Towards a better understanding of teacher connectedness in adolescence: The role of school level factors

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Introduction

School is an important site for young people's health and wellbeing, with teachers having the potential for being a key element of the wider public health workforce. School characteristics, such as school size and the number of different teachers students engage with, can have a significant impact in the quality of teacher-student relationships. Unfortunately, most studies in this area have tended to subsume relationships with teachers within the broader concept of school connectedness, and therefore the impact of school factors on teacher connectedness specifically has remained underexplored.

Purpose

As part of the EU funded Teacher Connectedness Project, this study aimed to conduct an initial examination of the potential contribution of a wide variety of school-level factors (including type of school, single-sex vs mixed schools, school size, student-teacher ratio, mean number of students per class and percentage of female teachers) to teacher connectedness in a representative sample of English adolescents.

Materials and Methods

Sample in the 13/14 edition of the Health Behaviour in School-aged Children in England consisted of 5,335 adolescents aged 11, 13 and 15 years from 48 schools (a total of 261 classes). Multilevel modelling was carried out using teacher connectedness as the dependent variable. The aforementioned school-level variables along with sex, grade and family affluence were automatically included in the model based on our literature review, whereas stepwise selection (with the criterion for entry set at the 1% level of significance) was undertaken to investigate the possibility to include additional school-level factors.

Results

Grade, family affluence, student-teacher ratio, single-sex vs mixed school and school location were significantly associated with teacher connectedness ($p < .01$).

Conclusions

It is important that the design of health interventions in schools considers how teacher connectedness changes by age and SES, since connectedness tended to decrease in higher grades and be lower in those from less affluent families. In terms of school characteristics, it was not the size of the school but the ratio of students per teacher which was significantly associated to teacher connectedness. Our results also showed more positive results in mixed schools than in all-girls schools, although this finding must be cautiously interpreted given that only 4 all-girls schools were part of the study sample. This is an aspect, nonetheless, that deserves further examination in future research.

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