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INNOVATION AND GOOD PRACTICE IN DRUG EDUCATION



# CREATING CONNECTEDNESS

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A REPORT FROM THE NATIONAL SCHOOL  
DRUG EDUCATION INNOVATION AND GOOD  
PRACTICE PROJECT

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The Innovation and Good Practice monographs are also available from the REDI – Resilience Education and Drug Information – website at [www.redi.gov.au](http://www.redi.gov.au).

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# CREATING CONNECTEDNESS

## Introduction

**Schooling includes the process of creating, building and reinforcing connectedness.**

This is the seventh in a series of eight monographs designed to inform leaders in the field of school drug education about the range of practices, views and approaches directing the way forward in Australian school drug education. The monographs derive from the findings of the National School Drug Education Strategy Innovation and Good Practice Project (the national project), completed during 2001 by Erebus Consulting Partners for the Commonwealth Department of Education, Science and Training. Over ninety schools ranging in location, size, system and sector; school type and approach to drug education participated in the national project. The findings indicated what was and wasn't working for students, and that all undertakings in school drug education – ranging from innovative and good practice to least successful – have provided information from which good practice can be defined and explained in these monographs.

The national project has highlighted that a sense of belonging (whether to a family, a friendship group, a community activity, the workplace, or to the broader backgrounds of culture and religion) is an important determinant in the wellbeing of individuals. By connecting positively to others in shared activities and beliefs, individuals are able to define and value their 'place' in a larger schema. The process by which individuals connect to these schemas, irrespective of the context, involves a myriad of largely intangible elements that interact constantly with each other and are able to be deeply internalised.

### Creating, building and reinforcing connectedness

Schooling includes the process of creating, building and reinforcing connectedness. This is realised by many parents and students on the first day of school when a child begins to connect with an entity other than the family unit. Students and teachers also have this experience with transition into new systems, such as a change of school. They may encounter relationships that emphasise that what connected them to the previous school may no longer apply. Unless connection is created and reinforced over time, disconnection and

low self-worth can lead to isolation or alienation. Disconnection precludes the acquisition and development of the necessary repertoire of skills needed for resilience. In a society where drugs are so readily available, outcomes such as disconnection, isolation or alienation can expose students to higher risks of problematic substance use, setting in train a descending spiral that may be extremely difficult to reverse.

## Orthodoxy and change

**School leadership needs to challenge established conventions for the unorthodox approach to find expression.**

There are many challenges for schools in addressing the issues associated with student connectedness and factors other than school may account for a student's sense of alienation. For example, the lack of certainty, safety or support in family life, the perceived breakdown of a number of traditional social institutions, and the pervasive influence of a popular culture which values and demands instant gratification may all contribute. Schools cannot disregard such realities for they confront many teachers on a daily basis. However, the national project raises the critical question of how schools can respond to the core challenges of:

- active student engagement in learning
- sustained student connectedness to the school over the full period of that learning.

### Student engagement in learning and connectedness to the school

Identifying the changes required to maximise student engagement in learning and connectedness to the school, and how these can be best achieved, is a considerable problem that confronts any teacher daring to be different. Unless the school leadership is challenging established conventions, the unorthodox approach has little opportunity to find expression. The national project discloses that drug education highlights these issues and has the potential to bridge the gap between learning as a student and self-identity as a person. During the course of the national project, many teachers identified bridging this gap as critical if schools are to fulfill any worthwhile function in drug education. The challenges are many, covering issues related to:

- the integration of drug education into the curriculum
- structuring schools to engage and connect with students
- understanding the professional work of teachers.

The national project demonstrated that where school leaders and teachers are part of a 'critical mass' committed to connecting students to their schooling, there is more likely to be a culture of openness in which issues are debated and explored. Debate and exploration of the local, contextual issues must underpin the design and delivery of drug education in order to create the structures and practices of schooling with which all students can connect.

## At-risk students and the process of schooling

**Dysfunctional families can be a critical factor in raising the level of risk for students.**

To establish a connectedness with school is extremely important for at-risk and vulnerable students. School may stand alone as the one place where there is any prospect of feeling positively connected to anything other than a friendship group. During the national project, a number of school reports revealed the extent to which dysfunctional families can be a critical factor in raising the level of risk for students. In these instances, it is vital for the student to maintain connectedness to the processes of schooling, irrespective of the difficulties.

Findings from the national project bring into question the suitability of traditional schooling structures and practices in relation to assuring the connectedness of at-risk and vulnerable students. 'Good practice' is when structures and approaches provide sufficient individuality and differentiation to ensure the connection to schooling of those who are at-risk and likely to be vulnerable to problematic substance use. The approaches strive to ensure that at-risk and vulnerable students feel they 'belong' no less than those students whose lives have strong connections and minimum risk factors prevailing. Such connection, inside or outside the traditional structures of schooling, provides the basis for resilience.

Over the course of the national project, many schools gathered and reported evidence that indicated their work in drug education does 'make a difference'. Although several criteria for success were put forward, a small number of

schools maintained that the most 'powerful' criteria for success was that they gave priority to keeping at-risk and vulnerable students connected to school and to their learning. This was achieved by creating conditions and circumstances through which they could 'reach' these students and support them toward greater and more positive self-responsibility.

