timidity regarding findings has been instructive in this study.

There are limitations to the study. Students and staff were drawn from a single school and are therefore not representative of all students or staff or the multiple school sectors in Victoria and elsewhere. The purposive sampling strategy may have excluded some participants whose experiences of connectedness differed from those who participated in the study. The voluntary nature of teacher participation in focus groups also means that not all teacher perspectives are captured. The questionnaire used in the study was researcher-developed and has not been validated, although it drew on validated measures of SC. A further limitation is the cross-sectional nature of the study, not allowing any conclusions about causality to be determined (Cornell & Huang, 2016). Additionally, the self-reported data from the questionnaire and the student diary entries cannot be independently verified, although this statement suggests that a single truth existed which may have eluded the researcher due to participant inaccuracy or deception, a position this researcher questions.

The strength of the study lies in its qualitative contribution to SC research which to date has preferred the empirical domain with student surveys the default data source of most studies (Chapman, Buckley, Sheehan, & Shochet, 2013a). Bringing student and staff voices into the research has allowed new understandings of SC to emerge, building upon the quantitative data gathered in the study. Focus groups provided insights into the meanings participants brought to their experiences of school, while the group interactions also shaped new understandings as discussion occurred (Kitzinger, 1994). Student diaries provided an
intimate and unvarnished view of young people’s experiences of school life (Harvey, 2011). Finally, a key strength has been the practitioner-researcher positioning of the study’s author. This positioning has yielded deep reserves of ownership, accountability and reflexivity that have underpinned the research from its inception (Shaw & Lunt, 2012) and given the study an embedded personal commitment, but also a view to the wider meaning of the study and how the findings may have applicability beyond the confines of this research.

10.3 Practice Implications

The first (and enduring) motivation for this study emerged from this practitioner’s curiosity about SC and how this promising new construct could inform approaches to strengthening young people’s relationship to school. Discerning the practice implications emerging from the study therefore closes the loop on this research project, linking back to the researcher-practitioner’s early curiosity about how better understanding SC could translate into her own work practices and school operations more generally. With the researcher keen to avoid presenting a wearily familiar set of implications, the core recommendations relate to the new understandings of SC identified in the study.

SC emerges from this research as a process rather than a state, fluctuating across time within the relational, experiential, and physical spaces of school life. It is a socio-ecological concept, transacted in the school setting, but influenced by factors within and beyond that physical space. Reconceptualising SC as connecting (and disconnecting) to school requires school responses that are both planned and spontaneous. Students are constantly building and dismantling their own and others’ connection to school as they negotiate their educational pathways. These changes can be minor and transient, or catastrophic, such as when a young person drops out of school.
The key challenge for schools is to become places of opportunity for every young person. This requires a commitment to delivering on the rhetoric or discourse of choice, increasingly favoured by schools in the competitive education marketplace (Yoon, 2016). As Woodlands students so evocatively described, they understood their connectedness to school through a dynamic and complex inter-weaving of opportunities within the relational, educational, and extracurricular life of the school. Opportunities were rarely one-dimensional; an activity such as an excursion to the local park could offer opportunities in each domain. This understanding of SC asks much of schools. Opportunity settings across each domain must be flexible, inclusive, responsive and engaging. Students must be co-collaborators with school staff in this work, positioned as key players in any school improvement agenda (Fletcher, Fitzgerald-Yau, Wiggins, Viner, & Bonell, 2015; Simmons, Graham, & Thomas, 2015), and contributing to the imagining and design of an opportunity-rich school environment.

The school’s relational climate emerged as the engine room of SC, with peer relationships the lead connection. For most Woodlands students, even those with fragile links to school, their peer relationships were a source of enjoyment and support, making school a place they wanted to be. This finding reinforces the important work schools do to provide safe, physical and psychological environments in which positive relationships can flourish (Bradshaw et al., 2014; Graham, Powell, & Truscott, 2016). Relationships however are volatile, and most schools have safe school or anti-bullying policies requiring responses to the ruptures in peer and friendship groups which can inflict distress and undermine connection to school (Rönkä et al., 2017). The relational fluctuations however that can cause young people’s connecting to school to flat line or diminish can be subtle and pernicious in nature, often requiring relationally attuned responses from school staff long
before any policy infraction is evident. Creating a school environment in which relationships flourish, wither and are repaired is not only a matter of policy, but requires caring and relationally attentive school practices among all members of the community. Promoting an enabling relational climate in schools has benefits beyond the young person’s school life, with adolescent social connectedness a strong predictor of adult wellbeing (Olsson, McGee, Nada-Raja, & Williams, 2013). Based on their findings, Olsson and colleagues (2013) have called for a social curriculum in schools, a position that the current study strongly endorses. The social climate in classrooms, however, could benefit immediately from more active pedagogical approaches such as those used routinely in certain subjects. Woodlands students and staff described subjects, including the creative and performing arts and sport, as having created broader invitational spaces, both social and physical, which enhanced learning and relational experiences while facilitating positive connections among students and staff.

