Teacher Connectedness – An Educator’s Perspective

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Abstract: This research study examines how lecturers at the Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology (MCAST) engage and connect with students. It analyses the impact of teacher connectedness from the educator’s perspective. Through an interpretivist approach that implemented phenomenography as the research method, the qualitatively different ways in which lecturers at MCAST engage with their students and how they experience teacher connectedness were analysed in order to understand the nature of student-teacher interactions. These interactions can positively affect students by guiding them towards appropriate behaviours and improved student outcomes. Three different ways in which MCAST lecturers experience teacher connectedness were identified, with a change in focus from teacher-centred to student-centred across the categories of pedagogic connectedness. Knowledge gained from this study can contribute towards the adaptation of teacher connectedness into pedagogical practices that will encourage educators to acquire skills that facilitate positive pedagogic engagements.

Keywords: Teacher connectedness, pedagogy, vocational education

Introduction

Teacher connectedness is defined as the interactions between educator and student that have an impact on student learning, and that foster student well-being. This is a qualitative study of the educators’ perspective of pedagogic connectedness. A phenomenographic approach was used to question the nature of teacher connectedness and to examine the different ways in which lecturers at MCAST experience this concept and how they view their teaching experience in relation to their ways of engaging with students.

The Research Problem

Young people of today’s generation have access to extensive informational sources outside school and family; and they are the direct target of advertising and mass media (Luke et al. 2002). Thus, today’s adolescents mature at a relatively fast pace, whether physically, cognitively or socially, and they bring to schools new skills, needs and issues that are unique to this generation. Challenges such as the easy availability of alcohol and drugs, socio-economic diversity, racial discrimination, and other issues such as teen pregnancies, lead to an increased vulnerability, to a poor educational achievement, student disengagement, and even failure (Rowan, Chiang and Miller 1997). Feelings of alienation and disconnectedness from others have been identified as major issues that contribute to underachievement and to behavioural problems in a number of students (Rowan, Chiang and Miller 1997). Such feelings experienced by adolescents today may be further intensified as a result of the absence of support from their families.
In order to address such issues, lecturers need to be able to adapt and respond to this changing nature of their students as well as acknowledge the new skills and experiences that they possess. Changes to classroom practices, curriculum, assessment, and pedagogy are necessary to enhance the academic achievements of adolescent students (Jackson and Davis 2000). Studies that have recognised the importance of positive and healthy teacher-student relationships in enhancing student outcomes have in fact shown that strong and supportive relationships also facilitate the intellectual, ethical, and social development of adolescents (Jackson and Davis 2000).

In researching teacher connectedness, the relational nature of pedagogic teacher-student interactions as experienced by lecturers at MCAST was studied. These interactions can prove to be central to reversing the alienation and disengagement experienced by MCAST adolescent students in their formative years.

**Background and Scope of the Study**

Many adolescents who experience increased alienation and disengagement from school may demonstrate inappropriate behaviours that may range from passivity and disinterest through disruptive behaviour and violence through to truancy and early leaving (Carrington 2002). Some of these negative conducts may occur as a result of physical, social, emotional, and intellectual changes of adolescence, while others may be a consequence of educational programmes that do not cater for the unique needs of the students. Connectedness has been recognised as one of the factors that may reduce alienation and disengagement from school (Kuperminc, Leadbeater and Blatt 2001).

Previous studies indicate that teachers’ perceptions of teaching range from ones that focus on a teacher-centred/content-oriented approach to ones that focus on a student-centred/learning approach (Boulton-Lewis et al. 2001). Such conclusions, however, fail to address the different ways of experiencing interactions between the teacher and the student, particularly in adolescent scenarios.

The current research study focuses on the pedagogic connections between lecturers and MCAST students. Previous studies have shown that some students link their school underachievement to their relationships with teachers (Trent and Slade 2001). This fact highlights the importance of educators in influencing student outcomes (Jackson and Davis 2000). Organisational changes alone are not adequate to achieve a significant and sustained increase in student achievement.

> “Only when schooling operates in a way that connects students relationally in a relevant, engaging and worthwhile experience can substantial learning occur.”