## Creating connectedness in middle school

**In the first two years of secondary school, too many students are not engaged by their learning.**

A number of schools described how they have attempted to challenge certain traditional processes of learning in order to better connect students to their schooling. Some secondary schools have also recognised the necessity to address the issue of why, especially over the course of the first two years, too many students appear not to be engaged by their learning. This lack of engagement is perceived as a first step toward disconnection, with its possible increased vulnerability to problematic substance use.

### Middle schooling

The national project frequently addressed the concept of 'middle schooling' which allows for a reduction in the number of teachers relating to students in the first years of secondary schooling. Initiatives within this approach include:

- organising students into small group learning teams
- team-teaching
- fully incorporating technology as one tool to promote student self-responsibility and perception
- delivering the curriculum as integrated rather than segmented.

The national project indicates that schools adopting this approach were giving priority to two key factors: relationships and self-responsibility. The middle school concept values and utilises relationships among students, between teachers and students, and between the school and students' families. It creates the conditions in which students perceive learning as fundamentally their responsibility and moves them away from a teacher-dependent model of education to one of

self-responsibility. Middle schooling assists in the integration of work in curriculum and the school's endeavours to ensure student wellbeing.

Irrespective of the potential of middle schooling methods to address issues related to student connectedness, it is also apparent that the school leaders and teachers have a desire to challenge established structures and orthodoxies. There is an appreciation that teachers must have appropriate professional development and support if they are to meet the demands placed upon them, particularly creating and sustaining student connectedness in the challenging early years of adolescence.

## Connecting through pastoral care and tutorial groups

Many schools that participated in the national project have employed pastoral care to better provide for the wellbeing of students. Pastoral care is perceived to strengthen the student-teacher relationship and increase the capacity of teachers to identify at-risk students. While pastoral care is conceived as a way to support the wellbeing of students, some schools embrace it as a framework within which drug education is located.

Tutorial groups have also been established to reduce class sizes and provide supportive, learning environments. Some of these groups are grade-based while others deliberately mix students of different ages. The objective of vertical groups is to break down barriers across age groups and thus build a stronger sense of school community.

### The significance of pastoral care and tutorial groups as meaningful to students

**The success of pastoral care and tutorial groups is dependent on whether students perceive them as meaningful and not merely symbolic.**

The national project indicates that the success of pastoral care and tutorial groups is dependent on whether students perceive them as meaningful and not merely symbolic and whether teachers have the capacity to relate empathetically to students. Where they are perceived as only a rhetorical mechanism to connect with students, they make little worthwhile contribution. In such cases,

teachers may express unease about the lack of a formalised program and uncertainty about what they are meant to be achieving. They may also doubt the adequacy of their professional preparation to address the range of issues that may arise.

## Student roles in school governance and decision-making

For many students, there are two realities at school. The first reality is that of their friendships and relationships, including those with teachers. The second reality is created by the organisational and curriculum demands of the school. For many students both realities can be enormously engaging and lead to a strong sense of connectedness. Schools and teachers can maximise the opportunities for such a sense of connection by:

- promoting self-responsibility
- implementing welfare practices which encourage support for all students
- providing opportunities for student voices to be expressed and heard.

### Valuing student 'voices'

**Students are more likely to remain connected to the school where they perceive their opinions to be valued and where they are able to contribute to the decision-making that informs school governance.**

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Students are more likely to remain connected to the school where they perceive their opinions to be valued and where they are able to contribute to the decision-making that informs school governance. Schools that value student 'voices' consolidate and move beyond the mere symbolism of student representative councils or school parliaments. They make such forums an important part of school governance, designed to connect not just student leaders, who in any case are likely to be the least vulnerable, but rather all students.

Such schools complement these forums with other processes that encourage students to develop a sense of belonging and a sense that all their views are important. Hence, it is 'good practice' for teachers to work with vulnerable students and the community to develop initiatives to meet their needs, rather than imposing initiatives on them. These teachers understand the importance of such approaches, given that vulnerable students are often characterised by a sense of futility and a lack of power over their destiny.

## Summary of 'good practice' in drug education

The national project indicates that disconnection from school is likely to commence in late primary school, coincidentally the time when children's horizons widen and they seek greater scope for individual expression. While the secondary school initially holds out the prospect of greater independence and freedom, some students seem to become lost in the complex structures and timetable of the secondary school. The challenging mix of issues that arise in early adolescence may exacerbate any lack of purpose and disconnection from school.

The national project indicates that an important consideration in drug education is that schools be prepared to examine and, if necessary, change their approach to student learning and wellbeing. Approaches that only add to existing school methods appear to have a limited capacity for enhancing student connectedness to the school and may be no more effective than a committed and empathetic teacher in a traditional classroom.

- **'Good practice' in drug education values and encourages debate and exploration of new and different ways to maintain student engagement and continued support for those most at-risk.** Students engaged with their learning, and school support over the full period of that learning, are two of the foundation stones upon which connectedness is built.
- **'Good practice' in drug education requires that students' learning experiences meet academic needs while also building social competencies and self-worth.** The structures in which learning occur should be designed to ensure that all students will be engaged and have a sense of belonging to the school community.

- It is **'good practice'** for schools seeking to create and sustain student connectedness to allocate time and resources and to provide precise, individual feedback to students on their learning. Individual feedback is valuable because of its potential to maintain students' connectedness to their schooling and, in the first instance, should be to the student as the primary client.
- **'Good practice'** in drug education accords a student's connectedness to school as a high priority. 'Good practice' ensures that all students, irrespective of their individual level of risk or vulnerability, have opportunities to be connected to their learning and school community as the basis of longer-term resilience in adulthood.

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