

Laying the Foundations of Connection to School:

Engaging Children in Early Literacy Learning

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There is a growing awareness that frequent absences from school limit a child's opportunities for early literacy acquisition, which has later consequences for academic success and broader life outcomes. Improving school attendance, and children's subsequent engagement in literacy learning is seen as a key to improving education outcomes. This summary report details the preliminary findings from a study that aimed to better understand the impact of Reading Recovery, as a literacy intervention, on improving school connectedness in the early years. Using a series of questionnaires that probed teachers, parents and children's perspectives, responses were mapped to four factors associated with school connectedness: (i) attending, (ii) belonging, (iii) engaging, and (iv) flow (Bowles & Scull, 2019). The findings from this study provide support for investment in early interventions and acknowledge the multiple outcomes that result from fine-tuned teaching interactions.

## Background

Over time there have been a variety of different definitions of connectedness. For example, connectedness has been defined as "a short-term experience of belonging and relatedness, based on quantitative and qualitative social appraisals, and relationship salience" (van Bel, Smolders, De Kort, & IJsselsteijn, 2009, p. 67). Regarding students' perceptions, connectedness has been described as when "students feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others in the school social environment" (Goodenow, 1993, p. 80). The Wingspread Declaration describes connectedness as "the belief by students that adults in the school care about their learning as well as about them as individuals" (Wingspread, 2004, p. 233).

Based on a review of the published literature from 1990 to 2016 four factors were identified as related to school connectedness: attending, belonging, engaging and flow (Bowles & Scull, 2019). Subsequently, based on the four factors, a sequential, four-level model of school connectedness was proposed. The model suggests a progression from minimal connection to a deep level of acculturation and shared meaning. It is argued that the four factors form the foundation for engagement and suggests the possibility of an experience of flow as a result of a student's connectedness with school.

## Four Overarching Factors

### Attending

At the simplest level attending is 'being present' and being in the company of others. Often research literature report attending in the negative when referring to absenteeism. Once absenteeism is habituated for the student and for the school, they become invisible and less of an apparent problem. However, uncoupling from the routines of school can open the prospect of other habits that become preclusive to returning to school. Special attention needs to be paid to students who are vulnerable at this level so that they do not slip into school refusal. Interrupting chronic absenteeism has been shown to be related to specific types of rewards, the need to establish a contact person for parents to work with, workshops for parents and family members, and developing positive communication with families (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002). A range of programs and interventions have achieved some success in addressing truancy and chronic school absence (Maynard, McCrea, Pigott, & Kelly, 2012). Establishing routines that assist students of all ages to attend physically, psychologically, emotionally and socially is of primary importance to schools.

### Belonging

Once a child is free of concerns and anxieties about attending, they can start to develop a stronger awareness of 'being with' and a sense of relaxation as well as knowing that school is a safe, sharing place of commonality with others. A key theme associated with belonging is about having a positive experience of school and aligned interests and values (Libbey, 2004) with the institution and with others. For schools, the point of belonging is to facilitate learning and the development of the whole student and emphasising the social and community-building aspects of connection. Establishing a real and symbolic way of expressing belonging at school provides the necessary safe and social foundation for learning.

### Engaging

Engagement is the factor that forms the foundation for learning (Bowles & Hattie, 2016) and is central to teaching (Australian Institute of Teaching and School Leadership [AITSL], 2013). Maintaining a high level of engagement over a long period requires behavioural, cognitive and emotional alignment with school values, practices and processes (Appleton et al, 2008; Jimerson et al., 2003). Parents, the school and staff conjointly are responsible for modelling and promoting these values, behaviours, and expectations. Engaging requires planning for a

