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Title: School Belonging as an Essential Component of Positive Psychology in Schools

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Abstract

Research on school belonging applies the well-established understanding that we have a fundamental need to belong, to gain knowledge that students are a part of an adaptive, ephemeral and complex school environment. This chapter sets out the fundamentals of school belonging and its link to positive school psychology and also incorporates a rapid literature review of the literature to summarise the main practice elements which are fundamental to school belonging. This is analysed alongside a short case-study bringing forth the key point of the importance of teachers in effective school belonging strategies in order to support students. The preventative and proactive focus of belonging research and discourse, alongside the associated approaches and interventions of fostering school belonging, makes it an area of emerging interest within the field of positive psychology. School belonging has been identified as an impactful factor in student wellbeing, mental health, academic outcomes, and prosocial behaviours. This chapter provides a review of the research and understanding of school belonging with a focus on applied implications for assessment and intervention.

Introduction

Why Belonging Matters

Individuals with a strong sense of belonging are happier, healthier, and achieve more than those without it (Neel & Fuligni, 2013; Jose et al., 2012; Marraccini & Brier, 2017). Conversely, people with unmet belonging needs are more likely to experience mental health problems (Parr et al., 2020), physical health problems (Begen & Turner-Cobb, 2015; Richard et al., 2017), suicidal ideation (McClelland et al., 2020), and early mortality (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015; Rico-Uribe et al., 2018). These differences clearly indicate the importance of developing a sense of belonging in one's life. Moreover, when comparing the psychological pain of not belonging with physical pain from injury, brain imaging studies have found that recovering from the psychological pain of rejection is more difficult than recovering from physical pain (Eisenberger, 2012; Kawamoto et al., 2015). This may be because the experience of social rejection can be mentally relived repeatedly, whereas broken bones heal in time (Sebastian et al., 2011). It is clear that empirical evidence supports the view that having a sense of belonging is a protective factor for mental and physical well-being (Walton & Brady, 2017).

Belonging in Adolescence

While having a sense of belonging is important for everyone across the lifespan, it is especially important during adolescence (Davis, 2012; Jose et al., 2012). When a need for belonging is thwarted during this period, the pain of rejection is experienced more intensely than at any other developmental period due to the stronger need to belong outside the family unit (compared with younger children) and the diminished capacity to regulate emotions (Pfeifer & Blakemore, 2012; Sebastian et al., 2011). This may explain why adolescents' needs for belonging can be unfulfilled, they are more likely to abuse drugs and alcohol,

report higher rates of suicidal ideation, experience more symptoms of depression and anxiety, and underachieve academically (Boen et al., 2020; Neel & Fuligni, 2013; Parr et al., 2020).

The above implications of a lack of belonging are likely due to the pivotal role belonging plays in achieving the key adolescent developmental task of identity formation (Brechwald & Prinstein, 2011; Tanti et al., 2011). That is, an individual's identity is shaped not only by personal beliefs and interests which change and evolve through exploration, but also by their relationships and sense of belongingness with significant others (Abbassi, 2016; Albarello et al., 2018). Achieving this developmental task has been found to be critical for adolescent psychosocial adjustment and transitioning into adulthood (Erikson, 1994; World Health Organization, 2014). However, despite the developmental drive to belong, an adolescent's ability to do so may be hindered by two primary changes that occur during adolescence. First, developmental changes in the social region of the brain during this time mean adolescents are more vulnerable to social rejection than younger children and adults (Blakemore, 2012). This is because they are not only more reactive to emotional cues, but they are also still learning how to accurately interpret facial emotions (Arain et al., 2013, Burnett et al., 2011; Wang et al., 2008). Second, changes in the school structure from primary to secondary school mean even though adolescents need more regular contact with non-parental adults, the transition to secondary school results in less regular contact with teachers compared with primary school (García-Moya, 2020).

The distinct developmental vulnerability to social rejection and the mismatch between adolescents' developmental needs and the secondary school structure may explain why adolescence is the peak period in which disconnection from school occurs (O'Brennan & Furlong, 2010; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2017)

and when most mental health disorders emerge (Kessler et al., 2007; Patel et al., 2007).