The practice implications that emerge from this study pivot around the relational climate of schools. This study provided a view of young people with eroded SC. School for them provided less access to adult support, less relational connection to teachers, less engaging teaching, and less enjoyment in being at school. They felt less well, perhaps unsurprisingly. Most of these factors are within the sphere of school influence, with the possible exception of health status, but even on this account schools can be active players in establishing home-school partnerships and in the provision of robust health and wellbeing practice frameworks (Michael, Merlo, Basch, Wentzel, & Wechsler, 2015; Scottish Health Promoting Schools Unit, 2004). The pathway to building SC for all young students is through the relationships which underpin the educational enterprise of schools. According to this study, SC will flourish in schools with opportunity-rich environments with relationally
inclusive, supportive and respectful climates which offer a niche for all young people.

10.4 Research Implications

Despite the bourgeoning research interest in SC, there continues to be little consensus about how it is defined (Loukas & Pasch, 2013). The repeated cries of consternation about lack of definitional clarity equate to a conceptual Groundhog Day scenario, as the concern has been accompanied by minimal progress in arriving at new understandings. This lack of clarity threatens the longer-term utility of the construct. Due to its definitional ambiguity, claims regarding SC are frequently based on studies of different constructs. Engagement, bonding, and belonging are most frequently used as equivalent terms, despite different conceptual origins and meanings. This unsatisfactory situation necessarily attenuates the strength of some claims made regarding SC.

As this study has shown, there are ways to engage with the definitional contours of SC and thus to arrive at new understandings; in time, research efforts should provide welcome conceptual status to this important construct in education and health research. Further research into its meanings would consolidate its place within the cluster of concepts describing a young person’s relationship with school. At present, SC needs rescuing from its frequent status as a pastiche of other concepts, or, more disturbingly, as a clone of those concepts. This is the key research implication arising from the current study. The promise of SC lies in its move away from the pathologising discourse that views students as connected or disconnected; rather, SC is about connecting and disconnecting environments, and this is where the scholarly gaze would be best directed.

A priority in this future research is the inclusion of student and school staff perspectives as offering a key pathway to understanding SC. A small number of studies have begun to emerge in which teachers’ views of connectedness are explored using qualitative
approaches (Biag, 2016; Bower, van Kraayenoord, & Carroll, 2015; Chapman et al., 2013a); however, student voices are largely absent. Notable exceptions in the Australian context are Rowe and Stewart’s (2009) study exploring the influence of a whole-school approach to SC via a case study design in which both students and staff were represented, and Thompson and Bell’s (2006) use of focus groups to explore student, teacher, and parent perspectives on disconnection to school. More recently, a New Zealand study by Neely, Walton, and Stephens (2015) used an ethnographic methodology involving students and teachers to explore the impact of shared school lunches on SC. Whitlock’s (2006) study, using surveys and student focus groups to explore contextual correlates of SC, is also noteworthy, as is the study by Yuen et al. (2012) exploring Chinese adolescents’ views on factors that shape SC. Such qualitative approaches remain the exception however, with SC research continuing to be dominated by empirical studies (Chapman, Buckley, Sheehan, & Shochet, 2013). This study has demonstrated the value of listening to student and staff voices to arrive at richer, more nuanced, and complex understandings of connectedness to school.

10.5 Summary

In summary, SC has emerged from this study as a multi-dimensional, socio-ecological concept, placing the individual in relationship with others within the school and beyond. It is shaped by peers in classrooms and policy-makers in government offices. The transactional pathways of these relationships are multi-directional, shaping and influencing the individual’s and others’ experience of SC. Additionally, SC is fundamentally mediated through the individual’s relational experience of school, and is therefore dynamic and fluid in nature, responsive to the relational opportunities or barriers that are thrown up within the school context. The malleability of a number of the factors associated with SC is good
news for schools; they know where to focus their efforts - and this gives cause for optimism and energetic engagement with the task. Further research is needed to arrive at deeper understandings of SC and to enable consolidation of its place as a unique concept among the multiple terms used to describe a young person’s relationship to school. Qualitative research which seeks the views of students and staff to inform these understandings must be prioritised in the evolving research agenda.
Appendices
Appendix 1  Plain Language Statements

Information about Research Project for Parents
(Questionnaire/Focus Group Participants)

**Project Title:** School Connectedness: an exploration of factors that shape young people’s closeness to school

Dear Parents/Guardians,

Apart from being one of the counsellors here at (Woodlands), I am also a PhD student at the University of Melbourne. I am researching how young people develop connectedness or feelings of closeness to their school, what helps this closeness develop and what gets in the way. This covers everything from how students feel about teachers and subjects to extra-curricular opportunities and the school environment. My project is called “School Connectedness: an exploration of factors that shape young people’s closeness to school”. Professor Alun Jackson from the Social Work Department at the University of Melbourne is supervising my studies.

**What does the study involve?**

In order to research school connectedness I am employing a variety of data collection methods. I will be running focus groups with some staff and students. I will be asking some students to complete a questionnaire and I will be asking other students to keep a journal about their feelings of closeness to school.

**Points to consider if your child takes part in the project**

If your child is currently coming to see me for counselling and you give him/her permission to take part in this project, your child’s involvement will not make any difference to our counselling relationship, nor will it make any difference to any future counselling relationship I may have with your child. While the results of this study may not benefit your child directly, they may be used to help schools improve the ways in which they form connections with their students. When the thesis arising from this research has been completed, you will be able to obtain a brief written summary of the findings. I will place a notice in the Lighthouse advising that the report is available and you can contact me for a copy. I hope that this research will help members of the (Woodlands) community to see whether the school can be doing anything differently or better in addressing issues of students’ connectedness within the College.
What your child may be asked to do if he/she takes part in the project

- **Focus Groups**

If your child participates in this project, she/he may be asked to take part in a focus group. A focus group involves a discussion among a small group of people including a facilitator. I would be the facilitator in any group in which your child was involved. The group usually concentrates on a particular topic as a way to build an understanding of that topic.