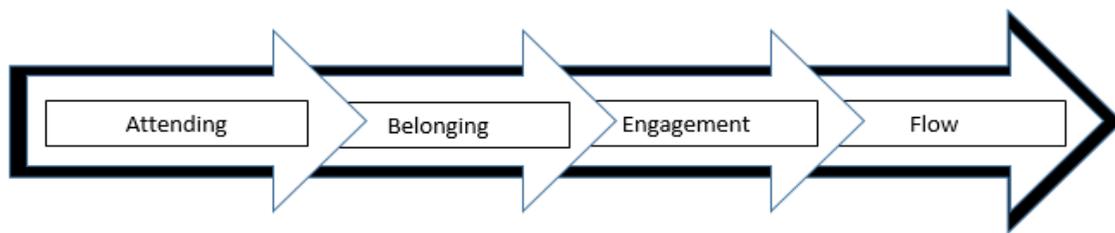
student at a level at which they can be maintained, motivated and moved to learn and understand more, systematically. It is after such careful preparation and negotiation that learning can occur (Glanville & Wildhagen, 2007). Positive social engagement is also about extending relationships with peers in various learning settings that resolve in generating greater engagement to and with the school's formal and informal and extra-curricular school activities (Appleton et al. 2008; Fredricks & McColskey, 2012).

### Flow

The object of schooling is socialisation into a community, achievement, and acculturation to new learning and to learning how to learn. When these things converge, there is a much higher prospect of achieving an optimal experience of being a student. Like other flow experiences it is characterised by intense immersion (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997), positive and rewarding activity (Clarke & Haworth, 1994) and meeting challenges beyond the known. Flow experiences are peak experiences, and although they may be infrequent, they are identity affirming, constructing of the self and possibly life changing.

### The sequence of factors-proposed

Connection begins with **attending** school: physically and psychologically (Morrissey, Hutchison, & Winsler, 2014) as well as being open to learn. Socialising opens the prospect of experiencing **belonging** as a student (Cemalcilar, 2009) and consistent attendance cements the relationship (Strolin-Goltzman, Sisselman, Melekis, & Auerbach, 2014) into a culture of welcoming trust and safety. Once a student's needs to be social and satisfied with up-building and affirming relations; the student can relax and feel comfortable in the environment; they are freer to learn and fully **engage** (Libbey, 2004; 2007). Being connected with student peers and teachers frees the student to achieve and **engage** (Appleton et al., 2008; Libbey, 2004; 2007). Occasionally, when more engaged, when more affirmed within the community, and when fully present, immersed and/or achieving, the student may experience some sense of transformation or transcendence. This is known as **flow** (Shernoff, Csikszentmihalyi, Shneider, & Shernoff, 2003).



## Aims and purpose of the study

School connection and belonging are very important protective factors for students, and are associated with increased attendance and academic achievement (Centres for Disease Control and Prevention, 2009). In the Australian context, researchers have noted the absence of interventions aimed to specifically increase students' perception of connection and belonging (Allen, Vella-Brodrick & Waters, 2016).

This research undertaken in 2019 aimed to explore school connectedness in the early years during a key period for early literacy acquisition and a tipping point in a student's trajectory of literacy learning. The ability to read is a gateway indicator of a successful transition to becoming a successful learner and consequently long-term connection to school. Specifically, this study was designed to better understand the impact of Reading Recovery, as an early literacy intervention, on improving school connectedness for students who were experiencing an early differentiator of achievement and success in the community of school.

It is accepted that Tier 3 interventions (Response to Intervention; RtI) are known to be pedagogically and educationally effective (Fox, Carta, Strain, Dunlap & Hemmeter, 2010). We accept that Reading Recovery may be identified as a Tier 2 or Tier 3 intervention (Lose, Schmitt, Gómez-Bellengé, Jones, Honchell & Askew, 2007). For the purposes of this research, we defined the intervention as Tier 3 because 1) the intervention was outside the classroom and provided to the individual student, 2) by specialist staff who assisted the child in the intervention, and 3) specialized testing accompanied the progress of the planned intervention. Importantly, we contend that student interventions are opportunities for teachers to assist students to re-connect with school and disrupt the potential down-spiral of attitudes to school (and oneself). Investigating the possibility of maintaining and

increasing school connectedness coincidental to a vulnerable time in a child’s trajectory (attending a Tier 3 intervention) was one of the aims of the research.

