Inclusive and exclusive belonging – the impact on individual and community well-being

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A sense of connectedness is increasingly recognised as a protective factor in resilience and well-being (Benard, 1991; Blum, 2005; Libbey, 2004). This paper reviews some of the international literature on belonging, especially within the school context, and explores the important distinction between those school communities that are inclusive and facilitate participation for all students and those that maintain an exclusive position that regulates who may belong and who may not, who is valued and who is marginalised. This is set within a broader socio-political context.

This paper addresses some of the beliefs and behaviours that promote healthy and inclusive relationships and puts forward a case for building inclusive school communities. Effective school and classroom practices are illustrated in the findings of a small study on Circle Solutions. This is a philosophy and pedagogy that aims to enhance the relational quality in a school and promote a sense of inclusive belonging. Our primary focus here is vulnerable and often challenging students. We address what this means for the role and responsibility of educational psychologists in increasing inclusive connectedness and reducing rates of exclusion.

Keywords: *Inclusion, exclusion, belonging, connectedness, resilience, well-being, social capital.*

THIS PAPER puts forward considerations for the development of healthy school communities in which relationships are core business and a sense of belonging is fostered for all, including those who are often marginalised if not excluded from full participation.

The following paragraphs place the specific educational issues discussed later within a broader socio-political context.

Equality: Although cultures differ, there is strong evidence in multiple studies cited by Wilkinson and Pickett (2010), that societies which strive for greater equality and the 'common good' have better levels of mental health, less violence and criminality and better social and health outcomes. According to a major study for the World Bank (Narayan et al., 2000), community well-being is demonstrated by adequate material conditions, a sense of security, educational opportunities and freedom from economic exploitation. The psychological signs of community well-being and the conditions that enable people to live with dignity include: respect and tolerance for diversity, democratic participation, a sense of community and solidarity, social support, freedom of choice and action and capacity for action.

Beliefs and Values: For the 'common good' to be a reality, individual ambition must be tempered with a responsibility towards others and a desire to facilitate the well-being of all. A common critique of modern societies is that the belief that 'everyone can make it' puts the responsibility for advancement on individual effort alone and ignores the need to address inequality of birth and opportunity (Lerner, 1980, cited in Roffey, 2012a). Much current political discourse is an argument between these two polarities, which encapsulate opposing belief systems. One set of beliefs and associated values is demonstrated in the cuts to public services and welfare together with policies which have at their heart the freedom of the

market unfettered by regulation. Those who do not achieve are blamed for their inadequacies rather than seen as having experienced a number of negative circumstances. The alternative position takes the view that we have a responsibility to ensure basic human rights for all – including full access to education – and equal opportunities to succeed.

These ideologies have implications for those students in school who come from disadvantaged circumstances and often find it more of a struggle to learn, achieve and behave in desired ways. Without positive intervention to alleviate the risk factors in their lives they may become the 'socially excluded' of the future – with all the implications this has for both individuals and the well-being of communities.

Community well-being: The Prilletenskys' (2006) summary of the literature on community well-being identifies the values that are the hallmarks of healthy communities. Some of these privilege the individual whilst others emphasise the importance of shared humanity and collaboration, alongside ethical behaviours. It would appear that this is not a question of one or the other as is often portrayed in political discourse – but a more complex interplay between the two. These values are self-determination, freedom, personal growth, health, caring and compassion, accountability, transparency, responsiveness to the common good, collaboration, democratic participation, respect for human diversity, support for community structures and social justice (p.235).

Community development: Positive developments in communities need specific principles and practices. Foster-Fishman and colleagues (2001) offered a meta-analysis of the critical factors involved. These are 'member capacity' – including diversity of assets, core skills and attitudes and dispositions; 'relational capacity', both internal dynamics and positive external relationships;

'organisational capacity' and 'programmatic capacity'. Throughout there is a strong emphasis on interpersonal value and respect. *'Attitudes and motivations make a big difference, particularly toward four issues: (1) Value of collaboration as a process whose benefits outweigh its costs. (2) Strong commitment to the targeted problem (3) Positive attitudes about the other stakeholders (e.g. viewing them as capable, legitimate, needed + valuing their diversity) (4) Positive perception of one's own role and competence'* (p.2).