Your child would be in a group with between 10 and 12 other students from their own year level, boys and girls. In the group the discussion will focus on the experiences, people and events that shape your child’s feelings of connection or closeness to school. The discussion will take about one hour and will take place in the Old Administration Building. I will be with the group during the whole discussion and nobody else except the other students will be present. The discussion will be audiotaped.

- **Questionnaires**

If your child participates in this project, he/she may be asked to complete a questionnaire, which will take between 35 to 40 minutes to complete. It will ask a range of questions about your child’s experiences at (Woodlands) College. These questions will cover issues such as your child’s enjoyment of school, participation in extra-curricular activities, relationships with teachers, understanding of different school policies and use of different facilities at the College. With some questions your child will only need to tick a box, while with some other questions he/she will need to write a short reply. I can make a copy of the questionnaire available to you if you would like to read it before deciding about your child’s participation in the project. You can contact me on 9259 3054.

**Confidentiality**

All questionnaire responses will be completely confidential and anonymous and they will not be identified. Your child will not be asked to give any details that could identify them such as their name or address. All information your child provides will be treated as strictly confidential. Some of your child’s comments, (from either the focus group or questionnaire) may be used in my report, however they will not be identified by name. Any comments used will be described as coming from “a year 7 boy” or “a year 11 girl”. Gender and year level will be the only identifying factors used to describe the young person who has made a comment. Discussion in the focus groups will be confidential. I will take great care to explain to everyone in the group that all comments made during the discussion stay within the group. My supervisor and I intend to protect your child’s anonymity and the confidentiality of his/her comments to the fullest possible extent, within the limits of the law.

The audiotapes and notes that come out of the focus group will be stored securely for five years and then destroyed. Only my supervisor and I will see this material. The questionnaires and results from
this study will be stored securely for the duration of the study and for five years after its completion and then be destroyed. Only my supervisor and I will see this material.

Concerns

If you have any queries or concerns about the way you child has been treated, or if you have questions that I have been unable to satisfy, you can ring 8344 7507 and speak to the Executive Officer. You can also write to or fax this person at the following address:
The Executive Officer,
Human Research Ethics,
The University of Melbourne
Fax 9347 6739

Ethical Guidelines

This project will be carried out according to the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Research Involving Humans (June 1999) produced by the National Health and Medical Research Council of Australia. The Human Research Ethics Committee at The University of Melbourne has approved this research project.

If your child feels upset

My supervisor and I believe that participating in this study should not upset your child in any way. If however your child does feel upset by participating in a focus group, you and your child can contact me or one of the following people for support:

Professor Alun Jackson - School of Social Work, University of Melbourne, (phone number).
(Name supplied) – Family Care Coordinator, Pastoral Ministry Centre, (phone number).
(Name supplied) – Assistant Counsellor, Pastoral Ministry Centre, (phone number).

(Name supplied) and I work full-time at (Woodlands) and (Name supplied) is here every Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday. You or your child can come to see me, (Name supplied) or (Name supplied) during the day and if we are not available, please leave a message and we will contact you to arrange a meeting. I can also arrange for your child to speak to a counsellor outside the College if you would prefer.

Follow-up

Sometimes when a person takes part in a project like this, he or she can start thinking about certain issues that may or may not be directly related to the focus group discussion. If taking part in the discussion starts your child thinking about something or raises some questions for him/her or if you or your child would like to find out more about the project, you are very welcome to talk to me or Professor Alun Jackson. My office is in the Old Administration Building and I am at school every day. If I’m not in my office when you call in, just leave a message and I will get back to you. I can also be contacted on (phone number supplied). Professor Jackson can be contacted on (phone number supplied).
Consent

Please note that in order for your child to take part in a focus group or complete a questionnaire you will need to give your consent. Your child’s participation is completely voluntary and of course you do not have to allow your child to take part. If you are happy to allow your child to participate, please sign the attached consent form. Your child will also be required to sign a consent form before they can participate in this project. Both forms can be returned to me in the Old Administration Building or handed in to your child’s Homeroom Teacher or the Campus Secretary. Please use the attached envelope.

Please be aware that even if you allow your child to participate, they are free to decide not to do so. Furthermore, if your child does take part, they will be clearly told that they can withdraw from the study at any time.

Thank you for taking the time to read this information.

Annie Gowing
College Counsellor
Information about Research Project for Parents (Diaries)

**Project Title: School Connectedness: an exploration of factors that shape young people’s closeness to school**

Dear Parents/Guardians,

Apart from being one of the counsellors here at (Woodlands), I am also a PhD student at the University of Melbourne. I am researching how young people develop connectedness or feelings of closeness to their school, what helps this closeness develop and what gets in the way. This covers everything from how students feel about teachers and subjects to extra-curricular opportunities and the school environment. My project is called "School Connectedness: an exploration of factors that shape young people’s closeness to school". Professor Alun Jackson from the Social Work Department at the University of Melbourne is supervising my studies.

**What does the study involve?**

In order to research school connectedness I am employing a variety of data collection methods. I will be running focus groups with some staff and students. I will be asking some students to complete a questionnaire and I will be asking other students to keep a diary about their feelings of closeness to school.

