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An Exploration of Teacher Perceptions of Mental Health Indicators within the Construct of School Connectedness

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An Exploration of Teacher Perceptions of Mental Health Indicators within the Construct of School Connectedness

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Abstract

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Mental health is an area schools have been increasingly asked to address. Protective factors to mitigate concerning mental health outcomes include those of building relationships, helping students feel safe and secure in their schools, and setting high expectations. These are encompassed within the construct of school connectedness, which is a burgeoning area of research and is linked to an increase of positive mental health outcomes in students. This study utilized a survey to determine the strength in relationship between teacher perceptions of ability to construct school connectedness and the importance of doing so. The study also examined variations in current practices of connecting students to school across Preschool through High School teachers. Findings suggest that there is a strong relationship (r_s=.427; p = .083) between teachers perceived abilities in constructing connectedness and the importance in doing so. Findings also suggest that teachers are currently implementing activities throughout their daily routines that positively foster student connectedness. Implications for the field and educational leaders are discussed.

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Chapter 1
The Problem

School connectedness is shown to be a predictive variable for psychological functioning; impeding future concerns and mitigating already prevailing ones. There is a strong link between mental health and academic outcomes giving the construct continued relevance as it aligns with visions of many school districts, in helping students' thrive to become contributing members of society. The responsibility of helping all students' thrive rests on all educational members shoulders and arguably the heaviest on teachers who have the accessibility to students and can reach them each and every day. Unfortunately teachers often express concern in being equipped to support students in all capacities including psychological and emotional needs. Implications for adding to the research in this area include offering a better understanding of how teachers perceive their abilities to connect students to school, the level of importance given to this concept, and recognizing if and how it is currently being constructed in practice.

Introduction of the Problem

Increasing attention has been paid to youth mental health as concerns have been on the rise. Increasing recognition has been given to factors that contribute to mental health issues, alleviate concerns, or support recovery of mental illnesses (Murray-Harvey, 2010; Whitley, 2010; WHO, 2009). As mental health conversations and research continues a more recent development has been the role schools play in supporting mental health outcomes of all students, several protective agents are highlighted in the research, with a more recent approach being through school connectedness.

Mental health refers to an individual's overall psychological well being, impacting his or her ability to cope with stressors, recognize ability levels, and contribute

to the greater good of society (Murray-Harvey, 2010; WHO, 2009). Mental health is the foundation of everyday living and functioning; making it overly concerning that there has been a steady increase of mental health needs in today's youth (Koller and Bertel, 2006; Brown, Dahlbeck, Sparkman-Barnes, 2006). Statistics support the notion that anywhere from 20% to 30% of youth have reported mental health concerns, making it crucial to find prevention and intervention strategies to decrease mental health issues (Brown, Gafni, Roberts, Bryne, and Majumdar, 2004). In youth, mental health impacts functioning within the educational setting, and has the potential to alter academic and emotional outcomes, placing increased pressure on educators to support students in this area (Farahmand, Grant, Polo, & Duffy, 2011; Koller and Bertel, 2006).

Youth spend a majority of their time in the school setting, which has led researchers and caregivers to start emphasizing the role schools and educators have in supporting youth well being as it is directly associated with positive student outcomes (Bond, Butler, Thomas, Carlin, Glover, Bowes & Patton, 2007; Lapan, Wells, Petersen, & McCann, 2014; Paternite & Johnston, 2005; Renshaw, Long, & Cook, 2015). Bronfenbrenner's (1977) ecological theory drives home the notion that youth are highly susceptible to influences within their environments, providing a framework of understanding for why schools are practical settings to implement changes for and to target mental health.

Mental health can be improved when risk factors are mitigated by protective factors, increasing youths' resilience (Bond et al., 2007; Lapan, et al., 2014; Joyce, 2015). Educational settings can focus on key protective factors such as increasing feelings of safety and security, engagement, relationships, and belonging to help direct students

toward promising paths of opportunity (Farahmand, et al., 2011; Lapan et al., 2014). Many of the well-known protective factors associated with positive student outcomes can be targeted through increasing students' connectedness to school. Connectedness is a concept associated with higher graduation rates, less emotional distress, fewer problem behaviors in school, and fewer risk behaviors outside of school (Lapan et al., 2014; Joyce, 2015; Wingspread, 2004). School connectedness is the belief by students that they belong to school and adults in the school community care about their learning and them as individuals (Lapan, et al., 2014; Renshaw, Long, Cook, 2014; Waters & Cross, 2010). Connectedness to school promotes positive outcomes associated with wellbeing, academic achievement and overall behaviors in students (Renshaw, et al., 2014).

Connectedness has been researched thoroughly as it relates to academic outcomes and has shown to be an important factor of school completion and reducing drop out rates (Hamilton, Wekerle, Paglia-Boak, Mann, 2012). The more recent research has shown that school connections not only lead to positive academic outcomes, but positive social-emotional functioning, and less participation in delinquent behaviors (Bond et al., 2007; Furlong, O'Brennan, and You, 2011; Hamilton et al., 2012; Joyce, 2015; Moffa, Dowdy, & Furlong, 2017; Perry & McIntire, 2001; Shochet, Dadds, Ham & Montague, 2006). Relationships, emotional well-being, anxiety and depression, and overall school satisfaction are a few of the non-academic outcomes that have been explored in the literature (Bond et al., 2007; Hamilton, et al., 2012; Joyce, 2015).

Connectedness holds within it common themes of positive relationships, perceptions of safety, feelings of belonging, and high teacher expectations. Each will be examined in the proposed research as it relates to highlighted outcomes for supporting

student well being through preventing mental health issues and even mitigating existing ones for youth who experience a great deal of adversity (Hamilton et al., 2012). It may only take a student to believe that adults at school care about him or her improve these outcomes (Furlong, et al., 2011).

School connectedness can be fostered in school communities through caring adults, positive behavior supports, curriculum targeting empathy and respect, and school-wide programs that emphasize the school as a learning community (Lester, et al, 2013; Moffa et al, 2017; Murray-Harvey, 2010; Lapan et al., 2014). School connectedness as a construct that can be influenced by teachers has been studied more recently, but still lacks depth and generalizability; therefore, support for ongoing analysis of this as a construct created and initialized by teachers is a needed addition (Blad, 2017; Moffa et al., 2017). This is justified in that a significant predictor of using practices is the perceived ability teachers have in using those skills to impact student performance, or their self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977; Tschannen-Moran, Hoy, and Hoy, 1998).

Moffa, et al. (2017) addresses the importance of assessing variables that can directly influence connectedness, amongst them is school staff. As with any school initiative, in order to influence the central agents of change, educational leaders must first build capacity and gain understanding of staffs' perceptions of ability and willingness to contribute to a shared vision (Whitley, 2010). Teachers display higher rates of implementation fidelity when they possess a certain array of skills that enables them to carry out expectations aligned with initiatives to meet needs of all learners (Shillingford & Karlin, 2014; Whitley, 2010).

A significant predictor of using skills for positive outcomes is the perceived ability teachers have in using those skills to impact student performance, or their self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977; Tschannen-Moran, Hoy, and Hoy, 1998). Self-efficacy scales can provide vital information to guide later decisions around the training and sustainability of future practices (Bandura, 1977; Klassen et al., 2011; Tschannen-Moran et al., 1998; Whitley, 2010). Teacher perception of school connectedness is a lacking, yet much needed addition to this burgeoning area research making the aim of this study to help fill those gaps.

The research being conducted herein is being proposed because mental health has become a contemporary issue educators are being asked to focus on in the school setting, and educational leaders will continue to seek solutions for improving outcomes at the district and building levels. Ecological, social learning, and social cognitive theories have set a foundation for the importance of examining mental health in schools as well as the ability level and perceived importance of the key parties being asked to carry out such services (Bandura, 1977; Bronfenbrenner, 1977; Moffa, et al., 2017). To further explore the social merit behind this research the following questions on school connectedness are examined as they relate to mental health outcomes for youth.

Research Questions

The following research questions guide the current study:

1) What are teachers' perceived abilities in *constructing school connectedness* according to the 12 item *Teacher Self-Efficacy Scale for Constructing Student Connectedness to School (TSE-SC. See Appendix A.)* and how does it correlate with teachers' perceived

importance on the *Teacher Importance Scale for Constructing Student Connectedness to School* (*TIS-SC. See Appendix B.*)?

2) How do teachers implement practices in their classrooms to facilitate school connectedness and are universal supports (i.e. professional development, trainings, and programs) in place to support this?

3) How does the perceived importance on the *TIS-SC* vary based on the grade level taught?

Operational Definitions

Mental Health: Refers to students' psychological, social, and emotional well-being in which individuals realize his or her own abilities, can cope with stressors, and contribute to his or her own community (Murray-Harvey, 2010; WHO, 2009).

Teacher Self-Efficacy: The belief a teacher has in his or her ability to meets the needs of students and influence student outcomes (Dicke et al., 2014; Klassen, et al., 2011; Tschannen-Moran et al, 1998). As defined through the *TSE-SC,* teacher self-efficacy for the purposes of this study refers to a teacher's ability to connect students to school as determined through the themes in the 12-item developed instrument.

School Connectedness Perceptions: The teachers belief that he/she can help student feel they belong to school and that adults in the school community care about their learning and about them as individuals (Lapan, et al., 2014; Waters & Cross, 2010). This will be determined through the perceptions from the teacher's response profile on the *TSE-SC* and *TIS-SC* instruments.

Demographic factors: These are defined by the instrumentation developed and include years of experience, how many students taught, areas of expertise, endorsements, grade

level taught, universal support from the school (i.e. professional development, trainings, or programs).

Framework

Student connectedness has been shown to be a construct predictive of positive academic and non-academic outcomes (Moffa, et al. 2017). Connectedness can be practically constructed within school settings and serves as a protective factor for a number of mental health problems (Lester et al., 2013; Pittman and Richmond, 2007; Moffa, et al., 2017). In examining ways to implement changes in schools it is necessary to look at the variables that will have the most impact on that change. Within the construct of school connectedness common themes of building relationships, fostering safe and secure environments, and having high expectation for students are factors that impact student outcomes (Joyce, 2015; Knesting and Waldron, 2006; Shochet, 2006). All school staff, but primarily teachers who see students each day, can foster school connectedness.

Providing a framework so each teacher can be successful in making a change is a critical factor. It is well known that teachers display higher rates of implementation fidelity when they possess a certain array of skills that enables them to carry out expectations aligned with initiatives to meet needs of all learners (Shillingford & Karlin, 2014). A significant predictor of using skills for positive outcomes is the perceived ability teachers have in using those skills to impact student performance, or their self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977; Tschannen-Moran, Hoy, and Hoy, 1998).