Applying these principles and practices to school communities suggests that individual differences are perceived as strengths so long as these are embedded within a framework of inclusion and collaboration.

Overview: In this paper we will be exploring factors that bring communities together and the place of social capital in this endeavour. We critique this concept by building on Putnam's bridging and bonding social capital, the former being inclusive and the latter with the potential for fostering a sense of belonging for some but excluding others who don't 'fit' (Putnam, 2000). Social capital in a school context often refers not only to the connections made between people but the quality of those interactions which build mutual trust and reciprocity. We stress that this needs to apply to all members of the school community if we are to break intergenerational cycles of school and social exclusion. We illustrate the extent of this problem by statistics on suspension and exclusion in the UK. The need to feel you belong is critical for resilience and well-being and yet young people, often the most vulnerable, are being marginalised and excluded (DfFE, 2011). Circle Solutions builds on Circle Time and is a philosophy and pedagogy for promoting both connectedness and positive relationships. We give a brief overview that includes developing evidence of the efficacy of this intervention and the implementation factors necessary to promote positive outcomes. Finally we discuss the role of the educational psycholo-

gist in being an agent of change for student and whole school well-being especially in offering alternative practices that promote connection for marginalised young people

Definition of community

Although strong communities are connected communities, where people feel they belong, they matter and their participation is facilitated, the definition of what constitutes a community is not straightforward (Barnes & Roffey, 2013; McMillan & Chavis, 1986). For administrative purposes a local community can be measured by geographical boundaries. Whether anyone feels they belong to their neighbourhood, however, is dependent on many factors. We regularly hear of elderly people being isolated with no meaningful contact with anyone in their locality whereas others perceive their neighbourhood to cover quite a wide area. A community of interest is a different kind of community and exists where people have something in common. They might share a faith, belong to a sporting association or a professional network. Schools, especially state schools, meet both criteria – they are communities within a local neighbourhood that also have a shared purpose and interest – the education of children and young people. There is a further definition of community that is predominantly psychological. This is where there is a sense of emotional connection, shared values and inter-dependence between the members of the community. Schools that manage to combine all three are more likely to have high levels of social capital (Roffey, 2008).

Social capital

Although there continues to be a lack of clarity around the concept, social capital is increasingly cited as having a role to play in addressing educational and social issues. There is evidence that neighbourhoods and educational communities with high levels of social capital are more likely to achieve their goals (Fukuyama, 1995; Pretty & Ward, 2001).

Over a century ago, John Dewey (1900) suggested social capital was a valuable resource that would develop when individuals connect to others in meaningful ways. Dewey went on to say that social capital is lost to any society that does not provide the environment and education necessary to bring out the best in any individual.

> *'Men (sic) live in a community in virtue of the things which they have in common; and communication is the way in which they come to possess things in common. What they must have in common in order to form a community or society are aims, beliefs, aspirations, knowledge – a common understanding – like-mindedness as the sociologists say. Such things cannot be passed physically from one to another, like bricks.'* (Dewey, 1916, p.4)

Since then there have been three main proponents of the concept of social capital, all of whom have developed their theories over time in ways that have both similarities and differences. According to Bourdieu (1993) membership of formal and informal groups gives access to opportunities and resources. As such, he sees social capital as a vehicle for the reproduction of privilege. Although he also acknowledges the dangers, Coleman (1988) has a more positive view. He proposes that social capital has three forms: level of trust, as evidenced by obligations and expectations; information and communication channels; and norms and sanctions that promote the common good over self-interest.

Putnam (2000) has added to the concept by identifying within-group connections, such as between teachers, as 'bonding social capital' and across-group connections, such as between staff and the parent community as 'bridging social capital'. Bridging social capital is seen as particularly useful in building resources and opportunities.