Given the consequences of a low sense of belonging and the important socialisation context

schools provide (Allen & Bowles, 2012; Allen, Kern, Vella-Brodrick, Hattie et al., 2018), it

is no surprise belonging in school has attracted significant research attention over the last

three decades (Anderman, 2003; Slaten et al., 2016; Uslu & Gizir, 2017) and generated

appeals for secondary schools to prioritise building students' sense of school belonging

(Allen & Bowles, 2012; Allen, Kern, Vella-Brodrick et al., 2018).

Theoretical Background

What is school belonging?

Schools are recognised as being especially influential contexts for students'

development and psychosocial adjustment (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Meece & Schaefer, 2011)

and important places for fostering a sense of belonging. School belonging has been described

in various ways in the literature—as school bonding, engagement, attachment, community,

and connectedness, for example. However, there is even less consistency in these descriptions

than in definitions of school belonging. Students who report not having a sense of belonging

to school also use a variety of terms, such as alienated, disengaged, socially isolated, or

disaffected (Willms, 2003). Terminology is often used interchangeably (Anderman, 2002;

Rowe & Stewart, 2009), and a given term's meaning in a particular context might depend

upon the individual author using it (Libbey, 2007). Some theorists have even suggested that

belonging is a component of school connectedness (McNeely & Falci, 2004). The

discrepancies in terminology arguably dilute the potency of the research drawn from the field

and muddy the implications for schools.

Overall, there are a number of high-quality research studies which have been

conducted on the long-term outcomes of school belonging (e.g., O'Connor et al., 2011;

Steiner, et al., 2019), but there is still considerable room for further research such as, for

example, to extend the age groups of the adult cohorts examined and to explore other potential outcomes of school belonging not already examined in the literature (e.g., relationship quality and post-school pathways). While the link between school belonging and positive outcome is well established, the converse is also true. Indeed, a low sense of belonging is also strongly associated with anti-social behaviour and school misconduct, including risk-taking behaviour related to substance and tobacco use (Goodenow, 1993). For this purpose, different theoretical frameworks have been developed, in order to better understand the concept of school belonging so that it could be better promoted in educational institutions and one such widely accepted framework is Bronfenbrenner's socioecological model of school belonging.

Given the important outcomes stemming from school belonging, there is a need to find meaningful ways of prioritising and fostering school belonging in schools. Investigating the ways in which school belonging is defined and represented in schools and understanding the unique themes that may influence school belonging from a systems perspective is important because, according to Bronfenbrenner (1979), schools offer the second most important set of relationships available to students aside from family. Moreover, as previously discussed, a sense of belonging is a vital need for normal adolescent development, particularly in respect to fostering identity, psychosocial adjustment, and social supports (Allen et al., 2014). It also plays an important role for academic outcomes, wellbeing, and prosocial school behaviour (Demanet & Van Houtte, 2012; Jose et al., 2012; Sari, 2012).

Socioecological Model of School Belonging

Bronfenbrenner's socioecological framework (1977, 1979) can be employed to demonstrate that the factors associated with school belonging operate at different levels. On a personal or individual level, individuals hold a sense of their cultural identity, whether it be racial, ethnic, or religious (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Faircloth & Hamm, 2005; Neville et al.,

2014). On a micro level, adolescents have immediate interactions with their parents and teachers which become places of belonging and support for the individual (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). Allen and colleagues (2016) highlight that from Bronfenbrenner's point of view (1977), families are the first place of belonging for individuals when they are children. As they develop into adolescents, teachers become important to students' belonging as high school students spend the majority of their time at school (Allen et al., 2016; Chhuon & Wallace, 2014).

Although the microsystem, being the closest in proximity to the individual, is the system which has the most influence on an individual's development (Wang & Eccles, 2012), little is known about the macrosystem's effect on the individual (Allen et al., 2018). The macrosystem, in the context of school belonging, can refer to not only to legislation and national education initiatives, but broader cultural and social norms (Allen et al., 2016). As such, broader culture may influence the ways in which students are taught to interact with the world.