Despite the literature supporting the idea that changes to pedagogy are essential in order to reach the unique yet diverse needs of students and ultimately to observe improvements in student outcomes (Carrington 2002), there seems to be far less research on the educators’ perspectives of teacher connectedness. The ways in which teachers interact with and engage students in learning have a considerable positive impact on the social and emotional wellbeing of students, regardless of the content of the curriculum (Zilm 2002). In addition to these beneficial social outcomes, positive teacher-student interactions also lead to improved academic outcomes (Rowan, Chiang and Miller 1997). Due to the fact that it is the educators who are the principal drivers of change in the process of student
development and achievement, it is important that the lecturers’ experiences of these pedagogic interactions are understood and revealed.

The scope of this study is to understand the nature of teacher-student engagements and analyse the impact of teacher connectedness from the lecturers’ perspective. By inquiring about the nature of student-teacher interactions, this research study analyses the qualitatively different ways in which lecturers at MCAST engage with their students and how they experience teacher connectedness. Knowledge gained from this project can contribute towards providing a basis for change and for the adaptation of teacher connectedness into pedagogical practices that will encourage educators to acquire skills that facilitate positive pedagogic engagements.

### Literature Review

Literature that is associated with pedagogy and adolescent psychology has contributed to the understandings of teacher-student interactions and pedagogic practices.

**Pedagogic Connectedness**

In the literature, the notion of “connectedness” has been described as a multidimensional construct that occurs when a person is actively involved with another person, object, group, or environment, and that involvement promotes a sense of comfort, well-being, and anxiety reduction (Townsend and McWhirter 2005). Connectedness therefore suggests a sense of close belonging in relationships with other people (Lee and Robbins 2000) and the feeling of being cared for by others (Blum, McNeely and Rinehart 2002).

In the context of this study, connectedness relates specifically to teacher connectedness, which is the active involvement or engagements between teacher and student in an effort towards impacting student learning and making the learning experience more meaningful to students. The term engagement is distinct from participation and is a multi-dimensional variable that includes behaviours, emotions, and psychological well-being (Osterman 2000).

Students show they are engaged when they show interest in learning, enjoy interesting challenges and show determination in trying to complete the tasks set (Osterman 2000). Thus, whenever teachers and students exhibit a pedagogic connectedness, there is a general sense of togetherness between teacher and student in the active and joint construction of knowledge. These teacher-student engagements usually vary for different teachers and for different students and also for particular teacher-student combinations. For these engagements to be understood, the different aspects of teacher connectedness need to be elucidated.

**Adolescence and Development**

The majority of students following vocational courses at MCAST are adolescents at an important phase of development in terms of the formation of their identities as young adults, their interpersonal relationships with peers, teachers and others, and the development of characteristics that are required for adaptive and lifelong learning.

In the transition from secondary to post-secondary school, students move to an environment which emphasises independence. In addition to dealing with the unfamiliar surroundings of a new school, students also need to build new friendships. Although many adolescents might look forward to these changes and cope well, a number of students may find these changes distressing and this can lead to anxiety issues.
Young people mature physically, socially, emotionally, intellectually, and morally at different times and at different rates (Hudson et al. 2010), so there is a widespread diversity in maturity among MCAST students. Adolescence is a pivotal period that greatly influences later development as an adult and it is at this time in their life that a considerable number of students experience underachievement, a lack of enjoyment in learning, and increased disengagement and alienation from school (Luke 2003).

Today's adolescents are immersed in rapidly changing social, cultural, technological, economic, and political contexts (Carrington 2002) which have brought about knowledge and new skills and abilities that are essential in 21st century society. Many adolescents engage with the modern media and embrace the latest technologies and popular culture. Consequently, there may be a mismatch between the skill sets and the knowledge of today's adolescents and traditional classroom practices. As lecturers we need to recognise this and tailor our pedagogic practices for the wide range of new and complex needs and abilities of our current students.

In addition to adjusting to a new sense of self and to new cognitive demands, adolescents are at a point in their lives where they have a desire for independence and yet have a strong need for security (Osterman 2000). Educational institutions play an important part in teaching young people the various skills that may increase their coping abilities, as they are involved in teaching adolescents social-emotional competencies and in encouraging school connectedness (Resnick et al. 1997).