The examination of teacher self-efficacy in constructing student connectedness can aid educational leaders in having needs-focused conversations on building capacity,

enhancing teacher skills, and how to best generalize constructing connectedness to classroom practice. Capacity can best be built with a thorough understanding of where teachers perceive their current abilities in carrying out an initiative and the level of importance they give to it (Whitley, 2010).

Mental health concerns are on the rise and schools are being asked to address these concerns in addition to various other aspects of children's' life each impacts (Brown et al., 2004; Murray-Harvey, 2010; WHO, 2009)). Much of the research on mental health focuses on evidenced based strategies to reduce anxiety in students, intervene on behalf of students who show symptoms of attention disorders or oppositional disorders, and work to increase engagement (Knesting & Waldron, 2006; Koller & Bertel, 2006; Lindo, et al., 2014). The key findings in this research suggest that by pairing with outside service providers, mental health in schools can be more easily addressed. Other research focuses on what schools can do internally to improve mental health outcomes for students and a common findings is to increase student sense of belonging. Current research targets student perceptions of their feelings of connection to schools through self-report. Where there are deficiencies in the research are teacher perspectives and teacher input on the importance of building connectedness to schools.

By examining multiple aspects of teachers' perceived abilities in constructing connectedness we can better understand the conceptions and misconceptions of this phenomenon. Researchers and educational leaders will be able to better isolate key findings in order to build capacity within their school systems. Administrators can support teacher skill development and assist with strategies that can be used in the classroom to support improved feelings of connectedness.

Educational leaders play an essential role and in a study conducted by Iachini, Pitner, Morgan, Rhodes, (2016), which examined principal perspectives on school improvement needs. In this study mental health was identified as the primary concern, with 80.9% of participants noting it as such and with school mentoring and academic concerns being reported at a significantly lower rate. Out of the administrators interviewed for this study, many of them reported the need for more help identifying student mental health needs and issues. Administrators focused on mental health as it "interferes with effectiveness of delivering instruction." and therefore found it to be a primary need (Iachini et al, 2016).

Convergence of current research on this topic lends itself to future researchers helping to fill in the gaps. Research has looked at school connectedness from a student point of view, has examined the impact mental health has on student outcomes, and has highlighted school settings as a practical place to where mental health can be targeted. Through this examination gaps are found to exist in teacher perceptions of school connectedness and the importance they give it. The significance in helping to fill these gaps will be to capture a more foundational scope of understanding so educational leaders can build capacity for school connectedness and help it to be a sustained practice.

Significance of study

A comprehensive review of literature found no existing study addressing teacher perceptions of the importance of school connectedness as it compares to their belief in ability to construct it for their students. The purpose of this study is to help fill in those gaps and add to the growing body of research on school connectedness in order for

educational leaders to foster the development of it within their settings, starting with their teachers.

Mental health has become a contemporary issue educators are being asked to focus on in the school setting and educational leaders will continue to seek solutions for improving outcomes at the district and building levels. Ecological, social learning, and social cognitive theories have set a foundation for the importance of examining mental health in schools as well as the ability level and perceived importance of the key parties being asked to carry out such services (Bandura, 1977; Bronfenbrenner, 1977; Moffa, et al., 2017). The need to belong is one of the most fundamental human desires and when people have satisfaction in the areas of autonomy, competence, and relatedness, good health prevails (Waters & Cross, 2010).

Results from this study build educational leaders understanding of teacher perceptions of abilities so they can identify areas that can be targeted and enhanced upon within school settings. It also enables educational leaders to have conversations around making informed decisions to support teachers in effectively connecting students to school. Within the teaching profession this research can support the idea that teachers *do* have the skillset to support student mental health and can do so without having specialized training in the area. School connectedness is a less intimidating approach to mental health and fostering it will serve as a protective factor so future outcomes are improved and present concerns are not exacerbated.

Chapter 2
Overview of the Literature

The following literature review highlights the importance of the present study by reviewing the prevalence of mental health issues in today's youth. It focuses on literature that addresses the need for practical solutions to improve mental health outcomes in school settings. This will be justified through a theoretical framework that highlights student connectedness as one of the solutions and strategies for improving all students' outcomes. Links will be made to demonstrate that the construct of student connectedness has the potential to be viewed as a less daunting approach to mental health as it's themes of building relationships, helping students feel safe in school, and having high expectations may be practically construction in school. This is needed as teachers often report feeling unprepared and unskilled to handle concerns in this area.

The literature delves into how mental health is a burgeoning area of concern in schools and how school connectedness can be linked better outcomes. School connectedness is a construct that is heavily influenced by educators, although it is generally measured through student self-report. For that reason there is a need to explore additional perspectives, with an emphasis on the importance of teacher perspective and backing to create buy-in for sustainability of this construct in the classroom setting. Creating buy-in requires a baseline gathering of information on the level of ability teachers have applying a vision, which helps stakeholders guide future planning.

Mental Health and the School Setting

Mental health needs are an increasing concern across today's youth and educators are being called upon more than ever to help increase awareness and provide supports (Brown, Gafni, Roberts, Byrne & Majumdar, 2004; Murray-Harvey, 2010; WHO, 2009).

In the United States alone nearly 20% of children have a mental health problem that is diagnosable, that is approximately 1 in 5 students who experience signs and symptoms of a *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* identified disorder during the course of a year (Lindo, Taylor, Meany-Walen, Jayne, Gonzales & Jones, 2014; Repie, 2005). Almost 65% of those children will not receive the supports they need for recovery (Lindo et al., 2014). For the purposes of this research the definition of mental health referred to comes from Murray-Harvey (2010) and the World Health Organization (2009), mental health means a students' psychological, social, and emotional well-being in which the individual realizes his or her own abilities, copes with stressors, and contributes to his or her own community.

Positive mental health contrasts the nature of the world today where escalating job poverty, job loss, and income inequality threaten that very idea (Lapan et al., 2014). However, there is a need to determine how to increase those positive outcomes because positive mental health in students is linked to academic outcomes, lower risk behaviors, increased outcomes for disadvantaged youth, fewer drop out rates, and less emotional distress (Joyce, 2015; Knesting & Waldron, 2006; Renshaw, 2015; & Shochet, Dadds, Ham, & Montague, 2006).

Traditionally, mental health initiatives have come form mental health sectors other than educational settings (Whitley, 2010). However, recognition of the amount of time youth spend in the school setting and the amount of adult influence readily available guides researchers and caregivers to acknowledge the key role schools can and should play (Bond, et al., 2007; Lapan et al., 2014; Lindo, et al., 2014; Patalay, Giese, Stankovic, Curtin, Moltrecht, and Gondek, 2016; Joyce, 2015; & Renshaw et al., 2015).

Bronfenbrenner's (1977) ecological theory drives home this notion as it highlights that youth are highly susceptible to influences within their environments, providing a framework of understanding for why schools are practical settings to target mental health. Knesting & Waldron (2006) emphasize ecological theory in their research as it demonstrates the need to focus on the influence of schools on students' education and overall mental health.

Many researchers have examined the mental health and school setting relationship, amongst them is Repie (2005) who nationally sampled participants perspectives of mental health issues in their respective school establishments. From the 413 respondents emerged common themes that allowed researchers to conclude that mental health issues are perceived as causing emotional strain, impeding on student learning opportunities, and impeding success in later life. Mental health issues in this study were often found to manifest themselves in the classroom through overt behaviors such as aggression or disruption and more covert behaviors such as emotional stress, anxiety, and withdrawal.

Children who do not receive support are at risk for social, emotional, and educational problems as life progresses. Therefore, early intervention and prevention is critical and many researchers and policy maker suggest school settings are the best place to start these supports (Lindo et al., 2014). A study by Whitley (2010) focused on the mental health intervention and prevention in Canadian schools. At the time of this study prevalence rates of youth experiencing mental health illnesses in Canada were similar to what is reported nationally within the United states, 15%-20%; and those illnesses were linked to the 2nd leading cause of death in this nation; death by suicide. There is no

question as to why mental health prevention and intervention is currently being discussed in all corners of the world and in educational establishments. Mental health programs traditionally to be primarily for students who received special education services, however it has become more of a focus for all students as the research overwhelmingly supports that mental health program increase positive outcomes (Weist et al., 2007; Whitley, 2010). As educators are realizing the direct link between student well being and academic success they are seeking practical solutions to the increased prevalence (Han & Weiss, 2005). A burgeoning area of research has highlighted school connectedness, which can be the practical and universal approach to mental health educators are looking for.

Improving Mental Health Outcomes through School Connectedness

Discussions on improving mental health outcomes have shifted from being primarily supported through outside establishments to supports now being incorporated within the school setting. With popular press providing evidence that both scholars and caregivers believe well being to be a primary outcome of public schools, schools are under more pressure than ever to address mental health head on with fewer resources to do so (Renshaw, et al., 2015, Weist, Lindsey, Moore, & Slade, 2006).

Amongst many variables, improved mental health seems to be attributed to student report of a sense of strong relationships, sense of belonging, sense of high expectations, a warm social environment, and feeling respected by adults and students in the building (Moffa et al., 2017; Reinke, et al., 2011; Renshaw et al., 2015). This was found to be the case for even the most vulnerable student populations. Knesting &

Waldron (2006) examined factors of what they determined to be critical to students who persisted in school and who were initially identified as being at risk for dropping out.

Of the 17 students they used for the study the main critical element that kept students in school was forming meaningful connections. According to these students' self report, support for persisting came from a teacher or staff member. Students reported essential components of support given by these staff members that included; communication of care, understanding of the student's life outside of school, high expectations, and they were perceived as safe havens during the day (Knesting & Waldron, 2006). While students attributed success to caring relationships, teachers reported that programs were the reason students were successful. In truth, programs may help connect students to adults, but the programs enough were and are not significant enough to keep students in school (Knesting & Waldron, 2006). Adults in which students fostered these connections with provided explicit feedback to students on which behaviors hindered student success. They then provided critical support, encouragement, and acceptance to students who reported they did not frequently find this at school (Knesting & Waldron, 2006).

In addition to those at risk for drop out, Shochet et al. (2006) supported the notion that connections are amongst the greatest predictors of mental health outcomes when they examined variables that were predictive of future depressive and anxiety outcomes in 12 – 14 year olds. This longitudinal study found that students who reported higher levels of connectedness as measured by the *Psychological Sense of School Membership Scale (PSSM)* had less emotional distress, less suicidality, and less substance abuse. Feeling of school connectedness negatively predicted depressive symptoms a year later for boys and

girls, and anxiety for girls, it also predicted positive general functioning for boys. Implications from these studies show that school connectedness may serve as a protective factor for future mental health outcomes (Shochet, et al., 2006).