'Bonding' social capital is where people connect within a defined network. According to Putnam (2000) this provides the foundations for reciprocity and solidary. It can generate multiple positive benefits, including psychological boosts, for those who are

within the group. It does, however, tend to be inward looking and can be self-congratulatory. Groups may seek to maintain a sense of cohesion and superiority by excluding those who don't 'fit'. 'Bridging' social capital is by contrast more flexible and inclusive. It generates broader identities which are more outward looking and inclusive.

Putnam suggests a vivid metaphor for the difference: *Bonding social capital constitutes a kind of sociological superglue, whereas bridging social capital provides a sociological WD-40* (Putnam, 2000, p.23).

Where there is high social capital individuals are likely to be more interested, more knowledgeable, and more concerned about their community. This facilitates collective action. There is a potentially virtuous cycle where participation in community action promotes social capital, which is turn increases participation. *'Community connectedness is not just about warm fuzzy tales of civic triumph. In measurable and well-documented ways, social capital makes an enormous difference to our lives'* (Putnam, 2000, p.290).

Plagens (2011) illustrates, however, the difference between the multiple connections in high social capital being used for individualistic purposes and that used for communitarian purposes. For example, in the first, parents are more likely use their social connections to advantage their own children: for instance, if their children are particularly sporting then they may connect with others to raise funds that go towards new sporting equipment or facilities – that the school orchestra may also need new instruments will not feature as their concern. Parents who are more community minded would be interested in the advancement of multiple initiatives, making it more likely, for example, that families with sporting children would want to help fund some orchestral expenses, given the contributions of the musicians to athletic events. Inclusive belonging promotes mutual support to the advantage of all whereas exclusive belonging benefits only those who meet the criteria for membership.

Negative or exclusive social capital promotes benefits for the few who belong to a particular group but opposes rights and opportunities for others. At the macro level this can be seen in the apartheid system in South Africa and the Indian caste system (Streeton, 2002).

Social capital in school

Social capital in school usually refers not simply to the number of connections between stakeholders but the quality of their interactions. (Stone, 2003; Roffey, 2008; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). Inclusive, strong, school communities are those where there is a shared vision and purpose that gives meaning and motivation to all students, not just a select elite. Many of these signs of well-being are embedded in social structures – how people perceive and relate to each other (e.g. Murray-Harvey, 2010; Noble & McGrath, 2012).

> *'The well-being of students in the school community is promoted through developing connectedness and social capital. Social Capital is a term used to describe the particular features of social relationships within a group or community. This includes such things as the extent of trust between people; whether they have a shared understanding of how they should behave toward, and care for one another.'* (Catholic Education Office, Melbourne, 2007)

Beliefs about others and the purpose of education, the vision of school leaders and a focus on relational values and skills dictate whether or not social capital is actively fostered. And whether it is used for the common good or only to privilege those who can succeed and boost the school's reputation.

Psychological need to belong

Feeling that you are accepted within your social group is a basic psychological need. Baumeister and Leary (1995) argue that it is so vital to our survival that it counts as one of our basic human needs along with sustenance and shelter. Being able to establish and

maintain positive social connections has numerous benefits and is important to everyone. When you are positively connected with others you have reliable alliance in the face of adversity, self-validation, support and emotional security (Majors, 2012). Positive social connections also offer opportunities for collaboration and extending the potential to attain mutual goals. In self-determination theory, alongside the need for competence and autonomy the need for relatedness to others is considered critical for well-being (Deci et al., 1991).

Well-functioning groups provide social and psychological support, can protect and aid in times of need, facilitate access to important resources and provide the foundation for strong families (Duncan et al., 2007). The need to belong is demonstrated powerfully in the success of online networks and the Facebook phenomena (Gangadharbatla, 2008).

