Introduction

Playing it safe is hurting our students

I want to start this book with a bold statement: *schools need to get their act together regarding connection*. Connectedness in schools is widely misunderstood in terms of what it looks like (García-Moya, 2020; Gümüş et al., 2022; Kim et al., 2023; Rose et al., 2022), and how it plays into the primary focus of many of these schools: academic achievement.

When I consider academic achievement and how it is measured and compared, I'm thinking grades, regardless of whether they are represented as letters, numbers, percentages and ranks. For far too long, schools have focused on this type of data while superficially addressing many of the foundational factors responsible for creating "good grades" (Allen et al., 2018; Burns & Frangiosa, 2021; Hardy, 2015; Schneider, 2017), such as connection.

> The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2023) defines school connectedness as a "students' belief that peers and adults in the school support, value, and care about their individual well-being as well as their academic progress" (para. 1).

> Students who feel more connected to school are "*less* likely to engage in risky behaviours" and "*more* likely to engage in positive health behaviours" (para. 2).

Contemporary schools have nailed the language in their public-facing materials (social media, websites, marketing materials and enrolment packages), and savvy leaders have perfected the art of the parent information night plug. Generally, schools aim for perfection of results rather than empowerment of people (Schneider, 2017) – this is despite the knowledge, skills and desire to change from this established status quo.

A cursory internet search will uncover countless blog posts, podcasts and articles begging for a change to the systems, processes and methods we

Understanding the journey

It is my belief that everything that makes an organisation successful stems from connection. Connection to an ideal, a belief, a purpose, even a person, is one of the most powerful drivers behind change, growth and success (Gümüş et al., 2022). If you were to suggest that any system, organisation or community could operate successfully and sustainably without a sense of connection, sense of belonging or meaning, I would prepare myself eagerly for a friendly debate.

In a meta-analysis of 51 studies on school connection (the authors used the term 'belonging'), Allen et al. (2018) concluded connection within a school community:

- Positively correlates to higher academic performance;
- Reduces rates of absence and increases rates of school completion;
- Lowers truancy and improves behaviour, engagement and self-efficacy;
- Contributes to high levels of happiness, self-esteem and positive identity; and
- Reduces occurrences of violence, bullying, vandalism and risk-taking behaviours.

Establishing high levels of connectivity between members and their community, therefore, is concomitant with improved wellbeing, positivity and meaning (Arslan, 2019; Šeboková et al., 2018). This is especially pertinent based on a study conducted by Virtanen et al. (2019), highlighting a systematic reduction in wellbeing across adolescents post-primary school, and one by Arslan (2019) concluding, where a student's and a school's values are aligned, peer groups are more likely to create a shared identity that fosters a sense of shared belonging that is driven by social values, rather than academic ones.

Connecting parents to their child's education allows for caregivers to be active contributors to their learning, understand and empathise with their performance, and effectively support young people to plan for their futures (Allen et al., 2023; El Zaatari & Ibrahim, 2021). Uslu and Gizir (2017) found that where parental involvement is encouraged, student motivation increased, along with improvements in effort and work ethic, and resilience to challenges.

Connection in the staffroom is intrinsically linked to a sense of wellbeing, feelings of worth and value, and motivation within the profession, with Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2021) stating that shared values correlated positively