Protective Factors Against Health-damaging Behaviours

It is crucial to identify any protective factors that may reduce adolescent health-damaging behaviours. Such protective factors include resilience, connectedness, and a sense of belonging.

Resilience is defined as a person’s ability to cope with changes and challenges (Wyn et al. 2000) or, in other words, the ability to bounce back from adversity (Cabanyes Truffino 2010). Resilience in adolescents can be influenced by factors such as connectedness, in particular, social connectedness with their peers, family connectedness and a general sense of belonging (McWhirter et al. 2016).

In a study by La Trobe University, school was seen by adolescents as a second home where “you see more of your teachers than you see of your parents” and good teachers were seen as caring adults who dealt with adolescents in fair and just ways (Fuller, McGraw and Goodyear 1999). Having positive, caring relationships increases resilience (McWhirter et al. 2016). Thus, supportive and encouraging teachers may help students become more resilient especially when the student experiences a lack of family connectedness or a lack of connectedness in other social settings (Zilm 2002).

Teacher connectedness and the sense of belonging have clear ties to improved academic, social and personal attitudes, increased student engagement and participation, and higher academic achievement (Osterman 2000). Teacher connectedness can be encouraged by creating an environment in which students feel safe, listened to, and valued (Mcneely, Nonnemaker and Blum 2002), thus promoting feelings of comfort and well-being (Hagerty et al. 1993). Through a positive learning environment, a healthy development would be encouraged, and inappropriate behaviours are discouraged (Mcneely, Nonnemaker and Blum 2002).
Significance of Teacher-Student Relationships

Achievement problems experienced by students who participated in a study by Trent and Slade (2001) were directly linked to the students’ relationships with their teachers. The study identified a number of features of what students perceived as a “good teacher”, most of which emphasised the “ability and willingness of teachers to establish relationships of mutual respect and friendship with their students” (Trent and Slade 2001). Students viewed their learning achievements as being positively influenced by “better teachers” and this can lead to the understanding that positive teacher-student relationships are essential for good teaching.

Individual teachers can contribute more significantly to changes in student achievement and performance than other factors related to the educational system (Lingard, Mills and Hayes 2000). Certain traits exhibited by teachers enhance teacher connectedness. These behaviours include the ability to relate to students, taking time to talk with and listen to students, and having a friendly approach and a sense of humour (Trent and Slade 2001).

Three aspects of classroom practice were observed to have an impact on students’ sense of belonging, mainly teacher support, authority relationships between teachers and students, and the methods of teaching (Osterman 2000).

Teacher Support

Teacher support involves qualities such as “being caring, friendliness, understanding, dedication and dependability” (Ryan and Patrick 2001). Students who perceived their teachers as being supportive and caring were more inclined to be motivated than students who did not (Wentzel 2002). Supportive teacher-student relationships help provide students with a sense of security that consequently improves social, emotional, and academic competence. The classroom environment improves when teachers show empathy towards their students, are consistent in the way they interact with students, and allow students to make decisions (Mcneely, Nonnemaker and Blum 2002).

Authority Relationships Between Teachers and Students

In classrooms, teachers can either opt for an approach that deals with discipline and the enforcement of rules, or alternatively, educators may use an approach in which they balance the learning requirements with the satisfaction of their students’ emotional and developmental needs (Schiff and Tatar 2003). A combined approach that maintains discipline while being supportive and caring is recommended and in fact, student achievement is generally higher, while juvenile delinquency is lower in schools where teachers are supportive but firm and maintain high expectations for behaviour and academic work (Lingard, Mills and Hayes 2000).

Methods of Teaching

There are two educational strategies that directly relate to students’ sense of belonging: cooperative learning and dialogue (Osterman 2000). The use of dialogue and cooperative learning strategies in the classroom, where students work on tasks in groups, not only increases academic performance and enhances student motivation but it also increases students’ self-efficacy as they realise that they are able to acquire the necessary knowledge without being completely dependent upon the teacher (Osterman 2000).