**Points to consider if your child takes part in the project**

If your child is currently coming to see me for counselling and you give him/her permission to take part in this project, your child’s involvement will not make any difference to our counselling relationship, nor will it make any difference to any future counselling relationship I may have with your child. While the results of this study may not benefit your child directly, they may be used to help schools improve the ways in which they form connections with their students. When the thesis arising from this research has been completed, you will be able to obtain a brief written summary of the findings. I will place a notice in the newsletter advising that the report is available and you can contact me for a copy. I hope that this research will help members of the (Woodlands) community to see whether the school can be doing anything differently or better in addressing issues of students’ connectedness within the College.
What your child will be asked to do if he/she takes part in the project

If you decide to allow your child to be involved in this project, your child will be given a diary and asked to make entries each school day over a three-week period. There is no set length on these entries. They can be as brief or as long as your child wants to make them. Your child will be asked to write about anything that happens during the school day that has an impact on how they feel about being a (Woodlands) student. These might be events like getting the result of a test, having a conversation with a teacher or being involved in an activity at lunchtime or recess. These are just examples of experiences your child might have in an ordinary school day that influence how close they feel to (Woodlands) and what being a student here means to them. These are the sorts of events your child will be asked to record in their diary. They will also be asked to write down how these different events each school day effect how they feel about being a student at (Woodlands).

If your child does take part in this project, I will meet with them once a fortnight during recess to talk about how the diary is going for them. They can come and see me at any other time if they want to ask any questions about keeping the diary. At the end of the three-week period I will collect your child’s diary. As diaries are very private possessions, I will explain to your child that it is important that they do not write anything in the diary that they don’t want my supervisor or me to read.

Confidentiality

My supervisor and I will be the only people who read your child’s diary. After I have read the diary and completed my analysis, I will return the diary to your child. I will also make some photocopies of some pages in your child’s diary and may use some quotes from the diary in my final report. Your child will not be identified by name. Any comments used in the final report will be attributed to “a middle school male” or “a senior school female”. In other words, gender and middle or senior school position will be the only identifying features attached to any quotes drawn from your child’s diary so that no one can tell which are their comments. My supervisor and I intend to protect your child’s anonymity and the confidentiality of his/her comments to the fullest possible extent, within the limits of the law. Any photocopied pages of your child’s diary will be stored securely for the duration of the study and for five years after its completion and then be destroyed, as required by the University Ethics Committee. Your child’s diary will also be stored securely until I return it to her/him.

Concerns

If you have any queries or concerns about the way you child has been treated, or if you have questions that I have been unable to satisfy, you can ring 8344 7507 and speak to the Executive Officer. You can also write to or fax this person at the following address:

The Executive Officer,
Human Research Ethics,
The University of Melbourne
Fax 9347 6739
Ethical Guidelines

This project will be carried out according to the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Research Involving Humans (June 1999) produced by the National Health and Medical Research Council of Australia. The Human Research Ethics Committee at The University of Melbourne has approved this research project.

If your child feels upset

My supervisor and I believe that participating in this study should not upset your child in any way. If however your child does feel upset by keeping a diary, you and your child can contact one of the following people for support:

Professor Alun Jackson - School of Social Work, University of Melbourne, 8344 9402.
(Name supplied) – Family Care Coordinator, Pastoral Ministry Centre, 9259 3055.
(Name supplied) – Assistant Counsellor, Pastoral Ministry Centre, 9259 3056.

(Name supplied) and I work full-time at (Woodlands) and (Name supplied) is here every Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday. You or your child can come to see me, (Name supplied) or (Name supplied) during the day and if we are not available, please leave a message and we will contact you to arrange a meeting. I can also arrange for your child to speak to a counsellor outside the College if you would prefer.

Follow-up

Sometimes when a person takes part in a project like this, he or she can start thinking about certain issues that may or may not be directly related to their diary keeping. If keeping a diary starts your child thinking about something or raises some questions for him/her or if you or your child would like to find out more about the project, you are very welcome to talk to me or Professor Alun Jackson. My office is in the Old Administration Building and I am at school every day. If I’m not in my office when you call in, just leave a message and I will get back to you. I can also be contacted on (Phone number supplied). Professor Jackson can be contacted on (Phone number supplied).

Consent

Please note that in order for your child to participate in this project, you will need to give your consent. Your child’s participation is completely voluntary and of course you do not have to allow your child to take part. If you are happy to allow your child to participate, please sign the attached consent form. Your child will also be required to sign a consent form before they can participate in this project. Both forms can be returned to me at my office in the Old Administration Building or handed in to your child’s Home Room Teacher or the Campus Secretary. Please use the attached envelope.
Please be aware that even if you allow your child to participate, they are free to decide not to do so. Furthermore, if your child does take part, they will be clearly told that they can withdraw from the study at any time.