Inclusive and exclusive belonging

Exclusive social capital, however, can have devastating effects for those positioned on the margins or actively rejected. This may then impact negatively on the entire community. We can see this where youngsters who have no other place to go, join up with each other, sometimes engaging in anti-social or criminal activity. In an extreme example, there is evidence that in the incidents of multiple killings in US schools since 1999 there had been high levels of social stratification where some students were seen as stars and others rejected as losers. In March 2009 the *New Scientist* reported on this study (Wike & Fraser, 2009) with the headline *'Teen killers don't come from schools that foster a sense of belonging'*. The recommendations from this research include strengthening school attachment.

Where connectedness and inclusion is actively promoted it is likely to discourage the development of connection to more negative groups such as gangs. Positive relationships and inclusive groups inhibit aggression and violence (Wolfe et al., 1999; Wilson, 2004).

A sense of belonging is a significant protective factor for children experiencing multiple adversity in their lives (Werner & Smith, 2001). Vulnerable students can be challenging students. They need more connection to school, not less. This goes well beyond the wearing of a school uniform and cheering on the school teams.

The other two environmental factors that promote resilience are having someone who believes in the best of you, thinks you are worth bothering about, and high expectations – not giving up on anyone. The figures suggest that the opposite is happening. This has potential consequences in promoting an intergenerational spiral of disadvantage and disaffection with impact on social exclusion in broader terms.

Marginalisation and exclusion

According to the latest available figures (DfE 2011) there were an estimated 5740 permanent exclusions from primary, secondary and all special schools in 2009/10 in the UK. Further details are given as follows:

- There were 279,260 fixed period exclusions from state funded secondary schools, 37,210 fixed period exclusions from primary schools and 14,910 fixed period exclusions from special schools.
- The average length of a fixed period exclusion in state-funded secondary schools was 2.5 days, for primary schools the average length of a fixed period exclusion was 2.1 days.
- The permanent exclusion rate for boys was approximately four times higher than that for girls. The fixed period exclusion rate for boys was almost three times higher than that for girls.
- Pupils with SEN with statements are around eight times more likely to be permanently excluded than those pupils with no SEN.
- Children who are eligible for free school meals are around four times more likely to receive a permanent exclusion and three times more likely to receive a fixed

period exclusion than children who are not eligible for free school meals.

● Nearly 900 children are suspended from school for abuse and assault every school day.

These figures are likely to be underestimates of children and young people not fully attached to school. Anecdotal evidence from both parents and teachers suggest that in order to keep suspension figures low, students may sometimes be marked as sick rather than as suspended, or informally asked to stay at home for a few days to 'cool off'.

Although unacceptable behaviour should not be condoned, exclusion is based on a set of beliefs rather than the evidence of what is effective practice. A review of zero tolerance policies in the US by the American Psychological Association (Skiba et al., 2006), found that schools that quickly exclude students not only perpetuate a 'school to prison pipeline' for disadvantaged youth but that both behavioural standards and academic attainment deteriorate rather than improve throughout the school. This is attributed to reduced trust and relational quality between students and staff. This study also concludes that other ways of approaching behavioural issues are more effective, including promoting stronger community connections and restorative practices. This is mirrored in the scoping study on approaches to student well-being for the Australian Federal government (Noble et al., 2008).

School connectedness
School connectedness can be defined as the belief by students that both peers and teachers in the school care about their learning and about them as individuals (CDC, 2009).

Students are more likely to engage in healthy behaviours and succeed academically when they feel connected to school. The National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health in the US looked at the impact of protective factors on adolescent health and well-being among more than 36,000

7th to 12th grade students (Blum et al., 2002). School connectedness was found to be the strongest protective factor for both boys and girls to decrease substance use, school absenteeism, early sexual initiation, violence, and risk of unintentional injury such as drinking and driving. In this same study, school connectedness was second in importance, after family connectedness, as a protective factor against emotional distress, disordered eating, and both suicidal ideation and attempts.