From a research perspective we were interested in whether involvement of a student in a one-on-one intervention with a significant staff member reduces the prospect of disconnection with school or increases connection with school from the perspective of the student, their parent, Reading Recovery and classroom teacher.

## Connectedness Questionnaires

A series of questionnaires were developed and specifically adapted for the use of the Reading Recovery teachers, early years teachers, parents and young children. Samples of questions for Reading Recovery teachers are shown below. There were different versions of the questionnaire used in this study for teachers, parents and students. A sample of the Reading Recovery teacher questionnaire is below:

<b>School Connectedness Questionnaire for Reading Recovery Teachers</b>					
<b>School Flow Scale</b>					
<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	
Enjoys concentrating and focusing intensely on their work.	1	2	3	4	5
Time flies by when they are absorbed in their school work.	1	2	3	4	5
Enjoys being fully immersed in their school work.	1	2	3	4	5
Is intensely focused when they are doing their school work.	1	2	3	4	5
Likes to concentrate fully when they are doing their school work.	1	2	3	4	5
Is highly involved in all of their work.	1	2	3	4	5
Is not concentrating on themselves when they are doing their work.	1	2	3	4	5
Feels rewarded when they are doing their school work.	1	2	3	4	5
Doing their school work is enjoyable.	1	2	3	4	5
Is not at their peak when they are doing their school work.	1	2	3	4	5
Feels positive when they are completing their school work.	1	2	3	4	5
Is interested in their school work.	1	2	3	4	5
Enjoys working at their best.	1	2	3	4	5
Feels challenged when they are at school.	1	2	3	4	5
Is motivated to achieve at school.	1	2	3	4	5
Has the right skills to deal with challenging school work.	1	2	3	4	5
Feels in control of their achievement.	1	2	3	4	5
Completing school work is rewarding.	1	2	3	4	5
Is not committed to their school work.	1	2	3	4	5
Has clear goals to help them achieve.	1	2	3	4	5

A sample of the student questionnaire is below:

<b>Connectedness Scales for Children</b>					
Circle the number below that corresponds to the face the child points to.					
Point to the face you feel when you are <b>getting ready to go to school.</b>	1	2	3	4	5
Point to the face you feel when <b>you are going to school.</b>	1	2	3	4	5
Point to the face you feel <b>when you are at school.</b>	1	2	3	4	5
Point to the face you feel <b>about the people at school.</b>	1	2	3	4	5
Point to the face you feel when <b>you are working hard at school.</b>	1	2	3	4	5
Point to the face you feel when you are <b>with your friends at school.</b>	1	2	3	4	5
Point to the face you feel when you are <b>with your teachers at school.</b>	1	2	3	4	5
Point to the face you feel when you are <b>doing your school work.</b>	1	2	3	4	5
Point to the face you feel when you are <b>doing work that is easy.</b>	1	2	3	4	5



## Participants and Data Collection

Data was collected with assistance of Reading Recovery Tutors, with ethics approval from Monash University and the University of Melbourne and permission from school systems in Victoria and NSW. Participants were drawn from the following school systems –

- Catholic Education Melbourne
- Catholic Diocese of Ballarat
- Catholic Education Sandhurst
- Catholic Education, Diocese of Wollongong
- Department of Education and Training, Victoria

This report details our preliminary analysis of the questionnaire responses drawing on data collected up until the end of June 2019. Participant numbers below -

Children  $N=108$

Reading Recovery Teachers  $N=73$

Classroom teachers  $N=107$

Parents  $N=97$

On average students met daily for a duration of 13 weeks of contact with their Reading Recovery Teacher.

## Results

Results from the child, parent, Reading Recovery and classroom teachers, for each of the four factors are presented below with sample items and summary statements.