A study by Joyce (2015) examined factors that impacted sexual minority youth in schools compared to peers. It was found that sexual minority youth reported feeling less safe and secure in their school communities than peers. This was correlated with increased depressive symptoms and more psychological distress than compared to peers who reported higher levels of safety, self-esteem, self worth, and well-being. The study highlights the differences between school sense of safety in minority youth and peers and shows the significance of constructing safe communities so all students can thrive. Relationships with teachers have a significant impact on students who face maltreatment and adversities within their families as well (i.e. neglect, abuse, trauma). These students tend to be more at risk for isolation and lack of belonging, but these effects can be mitigated through fostering a sense of belonging in their respective school communities (Hamilton et al., 2002).

Anderman (2002) brought additional research to this area as he sought to examine belongingness as it related to student outcomes. School level and individual level variables were examined. Findings suggest that individuals with higher levels of school connectedness had increased optimism and lower levels of problem behaviors and depression, which was measured given a brief depressive symptoms measure. School level variables were also found to highly correlate with sense of belonging and since they are environmental in nature the environment and context can be reformed. In addition to

improving individual outcomes, this study also highlights the idea that schools, as a learning environment, can alter their climates to better meet student needs.

The positive protective factors highlighted in the research above, such as feelings of safety, relationships, and high expectations are all incorporated within the construct of school connectedness, which is the belief by students that they belong to school and that adults in the school community care about their learning and about them as individuals (Lapan, et al., 2014; Waters & Cross, 2010).

In regards to mental health connectedness was initially researched in the context of school retention and drop out and since then has been found to be linked to sense of belonging, self-esteem, internal regulation, motivation, and achievement. Researchers such as Hagborg (1994) and Isrealashvili (1997) have found that positive sense of school membership predicted future successes. Additionally, it was found by Furlong et al. (2003) that it was linked to self-esteem, self-efficacy, and academic achievement. In the past, school connectedness has primarily focused on academic outcomes, with more recent research examining the association between this construct and psychological and behavioral problems it has been explored more heavily within the context of mental health.

Youth who feel connected to their schools are better protected from risk factors and have more positive in-school outcomes. It is found to be the strongest protective factor for promoting positive academic and nonacademic outcomes for youth, not only those who have risk factors stacked against them (Hamilton, et al., 2012; Joyce, 2015; Knesting & Waldron, 2006; Lapan et al., 2014). This construct is arguably most beneficial to elementary students who can benefit from the protection connections bring

and adolescents as they begin to rely less on family and start their individuation process by connecting with new found peer groups, most typically found in schools (Shochet, et al., 2006).

Battistich, Schaps & Wilson (2004) examined the effects the Child Development Project (CDP) had on elementary students, who were then followed up with during their middle school years. This project was designed to promote resilience and reduce risk in youth. Overall, students who were in the program showed more pro-social behaviors, had more engagement in school, and were identified as having fewer problem behaviors than their counterparts who were not part of the CDP. A critical component of this project is helping elementary schools become caring communities. The focus on collaborative learning and promotion of positive development places emphasis on prevention vs. reaction to already developing concerns (Battistich, et al., 2004). This program, over the course of this four-year study, impacted positive sense of school community, school related attitudes, and a decrease in problem behaviors. It was concluded in this study that students who were involved in CPD in elementary school appeared to be better connected to school, which is positively associated with a myriad of outcomes (Battistich, et al., 2004). This study further highlighted that when students in younger grades feel better connected to school, they will continue to report higher sense of belonging into their later school years.

Studies have repeatedly shown the strong link between school connectedness and a reduction in risk accumulation as it relates to overall child adjustment across all ages (Anderman, 2002; Chan et al., 2011; Hamilton, et al. 2012; Ito, 2011; Lapan et al., 2014; & Wu et a. 2011). Outcomes from Hamilton et al. (2012) showed the direct association

with the concept of school connectedness and students from troubled home environments. School connectedness was significantly associated with fewer symptoms of psychological distress for these youth. School connectedness is multi-faceted, it encompasses the various themes of belongingness, strong relationships with teachers, belief that adults have high expectations, belief that school is a place of safety and security, and belief that all students are treated in a fair manner (Anderman, 2002; Chan et al., 2011; Hamilton, et al. 2012; Ito, 2011; Lapan et al., 2014; & Wu et a. 2011). School connectedness involves participation of students, programs, and educational policies, and most importantly it is a construct that teachers can contribute significantly to (Lau, Lee, Tin-Yan, 2011; Roffey, 2011).

Teachers as Central Agents

Teachers represent the most powerful force in facilitating positive students outcomes in schools (Jimerson & Haddock, 2015). In a special topic section of the *School Psychology Quarterly,* Jimerson and Haddock (2015) examined six articles that highlighted the importance of teaching factors that contribute to student outcomes and discovered 9 key factors as reiterated by Marzano (2007) that impacted teacher effectiveness. Amongst these 9 factors many support the need for teachers to foster school connectedness; celebrating successes, engaging students, establishing relationships, and communicating high expectations. Teachers are ideal due to the exposure they have to multiple students.

Other staff members who have training in mental health are often associated with this work, but are burdened with many tasks, which are seemingly unrelated to the mental health field as Lapan et al. (2014) examined in recent research. The role counselors' play

in fostering school connectedness for all students was examined in the 2014 student. It highlights counselors as central agents for promoting protective factors and minimizing risk in student environments, but the barrier is the limited time face-to-face time they are allotted to students (Lapan et al., 2014). The quality counseling one would expect to be provided in a school setting is directly contrasted by what does happen due to the need for counselors to provide guidance lessons, perform administrative duties, implement school-wide programs, and work with multiple at-risk students within a given day, therefore some of the responsibility can be shared with classroom teachers to better support success. (Lapan, et al., 2014; Lindo et al, 2014).

Teachers are critical in mental health initiatives as they are the central change agents in schools. They have access to students each day throughout the academic year and are often the ones being asked to implement classroom level interventions to improve mental health outcomes and prevent crises that could originate from presenting mental health concerns (Bond et al., 2007; Lapan, et al., 2014). Because of teacher availability and exposure to multiple students on a daily basis, teachers are a significant and determining factor in promoting school connectedness. Teachers have a vital role in enhancing connectedness through classroom support, caring, facilitation and modeling of self-awareness, and having close relationships to student while maintaining high expectations. (Lau, et al., 2011). When teachers foster strong relationships with their students then students are more likely to engage in effective learning, demonstrate adaptive social behaviors, and perform better academically (Lindo et al., 2014).

Although this construct can be fostered in school settings, teachers often report feeling unprepared to handle work stressors beyond instructional needs for students;

including misbehaviors, systemic expectations, mastering new techniques, mental health, and meeting the diverse needs of all learners (Dicke, Marsh, Parker & Kunter, 2014; Eroglu & Unlus, 2015; Matheson & Shriver, 2005). Therefore, it is important to study this construct through the lens of teachers so educational leaders can provide support to improve or sustain practice. When teachers are trained in and have the skills to facilitate school connectedness they will be better able to manage behavioral difficulties and respond to the diverse needs todays youth display (Lindo et al., 2014).

Involving teachers in educational research is critical as they play dual roles of participants and researchers themselves. Studying connectedness through a teacher lens starts with and understanding of their perceived ability in fostering connectedness within their classrooms and schools. This perceived ability is self-efficacy.

Self-efficacy has been studied for a number of decades. It is the self-belief individuals have in relation to their abilities to undertake a specific task and to do so successfully (Bandura, 1977; Bullock**,** Coplan, & Bosacki, 2015; Dicke et al., 2014; Klassen et al., 2011; Tschannen-Moran, 2007). A growing body of research has looked at teacher efficacy and the positive influence it has on student academic and non-academic outcomes in the educational setting. Self-efficacy has been examined as it relates to perceived abilities in classroom management, instructional strategies, and student achievement (Bullock, et al, 2015, Fantuzzo et al., 2012). Although studies have been limited beyond this scope and within education, several studies have studied the variables that seem to impact self-efficacy beliefs the most. Predictors found to influence teacher self-efficacy include experience, training and education, and school climate.

Bullock et al. (2015) sought to explore some of the primary predictors of teacher self-efficacy for classroom management for early childhood educators through the examination of the teacher's role, experience, and personality. Each of these variables was found to be a predictor of self-efficacy, with years of experience and personality characteristics as having the most positive relationship. Teacher self-efficacy has been associated with persistence, enthusiasm, commitment and instructional behavior, as well as positive student outcomes (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2001). Higher efficacy beliefs are associated greater levels of planning and organization, stronger relationships with students, and more time spent with difficult and vulnerable student populations (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2001). Jong, Mainhard, Tartwijk, Veldman, Verloop, Wubbels (2014) examined critical variables that impact student-teacher relationships in pre-service teachers. The findings suggested that amongst various personality traits, self-efficacy was also a top contender.

Research by Tschannen-Moran et al. (1998) and Mohamadi & Asadzadeh (2012) have examined teachers' confidence in ability and the link to outcomes. Perception of ability can come through three ways according to Bandura (1997), 1) *mastery experiences,* which are the most important of efficacy information. When teachers perceive their performance and contributing to performance success they have higher belief of their abilities and vice versa, 2) *vicarious experiences,* which help to develop efficacy by observing others perform a task. The more the individual identifies with the model the greater impact on efficacy, 3) *verbal or Social persuasion,* which help develop efficacy based on feedback, encouragement, praise, or lack of support and criticism. In the context of this research, teachers' efficacy will likely be highly impacted through

parent, student, and administrative feedback. Educational leaders play a large role in social persuasion as it relates to self-efficacy, making it worth the time to explore perceptions within the construct of school connectedness and how the foundation for building capacity will be set.

Building Capacity: Implications for Educational Leaders

Behavior supports and mental health initiatives are consistently identified as two areas school leaders highlight as being priority for change (Iachini et al., 2016; McIntosh et al., 2016). Specific to behavior issues, McIntosh et al. (2016) highlight the role principals play in building capacity for universal supports. As with any initiative, principals play a critical role in influencing student outcomes and teacher outcomes and they are often the ones who support the adoption, implementation, and sustainability of initiatives. Actions from teachers are very much so driven by and related to principal's actions (Iachini et al., 2016; McIntosh et al., 2016; Whitley, 2010).

Iachini et al., (2016) examined principal perceptions on broader school improvement efforts such as student need, teacher need, and over all learning supports as they related to mental health, family engagement and out-of-school time opportunities. Their research aimed to address mental health as a core contributor to overall school improvement and the emphasis was on variables that may promote or impede student learning (Iachini, et al., 2016). The initial survey in this study highlighted that over 80% of administrators surveyed found behavioral and mental health needs to be amongst the greatest in their district for both teachers and students. The follow up interview format of this study lent itself to more in-depth conversation on individual principals perspectives in this area and highlighted the need for additional mental health workers in the school

district to support student need and development (Iachini, et al., 2016). This research study reiterates the importance of such initiatives that are starting to become higher priorities within the educational setting.