Research has also demonstrated a strong relationship between school connectedness and educational outcomes, including school attendance, staying in school longer; and higher grades and classroom test scores (Klem & Connell, 2004).

The Wingspread Declaration on School Connections (2003) identified four factors that influence school connectedness. These are: adult support; belonging to positive peer groups; commitment to education; and the quality of the school environment. The US Department for Health and Human Services also produced a document that outlines 60 strategies that could help pupils feel more connected to school. Most of these are minor adaptations in the school system rather than major structural or policy changes. As such they are actions that educational psychologists could well be involved with if not initiate. The following are the overarching six categories of suggested interventions

1. Create decision-making processes that facilitate student, family, and community engagement; academic achievement; and staff empowerment.
2. Provide education and opportunities to enable families to be actively involved in their children's academic and school life.
3. Provide students with the academic, emotional, and social skills necessary to be actively engaged in school.
4. Use effective classroom management and teaching methods to foster a positive learning environment.
5. Provide professional development and support for teachers and other school

staff to enable them to meet the diverse cognitive, emotional, and social needs of children and adolescents.

6. Create trusting and caring relationships that promote open communication among administrators, teachers, staff, students, families, and communities.

Using a Circle Solutions philosophy and pedagogy to increase inclusive belonging
Circle Solutions addresses at least four of the above and gives teachers pratical strategies to change the emotional climate in their classroom, increase inclusion and promote the pro-social behaviours that some students struggle to develop. Students who have a sense of commitment to the group are more likely to choose pro-social behaviour than those who are marginalised and see little reason to care about others. The Circle Solutions (CS) philosophy has developed from the better-known Circle Time. Circle Time is a pedagogy that is primarily used in schools to promote social and emotional learning. (Mosley & Tew, 1999; Roffey, 2006) The developments are in the additional principles that underpin the approach, the specifics of the facilitation and the emphasis on the application of the CS philosophy in all aspects of classroom interaction. Although Circle Solutions sessions and activities happen in a specific time slot this broader application is needed for sustainable outcomes (McCarthy, 2009). The CS principles and their praxis are:

Equality and democracy: Everyone is given the opportunity to participate and speak if they wish. Many activities are structured to enable students to discover what they have in common – their shared humanity. The teacher as facilitator does not 'stand and deliver' but participates in all activities as an equal with students. If one member of a group is asked to give feed back for others to save time, the rest are asked if they have anything to add.

Inclusion: It is the right of each person in the class to participate in circle sessions, they are never denied this right because of their behaviour outside the circle. Vulnerable young people need more opportunities for connection, not less. If their behaviour during the circle infringes the principles they are given the choice to stay and abide by these or take some time out to reflect and then return when they are ready. Conversations with the facilitator take place quietly whilst others are engaged in activities. No-one is shown up in front of others and the emphasis is on pupil choice, not teacher control. This appears to be effective as students enjoy Circles and are motivated to be there. Activities are rarely dependent on a high level of academic skills or take place within small co-operative groups. Although children with English as a second language and those with special educational needs tend to take longer than others to participate, the framework promotes their eventual inclusion.

Respect: Not putting anyone down either verbally or non-verbally. This means listening when one person is speaking, not laughing unkindly or making faces at what others say. Pupils are routinely mixed up out of their usual social groups and interact with others. It is not respectful to refuse to work with anyone else. This principle inhibits stereotyping. Feedback from students is that they enjoy the opportunity to get to know others they don't usually speak with (personal communications; McCarthy, 2009).

Safety and choice: No-one has to speak if they choose not to. It takes some students a while to become comfortable and confident in sharing their ideas. They are, however, watching, listening and learning and it would seem that pupils speak when they are ready. Circles may address issues, but never incidents so that there is no blame attached. Discussions are not opportunities to self-disclose but to share thoughts of issues of concern to all. There is no fear of 'losing' as activities are not individually competitive.