### Attending – Being Present

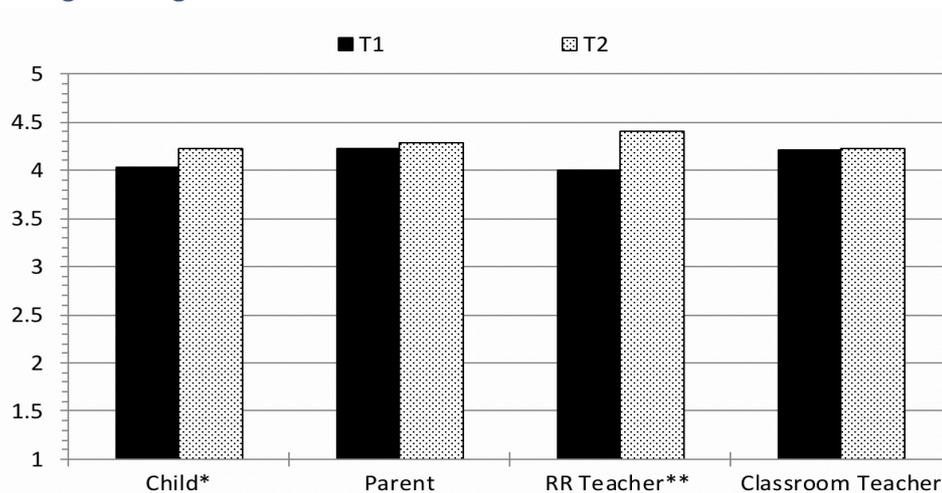


Figure 1. Comparison of Time 1 and Time 2 Means of Child, Parent and Teacher Data for the Attendance Factor

Note: \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$  |

#### Sample Questions/Statements (Teacher Form):

- Finds it hard to learn because they are away from school so much.
- Has lots of reasons to go school.
- Is not organised at school.

## Findings:

Parents' and classroom teachers' ratings of attending remained the same between time one and two. For the participating student and the Reading Recovery teacher there was a significant increase in ratings of attending over the duration of the intervention.

## Belonging – Being With and Among

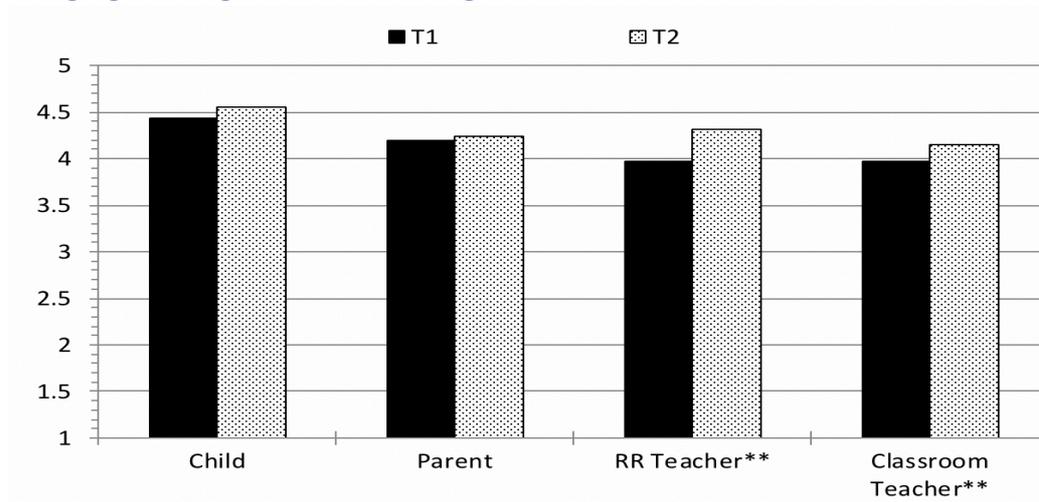


Figure 2. Comparison of Time 1 and Time 2 Means of Child, Parent and Teacher Data for the Belonging Factor

