

PERSPECTIVE ARTICLE

From social bonds to psychological safety: Rethinking the role of school connectedness in adolescent mental health

Usoro Udousoro Akpan^{1*}, Ibrahim Khalil Ja'afar¹, Favour Hilary Obong², Joy Chidinma Larry³, Obafemi Samuel Olayinka⁴, Muhydeen Opeyemi Olojo⁴, and Tolulope Israel Oni⁴

¹Warwick Medical School, University of Warwick, Coventry, United Kingdom

²Department of Medicine and Surgery, Faculty of Clinical Sciences, University of Port Harcourt, Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria

³Department of Public Health, Faculty of Basic Medical Sciences, Arthur Jarvis University, Akpabuyo, Cross River State, Nigeria

⁴Department of Public Health, Faculty of Pure and Applied Sciences, Kwara State University, Malete, Kwara State, Nigeria

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Mihajlo Jakovljevic M.D. Ph.D. MAE

***Corresponding author:**

Usoro Udousoro Akpan
(usoro.akpan@warwick.ac.uk)

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Abstract

School connectedness is essential for fostering a supportive environment that promotes adolescent mental health, emotional well-being and academic success. Psychological safety allows students to express themselves freely without fear of judgement, promoting open communication and resilience. This study highlights the limitations of focusing solely on social bonds, emphasising that positive relationships do not always mitigate challenges such as anxiety or depression, particularly amongst marginalised youth who often face discrimination. Strategies to enhance psychological safety, such as implementing anti-bullying policies, training staff in empathetic communication, establishing peer-led support programmes and encouraging student participation in governance, serve to deepen trust and emotional security within the school environment. By integrating these strategies, schools can create a more inclusive atmosphere, ultimately fostering both emotional resilience and improved educational outcomes for all students.

Keywords: School connectedness; Adolescent mental health; Psychological safety; Social relationships

1. Introduction

School connectedness is traditionally defined as the quality of relationships that students develop with their peers, educators and the broader school community. It encapsulates a sense of belonging where students feel cared for, accepted and respected in their educational environment. This foundational understanding aligns with Goodenow's definition, which emphasises acceptance, respect, inclusion and support from one's school community (Zhu, 2018). Furthermore, studies demonstrate that positive interactions with teachers greatly enhance students' perceptions of their school connectedness, indicating that supportive educational environments play a crucial

role in fostering such connections (Lester & Cross, 2015; Ninković *et al.*, 2022).

However, the conception of school connectedness is increasingly recognised as more than just social bonds. Emerging research highlights its critical influence on mental health and emotional well-being, suggesting that school connectedness encompasses dimensions of psychological safety and emotional support in addition to social interactions (Wilkins *et al.*, 2023; Y. Yang *et al.*, 2023). For instance, increased levels of school connectedness have been correlated with improved emotional resilience, lessening symptoms of anxiety, depression and other mental health challenges amongst students (Schulze & Naidu, 2014). Notably, longitudinal studies have shown that a strong sense of connection to school during adolescence is associated with better mental health outcomes in adulthood, establishing a link between early school connectedness and long-term emotional well-being (Andersen *et al.*, 2019; Rose *et al.*, 2022).

The purpose of this article is to advocate for an expanded definition of school connectedness that integrates psychological safety and emotional support as essential components alongside traditional social interactions. By doing so, we can better understand the multifaceted nature of connectedness in educational settings and its implications for students' mental health and overall development. Recognising school connectedness as a protective factor that includes emotional dimensions fosters a more inclusive approach in educational practices, promoting environments where students not only connect socially but feel psychologically secure and emotionally supported (Shochet & Smith, 2014; Waters *et al.*, 2010; Yavrutürk *et al.*, 2020). This broader understanding is not just necessary for student retention and academic success but also for nurturing their mental and emotional well-being as well.

2. The limitations of social bonds alone

Focusing solely on peer and teacher relationships as components of school connectedness is insufficient for several critical reasons. Notably, the presence of positive relationships does not automatically equate to emotional security or mental health benefits for adolescents. Research has shown that while adolescents may exhibit strong social bonds, these connections do not consistently translate into resilience against psychological distress. For example, adolescents who feel a sense of social connection may still struggle with issues such as anxiety, depression and emotional distress despite the presence of peers or supportive teachers (Ginzburg *et al.*, 2021; Johnson *et al.*, 2018). This disconnect highlights the need for a more nuanced understanding that includes aspects of

psychological safety and emotional well-being as integral parts of school connectedness.