In the context of implementing Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS), McIntosh et al (2016) studied the factors that influence administrator's decision to support and build capacity for a practice. In this study five key factors are indicated as increasing likelihood that an initiative will be adopted. These factors included; first, that administrators must see the program being implemented as a solution to an existing problem, second, it must be compatible with ones own beliefs, values, and experiences; third, stakeholders must support implementation and practice; fourth, that implementation begins with a small cohort and then expands to whole systems; and finally, outcomes of the initiative must be visible (Petty & Wegener, 1998; McIntosh, et al., 2016). This aligns well with the research on factors that contribute to overall student achievement.

A prominent research when it comes to identifying variables that impact student achievement is John Hattie. In his book Visible Learning he synthesizes 800 meta-analyses and summarizes outcomes in a practical, ready to use manner. In this book Hattie (2009) identifies 6 critical factors that contribute to student achievement; the child, the home, the school, curriculum, teacher, and teaching approaches. In regards to the present study, teacher and school factors are the most critical. Specifically, the examination of how school-wide visions can be implemented with specific variables related to the teacher in the classroom.

Hattie (2009) ascertains through a series of 800 meta-analyses that schools are only effective to the extent in which they have effective teachers. It is rare that effective

teachers are simply hired from day one; therefore, school leaders are amongst the most important factors that can contribute to this change. In the review meta-analyses it was found that principals who involved teachers in the design and implementation of new strategies found themselves in a school with greater student outcomes. Teachers who were in schools and were contributors to change had students who faired better than schools where the teachers were suppose to be driven by decisions in a non-collaborative manner (Hattie, 2009). With this knowledge it is evident that educational leaders play a critical role in implementation of changes, but they must include teachers for it to be successful, which is why building capacity, while time consuming is a necessary step.

Capacity can best be built with a thorough understanding of where teachers perceive their current abilities in carrying out an initiative and the level of importance they give to it (Whitley, 2010). Capacity building can be approached in many ways. Whitley (2010) highlight a few, 1) establishing an infrastructure, 2) providing trainings to create buy-in, 3) develop evidence through data, and 4) create committee to support future planning. A shared vision starts with a shared understanding. Knowledgeable school leadership is essential in supporting initiatives for school improvement, therefore, when building capacity for mental health with universal supports in place that focus on connectedness, principal knowledge of the topic is beneficial. Knowledgeable school leadership is instrumental and especially in supporting new initiatives such as mental health programs in school. By having a shared understanding of school connectedness administrators will better be able to initiate trainings and build capacity for improvement (Whitley, 2010).

While teachers play an integral role in supporting connectedness and improving mental health outcomes, educational leaders can play the role in better providing targeted training for educators to support students social/emotional and behavioral needs (Weist, Lindsey, Moore & Slade, (2006). Administrative support is critical as many teachers report leaving the profession due to student needs beyond instruction, this was identified in a study by Lui and Meyer (2005) who completed an analysis of data from the National Center for Education Statistics and concluded that over six thousand teachers reported discipline problems as a major reason for leaving the profession. With mental health being identified as one of the greatest student, teacher, and school needs, the impact the present study can have on schools may support positive implementation of changes to support mental health outcomes and support teachers in intentionally using practices to do so.

Chapter 3
Method

Teacher input and perspective is instrumental in building capacity and sustaining initiatives in school settings. In current research, school connectedness has primarily been studied through the lens of student self report. Teacher perceptions are minimally examined, making it a necessary area of exploration in regards to this topic.

Participants

School connectedness is important at all ages; therefore the research questions were not formed to address specific grade levels (i.e. elementary, middle/high school), but sought to target teacher perceptions across all grade levels and examine differences. Participants were chosen based on the willingness of school administrators to have teachers within their districts voluntarily complete the surveys. All participants were recruited from schools in Southwest Iowa. These schools were selected from a list of 48 districts possible districts within the region. Demographics of these districts ranged from a student enrollment of 450 in the entire district to 2,000 students in one district building. Teachers were the intended respondents and it was expected they would have various teaching endorsements, specialties, and experiences. A return rate of approximately 40 surveys was expected at the time the research was designed.

Instrument Development

For the purposes of this study, recall that the variables of teachers perceived efficacy in constructing school connectedness, teachers perceived importance of constructing school connectedness, and demographics were focused on. The following highlights the instruments developed for the present study and the exploration of the focus group that helped to further develop variables included. Initiation of

instrumentation development came from extensive searching in a variety of databases with the support of the University of Nebraska at Omaha's library personnel. Searches included key terms such as school connectedness, teacher perceptions of school connectedness, constructing school connectedness, and importance of connectedness. When no existing surveys were found that answered research questions being examined, surveys were developed and adapted from a number of already existing scales that had been utilized to gather student perceptions on how connected they feel connected to school. These scales were located based on searches of the primary themes that are repeatedly highlighted in research on school connectedness. These themes include high expectations, feelings of safety, and student-teacher relationships (Anderman, 2002; Chan et al., 2011; Hamilton, et al. 2012; Ito, 2011; Lapan, et al., 2014; & Wu et al., 2011).

The existing measurement tools found and utilized included the *Psychological Sense of School Membership Scale (PSSM*) and the *Elementary School Ethical Climate Index (ESECI).* An additional tool, *Bandura: Guide to Self-Efficacy Scale Development,* was located and used as for the purpose of the guidance offered to create instrumentation on self-efficacy beliefs for various constructs. The following describes how questions from these measurement tools were adapted to create the surveys in the present study.

The *PSSM* is an 18-item student self-report in which students are asked to answer items using a Likert scale of 1=never, 2=occasionally, 3=usually, and 4 = always. Directions on the *PSSM* state that students were to read a number of statements, which may describe situations at school, and then circle the number (1 through 4) that best described how they felt about each statement (i.e. "I feel like a real part of this school").

From the 18-item *PSSM*, items 1 - 10 on the *Teacher Self-Efficacy Scale for Constructing Student Connectedness to School* (*TSE-SC)* survey were developed (e.g. "it is important to help students if they approach me with a problem," and "I can notice students strengths"). This development came from changing the questions to a teacher focus rather than a student one. Of the original 18 items, the researcher used 10 items that could be adapted into teacher perspective questions. Items that were not used included those addressing peer-to-peer relationships (e.g. "Other students at this school take my opinions seriously," "I feel very different from most other students here"). The researcher did not perceive these questions as fitting into the three themes of student connectedness described above. Based on the main themes within school connectedness, the researcher believed items on student-teacher relationships and expectations needed to be more robust.

Therefore, the *ESECI* was utilized to enhance the survey. The *ESECI* is a 38-item scale, originally developed to capture teacher and student perceptions of school climate. This 38-item survey incorporates many facets of relationships within school settings, specifically teacher to student, student to teacher/learning environment, and student to student. The survey was developed in response of concerns for achievement and safety to help improve positive cultures.

Participants who complete this survey are asked to respond using a Likert scale based on the items; 1 = rarely or never true, 2 = seldom true, 3, = sometimes true, 4 = often true, and 5 = usually or always true. From the *ESECI* scale item #3 "Teachers make students feel safe," #10 "Teachers set high expectations for good behavior" were utilized to produce items 11 and 12 on the *TSE-SC*, which are "I can help students at this

school feel safe," and "I can set high expectations for all students." The additional items were used to highlight school connectedness components of safety and teacher expectations.

Once the items were developed from the above scales the author consulted the *Bandura: Guide to Self-Efficacy Scale Development* to fine-tune wording and ensure that participant responses could answer the research questions. Within this guide were examples of teacher efficacy scales for instructional strategies, classroom management, and student's engagement. School connectedness was not a pre-existing scale; therefore the guidelines were utilized and directed the researcher to use fewer items and wording such as 'can' instead of 'will' due to show the differentiation between capabilities versus intention. A final contribution to the origin of the *TSE-SC* was Dr. Michael Furlong, who is a popular researcher in the area of school mental health. He graciously provided input via email on the gradation of the Likert scale being used, what questions could be used, and validated the importance of looking at teacher efficacy in supporting this construct. From the combination of the above sources the first draft of the 12-items on the *TSE-SC* was developed to include 12 items that could be responded to with the use of a Likert scale (1 =strongly disagree to 6 = strongly agree).

In addition to the 12-items, the drafted *TSE-SC* survey also included eight questions meant to answer qualitative research questions. These were formatted in five demographic questions and three open-ended questions. Demographic questions included, 1) How many years have you been a teacher? 2) What grade(s) do you teach? 3) How many classes and students do you teach? 4) What is your subject or area of expertise (e.g. PE, Art, Special Education, and Math)? 5) Approximately what percent of

students at your school are on free or reduced lunch? The three open-ended questions included, 1) what beneficial resources has your school provided (e.g. professional development, training, and program access) to help support connectedness? 2) What endorsements do you have? 3) Please list examples of ways you construct connectedness in your classroom.

Due to the research questions being examined a second survey, *The Teacher Importance Scale for Constructing Student Connectedness to School* (*TIS-SC),* was drafted to capture the level of importance teachers put on each item explored in the *TSE-SC*. These items are worded in the same manner with replacement of the word 'can' with 'it is important to,' in order capture level importance of each. The *TIS-SC* was formatted for respondents to rank items 1 through 12 instead of using a Likert scale. The intention of this was to provide variability of responses and answer research questions in a more robust manner.

Prior to piloting the instrumentation a focus group was formed with the goal of helping in the development, clarity, and alignment of the drafted instrumentation as it pertained to the research questions being examined. Participants were asked to help with spelling, wording, and conceptualization of surveys.

Focus Group. The focus group came together and met face to face at a preselected location, which was convenient for all members. The focus group was comprised of four members in addition to the researcher. All members were employed in an educational setting and were chosen based on proximity to the researcher and because they jointly represented aspects of mental health, educational settings, and working

directly with students. Titles of participants included; teacher, school psychologist, and speech language pathologist.

During the focus group an agenda was provided along with a copy of the drafted surveys. Members were told that the goal was to help with the development, clarity, and alignment of instrumentation as it pertains to research questions being examined and that they were to help with spelling, wording, and conceptualization of the instruments. At the meeting a brief summary of the study was shared in that the intent was correlate perceptions of teachers' self-efficacy in an ability to connect students to school and the importance in doing so. With that information members were provided with the developed research questions. The group was instructed to take the *TSE-SC* survey and the following list of questions was presented; 1) are demographic questions and Likert scales appropriate? 2) Are additional items needed or do any need to be taken out? 3) Does the word 'can' need to be substituted with the words 'am able to?' and 4) Do the open-ended questions support what research questions are being addressed? Do more need to be added?