Agency: Pupils are not told what to think or do but given structured opportunities to discuss and address important issues with others. This makes it more likely they will take some group responsibility for abiding by decisions. The role of the teacher/facilitator is to be in charge of proceedings but avoid taking control.

Positivity: Participants are focused on what they would like to aim for in their class for themselves and others – including what they would like to feel about being there. This is different from addressing problems. The aim is to identify both individual and class strengths and explore ways to build on these. We know that predominantly positive feelings encourage both problem solving skills and collaboration (Fredrickson, 2009). CS promotes a sense of belonging by fostering positive feelings, including shared laughter.

Developing evidence

More than 100 schools across all States and Territories in Australia have introduced this intervention with positive feedback from teachers who are noticing positive changes in class ethos, relational skills and problem-solving (personal communications; Wellbeing Australia, 2011; Circle Solutions Network, 2012). Students as a group are taking increased responsibility – especially in addressing bullying by increasing inclusion. In Australia many school counsellors (in most States the equivalent of educational psychologists) have taken a trainer programme so they can introduce this into their schools.

Preliminary evidence of the efficacy of this intervention/approach has been provided by two student research projects (unpublished), a nationwide survey on well-being, and a small study that was carried out for the Department of Education, New South Wales (McCarthy, 2009). In the latter 18 undergraduate students, many training to be teachers or work as early years professionals, were trained as Circle facilitators and placed into eight Greater Western Sydney schools as part of a 'Learning through Community Service' module. Here they supported Circles in whichever way the school determined. Their placement began with a needs analysis on social and emotional issues within the classes to which they were assigned. The student facilitators were surprised at the lack of social skills in many pupils that interfered with both their learning and their integration: *'Children knew little about their feelings and how to regulate emotions. They acted on impulse rather than logic, and lacked assertive skills. There were deficiencies in communication and little awareness of or relationships with others.'* (Student facilitator, cited in McCarthy, 2009)

During the following 10 weeks student facilitators spent 100 hours in the school running sessions, making materials, supporting teachers and observing changes. Assessment for the module was four submissions over four months on aspects of their experiences, including literature reviews and reflections. Their final portfolios were submitted with evidence of their experiences and their own learning. This included interviews within the community setting, observational data and other material. With students' permission their portfolios were analysed and written up after marking and grading (McCarthy, 2009).

Although there were major differences between schools the pupils in all eight schools invariably became engaged during Circle sessions and changes were notes in their social behaviour.

> *'We covered a lot on friendship which I think eventually brought the class together more. They began to think about their class and the importance of forming bonds within the classroom. I think the atmosphere in the classroom began to change in regards to friendship and classroom connectedness.'* (Student facilitator School 8)

Changes were observed if teachers were not involved but these did not last nor generalise.

> *'In relation to teachers not much was discussed in terms of what we were doing with circle time, they seemed disinterested and didn't seem to*

value what we had to offer… the children… seem to forget what was done during circle time and resort to old behaviours of being ego centric, not getting along with others or not thinking about how others might feel.' (Student facilitator School 6)

It needs a whole class, if not a whole school approach for optimal outcomes. Teachers have to believe that social and emotional issues are not only critical but they can change behaviour. Circles have limited impact if the relational values are not embedded within everyday interaction. This is also reflected in earlier research (Taylor, 2003).

Indigenous communities across the world are often vulnerable and marginalised. In Australia they comprise about two-and-a-half per cent of the population but make up nearly 24 per cent of the prison population. Retention at school is improving but still a long way behind other Australians at 23 per cent (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2008).

The CS philosophy has underpinned work with groups of Aboriginal girls aged between 12 and 17 years in a city in regional New South Wales. The girls work together to identify and work on projects that will be of benefit to the community in some way. They explore the parameters of positive relationships and take part in activities that raise issues of give them a sense of leadership and connection with others, both at school and within the wider community.

The three high schools involved have seen improvement in levels of confidence, engagement and resilience in the girls and as a consequence have adopted the Circle philosophy across all schools. Teachers are noticing a difference to the relationships they are having with pupils, as well as between the young people. The programme and its implementation is currently being evaluated.