Teachers thus need to provide opportunities for their students to develop the skills that are necessary for them to be able to actively engage in cooperative learning. Otherwise,
students may become disengaged and experience feelings of disappointment and frustration which may result in the lowering of their self-esteem. When students are provided with opportunities to participate in discussions in a supportive classroom environment, they may develop feelings of trust, mutual respect, and an acceptance and appreciation of others’ points of view. As a result, students’ sense of belonging, and hence connectedness, may be enhanced.

Teachers need to use a variety of teaching and learning strategies that challenge students within a supportive environment. By providing students with interesting and challenging tasks that provide relevant experiences, and by supporting and encouraging students to act autonomously, the students’ motivation to learn would increase (Murdock 1999).

Educators also need to engage with students to discover their backgrounds and experiences so that they can tailor their teaching practices in response to student diversity. It is by establishing a level of pedagogic connectedness with their students that teachers can cater for the unique needs of each individual student.

Research Methodology

An interpretivist philosophical worldview was adopted in this study that focuses on individual experiences and meanings gathered from open-ended questioning. The qualitative research methodology used in this study is phenomenography, which seeks to investigate the different ways in which people experience or perceive particular phenomena (Marton 1986).

Phenomenography

Phenomenography is a specific qualitative research methodology developed from educational research undertaken in Sweden back in the 1960s (Ashworth and Lucas 1998) and the term was defined by Marton (1986) as “an empirically based approach that aims to identify qualitatively different ways in which different people experience, conceptualise, perceive, and understand various kinds of phenomena” (Marton 1986).

When carrying out phenomenographic investigations, the phenomenon under study is viewed from the perspective of the research participants rather than from the perspective of the researcher. Since this study aims to reveal the qualitatively different ways in which MCAST lecturers experience the phenomenon of teacher connectedness, a phenomenographic perspective is appropriate for such a study.

Context of the Study

MCAST is a vocational education institution that caters for post-secondary as well as adult students. The majority of students pursuing courses offered by MCAST are adolescents that are following post-secondary education.

Besides striving for excellence and equity, MCAST’s vision also embraces the concept of inclusion by “providing an environment in which any individual or group can be and feel welcomed, respected, supported, and valued to fully participate” (MCAST Strategic Plan 2019-2021 2019).

The focus of this study is the pedagogical relationship between the teacher and student, viewed from the perspective of the lecturers at MCAST. The study focused on identifying and describing the particular features of pedagogic connectedness, thus elucidating the meaning that is attributed to teacher connectedness by the research participants. Following
identification of these aspects of teacher connectedness, a deeper understanding of this phenomenon was possible by looking at the differences in meaning assigned to teacher connectedness among the participants.

**Research Questions**

The following are the three research questions addressed in this study:

1. What is the nature of teacher connectedness experienced while teaching at MCAST?
2. Which are the different ways of experiencing teacher connectedness?
3. What does knowledge gained from this research mean for pedagogic practices at MCAST?

**Data Collection and Analysis**

The data was obtained through semi-structured interviews with the lecturers and the transcripts of the interviews were analysed iteratively. This being a mini research study, five (5) lecturers were chosen as research participants. This number allowed for any variation to be revealed but also limited the vast amount of data that needed to be analysed. The research participants were selected from lecturers at MCAST. The interviewees gave consent and expressed their willingness to talk about their pedagogic interactions with students. The anonymity of the interviewees was maintained so as to encourage the participants to express their personal views in an honest and open manner.

When conducting phenomenographic interviews the principal method of data collection is through semi-structured interviews in which the researcher poses a set of key questions together with other spontaneous questions or prompts that emerge during the course of the interview (Marton 1986).

Lecturers were interviewed in relation to their perception of teaching and learning, their preferred method of teaching and the nature of their classroom engagements with students. A number of prepared open-ended interview questions (Appendix I) allowed the participants to express their views and their ways of experiencing teacher connectedness. The semi-structured interviews gave the participants the freedom to critically reflect on their experiences of this phenomenon.

The interviews aimed to reveal the lecturers’ descriptions of teacher connectedness and what it means to them. Any commonalities and differences within the descriptions were identified and the results were presented in the form of an outcome space, which is a visual representation of the range of ways of experiencing the phenomenon in question, thus revealing a number of ways that educators experience pedagogic teacher-student interactions.

