

**“Connectedness” as the Key Theme of 2020-2021 – To Build Harmony
in People and Develop Wellbeing
1 September 2020**

Dear Fellow Students, Colleagues, Parents and Friends,

Welcome back although we are still being challenged by the COVID-19 pandemic. Hope you are all physically, mentally and spiritually well and healthy! Have peace!

One day during the class suspension period in April, at a meeting with our school senior leadership team, we shared our worries about the effect of social distancing. The more social distancing is practising, the more the people are disconnected. The concern was that if children had been separated from each other or disconnected from their classmates, friends and teachers as well as the school for such a long time, would they be familiar with the routine teaching and learning practices and the intimacy they have built up with others when class resumed? “How we can align all the stakeholders of this school together and build up the harmony within and develop the wellbeing of all” is one of the biggest concerns for the coming school year and thus, “Connectedness” is chosen as the key theme of 2020-2021.

After reading an article titled “Social Distancing and Its Effect on Social Connectedness in the Algerian Society”¹, which was published in May 2020 very recently, we noticed that in some researchers’ eyes (Messaoudene and Belhami, 2020), people meeting each other can carry the following meanings:

We meet because we have to, we need to feel safe, and we are used to meet so that we feel strong and belonging, we gather because the meeting makes us feel that everyone of us is important, certainly we meet to give meaning to our lives. Human contact, whether in public places or narrow places, neutralizes real problems such as loneliness, fear and depression, as well as social chaos and social imbalance.

As we have gone through a long period of “social distancing” since the outbreak of the Coronavirus disease in January 2020, it appears that people’s cohesiveness, social connections, personal wellbeing as well as their physical and mental health have been weakened.

In a study published in April 2020 in the *Lancet*, reported by Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia, the authors expressed their belief that border restrictions, quarantine and isolation, social distancing, and behavioural changes such as wearing masks likely all played a part in the containment of the disease. However, these measures to keeping safe from the disease are about “keeping some space between you and other people”³, this informs the need to separate from each other at a distance so that people will not be infected by the disease so easily. Members of the public are advised strongly to reduce social contact to protect themselves and others. They have to either stay away from crowded places, work from home, avoid social gatherings, do not shake hands when meeting people or avoid meal gatherings, etc.

Concerning the advantages of “Connectedness”, Anne Schuchat, the Principal Deputy Director of the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, once said that “Usually when we talk about health and wellness, it’s all about connectedness and really reaching out and being together with community, family, friends, loved ones.” In what is called “social connectedness” as defined by the Ministry of Social Department, New Zealand, three components namely, “socialising”, “social support” and “sense of belonging” are identified, which together can support people’s wellbeing and resilience.

In Frieling, Peach and Cording’s (2018)⁴ elaboration, “social connectedness” refers to the social ties between people. It is a key driver of wellbeing and resilience. Social connections play an important role across many aspects of people’s lives, from finding employment and getting advice on important decisions, to receiving support during difficult times and having someone to enjoy life and relax with. Socially well-connected people and communities are happier and healthier, and are better able to take charge of their lives and find solutions to the problems they are facing.

In practice, socialising can help strengthen individuals' willingness to provide social support and enhance their sense of belonging. Then people are more likely to ask for or receive support from people they trust and socialise with more often, and feel more connected.

To me, it is quite sad to observe that Hong Kong has gone to her dark age where people can no longer see each other freely, no face-to-face schooling, no social life with their loved ones, have been isolated and separated apart because of the enactment of the "social distancing" rules. Another thing that also worries me much is the "social distancing" effect caused by the anti-government sentiment due to the intense political conflict and civil unrest since June 2019. The problem is: how can we restore the confidence in people of Hong Kong, reconnect all people together, enhance their physical and mental health, rebuild the social connectedness among people and maintain personal wellbeing as well as the wellbeing of all people in the school, the district and Hong Kong as a whole especially after the COVID-19 epidemic? As educators, what can we do and where shall we start?

Restoring and enhancing "connectedness" or "social connectedness" among people can be the answer. We have to build the social ties among people. Nurture the sense of socialising among our community, whether planned or unplanned. Let people come together and enjoy each other's company, with everyone supporting one another physically and mentally. Therefore, when class resumes, we can bring children together. Let them enjoy the company with teachers, friends and learning peers. Let them feel the warmth, respect, caring and love from others.

However, reform informs us that changes should start small and emphasis on the current good practices like "Buddy System", "House System", "Firefly Scheme", "Service Learning", "Life Education", "CB Lessons", etc. can help children socialise with their peers, teachers and friends. These ties with social support from parents and all people in the community involved should be strengthened so as to increase children's sense of belonging, their belonging to class, to school, to the community and to the whole region. In addition, paying extra attention to the initiation of the school-based development programmes

like “Healthy School” and “Student Wellbeing” can also let children feel the joy within and outside the school.

The next step of enforcing “Connectedness” in our school can target on building stronger ties between school and families as well as the education community. Besides that, we can also connect families and community, parents and children, teachers and children, teachers and teachers, and teachers with parents together with a shared vision. Families and friends can spend time together. Colleagues can have lunch together, work together as a team. People from the neighbourhood can also join meaningful Wofoo Community Hub activities. We hope that in the future, there is connectivity going on within our education community where all individuals can be under one family. The socialising effect can further spread to other schools and other communities, across culture and countries, making a world without boundaries, but people connecting one another with wisdom, faith and love.

Ladies and gentlemen, starting from today, please show your smile whenever you see someone. Give your friends and neighbours more care, praise, support and hope. Or should you give them a big and warmest hug! Release our “Social Connectedness”, to restore “Harmony” and “Wellbeing” within our family, school and the whole social community!

¹ Messaoudene, A. & Belhami, M. (2020) Social distancing and its effect on social connectedness in the Algerian Society. *The International Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities Invention*, Vol. 7, Issue 05, May 2020.

² ***The Lancet*** is a weekly peer-reviewed general medical journal. It is among the world's oldest and best-known general medical journals.

³ Also said by Anne Schuchat, the Principal Deputy Director of the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, “Keeping your distance from others helps keep others healthy.” Source comes from <https://www.aarp.org/health/conditions-treatments/info-2020/social-distancing.html>

⁴ Frieling, M., Peach, E. K. & Cording, J. (2018). *The measurement of social connectedness and its relationship to wellbeing*. Ministry of Social Development, NZ: Wellington.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'J. Cording', is positioned in the lower-left quadrant of the page. The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial 'J' and a long, sweeping underline.