Note: \*= $p < .05$ , \*\*= $p < .01$

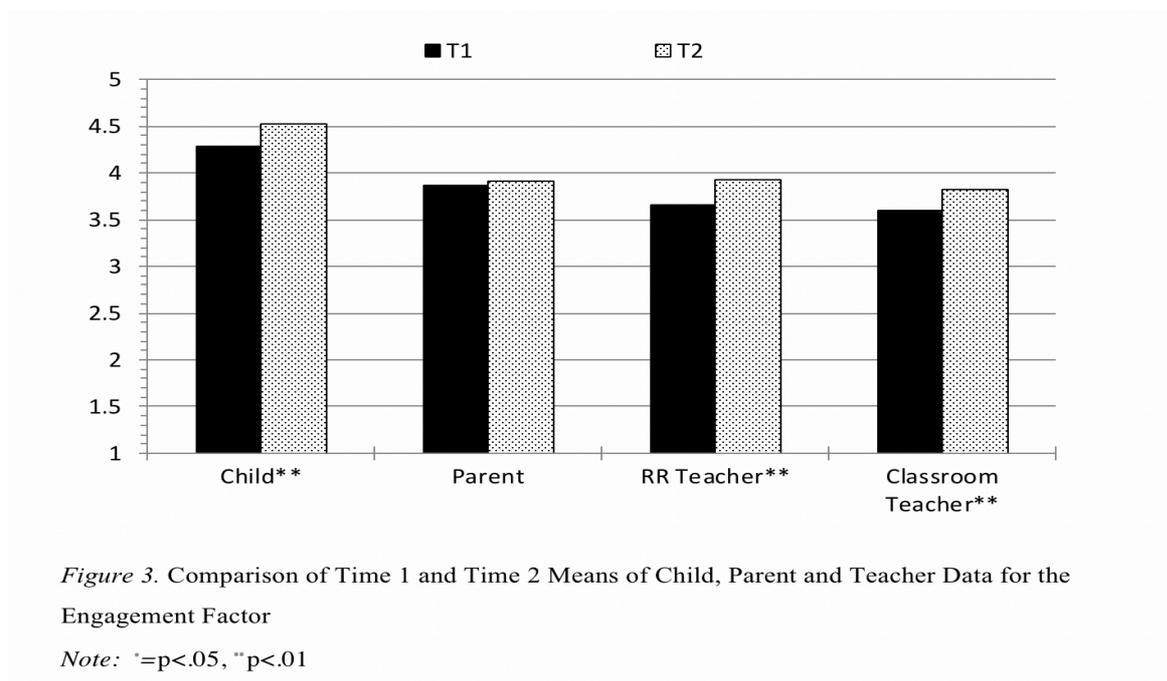
## Sample Questions/Statements (Teacher Form):

- Cooperates with people at school.
- Feels cared for at school.
- Enjoys spending time with people at school.

## Findings

For the child and parent, the ratings of belonging remained the same between time one and two. Reading Recovery teachers and classroom teachers noted a significant increase in belonging between times one and two

## Engaging – Being There to Learn



### Sample Questions/Statements (Teacher Form):

- Asks for help to understand their school work.
- Is engaged in all school activities.
- Is focused on tasks at school.

### Findings

For the parents, the ratings of engagement remained the same between time one and two. For the child, the Reading Recovery teacher and the classroom teacher a significant increase engagement occurred between time one and two.