The group was then instructed to take the *TIS-SC* and questions pertaining to that survey included topics on instruction clarity and alignment with the previous survey. The final task was to revisit the research questions and determine if the surveys answered the questions being examined. The focus group conversed about lack of ability to correlate the two surveys and the recommendation to also rank order items 1-12 on the *TSE*-SC was provided and utilized. It was recommended that the Likert items be kept because of the valuable information that could be gathered.

The group gave valuable feedback on changes that could be made. From this feedback additional demographic questions were added and clarification on wording on two similar items within the survey was made. In addition, changes were made to the open-ended questions to gather more meaningful responses. Therefore, the final *TSE-SC* survey included the Likert responses and rank order responses to better align with importance.

The group also discussed how the surveys should be administered and to which districts. All members believed surveying districts in Southwest Iowa would be most beneficial to the researcher in terms of impacting practice. Group members also talked about online vs. paper and pencil format for response submissions. There was not a consensus on this topic as there were clear pros and cons to each delivery method. Therefore, the decision to have them sent out online was driven by ease of administration and likelihood of receiving the expected number of responses. The final scales were administered sequentially in one email and resulted in 22-item survey on Survey Monkey.

Instrument Testing. The instruments developed were tested through a pilot trial to a small group of individuals who worked within the educational setting. These individuals were chosen based on their participation in the focus group in addition to three individuals who had no prior knowledge of the instrument. Additionally, their participation was based on the expertise they have in the area of education and the experiences they have in working with youth in a variety of capacities, from mental health to direct instructional service providers. Their roles give them each exposure to the importance of improving outcomes for all students.

The intent of the pilot was to see if answers were returned in the format expected to generate answers to the research questions being asked. Pilot participants were also asked to make clarifying changes and provide feedback on the ease of completion. Of the six individuals who were asked to participate in the pilot group, two returned completed surveys. Feedback supported that the survey could be completed with ease and the questions were clear. It took no longer than 10 minutes for participants to complete the survey and the manner in which the data returned to the author allowed for ease of data analysis and interpretation. Once this pilot was completed the researcher sent the survey out to participating district teachers.

Procedures

Informed consent from participating districts was obtained by emailing representatives of potential district participants the following email:

> (District representative),
>
> I am currently working on my dissertation research for my studies in educational leadership and through this letter I am seeking your permission to conduct this research within ____ public school. My research is titled *An Exploration of Teacher Perceptions of Mental Health Indicators within the Construct of School Connectedness*. This research involves examining the correlation between teacher ability in constructing school connectedness and their perceived importance of school connectedness as a concept.
>
> I am specifically planning to send out 2 surveys to teacher participants from various school districts and together they should take no more than 15 minutes. The surveys are voluntary and no identifying information will be shared with the researcher or the committee members working with the researcher.
>
> Your district would be noted in my research as a setting for where data was gathered. I have attached a brief synopsis of the intent and purpose of this study for further information and how it will impact the field of education.

> If you agree to participate I will need formal consent from the district HR representative and teacher email addresses through a list serve or permission to seek them out online.
>
> Please let me know what questions you may have and I thank you for your time in consideration of this request.

Included in the email was an attachment with the purpose of the research, which included the implications for the field of education. The attachment was opened on receiving individuals' own accord and it is unknown how many read the purpose prior to providing consent. After district and IRB approval was provided, the final expectation was to send the survey out to teachers in two participating districts with approximately an 80% response rate.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data derived from the surveys included individual level responses to quantitative and qualitative items in addition to a summary of all responses received. When data collection was complete, both qualitative and quantitative data analysis was conducted to answer the questions being asked. Data was received in graph format that provides a percentage of responses for each question, both individually and in summary of all responses. Qualitative questions were collected on an individual basis and common themes examined.

Quantitative. Quantitative results were derived from the rank ordered responses on the *TSE-SC* and *TIS-S*C. Likert items on the *TSE-SC* were also examined and were the same as the ranked items on the *TSE-SC*; which are as follow:

- I can help students feel like they are a valuable part of this school
- I can notice students' strengths
- I can help students in this school feel accepted here
- I can show interest in students at this school

- I can help students if they approach me with a problem
- I can be friendly towards students at this school
- I can include students in a variety of activities at this school
- I can treat students at this school with the same amount of respect
- I can notice when students at this school do good work
- I can help students feel proud about being a part of this school
- I can help students in this school feel safe
- I can set high expectations for all students

Responses on Likert items allowed the researcher to determine the level of ability teachers perceive themselves as having as they respond with a Likert gradation of 1 through 6 (1= strongly disagree, 2 = moderately disagree, 3=mildly disagree, 4=mildly agree, 5=moderately agree, 6=strongly agree). It produced data that showed a trend as to which items individual teachers perceived as having ability to do and provided a summary based on all of the responses.

After teachers answered each of the 12-items with the Likert scale, each teacher was prompted to read through the same items a second time and rank order them 1-12 to describe their perceived level of importance for each item. 1 meaning it was the teachers greatest area of ability or importance given these items and 12 meaning it is the teachers least area of ability or importance given these items. They were directed to use each number only once.

This ranking was used to address the question of correlation between importance and ability. The researchers intent was to pair itemed responses from the *TSE-SC* and *TIS-SC* and use a Spearman Correlation on the ranks to determine strength of relationship. This correlation was calculated based on the alignment of the scales made by the focus group.

A composite score was derived from each paired item, for example the first item on the *TSE-SC and TIS-SC scale* is ‘I can help students feel like they are a real part of

this school," and "It is important to help students feel like they are a real part of this school." These were paired across the participants along with the remaining items on the scale and for each participant. Responses were then averaged and ranked between the two scales then collapsed into a single composite score. A Spearman Correlation Coefficient was used to determine the strength of relationship between the two scales and a t-test was used for significance.

Qualitative. Demographic and open-ended questions were transcribed to determine themes relevant in answering research questions. To answer how teachers implement practices in their classrooms to facilitate school connectedness and what universal supports are in place to aid the implementation, the open ended questions of *"*What beneficial resources has your school provided (e.g. professional development, trainings, programs) to help support school connectedness?" and *"*please list examples of ways you construct connectedness in your classroom," were analyzed.

The final research question being addressed through qualitative information will be examining the relationship between the varying importance ratings teachers give to school connectedness based on the response profile from *TIS-SC* and the grade level taught. Specifically the top three importance ratings were examined and the differences between elementary and secondary teacher responses were examined.

Chapter 4
Results

The purpose of this mixed methods study was to explore and correlate perceptions of teachers' self-efficacy in an ability to connect students to school and the importance in doing so. Chapter 4 presents results of participant responses to the survey and further analyzes outcomes based on the research questions being asked that were presented in previous sections of this paper. An overall summary of findings will be presented in the end prior to exploration of a more holistic approach to the findings in Chapter 5.

Summary of Data Collected

Response Rate. A total of 226 teachers from 2 different districts were distributed the 22 – item online survey via Survey Monkey consisting of the *TSE-SC* scale and the *TIS-SC.* Of those sent, zero returned were as undeliverable and 60 participants answered the survey making a response rate of 27% (60/226). All fully and partially completed surveys were included in final data analysis.

Demographic Characteristics. Table 1 depicts the demographics of the teachers who responded. From the participants 10% had less than 5 years of experience, 15% had between 5 and 10 years of experience, 16% had between 11 and 15 years of experience, 18% had 16 to 20 years of experience, 15% had 21 to 25 years of experience, 16% had 26 to 30 years of experience, and 11% had over 30 years of experience. In regards to grade level taught less that 1% taught preschool, 49% taught grades K-5th indicated "Elementary" in their response, 16% taught in grades 6th – 8th or indicated "Middle School" in their response, and 19% taught in grades 9th through 12th or indicated "High school" in their response. It is also relevant to note that that 11% of participants indicated that they taught 1 or more grade level.

Table 1

Demographics

Item	N	Percentage
Years of Experience		
<5	6	10%
5 to 10	9	15%
11 to 15	10	16%
16 to 20	11	18%
21 to 25	9	15%
26 to 30	10	16%
31 to 35	4	7%
36 to 40	1	2%
41 to 45	1	2%
Grade Levels Taught		
PreK	4	0.50%
K - 5th	39	49%
6th - 8th	13	16%
9th - 12th	15	19%
More than 1 grade level	9	11%
Endorsements/Expertise		
Math	8	12%
Literacy (reading/writing)	13	20%
Support Service Provider	5	7%
Science, Social Studies	8	12%
Technology	2	3%
Specials (PE, Music, Art)	6	9%
Foreign Language	2	3%
Special Education	12	18%
General/All courses	9	14%
Free/Reduced Lunch %		
Unknown	28	51%
0 to 25%	3	5%
26% to 50%	17	31%
51% to 75%	9	16%
76% to 100%	1	1%
Number of Students Taught		
< 10	6	10%
11 to 20	7	12%

21 to 30	14	23%
31 to 40	1	1%
41 to 50	7	12%
51 to 60	4	7%
61 to 70	3	5%
71 to 80	2	3%
81 to 90	0	0%
91 to 100	1	1%
> 100	15	25%

In regards to indicating areas of specialization, participants referred to expertise or endorsements. Of the 60 participants 20% had endorsements in literacy, 12% had endorsements in the area of mathematics, 12% noted their area of expertise was in Science and Social Studies, 18% reported they were special education teachers, 9% taught specials courses such as art and music, 3% reported technology and foreign language as their primary area of expertise, and 14% of participants indicated that they taught all general courses in elementary school.

When asked about free and reduced lunch population 51% of teachers responded with and "I do not know" or "N/A," or "we are not provided this information." 5% of participants responded between 0% and 25% of their student population is on free or reduced lunch, 31% responded between 26% and 50% of their student population is on free or reduced lunch. 17% of participants responded that over 51% of their student population is receiving free and reduced lunch.

An additional demographic question asked what how many students taught in a given day. 10% of participants taught less than 10 students and these individuals identified themselves as special education teachers. 12% of participants reported teaching between 11 and 20 students in a given day, 23% of participants reported teaching between 21 and 30 students in a given day, 1% of participants reported teaching between 31 and 40 student in a give day. 12% of participants reported teaching between 41 and 50 students in a given day, and 7% of participants reported teaching between 51 and 60 students in a given day. 34% of participants reported teaching over 61 students in a given day and these teachers self-identified as being teachers of specials such as art or PE and therefore teach multiple classes in the same content area

Teacher Self-Efficacy of Constructing School Connectedness. Prior to participants ranking items by their ability to construct connectedness and the importance of doing so they were asked to read each item on the *Teacher Self Efficacy Scale for Constructing Student Connectedness to School (TSE-SC)* and provide a Likert rating (1 through 6, with 1 being strongly disagree and 6 being strongly agree) on their ability to implement each of the 12 items. A total of 60 responses were returned. A majority of all respondents reported that they strongly agree with items 1 through 12. Further, over two-thirds of all respondents reported they mildly to strongly agree with all statements. Tables 2 through 13 represent the number and percentage of respondents who responded with each Likert rating 1 through 6.