The experiences of ethnic minority youth and marginalised groups further complicate the impact of social connections. Discrimination and exclusion may undermine the potential benefits derived from social bonds, as these groups often face unique barriers that can negate feelings of support and security within a school environment (Caserta *et al.*, 2016; Ginzburg *et al.*, 2021). For instance, studies have identified that members of marginalised communities can experience heightened emotional distress despite having access to social networks. Such distress arises not from a lack of social support but rather from the detrimental effects of experiences of stigma or exclusion from those social networks (Caserta *et al.*, 2016). Hence, while social bonds might exist, their efficacy in promoting mental health is significantly reduced if the emotional context within which they occur is fraught with negativity.

Research has documented instances where social connectedness has failed to protect mental health outcomes due to inadequate psychological safety. In one study examining adolescents during the COVID-19 pandemic, it was noted that many participants felt socially connected yet faced increased levels of anxiety and emotional distress due to pervasive feelings of fear and uncertainty about the future (Shanahan *et al.*, 2020; X. Yang *et al.*, 2021). Such scenarios exemplify how social support can be rendered ineffective when it lacks the accompanying emotional security essential for mental health resilience. Furthermore, long-term investigations of adolescents highlighted that social connectedness does not always mitigate the risk of mental health issues, particularly for those exposed to adverse experiences or trauma early in life (Pate *et al.*, 2016).

3. Psychological safety as a critical component of school connectedness

Psychological safety in the school context refers to an environment where students feel safe to express themselves without fear of judgement or punishment. This includes the belief that they can share their thoughts and feelings openly and that their mistakes will be treated with understanding rather than ridicule. Students must have the confidence that their emotional needs will be supported by both teachers and peers, fostering a climate of trust where they can engage in learning without fear of negative repercussions (U. Akpan & Ja'afar, 2025; Stilwell *et al.*, 2024). These elements collectively contribute to an environment conducive to positive youth development, allowing individuals to thrive academically and socially.

Integrating psychological safety into the concept of school connectedness enhances the protective effects of

social bonds. Emotional resilience, which is critical during adolescence, thrives in environments where psychological safety is prioritised. In such settings, students can discuss challenges, seek help and express vulnerabilities without the concern of being stigmatised. The presence of psychological safety has been linked to reduced mental health risks, including anxiety and depression, which can pervade the adolescent experience, often regardless of the quality of social interactions (Khalijian *et al.*, 2023; Lamoreaux & Sulkowski, 2020). Research indicates that students with high psychological safety tend to exhibit greater emotional resilience, enabling them to cope better with stress and adversity, thereby fostering improved mental health outcomes (U. Akpan, Ja'afar, *et al.*, 2025a; Khalijian *et al.*, 2023).

Notably, psychological safety is especially crucial for ethnic minority and marginalised youth who frequently encounter additional social and cultural stressors, including discrimination and exclusion, within the school environment (Francis *et al.*, 2022; Widowati *et al.*, 2021). For these marginalised groups, the lack of psychological safety can compound the negative impacts associated with their social isolation, making it even more challenging for them to engage meaningfully in educational settings. Studies have shown that students from these backgrounds often feel vulnerable to not only rejection but also targeted behaviours that can lead to increased emotional distress (Mavrommatidou *et al.*, 2023). When an environment lacks psychological safety, these students may feel their emotional and cultural identities are undervalued or dismissed, intensifying feelings of alienation and anxiety (Wu *et al.*, 2022).

A pertinent example can be drawn from the experiences of black girls in educational settings, who, according to one study, described a consistent lack of psychological safety, leading to feelings of invisibility and devaluation within school environments. This study illustrated how systemic factors contribute to an unsafe emotional climate for these students, ultimately impeding their academic and social engagement (Harris & Kruger, 2020; Inniss-Thompson *et al.*, 2024). Similarly, the role of Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs) in schools exemplifies the impact of fostering psychological safety, where specialised support systems can aid LGBTQ+ students in navigating their unique challenges, thus promoting their mental well-being (Toomey *et al.*, 2011).

4. Strategies to foster psychological safety in schools

Enhancing psychological safety within educational settings is essential for promoting a conducive learning atmosphere

that supports students' emotional well-being and social connectedness. Below are practical approaches that can be adopted to foster psychological safety in schools:

4.1. Creating anti-bullying and anti-discrimination policies

Schools should establish clear, comprehensive policies aimed at preventing bullying and discrimination. These policies should not only outline unacceptable behaviours but also articulate the consequences for infractions, creating an environment that conveys that such actions will not be tolerated. Research indicates that well-enforced anti-bullying measures correlate with improved school climates and lower rates of victimisation (U. Akpan, Oni, *et al.*, 2024; Marraccini & Brier, 2017). Effective policies should also include avenues for reporting violations in a safe manner, allowing students to speak out without fear of retaliation.