Individual interviews were carried out online using a video chat platform. Prior to being asked the interview questions, the participants were given a brief introduction to the topic of pedagogic connectedness and were engaged in a general conversation regarding their teaching experience, as well as the year levels and subjects they currently teach. Following this initial conversation, the focus shifted towards the interview questions. Each interview took between 45-60 minutes, which allowed for considerable exploration of the topic and in-depth response by the participants. The interviews were recorded for later transcription.

In analysing the data, a number of key categories related to pedagogic connectedness were identified. Comparisons between the different categories resulted in the development of the outcome space – a diagrammatic representation which illustrates the differences in the lecturers’ experiences of the phenomenon of teacher connectedness.
Results and Discussion

Three different ways of experiencing teacher connectedness were revealed from analysis of data obtained from the interviews. For each of these descriptive categories, several direct quotes from the interview transcripts are included as examples to demonstrate how the data analysis reflected the participants’ experiences.

Category 1: Instructing

The first category of teacher connectedness is that of providing information and instructions, thus imparting knowledge and skills to the students. In view of the limited period for lecture delivery and the requirements of the curriculum, this perspective might seem an efficient way of teaching students, yet it is important to help students understand the information being given.

In this concept, a teaching approach that ensures order and discipline, as described by Schiff and Tatar (2003), is maintained in the classroom and thus, authoritarian relations between teacher and student are evident.

One lecturer mentioned the fact that their role in the classroom was predominantly one of passing on knowledge to students in order to prepare them for the periodical assessments. In addition, due to the vast amount of information and the time constraints of the lectures, she expressed a sense of frustration with the focus on exams:

“The timetable can at times be frustrating in that you have to somehow deliver a one-hour lecture to a group of students who you only meet once a week, so it is important to make sure that students are paying attention. You need to get through a certain amount of information within a limited time in order to get the students ready for the assessment which addresses all the required criteria.” (Interview D).

At times, albeit rarely, teacher-student interactions are one-way, with minimal input from students. Some lecturers may prefer using direct instruction as the main pedagogic practice, with little or no adaptation of their teaching method in response to the different learning styles or interests of students. In such situations, teacher-student interactions are predominantly from teacher to student rather than the reverse. As such, pedagogic connectedness is teacher centred.

Category 2: Facilitating

In this concept, lecturers perceive pedagogic connectedness as facilitating student learning, with the teacher as the facilitator of that learning.

Due to the vocational nature of the courses being taught at MCAST, the acquisition of skills and strategies provides opportunities for teachers and students to connect pedagogically as the teacher would often move around the classroom monitoring student engagement. In this facilitating concept, teachers provide students with the skills required to perform particular tasks. Skills include discipline-based activities such as working in a science laboratory, performing beauty therapy treatments, aircraft maintenance and a variety of other skills that are taught in the vocational courses at MCAST. Students have a more active role in their learning through participation in activities. In other cases, the lecturer focuses on developing strategies intended to assist students in more generic learning or to improve their organisational skills.
Lecturers describe demonstrating skills and strategies to students and then students are provided with opportunities to practise the learned skill:

“Demonstrating what you expect them to do is very important so that the students have a clear sense of what is expected from them, particularly in their assignment work. They are required to practise their skills to build their confidence.” (Interview E).

In this concept, the use of group activities as a pedagogic tool is given importance and there is a focus on getting students involved in a range of activities rather than simply copying down notes from the board.

Lecturers may provide classroom activities for other reasons. Some perceive the students as having short concentration spans and use activities to maintain student interest and engagement through the course of the lesson:

“One of the things that comes to mind is that students’ concentration spans are usually pretty short, and they like to have short breaks because three hours at a go is too much. For this reason, I like to balance theory and practical sessions.” (Interview C).

Although whole group or direct instruction might be the key pedagogic practice used in this concept, teachers move from the front of the classroom to where the students are situated in the room.

“I don’t stand at the board constantly, but I move around the room all the time because with moving around the room, it keeps them focused because they have to look where you’re going all the time.” (Interview D).

The teacher engages with students as he/she moves through the room and asks questions to gauge the students’ understanding of the subject as well as to assist in the learning process. Teachers also encourage feedback from students. This physical proximity between teachers and students provides opportunities for the exchanges between teachers and students to become less authoritarian in nature.