Table 2**.**

Teacher Responses on Perception of Self- Efficacy for Item 1

Item 1: I can help students feel like they are a valuable part of this school	
Answer Choices	**Responses**
1 – Strongly Disagree	5 (8.33%)
2 – Moderately Disagree	0
3 – Mildly Disagree	0
4 – Mildly Agree	3 (5.00%)
5 – Moderately Agree	21 (35.00%)
6 – Strongly Agree	31 (51.67%

Table 3**.**
Teacher Responses on Perception of Self- Efficacy for Item 2

Item 2: I can notice students' strengths	
1 – Strongly Disagree	3 (5.08%)
2 – Moderately Disagree	0
3 – Mildly Disagree	0
4 – Mildly Agree	3 (5.08%)
5 – Moderately Agree	18 (30.51%)
6 – Strongly Agree	35 (59.32%)

Table 4

Teacher Responses on Perception of Self- Efficacy for Item 3

Item 3: I can help students in this school feel accepted here	
1 – Strongly Disagree	3 (5.08%)
2 – Moderately Disagree	0
3 – Mildly Disagree	0
4 – Mildly Agree	7 (11.86%)
5 – Moderately Agree	16 (27.12%)
6 – Strongly Agree	33 (55.93%)

Table 5

Teacher Responses on Perception of Self- Efficacy for Item 4

Item 4: I can show interest in students at this school	
1 – Strongly Disagree	3 (4.92%)
2 – Moderately Disagree	0
3 – Mildly Disagree	1 (1.64%)
4 – Mildly Agree	1 (1.64%)
5 – Moderately Agree	10 (16.39%)
6 – Strongly Agree	46 (75.41%)

Table 6

Teacher Responses on Perception of Self- Efficacy for Item 5

Item 5: I can help students if they approach me with a problem	
1 – Strongly Disagree	3 (4.84%)
2 – Moderately Disagree	0
3 – Mildly Disagree	1 (1.61%)
4 – Mildly Agree	5 (8.06%)
5 – Moderately Agree	10 (16.13%)
6 – Strongly Agree	43 (69.35%)

Table 7

Teacher Responses on Perception of Self- Efficacy for Item 6

Item 6: I can be friendly towards students at this school	
1 – Strongly Disagree	3 (4.84%)
2 – Moderately Disagree	0
3 – Mildly Disagree	0
4 – Mildly Agree	0
5 – Moderately Agree	3 (4.84%)
6 – Strongly Agree	56 (90.32%

Table 8

Teacher Responses on Perception of Self- Efficacy for Item 7

Item 7: I can include students in a variety of activities at this school	
1 – Strongly Disagree	2 (3.28%)
2 – Moderately Disagree	1 (1.64%)
3 – Mildly Disagree	5 (8.20%)
4 – Mildly Agree	8 (13.11%)
5 – Moderately Agree	13 (21.31%)
6 – Strongly Agree	32 (52.46%)

Table 9

Teacher Responses on Perception of Self- Efficacy for Item 8

Item 8: I can treat each student at this school with the same amount of respect	
1 – Strongly Disagree	3 (5.00%)
2 – Moderately Disagree	0
3 – Mildly Disagree	0
4 – Mildly Agree	1 (1.67%)
5 – Moderately Agree	10 (16.67%)
6 – Strongly Agree	46 (76.67%)

Table 10

Teacher Responses on Perception of Self- Efficacy for Item 9

Item 9: I can notice when students at this school do good work	
1 – Strongly Disagree	3 (4.84%)
2 – Moderately Disagree	0
3 – Mildly Disagree	0
4 – Mildly Agree	3 (4.84%)
5 – Moderately Agree	8 (12.90%)
6 – Strongly Agree	48 (77.42%)

Table 11

Teacher Responses on Perception of Self- Efficacy for Item 10

Item 10: I can help students feel proud about being part of this school	
1 – Strongly Disagree	3 (4.92%)
2 – Moderately Disagree	0
3 – Mildly Disagree	1 (1.64%)
4 – Mildly Agree	3 (4.92%)
5 – Moderately Agree	15 (24.59%)
6 – Strongly Agree	39 (63.93%)

Table 12

Teacher Responses on Perception of Self- Efficacy for Item 11

Item 11: I can help students in this school feel safe	
1 – Strongly Disagree	3 (4.84%)
2 – Moderately Disagree	0
3 – Mildly Disagree	0
4 – Mildly Agree	5 (8.06%)
5 – Moderately Agree	16 (25.81%)
6 – Strongly Agree	38 (61.29%)

Table 13

Teacher Responses on Perception of Self- Efficacy for Item 12

Item 12: I can set high expectations for all students	
1 – Strongly Disagree	3 (4.84%)
2 – Moderately Disagree	0
3 – Mildly Disagree	1 (1.61%)
4 – Mildly Agree	4 (6.45%)
5 – Moderately Agree	15 (24.19%)
6 – Strongly Agree	39 (62.90%)

Analysis of Data by Research Question

Research Question 1. To address the first research question of what are teachers' perceived abilities in constructing school connectedness according to the 12-item *Teacher Efficacy Scale for Constructing Student Connectedness to School* (*TSE-SC)* and how does it correlate with teachers' perceived importance on the 12-item *Teacher Importance Scale for Constructing Student Connectedness to School* (*TIS-SC)*, participants were asked to rank items on the *TSE-SC* and *TIS-SC* 1 through 12. For these ranks 1 was referred to the greatest and 12 was referred to as being the least.

A total of 36 participants completed both the ranking on the *TSE-SC* and *TIS-SC*. From these responses an average score for each of the 12 pairs on the ability and importance scales was derived. Table 14 depicts the averages that were then ranked accordingly. The use of a Spearman Correlation Coefficient and a t-test was utilized to analyze the relationship and significance (r_s=.427; $p = .083$) ($t(11) = 1.493$). Although not statistically significant, the correlation indicates a meaningful and positive association between perceived ability and perceived importance of school connectedness items. There is a real relationship between ability and importance and the probability of this relationship occurring by chance is only slightly greater than 8%.

Table 14

Ranked Averages of Responses for Spearman Correlation Coefficient

Item	Average Efficacy Rank From Participants	Rank of Averages Lowest to Highest	Average Importance Rank From Participants	Rank of Averages Lowest to Highest
1	6.41	8	5.79	5
2	5.53	3	6.15	7
3	6.44	9	5.12	2
4	5.62	4	5.29	4
5	6.94	10	6.41	9
6	5.12	2	5.21	3
7	9.41	12	9.12	11
8	5	1	6.03	6
9	6.32	6	7.88	10
10	8.59	11	9.41	12
11	6.38	7	5.03	1
12	6.24	5	6.38	8

Research Question 2. To address the second research question of how teachers implement practices in their classrooms to facilitate school connectedness and to determine what, if any, universal supports are in place to assist, teachers were asked to respond to a series of qualitative questions**.** Of the 60 individuals who responded to the survey 47 individuals responded to the question that addresses ways in which connectedness is constructed in classrooms. 15 participants skipped this question and 2 responded with "not sure," or "N/A."

Responses were read and then re-read to look for common replies. A concept schema modeled after Waters & Foss (2016) research in *Destination Dissertation: A Traveler's Guide to a Done Dissertation*, was utilized. Through a series of coding that reflected common thoughts and strategies used in the classroom 5 themes emerged. These themes included the use of inclusive practice, collaboration, use of routine adherence with expectations, relationship building, and specific programming to support curriculum. Some responses fell within two themes as they were expanded upon or answered with multiple practices. Of the responses only two were elaborated on beyond a simple sentence.

Inclusive practice. Five answers were representative of inclusive classroom practice. These answers included answers of, "I usually have students with behavior needs integrated into my class, everyone is expected and encouraged to participate," "I celebrate the success of all students for a positive culture," "I work with small group and large group to support all student needs," and "I include everyone in all activities, and "I believe in all kids."

Collaboration. 18 replies were encompassed in the theme of collaboration and examples of such activities included, allowing for classroom discussion, having students work together, facilitation of learning groups, encouragement of participation, partner and group talking time, supporting encouragement and feedback, and options to help a friend with his or her work

Setting Expectations. Five replies fell within the theme of having clear expectations. These responses reflected adherence to a routine or daily schedule, specification that expectations were frequently reviewed, or zero tolerance policies for undesired behaviors (e.g. bullying, aggression towards others).

Relationship Building. The most common theme that emerged from the replies was relationship building. 26 answers reflected relationship development was a primary way to help student connect to school. Responses that were included in this theme were the use of team building activities such as setting expectations together, role modeling what good relationships look like, providing compliments to friends in the classroom, celebration of successes, and building a community in the classroom. Many responses also alluded to conversations that were held with individual students such as greeting every student in the morning, asking students about their evening and weekend, working with all kids to understand their skill level, conferring with students, giving praise, and calling on each student daily.

Program Specific. Seven respondents noted a specific program embedded into their instruction throughout the day to support connectedness. These program included the use of Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports, use of preference assessments, Kagan Strategies, use of Class Dojo reinforcement system, and Zones of Regulation.

These programs are noted to enhance positive reinforcement throughout the school day. Each program supports use of common language and use of behavior specific reinforcement.

When addressing the question, in which ways does your school provide support to improve and foster connectedness, a similar strategy of coding common ideas was utilized from Waters & Foss (2016). A total of 48 of the 60 participants responded to this question.

From participant responses to this open-ended question four primary themes emerged. Themes were derived from coding and the following emerged; unspecified professional development opportunities, opportunities for collaboration between staff members, use of curriculum of universal support, and general answers such as, "Our school helps in any way possible." Within the general responses five individuals put answers of "none," or "none that I know of."

Professional Development; Unspecified. 12 participants responded that professional development time was established in their building, without sharing specific trainings. Answers were non-specified and referred to online training, mental health training, and training on student diversity.

*Teacher collaboration***.** Four participants highlighted teacher collaboration time that looked like teacher-led data conversations, opportunities for teacher leaders in the building for instruction and curriculum, professional learning teams were also highlighted in this theme as they allow for teacher discussion around data and instruction. A final mention was teacher participation in guidance lessons throughout the school year.

Program-Specific Responses. 26 respondents specified training or services in place in their buildings that support connectedness. These responses included reference to Positive Behavioral Intervention and Supports (PBIS), wrap around services such as counseling from local therapists and agencies, training to decreasing bullying, the Food Bank programs that allow students to take food bags home on the weekends or for families to come to the school to "shop" for food donated to the school. Additionally, teachers highlighted the use of family and community events that are meant to strengthen partnerships between the school and community.