4.2. Training teachers and staff to respond with empathy

Training educators and staff to recognise and respond to students' emotional needs is critical in establishing psychological safety. Workshops and continuous professional development should focus on empathy, active listening and culturally responsive practices, which can enhance staff's ability to support diverse student populations. Studies have demonstrated that increased teacher support is linked to better emotional outcomes for students (Foster *et al.*, 2017; Zullig *et al.*, 2010). Such training would enable teachers to become not only educators but also trusted confidants who foster a nurturing school environment.

4.3. Establishing peer-led support programmes

Peer-led support initiatives, including mentorship and buddy systems, can enhance psychological safety by providing students opportunities to express themselves openly amongst peers. Such programmes allow students to share experiences and provide mutual support, which can be particularly valuable for emotional resilience. Evidence suggests that peer relationships significantly influence school connectedness and mental health, facilitating a sense of community and acceptance amongst students (U. Akpan, Ja'afar, *et al.*, 2025b; George *et al.*, 2010; Oldfield *et al.*, 2015).

4.4. Encouraging student voice and participation in governance

Empowering students to actively participate in school decision-making processes enhances their sense of ownership and agency. Schools can implement student

Table 1. Strategies to foster psychological safety in schools

Strategy	Description
Creating anti-bullying and anti-discrimination policies	Establishes clear policies outlining unacceptable behaviours and consequences. Includes safe reporting mechanisms. Linked to better school climate and lower victimisation.
Training teachers and staff to respond with empathy	Trains educators in empathy, active listening and cultural responsiveness. Improves emotional outcomes and creates nurturing environments.
Establishing peer-led support programmes	Introduces mentorship and buddy systems to foster emotional resilience and peer support. Promotes community and acceptance.
Encouraging student voice and participation in governance	Implements student councils/forums to give students a voice in decision-making. Enhances sense of ownership, trust and connectedness.

councils or forums where students can voice their opinions, concerns and suggestions for improvement. This approach reinforces their importance within the school community and fosters trust between students and administration. Participation in governance has been linked to improved school connectedness and reduced feelings of alienation (U. Akpan, Olojo, *et al.*, 2024; Millings *et al.*, 2012).

These strategies complement the development of social connectedness by deeply embedding trust and emotional security into the fabric of the school environment. When policies establish a zero-tolerance approach towards bullying and discrimination, it strengthens the bonds formed between students and their peers as well as educators. Concurrently, training staff to engage empathetically with students cements the feeling of safety and support, allowing students to be more open and vulnerable without fear of judgement.

Moreover, initiatives like peer-led support programmes provide existing social structures that reinforce psychological safety while promoting mental well-being. When students feel included in governance and decision-making, they develop a greater sense of belonging and investment in their school, fostering a collaborative spirit that enhances overall school connectedness.

Table 1 shows the strategies to foster psychological safety in schools.

5. Conclusion

In summary, the concept of school connectedness has evolved to encompass a broader understanding that integrates psychological safety along with traditional social bonds amongst students, peers and educators. Emphasising

psychological safety is critical for fostering an environment where students feel secure to express themselves without the fear of judgement or punishment. Such an environment is foundational for healthy emotional development and for mitigating mental health risks, particularly amongst vulnerable populations such as ethnic minority and marginalised youth.

The interplay between social bonds and psychological safety creates a robust framework for enhancing educational outcomes. When students feel psychologically secure, they are more likely to develop trusting relationships with their peers and educators, leading to greater emotional resilience and a stronger overall sense of belonging within the school community. This comprehensive understanding underscores the necessity for practical strategies such as implementing anti-bullying and anti-discrimination policies, training educators to respond empathetically to students' needs and promoting student engagement in school governance. These strategies not only support social connectedness but also deepen trust and emotional security, ultimately contributing to a healthier school environment conducive to learning and personal growth.

The implications of this expanded view extend beyond individual mental health; fostering psychological safety and connectedness within schools can lead to improved academic achievements, reduced behavioural issues and higher levels of engagement amongst students. As schools continue to navigate the challenges presented by a diverse student population, prioritising these elements will be essential for cultivating supportive educational environments that connect students socially and nurture their emotional and psychological well-being.

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Conflict of interest

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Author contributions

Conceptualization: Usoro Udousoro Akpan

Writing-original draft: Usoro Udousoro Akpan, Ibrahim Khalil Ja'afar, Favour Hilary Obong

Writing-review & editing: Joy Chidinma Larry, Obafemi Samuel Olayinka, Muhydeen Opeyemi Olojo, Tolulope Israel Oni

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