*Thank you for taking the time to read this information.*

Annie Gowing  
*College Counsellor*
Appendix 2  

Student Focus Group Questions

1. When you think about everything that goes on in your life, how important is school to you?

2. What makes (Woodlands) a place you want to be?

3. What are some of the things you don’t like about being a student at (Woodlands)?

4. What helps students to feel like they are a part of school?

5. What could (Woodlands) do to help students feel more connected to school?

6. Teachers and other staff are a big part of school. What helps students and staff get to know each other?

7. What sorts of activities can you get involved in at (Woodlands)?
Appendix 3  Staff Focus Group Questions

1. How do you know when a student loves to be at school? (What do you see them doing?)
2. What helps students feel a part of school?
3. What gets in the way of connectedness developing?
4. What helps teachers and other staff members get to know students?
5. What makes it difficult to get to know students?
6. How does (Woodlands) help students feel a part of school?
7. What else could (Woodlands) do to help students feel part of the place?
8. Are there any final thoughts on this subject that you like to share?
Appendix 4  Student Questionnaire
Section 1: About You

1) How old are you? (Circle one)

   11  12  13  14  15  16  17  18

2) What is your year level? (Circle one)

   7  8  9  10  11  12

3) Are you: (Circle one)

   Male  Female

4) Think of the place where you live most of the time. List all the people who live there with you and your relationship with them.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Person</th>
<th>Relationship to me</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jenny</td>
<td>My sister</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

5) Do you spend significant time (eg. every weekend, every second weekend or week or some week nights) living in another household eg. with another parent? (Circle one)

   Yes  No

6) If yes, list all the people who live there with you and your relationship to them.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Person</th>
<th>Relationship to me</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Example</td>
<td>John</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Father</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
7) Do you have any siblings currently at (Woodlands)? (circle one)
   Yes  No

8) If yes, what year level are they in? (circle the year level/s)
   7  8  9  10  11  12

9) Did either of your parents come to (Woodlands) as students? (circle one)
   Yes  No

10) Do you have siblings who attended (Woodlands) as students? (circle one)
    Yes  No

11) If yes, how many? ________________

12) Have you been at (Woodlands) since year 7? (circle one)
    Yes  No

13) If no, how long have you been here? (mark one box only)
    ☐ Less than a year
    ☐ One to 2 years
    ☐ 2 to 3 years
    ☐ 3 to 4 years
    ☐ 4 to 5 years
    ☐ 5 to 6 years

14) How many other secondary schools have you attended? (mark one box only)
    ☐ One
    ☐ Two
    ☐ Three
    ☐ More than three (write number) ________________

15) What did you know about (Woodlands) before you started school here?  (mark one box only)
    ☐ Lots
    ☐ Quite a bit
    ☐ A few things
    ☐ Hardly anything
    ☐ Nothing
16) Who decided that you would come to (Woodlands)? (you can mark more than one box)

☐ Me
☐ My parent/s
☐ Me and my parent/s
☐ Brothers and sisters
☐ Other family members
☐ Other (please name) ________________________________

17) Did any students from your primary school come to (Woodlands)? (mark one box only)

☐ Lots (20 or more)
☐ Some (10 to 20)
☐ A few (5 to 10)
☐ Not many (less than 5)
☐ None

18) How do you get to school most days? (you can mark more than one box)

☐ Walk
☐ Bicycle
☐ Bus
☐ Train
☐ Car

19) How close do you live to (Woodlands)? (mark one box only)

☐ 1km or less
☐ 1 to 2 kms
☐ 2 to 3 kms
☐ 3 to 5 kms
☐ More than 5 kms
☐ More than 10 kms

20) Have you done or are you doing any VET courses as part of your studies at (Woodlands)? (circle one)

Yes   No

21) Are you attending or have you attended any TAFE courses as part of your studies at (Woodlands)? (circle one)

Yes   No
22) Did one or both of your parents/guardians attend the last Parent-Teacher interviews at (Woodlands)? *(mark one box only)*

☐ Yes
☐ No
☐ Not last time, but one or both usually do

23) Did you attend the last Parent-Teacher Interviews? *(mark one box only)*

☐ Yes
☐ No
☐ Not last time, but I usually do

24) Do you enjoy being part of the (Woodlands) community? *(mark one box only)*

☐ Yes, all the time
☐ Yes, most of the time
☐ Sometimes
☐ Occasionally
☐ Hardly ever
☐ No, never

25) Thinking about the friends you hang out with at school, do you think they feel the same about being a student at (Woodlands) as you do? *(mark one box only)*

☐ All
☐ Most
☐ Some
☐ A few
☐ None

26) Place a cross on the line below that best indicates how connected or close you currently feel to the (Woodlands) community.

___________________________________________________________

Not connected at all

___________________________________________________________

Very connected

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Section 2: Your Views about (Woodlands)

What do you like most about being a (Woodlands) student? (write your answer below)

_______________________________________________________________________________

_______________________________________________________________________________

_______________________________________________________________________________

_______________________________________________________________________________

_______________________________________________________________________________

28. What things don’t you like about being a student at (Woodlands)? (write your answer below)

_______________________________________________________________________________

_______________________________________________________________________________

_______________________________________________________________________________

_______________________________________________________________________________

_______________________________________________________________________________

29. If you and your family moved interstate, what would you miss most about being a student at (Woodlands)? (write your answer below)

_______________________________________________________________________________

_______________________________________________________________________________

_______________________________________________________________________________

_______________________________________________________________________________

_______________________________________________________________________________

30. If you changed schools, are there things about (Woodlands) that you would be glad to get away from? If yes, what would those things be? (write your answer below)

_______________________________________________________________________________

_______________________________________________________________________________

_______________________________________________________________________________

_______________________________________________________________________________

_______________________________________________________________________________
31. If you had a strong opinion about something that was happening at school, who would you talk to? *(you can mark more than one box)*