These interactions are used to discover student interest and understanding of the topic being taught. In this concept, teachers do not expect the classroom to be quiet but acknowledge the importance of peer interactions in facilitating learning.

“By having them ask questions is another way to gauge whether they are engaged in the lesson and from the type of question you can gauge whether they understand or not, as well as whether I am explaining clearly. A good teacher-student connectedness also helps with the dynamics of the group. They get along better and they communicate better. You’ll also get more students who cooperate well and do their work because they want to do the work, not because they are forced to.” (Interview C).

Group activities can facilitate these interactions and teachers encourage students to think more deeply by getting them to analyse and discuss topics under investigation in the classroom.

In teachers’ descriptions relating to this concept, students are seen as active participants in the learning process and thus play a more active role in learning. The teacher acknowledges that students bring to the classroom prior knowledge and understandings of the object of learning. The teacher is not necessarily the expert and the student the novice.
“I usually have students sit in a circle which changes the dynamics of the classroom from one of hierarchy to one of a more egalitarian level and we share stories on an equal level so that brings more of a community feel to the classroom.” (Interview B).

Thus, this category is different from the previous one in that the focus has moved from the teacher to the teacher’s relationship with the student. The facilitating concept marks the transition between teacher-centred and student-centred categories of description.

Category 3: Guided Participation

This concept is one where students take on an active role in the learning process and are encouraged to take responsibility for their own learning. The lecturer would work with the students and guide them towards becoming independent learners by providing them with challenges and opportunities to initiate learning experiences rather than simply providing information. The focus is one of developing a more independent approach to learning as teachers would recognise and cater for the uniqueness of individual students. Teachers’ pedagogical approaches should include the use of small group activities, the maintenance of a positive classroom atmosphere, and increased student independence in learning tasks, in order to help students develop higher order cognitive processes (Tharp and Gallimore 1991). Such a range of pedagogic practices is evident in this category of pedagogic connectedness.

The guided participation concept acknowledges the importance of success for all students. The lecturer encourages students to move beyond their initial level of understanding into a deeper understanding of the subject and to be creative in their thinking:

“Over the years, my mode of teaching has changed. For example, I used to be working with the flow, doing what other lecturers do, but nowadays, the Masters in Vocational Education Applied Research (MVEAR) gives me a boost to do what I think is best even if no one else is doing it or if it is a bit unorthodox. For example, rather than showing how a laptop is dismantled, I ask the student how they think it should be done. And students rather than having me showing them how it’s done, they try to scavenge and try to find a way how to fix it. In my first years of teaching, I would show them how to do it or show a video, but nowadays I ask them to show me how they would do it.”

“I also try to keep them involved and motivated by showing them the true meaning of what they are learning by giving them real life scenarios. Thus, they are empowered and they feel more independent.”

“Most of the time I ask questions and give a form of formative assessment that is going to help them realise whether they understood or not. Sometimes they would assess themselves if they learned or not.” (Interview A).

Other teachers encourage students to reflect in order to gain a deeper awareness of themselves and a clearer understanding of the subject. The lecturer perceives students as active participants in the learning process.

“I am trying to use mindfulness as a teaching approach, start the lesson with some mindful meditation. It helps calm them down and open their mind. I’ve tried it last scholastic year and found that it helped them remember sequence more and to be more openminded, and it helps them calm down enough to focus and it helps to connect us as well. We share experiences through that 5-minute session.” (Interview C).
In previous concepts, lecturers were responsible for planning and structuring the learning activities. In the guided participation concept, teachers spoke of giving students some freedom to choose their learning experiences:

“I ask my students what topics they would like to learn about and spend a lot of time working with texts that are meaningful and related to current events and issues. I do try to create this engagement not just through fun and games but also through serious talk and dialogues about topics that are of interest to the students I teach.” (Interview B)

Dialogue is defined as the questioning and sharing of ideas and knowledge that happen in conversation. While classroom activities such as lectures, demonstrations, and textbook reading can assist learning performance, the use of dialogue is critical to the development of thinking skills (Tharp and Gallimore 1991).