General answer. A final theme that emerged was general answers, which include responses of, "none," or refer to specific responses of, "our school will help in anyway possible," or "we send out surveys on culture and climate."

Research Question 3. Of the 36 participants who responded to the importance rankings survey there were a total 27 participants indicated they taught within preschool through fifth grade and 9 who indicated they taught within the secondary school setting (6^{th} through 12^{th}). This information was utilized to answer research question 3 of, how does the perceived importance on the *TIS-SC* vary based on the grade level taught? In order to analyze responses Elementary and Secondary grade level responses were teased out and items of greatest importance were identified. Elementary and Secondary teachers most commonly ranked 3 items of importance. The total percentage of responses each item was given for being the most important (or rated as a 1) was derived to help analyze and make interpretations based on grade levels taught.

Table 15 represents elementary respondents most important aspects of school connectedness based on the *TIS-SC*. These include, helping students feel like they are a

valuable part of school and setting high expectations for all students. Of the 27 respondents who taught elementary 18% indicated their number 1 item of importance as being “It is important to help students feel like they are a valuable part of this school,” and “It is important to set high expectations. Of the 27 respondents who taught elementary 14% ranked that helping students feel accepted and being friendly towards students at this school as most important. Finally, the importance of treating all students with respect and helping them feel safe rounded out the items elementary teacher participants responded to as being the top three most important aspects of constructing school connectedness. The remaining items had 3% or fewer of the 27 respondents indicate they were most important. Items that received 0% responses indicating they were the most important were, “It is important to help students if they approach me with a problem,” “It is important to include students in a variety of activities at this school,” and “It is important to notice when students at this school do good work.”

Table 15

Elementary Teacher Responses to Most Important Items Ranked

Item	Percent Ranked #1 on the *TIS-SC*
It is important to help students feel like they are a valuable part of this school	18%
It is important to notice student strengths	3%
It is important to help students in this school feel accepted here	14%
It is important to show interest in students at this school	3%
It is important to help students if they approach me with a problem	0%
It is important to be friendly towards students at this school	14%
It is important to include students in a variety of activities at this school	0%
It is important to treat each student at this school with the same amount of respect	11%
It is important to notice when students at this school do good work	0%
It is important to help students feel proud about being a part of this school	3%
It is important to help student in this school feel safe	11%
It is important to set high expectations for all students	18%

Table 16 represents the percentage of secondary teacher responses that ranked each item as being most important. There were a total of 9 participants who identified as being secondary level teachers. Of the 9 a majority, or 66% indicated that the number one item of importance, based on the *TIS-SC*, is "it is important to help students feel like they area valuable part of this school." This was determined based on the percentage of respondents who gave this item a ranking of 1 (or most important). Of the 9 respondents, 22% indicated the number one item of importance, as being setting high expectations for all students and helping students feel safe. Finally, the importance of treating all students with respect and being friendly towards students was most important to 11% of respondents. Fewer items were favored as being the most important from secondary teachers responses. Those that received 0 responses as being the most important include; "it is important to notice student strengths," "it is important to help students in this school feel accepted here," "it is important to show interest in students at this school," "it is important to help students if they approach me with a problem," "it is important to include students in a variety of activities at this school," "It is important to notice when students at this school do good work," and "It is important to help students feel proud about being a part of this school." This does not mean they were not ranked; it simply shows there were no participants who ranked these items as number 1.

Table 16

Secondary Teacher Responses to Most Important Items Ranked

Item	**Percent Ranked #1 on the *TIS-SC***
It is important to help students feel like they are a valuable part of this school	66%
It is important to notice student strengths	0%
It is important to help students in this school feel accepted here	0%
It is important to show interest in students at this school	0%
It is important to help students if they approach me with a problem	0%
It is important to be friendly towards students at this school	11%
It is important to include students in a variety of activities at this school	0%
It is important to treat each student at this school with the same amount of respect	11%
It is important to notice when students at this school do good work	0%
It is important to help students feel proud about being a part of this school	0%
It is important to help student in this school feel safe	22%
It is important to set high expectations for all students	22%

As represented in Table 17 all respondents, both elementary and secondary, reported a preference for most important items being the following: “It is important to help students feel like they are a valuable part of this school,” “It is important to set high expectations for all students,” ” It is important to help student in this school feel safe,” “It is important to treat each student at this school with the same amount of respect,” and “It is important to be friendly towards students at this school.” The only item that had a majority of elementary teachers respond as most important and not secondary teachers was “It is important to help students in this school feel accepted here.” In fact, no secondary teacher prioritized this item in his or her rankings.

Table 17

Comparison of Grade Level Respondents First Ranked TIS-SC Items

Elementary Teachers Items of Greatest Importance	**Secondary Teachers Items of Greatest Importance**
1) It is important to help students feel like they are a valuable part of this school 2) It is important to set high expectations for all students 3) It is important to help students in this school feel accepted here 4) It is important to be friendly towards students at this school 5) It is important to help student in this school feel safe 6) It is important to treat each student at this school with the same amount of respect	1) It is important to help students feel like they are a valuable part of this school 2) It is important to set high expectations for all students 3) It is important to help student in this school feel safe 4) It is important to treat each student at this school with the same amount of respect 5) It is important to be friendly towards students at this school

Data indicates that both elementary and secondary teacher find it most important "to help students feel like they are a valuable part of school." A larger percentage of total elementary respondents believe setting high expectations is also most important, while secondary teachers have fewer respondents who believe high expectations are the most important. Elementary teacher respondents think it is important to help students feel accepted in school, while more secondary teachers responses showed a preference for the importance of safety.

Summary of Findings

Starting with demographic data, there are notable findings from this study. A majority of participants were teachers who taught grades Elementary grades Preschool through 5th. Fewer participants represented Middle School and High School teachers. Findings from this study also show that a majority of respondents had between 11 and 30 years of teaching experience. This statistic shows that veteran teachers recognize the importance and value of having students in their schools that are positively connected. Through taking the time to complete the survey teachers are taking steps to learn more about school connectedness and how they impact it on a daily basis.

Another notable finding is the number of participants who reported variance in the percentage of free and reduced lunch population. It would be expected that with a small sample of schools individuals would have been more consistent with this response. However a majority did not know and responses varied from 0% to over 76% free and reduced lunch populations. This variance indicates teachers are not having data shared with them on the demographics of their school buildings and educational leaders may

want to offer this opportunity more readily. A final note on the participants is the number of students who each taught. These answers ranged from fewer than 10 students in self-contained behavior programs to over a 100 students for those who taught specials courses such as art, music, or PE. Convergence of demographic information shows a diversity in participants; therefore, the findings of a strong relationship between perceived self-efficacy in constructing connectedness and the importance of doing so was even more meaningful as it reflects the perceptions of what could be a representative sample of teachers across the state.

A strong relationship between teachers perceived ability and perceived importance on the *TSE-SC* and *TIS-SC* exists. While not significant, the chance the correlation exists at random is low. Convergence of data that addresses research question 1 indicates that if teachers believe they have the ability to construct connectedness, they also find it to be important. Data analysis of question 2 shows that teachers are constructing connectedness in their classrooms on a daily basis through 5 common themes, this is supported further at a universal building level in schools that provide opportunities for professional development, teacher collaboration and student centered approaches to learning. The third research question was addressed by an analysis of elementary and secondary teacher responses and a comparison between top-ranked items on the *TIS-SC*. A majority of teachers in both grade levels specified that it was most important for teachers to help students to feel like they were a valuable part of the school. Differences in responses were compared as most research highlights the importance of connecting students to school early to support their sense of belonging throughout their educational career. It is evident that teachers across grade levels who participated in this

study all acknowledge the importance of connecting students to school, whether it be in elementary or secondary school.

The present study found an overwhelming majority of teachers surveyed could specify frequently used strategies to connect students to school. Teachers are in a unique position to foster connectedness most frequently as they see students on a daily basis and this study confirms that even if these strategies are not used to intentionally connect students to school they are regularly and proactivity employing techniques that do so. Of the strategies that were highlighted as being used in classrooms to connect students to school, common themes of inclusion, collaboration, expectations, relationship building, and program use emerged.

Embedded within these themes were also a couple of the key components highlighted in research as building blocks to school connectedness, such as relationships and having high expectations. Through praising students, identifying strengths, and asking them about life outside of school, teachers are actively building positive relationships. High expectations are being provided through frequent review of classroom routines, adherence to rules on interacting with peers and participating in class. Students whom report feeling most connected to school are those who believe teachers give them high expectations and believe in them. These responses show that while supporting mental health may appear to be an elusive task for teachers to take on, they are already doing so, seemingly unintentionally. The positive practices highlighted within the classroom can be talked about within the realm of supporting mental health outcomes in students.

Findings reveal that only two-thirds of respondents addressed the question about ranking importance of connectedness items. From those responses the items of importance ranked #1 were examined and findings show a majority of respondents were elementary teachers. Most elementary teachers find it most important to help students feel like they are a valuable part of this school and this did not differ from secondary teacher responses that also overwhelmingly support this item as being most important. Fewer respondents in elementary find it most important to help students feel accepted and to be friendly towards students, while secondary teachers also find it to be most important to treat students with respect and to be friendly towards them. This study did not highlight an unambiguous difference between elementary and secondary teacher perceptions of importance.

For the present study one can conclude there are similar priorities amongst teachers of all age ranges. Research suggests that an increasing number of students are disengaged or disconnected from school by high school; however, this research supports the notion that most teachers are still finding value in the construct and strategies used may need to be done with more intentionality.

Chapter 5
Discussion and Conclusions

Through a combination of qualitative and quantitative data analysis present research contributes to the literature and highlights the importance to continue with examination of student connectedness as it relates to mental health outcomes. More specifically the present study necessitates the continued exploration of teacher perspectives on the topic, as they are the ones in schools who have the opportunity to foster this construct and reach large populations of students. The most significant outcome of this study is that while teachers may feel unprepared to support mental health needs and outcomes for students, they are contributing to outcomes in a very real way by simply connecting students to school. This is evidenced through the various responses to the question that asked teachers to share activities or ways they foster connectedness in their own classrooms.

The intent of the content in chapter five is to discuss the findings in a practical manner in which they can be generalized to other settings. This chapter will discuss the research questions, provide recommendations for further study, and discuss the implications for educational leaders and districts as they work to further support the diverse needs of students.

Participants

Participants in the present study were from two school districts in Southwest Iowa. One of the districts was a relatively small rural school, while the second was within more of a metropolitan area. Participants were selected based on districts leaders willingness to have teachers voluntarily give their time to do so.