- My SRC Representative
- My Homeroom Teacher
- Year Coordinator
- A Subject Teacher
- A Deputy Principal
- The Principal
- Other *(please name)* ________________________________
- I wouldn’t talk to anyone

32. How seriously do you think the opinions of students are taken at school? *(you can mark more than one box)*

- Very seriously – the school values students’ opinions on all issues
- Quite seriously – the school values students’ opinions on lots of issues
- It varies, depending on what the issue is
- Not much
- Not at all
- Depends on who you are – some students get heard more than others
- Some teachers take you seriously
- The school makes decisions regardless of what the students think
- The school says it takes students’ opinions seriously, but it doesn’t really

33. Which of the following do you think best describes the way the school treats students when they break a school rule? *(you can mark more than one box)*

- Harshly
- Strictly
- Unfairly
- Fairly
- Kindly
- Respectfully
- Always listens to the student’s side of the story
- Depends on who the student is
- Depends on who the teacher is
- Depends on what the rule is
- Treats all students the same
- Gives students lots of chances
- Never forgets that you’ve been in trouble
- Other *(please describe)* ________________________________
34. Have you ever wagged school for an entire day? (*circle one*)
   
   Yes   No

35. **If yes,** how often this year? (*mark one box only*)
   
   - Once
   - Twice
   - 3 to 5 times
   - More than 5 times

36. If you have wagged school in the past, did you wag by yourself or with a friend or friends? (*you can mark more than one box*)
   
   - By myself
   - With a friend from (Woodlands)
   - With more than one friend from (Woodlands)
   - With a friend or friend at another school
   - With a friend or friends who have finished school
   - Not applicable

37. Have you ever received any detentions at (Woodlands)? (*circle one*)
   
   Yes   No

38. **If yes,** do you think that this was a fair punishment? (*circle one*)
   
   Yes   No   Sometimes

39. Have you ever been suspended from school? (*circle one*)
   
   Yes   No

40. **If yes,** do think that this was a fair punishment? (*circle one*)
   
   Yes   No   Sometimes
Section 3: Your Views about Being Safe at School

41. Are you aware of the (Woodlands) Safe School Policy? (circle one)
   Yes    No

42. **If yes**, can you say in your own words what you think the (Woodlands) Safe school policy means? *(write your answer below)*
   __________________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________________

43. If you were being bullied at school, would you tell a teacher or other staff member what was happening? *(circle one)*
   Yes    No

44. **If no**, what would stop you? *(you can mark more than one box)*
   □ Things might get worse
   □ I would deal with it myself
   □ I’d get help from my friends
   □ I’d get help from my family
   □ Teachers can’t do anything to stop it
   □ I’ve told teachers before and nothing happened
   □ I don’t want to be a dobber
   □ Other *(please describe)*_____________________________________
   __________________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________________

45. If you did tell a teacher you were being bullied at school, what do you think they would do about it? *(write your answer below)*
   __________________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________________

46. Have you ever felt unsafe at (Woodlands)? *(circle one)*
   Yes    No

47. **If yes**, where and when did you feel unsafe? *(eg. was it when you were in a certain year level or at a certain time of day or at a particular school event)* *(write your answer below)*
   __________________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________________
Section 4: Your Views about the School Environment

48. If you were upset or worried at school and wanted to talk to a friend, is there a place or places at (Woodlands) where you are allowed to go and talk together privately? (you can mark more than one box)

☐ Lots
☐ Some
☐ A few
☐ None
☐ Yes, but there should be more

49. If you were upset or worried at school and wanted to talk to a friend, where would you go? (write your answer below)

_____________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________

50. Have you ever skipped a class or classes at (Woodlands)? (circle one)

Yes   No

51. If yes, have you skipped class alone or with a friend/s? (you can mark more than one box)

☐ Alone
☐ With a friend
☐ With friends

52. If you have skipped class, where have you gone? (you can mark more than one box)

☐ The ovals
☐ The toilets
☐ Health Centre
☐ Pastoral Ministry Centre
☐ A classroom
☐ The Resource Centre
☐ Out of the school grounds
☐ Other (please name) ___________________________________________________________________
53. If you have skipped class in the past, which of the following statements best describes why? (you can mark more than one box)

☐ I was upset
☐ My friend was upset
☐ I hadn’t done my homework/assignment
☐ I didn’t like the subject
☐ I didn’t like the teacher
☐ I wanted to avoid someone in my class
☐ I needed some time out
☐ Other (please describe) _________________________________

54. Approximately how many times have you skipped class this year? (mark one box only)

☐ None
☐ Once
☐ 2 to 5 times
☐ 6 to 10 times
☐ More than 10 times

55. What are your favourite places at (Woodlands)? (write your answer below)

_____________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________

56. Where do you usually go during recess and lunchtimes? (write your answer below)

_____________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________

57. What lunchtime activities do you enjoy? (write your answer below)

_____________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________

58. Are there activities you would like to do during recess and lunchtime that aren’t offered at (Woodlands)? (mark one box only)

☐ Yes
☐ Yes, not currently, but there have been in the past
☐ No

59. If yes, what are those activities?

_____________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________
Section 5: Your Views about School Work

60. Thinking about all your subjects, how many do you enjoy? (mark one box only)

☐ None
☐ One
☐ A few
☐ Most
☐ All

61. Do you think your teachers care whether you like their subject? (mark one box only)

☐ No
☐ Some do
☐ Most do
☐ All do

62. Thinking about all your subjects this year, how many are you passing? (mark one box only)

☐ None
☐ One
☐ A few
☐ Most
☐ All

63. Do you think your teachers care whether you pass their subject? (mark one box only)

☐ None
☐ One
☐ A few
☐ Most
☐ All

64. For students in years 10, 11 and 12 only!

Have you ever had a panel in a subject? (mark one box only)