In the guided participation concept, there is an emphasis on the social-emotional development of the student as a person rather than solely on the academic development of the student. The importance of the development of social and emotional skills is recognised. Such interpersonal skills include empathy, respectful interactions with others, and assertiveness.

Student motivation is an important dimension in students’ learning and it is the students’ own interests, involvement, and intrinsic motivation that are viewed as prerequisites to meaningful learning (Murdock 1999). Teachers describe getting students to work and to cooperate in the classroom through the rapport that exists between teacher and students, rather than focusing on the enforcement of rules and the use of punishment. The notion of respect between teachers and students begins to emerge in this concept. The teacher works with students rather than simply providing information or skills to students. This concept is identifiably different from the previous concept as it focuses on the personal development of the student in addition to academic development.

Lecturers in this concept use a wider range of pedagogic practices than in previous concepts. These practices include the use of group activities. Teachers need to reveal the different ways in which students experience learning in order to be able to design the tasks and context of learning with the experiences of the learners in mind (Booth 1997). While the teacher is responsible for the structure and content of these activities, the teacher acknowledges the interests and talents that the students bring to the classroom. During these group activities, students learn through interactions with each other and with the teacher.

Lecturers described developing interpersonal skills in students and such skills were useful for facilitating group activities. Teachers expect students to demonstrate empathy in their interactions with others and thus the use of social and emotional skills were seen as part of student learning experiences:

“Students in the classroom tend to form these little groups and I always disperse these groups like I make groups in class for an assignment or something and they’re forced to interact with each other and learn from each other and some of them might feel uncomfortable but they’re going to be exposed to many different ideas. Mutual respect is important in the classroom. So, listening and understanding are important because there are times when you need to be quiet and you need to listen and to be responsive to others.”

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“I know that as students, when you can choose your group, you not only get to work with the same people but you also usually take on the same role every time. I always try to mix it up. When they then present their work, they’re learning from each other as well.” (Interview B)

Unique to this concept, teachers speak of their passion for teaching and learning and speak also of sharing this passion with students. In the guided participation concept, teachers spoke of sharing some aspects of their personal lives with their students. Teachers stated that these close interpersonal interactions with students led also to the development of mutual respect between teacher and students. In a study on lecturers’ emotional intelligence, the importance of taking an individual interest in the students, taking time to building relationships and gaining trust was found to help with positive interactions in the classroom (Bonnici and Aquilina 2019).

Sometimes sharing one’s life experiences with students assists in breaking the traditional power balance between lecturer and students. This helps develop positive teacher-student relationships. However, one must find a balance between being approachable while at the same time ensuring that boundaries are respected.

The guided participation concept is one where the relationship between teacher and students can be described as equal rather than authoritarian:

“Throughout the year I share my experiences, encourage them to share theirs and in that way we learn more about each other. I like to make them feel that I’m part of the team by not only giving out orders, but by helping out as well. I wear a uniform in the beauty salon and lead by example. I try to learn about their learning style, and I find ways to accommodate that learning style. I like to have a student-centred type of environment where they feel they are part of the lesson too.” (Interview C).

In this concept, the focus has moved from the teacher to the student, in particular the focus is on the quality of the relationship between teacher and student. This category of teacher connectedness is one where students are challenged and encouraged to become critical thinkers and to develop their own views on topics inside and outside the classroom. In guided participation, pedagogic connectedness is perceived by teachers as guiding students to become independent learners in the classroom and to assist students in their personal development in addition to their academic development.

The Outcome Space

The relationships between the three categories identified were put together in the drawing of the outcome space (Figure 1) that reveals how the categories of description of the phenomenon under investigation are related.
Figure 1: Outcome space of pedagogic connectedness

In this study, the three categories were considered to be on a scale that increases in complexity from category 1, the instructing concept, to category 2, the facilitating concept and ultimately to category 3, the concept of guided participation. Each successive category is defined from the previous one by a shift in focus within the aspect of pedagogic connectedness. However, a particular category could also contain aspects of previous categories. There is a change in focus from teacher-centred to student-centred across the categories of pedagogic connectedness as perceived by MCAST lecturers.