The work of educational psychologists in promoting inclusive belonging

Educational psychologists (EPs) already act as advocates for vulnerable children, sometimes battling for inclusion when other dominant voices are pressing to 'get rid' of the 'problem'. Often teacher well-being and the rights of other children are given as a rationale to suspend and exclude. It may be a struggle to persuade schools that there are viable alternatives. There are a number of possible ways in which EPs might take affirmative action both as individuals and as a profession.

Educational psychologists work with evidence-based practice. The profession as a whole needs to keep the evidence at the fore-front of discussion. We know what works for vulnerable children and should be raising the evidence wherever we can.

'The school's philosophy, a supportive and stable school environment, and strong relationships between the school and parents were found to be important factors in preventing very young children from being excluded'. (Ofsted, 2009)

Gladwell (2000), however, talks about the 'stickiness' of messages in getting ideas to take hold. By this he means delivering memorable messages that resonate with what people want in their lives. Time is an issue in education, so it is helpful to get teachers to see that what you are suggesting is doing things a little differently rather than doing more.

We also know that addressing the well-being of children in schools in general also supports the well-being of teachers (Roffey, 2012b). It is in teachers' interests to promote inclusive belonging for all.

Student well-being is also connected with learning outcomes and pro-social behaviour (Noble et al, 2008). All schools want students engaged, so pedagogy matters. Educational psychologists are experts on teaching approaches but this is rarely part of their brief in schools. What opportunities might there be to raise the profile of this aspect of the profession?

EPs may be able to work at a systems level to promote the value and practice of restorative approaches to behaviour as an alternative to punitive sanctions and exclusions. This is not the 'soft' option but enables

people to repair the harm they have caused and reconnect them to the school community. They are also well placed to deliver training on how teachers might develop constructive and more effective relationships with challenging children and what might be involved to foster a sense of connectedness and engagement for all stakeholders in a school.

At an individual level, EPs can intervene early to help schools identify whether behaviour can be addressed by teaching or whether there are developmental issues that need assessment. It is also worth considering who in the school might have some belief in the best of the student, be able to see potential where others do not and be prepared to identify and develop strengths, whatever these may be (Roffey, 2011). This person could be the catalyst for increasing school connection. If finding someone who meets this criterion presents a challenge, what does this say about the quality of relationships throughout the entire school and the way vulnerable and challenging children are positioned? When children are marginalised or simply labelled as 'naughty' this reinforces how other children, teachers and parents perceive the child as 'not one of us', respond negatively to their needs and boosts a downward educational trajectory (McClure et al., 2008).

Summary and conclusions

It is the socio-political context that determines much of what happens in schools (Parsons, 2005). The current UK discourse constructs 'good' schools and teachers as those who have strong discipline and get high grades. Those students who are vulnerable, struggle with their learning and perhaps infringe strict behavioural expectations may be positioned as 'not a good fit' with the school's ethos or the Government's priorities.

When dominant discourses are negative towards such students, it may be hard for individuals to counter with a more constructive view and in schools where an authoritarian ethos prevails, positive statements may be dismissed as evidence of a willingness to be 'soft' on students rather than ensure that appropriate discipline is upheld. The accepted view may be that students who challenge the system need to adapt to the expected standards or be asked to leave to maintain the 'good' reputation of the school.

However, where there has been conscious and sustained school development on well-being, respect and inclusion for all, the opposite may be true (Roffey, 2010).

> *'Negativity about the kids is rare. It is taboo to talk negatively about the kids. When teachers do sometimes say something negative others will give a different view. It is not seen as a cool thing to do.'* (High School Teacher)

Pupils need support to identify their personal strengths and be surrounded by educational professionals that do not position them as unworthy, lacking in skills, qualities or potential. They need to feel they are acknowledged, welcomed, valued and included, especially when life outside school presents them with multiple challenges.

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