☐ Yes – in one subject only
☐ Yes – in several subjects
☐ No
65. **For students in years 7 to 11 only!**

Do you plan on continuing at school until the end of year 12? *(mark one box only)*

- [ ] Yes
- [ ] No
- [ ] Unsure

66. **If yes,** who has made the decision that you will continue until year 12?
*(you can mark more than one box)*

- [ ] I have
- [ ] My parents
- [ ] Other family members
- [ ] Other *(please name)* ____________________________

67. If you do plan to continue at school until the end of year 12, do you think that you will stay at (Woodlands) until the completion of your secondary schooling? *(mark one box only)*

- [ ] Yes - definitely
- [ ] Yes - probably
- [ ] Unsure
- [ ] No

68. Thinking about your friends at school, how many of them are planning to continue until year 12? *(mark one box only)*

- [ ] All
- [ ] Most
- [ ] Some
- [ ] A few
- [ ] None
Section 6: Your Views about Getting Support at School

69. If you arrived at school upset, is there an adult or adults at (Woodlands) you would feel comfortable talking to? (circle one)
   - Yes
   - No

70. If yes, who is that adult/s? (you can mark more than one box)
   - My Homeroom Teacher
   - Subject Teacher/s
   - Year Coordinator
   - School Counsellor
   - School Nurse
   - Deputy Principal/s
   - Resource Centre Staff Member
   - Educational Support Staff Member
   - Sports Coach
   - Music Tutor
   - Information Technology Staff
   - A Campus Secretary
   - Maintenance Staff Member
   - Other (please name school role) ________________________________

71. If you arrived at school and were upset, do you think anyone would notice that you were having a tough day? (circle one)
   - Yes
   - No

72. If yes, who do you think would notice? (you can mark more than one box)
   - Friends
   - People in my class
   - My Homeroom Teacher
   - A Subject Teacher/s
   - Year Coordinator
   - School Nurse
   - School Counsellor
   - Resource Centre Staff Member
   - Campus Secretary
   - Information Technology Staff Member
   - Other (please name school role) ________________________________

73. Have you ever visited the school nurse? (circle one)
   - Yes
   - No
74. **If yes**, how often in the past month? *(mark one box only)*

- [ ] Once
- [ ] 2 to 5 times
- [ ] 5 to 10 times
- [ ] More than 10 times

75. How would you describe your general state of health? *(mark one box only)*

- [ ] Excellent
- [ ] Very good
- [ ] Good
- [ ] Average
- [ ] Not so good
- [ ] Poor

76. Approximately how many days of school have you missed so far this year through sickness? *(mark one box only)*

- [ ] None
- [ ] One to 3
- [ ] 4 to 6
- [ ] 7 to 10
- [ ] More than 10

77. Have you ever stayed at home because you simply needed some time out from school, not because you were sick? *(circle one)*

- Yes  
- No

78. **If yes**, please write down the number of days you have missed this year, because you needed some time out from school. _____________________

79. Have you ever visited the school counsellor? *(circle one)*

- Yes  
- No

80. **If yes**, would you use the counselling service again? *(circle one)*

- Yes  
- No
81. *If no*, what would stop you from using the counselling service again? (you can mark more than one box)

☐ It wasn’t helpful last time
☐ I have other people to help me now
☐ I don’t like the counsellors
☐ I don’t want to miss classes
☐ I don’t want my friends to ask where I’m going
☐ I don’t want my family to know
☐ I can work things out by myself now
☐ Other (please describe) ____________________________________________

82. If you have *never* visited one of the school counsellors during your time at (Woodlands), is this because: (you can mark more than one box)

☐ You haven’t had any serious problems
☐ You don’t know the counsellors
☐ You want to solve your own problems
☐ You don’t want your friends to know
☐ You don’t want your parents to know
☐ You don’t want to miss class
☐ You are worried about confidentiality
☐ You have lots of other people to talk to
☐ Other (please describe) ____________________________________________

83. Have you ever received assistance from Educational Support (previously known as Special Education)? (circle one)

Yes  No
Section 7: Your Views about the People at School

84. Apart from pastoral, how many subjects does your homeroom teacher teach you? *(mark one box only)*

- None
- One
- Two
- Three
- More than three

85. Are there staff members at (Woodlands) who you feel close to? These would be people who also know you well and whom you could go and talk to easily. *(circle one)*

- Yes
- No

86. **If yes**, who are those staff members? *(you can mark more than one box)*

- Your Homeroom Teacher
- Subject Teacher/s
- A Deputy Principal
- The Principal
- A Music Tutor
- A Sports Coach
- A School Counsellor
- School Nurse
- Resource Centre Staff Member
- Information technology Staff Member
- Educational Support Staff Member
- Campus Secretary
- Maintenance Staff Member
- Other *(please name their school role)* ____________________________

87. Please write down what has helped you to get to know this person or persons during your time at (Woodlands)? *(write your answer below)*

____________________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________
88. Are there opportunities at school for you to talk to your teachers if you want to ask for help with something? (circle one)