The three categories represent the ways in which MCAST lecturers experience teacher connectedness. Across the categories, the concept of pedagogic connectedness moves away from dependence on teachers for student learning (Instructing concept) towards students becoming more self-responsible for learning (Guided Participation concept). The facilitating concept may be viewed as a transitional or intermediate concept between dependence and independence in learning, where teachers engage in two-way dialogue with students to facilitate learning. Lecturers’ perceptions do not necessarily remain fixed in one concept of pedagogic connectedness but tend to move across the categories.
Issues Related to Teacher Connectedness

The more you involve students, the more open they can be towards learning. Unfortunately, sometimes students are more concerned about the end result rather than the learning process. This attitude can be very demotivating for the lecturer. Sometimes, students would come into the classroom with other baggage from other teachers or their parents, or maybe learning is hard for them.

At MCAST, students in levels 1-3 are assigned a mentor to whom they can reach out and get support. The Student Support Services Coordinator has a similar role and it covers all the students in the respective institutes. These initiatives have been of immense help to both the students and lecturers since mentors help facilitate communication and help students in their educational and personal lives.

It is not always easy for lecturers to respond to the individual needs of adolescent learners. The timetable arrangements at MCAST usually consist of several lectures which vary in length and are delivered by different lecturers. Thus, each lecturer teaches many classes, often being large class sizes, including up to, and sometimes in excess of, twenty-five students. The lecturer may be teaching a particular class for as little as one hour a week. The student-teacher ratio is one of the factors that can affect a student’s ability to connect with their teachers. Ideally, the classroom scenario should be one where teachers can get to know their students and provide individualised interactions with each of them. Frequent and affectively positive interactions are essential for the development of positive and healthy teacher-student relationships (Booth 1997). The lecture time limitations and large class sizes in post-secondary educational institutions such as MCAST, can hinder opportunities for lecturers to form attachments with students in the same way as teachers in primary or secondary schools.

Conclusion

The concept of teacher connectedness views the relationship between students and teachers as a complex bond that is about more than simply the teaching and learning process. The nature of teacher-student relationships and the quality of pedagogic practices are the most important factors that influence students’ engagement (Lingard, Mills and Hayes 2000). This study records the types of teacher-student interactions that positively affect students by guiding them towards appropriate behaviours and improved student outcomes. Lecturers’ perceptions of teacher connectedness ranged from the concept of simply providing information to their students, to concepts related to the facilitation of understanding of specific topics, and guided participation. These different concepts may be largely classified as teacher-centred, transitional or student-centred.

Despite being relatively small, this study provided a snapshot of the way that lecturers view their teaching experience in relation to their ways of engaging with students. Further research that would include a larger number of participants would provide a clearer picture of how lecturers experience the concept of teacher connectedness. In addition, finding out the students’ perspective would be of great interest and such research can then be used to determine if the findings are comparable with those observed for this study as well as provide an understanding of how teacher connectedness can influence the students’ learning experience.

Learning should be an enjoyable experience. Yet many students can end up finding it very dull and tedious, especially if much of the focus is placed on academic subjects and assessments, while disregarding the importance of student well-being. There should be
an effort to nurture the bond between teachers and students instead of focusing merely on the exchange of curriculum-related information. There is also convincing evidence that student engagement and achievement are linked to pedagogy that is supported by an intellectually demanding curriculum that is relevant to real-world experiences (Carrington 2002). Professional development programs for lecturers serve to develop skills that will help the lecturers move towards the higher concepts of pedagogic connectedness. Thus, the outcomes of this research would be helpful in helping to create a framework for adapting pedagogical practices at vocational educational institutions such as MCAST.

References


Blum, R.W., McNeely, C. and Rinehart, P.M. 2002. Improving the Odds: The Untapped Power of Schools to Improve the Health of Teens. Center for Adolescent Health and Development.


**Appendix I**

*Interview Questions*

What do you understand by the term “teacher connectedness”?

How do you connect with your students in the classroom?

What specific teaching methods do you use to facilitate these connections in the classroom?

How has your approach to teaching changed over the years?

How do you get students engaged in their academic work and other activities in the classroom?

What does it look like when students are engaged in your classroom?

How do your connections with students influence classroom learning?

How do you know when students understand something you have taught them?

Tell me about a time when you really connected with a group of students.

How do you connect with students who do not appear to be interested in the lecture?