## Flow – Being Beyond the Familiar

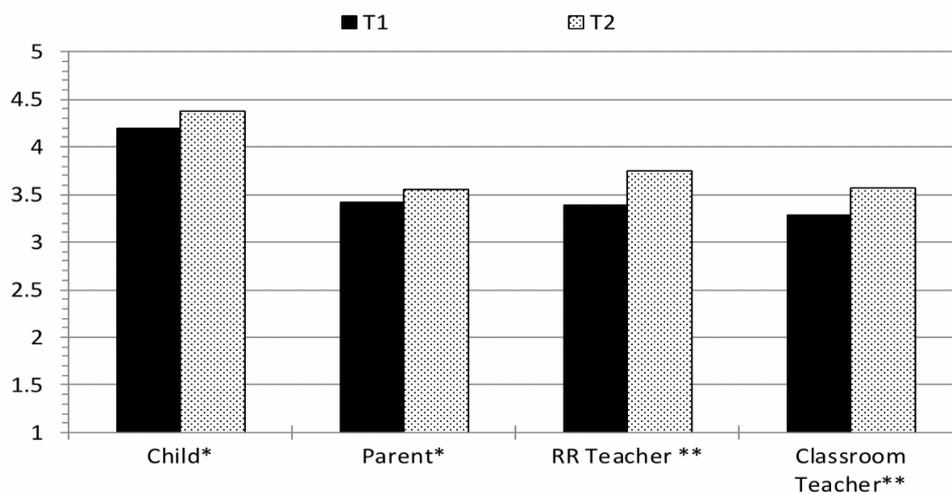


Figure 4. Comparison of Time 1 and Time 2 Means of Child, Parent and Teacher Data for the Flow Factor

Note: \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$

### Sample Questions/Statements (Teacher Form):

- Enjoys concentrating and focusing intently on their work.
- Is highly involved in their work.
- Enjoys working at their best.

### Findings

All four respondents saw a significant increase in flow between time one and two, particularly so for Reading Recovery teachers and classroom teachers.

## Summary of the Findings

None of the ratings of the four connectedness factors, by the four participant groups showed a decline over the period of the intervention. For attending and belonging two participant groups indicated a significant increase between time one and two. Students, Reading Recovery and classroom teachers saw an increase over time in engagement.

Parents only saw a significant increase in one connection factor - flow, which was also shown to be significant for the other three groups.

It can be reasonably concluded that on average the intervention interrupted the potential decline in connectedness over the duration of the intervention and that participation in the intervention moved students towards greater connection to school. Of the 16 ratings of connectedness factors, 11 showed a *significant* increase from time one to time two. The Reading Recovery teachers saw large gains consistently across the four factors of connectedness, more than parents and teachers and the children themselves. This is largely due to the training of Reading Recovery teachers and the fine-grained ways in which 1) they observe children, 2) they analyse performance and record changes on a daily basis, and 3) they attend and attune to the child's social and emotional needs as part of the common practice of intervention.

## Teacher Recommendations and Reflections

The following has been provided after consultation with teachers at feedback sessions regarding the implementation of Reading Recovery to better build connectedness at school:

- Celebrate students' achievements at assemblies and in classrooms
- Share students' success with class teachers and principals
- Regularly communicate students' achievements to parents through phone calls and notes home
- Invite parents into classrooms or to watch their children in Reading Recovery or to a class lunch see their children at school
- Connect students with teacher buddies: for some part of the school term, so that students have a particular teacher they can talk to
- Build opportunities for enjoyment with literacy by allowing students to visit the library to play games, read or draw
- Get to know the families of children and their family background well
- Allow students to bring a friend to Reading Recovery lessons

- Allow time for students to develop their own interests alone and with others
- Ask parents to write a letter to the Reading Recovery Teacher about their child's interests and relevant information
- Reconnect with past Reading Recovery students –with regular meaningful connections that build on established relationships
- Provide food and sleep if necessary

## Conclusion

In an era where many students are becoming disenfranchised and disconnected from school most likely triggered by high-impact events, possibly also including having to attend a tier 3 intervention, it is heartening to know that the students who participated maintained their level of connectedness in the eyes of others and themselves or importantly increased their connectedness. This is due in large measure to the competence of the staff involved. However, this research signals the need for closer communication with parents to better understand children's performance and connection to school. It may be beneficial to assist parents to better understand how students need to build and renew their connectedness to school.

Overall, findings support investment in early interventions and acknowledge the multiple outcomes that result from fine-tuned teaching interactions. As such we must continue to test and operationalise the factors and definitions that correspond to young students' dominant way of connecting to school. Importantly, these findings need to be replicated before we can be certain, and other interventions need to be investigated, to ensure they meet the pedagogical needs of the student and the student's need for connection to school. Continuing reform efforts and targeted research is necessary to refine our practices to address the very specific needs faced by young learners to further enhance school connectedness more generally, now and in the future.

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