Yes   No

89. If no, what makes it difficult to talk to your teachers? (you can mark more than one box)

☐ They’re too busy  
☐ There’s no privacy for conversations  
☐ I’m too busy  
☐ I wouldn’t feel comfortable asking for help  
☐ I’d have to give up my recess or lunchtime  
☐ They wouldn’t be interested  
☐ They’d think I wasn’t coping  
☐ They might ring my parents  
☐ Other (please describe) ____________________________________________
   ____________________________________________
   ____________________________________________
Section 8: Activities/Things You Like Doing

90. Please tick any of the following school-based activities and groups in which you are currently involved? (you can mark more than one box)

- ☐ A school sports team
- ☐ Student Representative Council
- ☐ Amnesty International
- ☐ St Vincent de Paul
- ☐ Catholic Action Program
- ☐ School debating team
- ☐ School musical
- ☐ School band
- ☐ A school musical group
- ☐ Other (please name) ________________________________________________

91. If you are not currently involved in any school-based activities or groups, have you been involved in any of these activities in the past?

- ☐ Yes (please list the activities or groups)
  __________________________________________
  __________________________________________
  __________________________________________

- ☐ No

92. If you have never been involved in any school-based activities or groups, please indicate which of the following statements best explains why. (you can mark more than one box)

- ☐ I’m not interested in taking part in any school activities or groups
- ☐ None of the groups or activities offered at (Woodlands) interests me
- ☐ I’m involved in activities and groups outside school
- ☐ I don’t have enough time to get involved in activities or groups at school
- ☐ It’s too expensive
- ☐ None of my friends take part in any school groups or activities
- ☐ Other reasons (please describe) _______________________________________
  __________________________________________
  __________________________________________
  __________________________________________
93. If you have been involved in any school based activities or groups in the past, but are no longer involved in those activities, which of the following statements best explains why? (you can mark more than one box)

☐ I have stopped those activities to concentrate on my studies
☐ I have changed the activities I’m involved in because my interests have changed
☐ I now have a part-time job and don’t have time
☐ The activities I was interested in became too expensive
☐ I’m now involved in activities and groups outside school
☐ My friends stopped being involved and I stopped too
☐ Other (please describe) ________________________________________________

94. Do you have a part-time job? (circle one)

Yes  ☐  No

95. If yes, how many hours a week do you work on average? (mark one box only)

☐ 1 to 2 hours
☐ 3 to 5 hours
☐ 6 to 10 hours
☐ 10 to 15 hours
☐ More than 15 hours

96. Do you smoke cigarettes? (circle one)

Yes  ☐  No

97. If yes, which of the following statements best describes your smoking habits? (you can mark more than one box)

☐ I only smoke socially – at parties or with friends
☐ I only smoke occasionally – less than once a month
☐ I only smoke at weekends
☐ I smoke at weekends and sometimes during the week
☐ I smoke most days of the week
☐ I smoke every day of the week
☐ Other (please describe) ________________________________________________

_____________________________________________ ________________________

_____________________________________________ ________________________
98. Which of the following statements best describes what you think about your smoking? *(you can mark more than one box)*

- I’m OK with my smoking at the moment
- I’d like to stop smoking
- I’d like to cut back on my smoking
- My smoking has increased over the past 6 months
- My smoking has decreased over the past 6 months
- My smoking hasn’t changed in the past 6 months

*For Years 11 and 12 students only!*

99. Did you go on either the Central or Kakadu trip? *(circle one)*

- Yes
- No

100. If no, why? *(write answer below)*

____________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________

101. Did you attend one of the debutante balls at (Woodlands)? *(mark one box only)*

- Yes - I made my deb
- Yes - I partnered a debutante
- Yes - I went as a guest
- No

102. If no, why? *(write answer below)*

____________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________

*For Year 10 students only!*

103. Are you attending one of the debutante balls at (Woodlands) this year? *(mark one box only)*

- Yes – I’m making my deb
- Yes – I’m partnering a debutante
- Yes – I’m going as a guest
- No
- I haven’t decided yet
104. **If no, why? (write answer below)**

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

105. Are you planning to go on either the Central or Kakadu trip in year 11?  
* (mark one box only)

☐ Yes  
☐ No  
☐ I haven’t decided yet

106. **If no, why? (write answer below)**

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

For Years 7, 8 and 9 students only!

107. Have you heard about the Kakadu and Central trips that happen in Year 11?  
* (circle one)

Yes  No

108. **If yes, what have you heard? (write answer below)**

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________
And Finally – One Last Question!

109. If you had to describe what (Woodlands) is like to someone who is thinking of coming here, what would you say to them? *write answer below*

_______________________________________________________________________________
_______________________________________________________________________________
_______________________________________________________________________________
_______________________________________________________________________________
_______________________________________________________________________________

Thank you very much for taking the time to complete this questionnaire. I really appreciate your assistance! 😊

Sometimes when a person takes part in a project like this by answering a questionnaire, he or she can start thinking about certain issues that may or may not be directly related to the questionnaire. If answering the questionnaire starts you thinking about something or raises some questions for you or if you would like to find out more about the project, you are very welcome to come and talk to me or Professor Alun Jackson. My office is in the Pastoral Ministry Centre and I am at school every day. If I’m not in my office when you call over, just leave a message and I will get back to you. Professor Jackson can be contacted on (phone number supplied).

*Annie Gowing*
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