A majority of participants were elementary school teachers. Early grade level teachers may have had more of an interest in this topic as they are consistently with the same students throughout the school day. Therefore, the need for positive connections to school may be more apparent or participants selected had already been seeking out more information on this topic and wanted to explore their beliefs further. Secondary teachers rarely see the same student more than once per day depending on the size and structure of the school day, therefore it could be concluded they have perceptions that they do not have the chance to foster this construct as frequently as their elementary teacher counterparts.

Correlation Between Importance and Ability

It is one task for teachers to be able to construct connectedness unknowingly, it is another for them to build awareness in the strength of their ability and acknowledge the importance of doing so. It would be more difficult for educational leaders to build a foundation of fostering connectedness if teachers believed they had the ability to do so, but did not think it was important. Similarly, it would be more trying to foster connectedness as a school if teachers found it to be important, but lacked the confidence in their ability to move forward with it. The relationship between these two aspects is instrumental in helping educational leaders move forward with creating a meaningful infrastructure for creating connectedness universally throughout school districts.

Strategies Used in the Classroom to Foster Connectedness

Respondents to this survey are primarily connecting students to school through the use of building relationships and building classroom communities where expectations are clear and simple. This is a significant finding in that these two themes are most

closely aligned with the research that aligns them with the definition of school connectedness as it pertains to this study. There are fewer differences than expected between Elementary and High School teachers' responses in how connectedness is being fostered.

Teachers who participated in this survey identified that they connect student to school in ways the research identifies as being most powerful. It is not only the general education classroom teachers who teach core lessons that are supporting this, but teachers who instruct extracurricular subjects such as art and music as well. Some teachers are connecting smaller groups of students to school and some are making this a reality for hundreds of students in one day through the use of kind words, inclusion, and having clear classroom expectations.

As evidenced by present study this sampling of teachers is already addressing mental health needs in students through actively engaging in activities that promote positive connections to school. Participants report fostering connections through already existing classroom activities. These activities align with themes of student connectedness such as enhancing relationships and maintaining a high level of expectations for all students. Teachers are actively increasing opportunities for student feel connected and are acknowledging that it is already a naturally integrated part of the school day. This is being done without the intention of directly impacting mental health outcomes in students.

Teachers who engage in these activities should be provided with recognition for addressing mental health in their schools throughout daily routines. When teachers think of mental health, as research shows, thoughts of outside services come to mind and it is

easy to dismiss mental health as being beyond the scope of educational setting. However, it is the work embedded and entwined throughout daily routines in the school day that are just as effective in increasing positive outcomes and mitigating risk factors that are already present. Participants of this study recognize the importance of building rapport and trust with students and for current participants is a natural part of their day-to-day practice.

Variation of Importance Ranking Based on Grade Level

There was less variability amongst elementary and secondary teachers responses on items of most importance. Despite inherent differences in the role, teachers across all grade levels provided similar responses to the most important aspects of connecting students. Majority of both respondents indicated that elements of helping students feel like they are a valuable part of school and setting high expectations for all students are most important. These elements were expected to be ranked more highly because at the elementary level students are frequently being exposed to academic and school structures for the first time, therefore having clear expectations on norms for the new setting is essential. Most teachers are able to understand that importance of having those expectations and reviewing them routinely. At the secondary level teachers are frequently tasked with addressing school norms around use of technology, attendance, and higher-level work completion for graduation. Setting expectations can arguably be equally important at this level of teaching.

When students feel valued they are more likely to engage positively and recognize that school is a place with caring adults and a community where they can be themselves. When high expectations are set for all students, inclusive practices are more readily

available and teachers are more likely to display a consensus that all students can achieve at high levels. These aspects of connectedness are closely linked

The lack of variability amongst grade level responses also generalized to those items in which zero respondents indicated as being most important elements of connectedness. These items included helping a student if he/she approaches the teacher with a problem, involving students in a variety of activities, and noticing when students do good work. These items could have not been selected due to random choice and the expectation to rank each item, or intentionally were not seen as being a priority to participants in their current day.

While some variance is expected based on teacher comfort level it would be important to understand why teachers prioritized the items they did. Open-ended questions following the rankings could be used in the future to explore this.

As indicated previously teacher are currently constructing connectedness in their classrooms, the reason for engaging in these tasks may vary, but it is educational leaders' role to make this more intentional and purposeful practice for teachers. Educational leaders can facilitate collaborative team conversation to help determine the best course of action for helping teacher foster connectedness in a more conscious and intentional manner.

Implications for Educational Leaders

Convergence of data analyzed from this survey provides insight that teachers believe they can construct connectedness and they believe it is important. Therefore, purpose and intentionality of these practices can be capitalized on. From this information educational leaders could operate with working knowledge that connectedness is being

constructed in their school buildings to support mental health outcomes and they can guide conversations with teachers about the positive implications for fostering connectedness to shed awareness. An important finding in this study showed that teachers fostered connectedness through enhancing collaboration opportunities in their classrooms. School leaders may want to provide collaborative environments for teachers to discuss ways to build connectedness and learn from one another since it is shown to be a popular strategy used their own teaching. Further, since the schools in this study were from Iowa, educational leaders in the area could explore the option of using teacher leadership compensation dollars and have teachers' coach and train in the area of connectedness as it supports overall outcomes. Present study has several positive implications for the field and mental health conversations as they are more rigorously being brought into school settings. It is not, however, without limitations that can be addressed and mitigated for in replication or future studies.

Present study is as good as the responses received. It is bound in that self-efficacy is a self-reported measure and studies that include self-efficacy may be more appealing to those who have a higher belief in their existing abilities; therefore this voluntary survey may have a skewed response rate. There are many studies that show the predictive strength between the various variables discussed within the literature, but the leap from teacher self-efficacy to student connectedness is one that continues to need development and research. The author predicted a majority of the outcomes derived from data. The researcher was at one point or another serving the districts teams of the teachers whom participating and had prior knowledge of the training and experiences teachers have had

within mental health and school connectedness. Additional limitations should be examined to enhance future research.

Participants were limited to teachers from two districts in Southwest Iowa; therefore, this study may lack generalizability to other geographical areas. The nature of this survey was a self-report, which may create a personal bias. Those who completed the survey may already have working knowledge on the importance of this construct and may have been more apt to complete it.

Similarly, interpretation of questions could err on being subjective and muddy the data, making the qualitative research questions more difficult to draw objective and concrete conclusions from. The general format of the self-efficacy and importance survey may have caused some teachers to respond in a more socially desirable manner to open-ended questions. The sequence of the survey questions may have lead teachers to respond to qualitative questions with the strategies they interpreted from the items previously ranked. Surveys that were sent out sequentially and at different times may have resulted in more varied answers. A final consideration is that the researcher has had working relationships with the teachers in both districts that chose to provide consent for research being conducted; therefore the survey responses may have been made to support the overall view of the researcher, in that connectedness as it relates to mental health outcomes is an important construct to study and commit time to.

Recommendations for Future Research

This burgeoning area of research will continue on an uphill trajectory and mental health becomes more of a trending topic in school settings. First and foremost this study should be replicated in other school districts to help guide future conversations around

this topic and to validate findings. As noted in the research a shared vision supports implantation and sustainability of practice, therefore administrators and stakeholders should have their own perspectives examined in future research on this topic. Previous research has found that students in early elementary school have greater opportunities for improved connectedness compared to middle and high school students as they do not have the opportunity to connect with that 1 teacher as readily due to classes switching and multiple changes in peer interactions. More data should be collected to assess the differences in opportunities between the grade levels. Additionally, longitudinal data can be collected on perspectives to see if teachers experience and role impacts answers to similar questions on constructing connectedness.

The following questions could be examined in future research on connectedness, what are teachers' perceptions of how connectedness relates to mental health outcomes? Are there differences in class-wide data on office discipline referrals and attendance in classrooms where connectedness strategies are implemented versus where connectedness strategies are reported as not happening? And, what are administrator perceptions of the importance of connectedness and their ability to support implementation of strategies in classrooms? By addressing these questions the body of research on connectedness will continue to grow and provide educators with practical solutions to meet the needs of all learners.

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Appendix

Appendix A: Teacher Self-Efficacy Scale for Constructing Student Connectedness to School

Demographic Information

How many years have you been a teacher? What grade(s) do you teach?

How many classes and students do you teach?

What is your subject or area of expertise (e.g. PE, Art, Special Education, Math, etc)?

Approximately what percent of students at your school are on free or reduced lunch?

Using the Likert scale below, select the answer (1-6) that best describes your ability for each item as it pertains to your school. Then read the items again and rank order them 1 through 12 to describe your strength in ability. 1 meaning it is your greatest area of strength given these items, 12 meaning it is your least area of strength given these items. You will use each number (1-12) once.

1= Strongly Disagree 2 = Moderately Disagree 3 = Mildly Disagree 4 = Mildly Agree 5 = Moderately Agree 6 = Strongly agree

Rank

1. I can help students feel like they are a valuable part of this school 1 2 3 4 5 6 ___
2. I can notice students' strengths 1 2 3 4 5 6 ___
3. I can help students in this school feel accepted here 1 2 3 4 5 6 ___
4. I can show interest in students at this school 1 2 3 4 5 6 ___
5. I can help students if they approach me with a problem 1 2 3 4 5 6 ___
6. I can be friendly towards students at this school 1 2 3 4 5 6 ___
7. I can include students in a variety of activities at this school 1 2 3 4 5 6 ___
8. I can treat students at this school with the same amount of respect 1 2 3 4 5 6 ___
9. I can notice when students at this school do good work 1 2 3 4 5 6 ___
10. I can help students feel proud about being a part of this school 1 2 3 4 5 6 ___

11. I can help students in this school feel safe 1 2 3 4 5 6 ___

12. I can set high expectations for all students 1 2 3 4 5 6 ___

Follow up questions:

1) What beneficial resources has your school provided (e.g. professional development, trainings, and programs) to help support connectedness?

2) What endorsements do you have?

3) Please list examples of ways you construct connectedness in your classroom.

Appendix B: Teacher Importance Scale for Constructing Student Connectedness to School

Please read through all items then rank order them 1 through 12. 1 meaning it is the most important on this list to 12 meaning it is the least important on this list. You will use each number (1-12) once.

RANK

1. It is important to help students feel like they are a valuable part of this school _____
2. It is important to notice students' strengths _____
3. It is important help students in this school feel accepted here _____
4. It is important to show interest in students at this school _____
5. It is important to help students if they approach me with a problem _____
6. It is important to be friendly towards students at this school _____
7. It is important to include students in a variety of activities at this school _____
8. It is important to treat all students at this school with the same amount of respect _____
9. It is important to notice when students at this school do good work _____
10. It is important to help students feel proud about being a part of this school _____
11. It is important to help students in this school feel safe _____
12. It is important to set high expectations for all students _____