A strength of the socioecological perspective is that the multi-dimensional nature of school belonging can be demonstrated rather than narrowly focusing on the classroom's role in belonging (Allen et al., 2016). For this purpose, this chapter seeks to examine, on the basis of the socioecological framework, how measures can be implemented at the different levels within the framework in order to foster school belonging. This will be carried out through a quick review of literature to identify commonly cited practices which are recognised as being effective in improving a sense of belonging. In doing so, the main objectives of this chapter would be to:

1. Describe and provide an overview of belonging as an important construct in positive psychology and school belonging in positive education

2. To present summary findings of a rapid review that demonstrate the main drivers for school belonging.

Practice

Rapid confirmatory literature review

A rapid review of the literature was conducted for the purpose of this chapter as a way to summarise practices that influence school belonging at the classroom and school level. The authors used the following databases: OVID Medline, PSYCINFO, ERIC and Cochrane Library. Search terms included: (school belonging OR school connectedness OR school membership OR school bonding) AND (teacher support OR teacher relationship OR teacher OR school support OR social support OR fairness OR extracurricular activities OR groups OR inclusion OR diversity OR equity OR peer support OR friends OR policy OR procedures OR strategic plan OR practices), focusing on students in secondary education. Additionally, the meta-analysis of Allen et al. (2018) and the systematic review of Greenwood and Kelly (2019) were referred to for additional papers by screening the reference lists.

Evidence-base to support implementation in schools

Tables 1 and 2 provide a summary of the results of the review process used to identify the evidence-base of school belonging practices, and the processes that schools might use to enact these practices.

"Try this" for Educators

Table 1. Rapid literature review: school belonging practices evidence-base (teacher-level factors)

Student-identified school belonging practices	Source/s in published literature*	Processes to support implementation in schools
Teacher-level factors		
Emotional Support		
Approachable and understanding	Allen et al. (2018) Bowen et al. (1998) Brewster & Bowen (2004) Reschly et al. (2008) Van Ryzin et al. (2009) Sakiz (2012) Shochet et al. (2007) Waters et al. (2010)	• Supporting teachers to build positive relationships with students through consistency, a positive approach, persistence and rapport building, and ensuring teachers have time to get to know and understand their students (e.g., Anderman, 2003; Bowen et al., 1998; Chapman et al., 2014; Garcia-Reid, 2007; Garcia-Reid et al., 2005; Reschly et al., 2008; Shochet et al., 2007; Shochet et al., 2011; Waters et al., 2010; Zimmer-Gembeck et al., 2006). • Connecting students with additional support or counselling or psychological support services when necessary (Biag 2016; Bower et al., 2015; Greenwood &
Positive regard	Garcia-Reed et al. (2005)	

Student-identified school belonging practices	Source/s in published literature*	Processes to support implementation in schools
	Garcia-Reed (2007) Hallinan (2008)	Kelly, 2019) and normalising access to this support by students (Anderson et al., 2006).
Social Support		
Connections with peers	Wang & Eccles (2012) Wentzel (1998)	• Providing opportunities for students to become involved in both school-based activities such as sports and house activities (e.g., Jennings, 2003; Shochet et al., 2011; Whitlock, 2007, Zimmer-Gembeck et al., 2006) in addition to activities in the local community that foster a sense of belonging to the broader networks surrounding students (e.g., Bower et al., 2015; Greenwood & Kelly, 2019).
Support to become involved in school events/activities	Allen et al., (2018) Wang & Eccles (2012) Wentzel (1998) Zimmer-Gembeck et al. (2006)	• Supporting teachers to promote school belonging by facilitating positive connections with peers through awareness of peer-group interactions and creating opportunities for students to get to know each other (e.g., Allen et al., 2016; Hamm et al., 2011). • Exploring buddy systems, peer support or peer mentoring programs within the school (e.g., Allen et al., 2016; Shochet et al., 2011; Whitlock, 2007; Zimmer-Gembeck et al., 2006; Goodenow & Grady, 1993; Reschly et al., 2008; Van Ryzin et al., 2009).

Student-identified school belonging practices	Source/s in published literature*	Processes to support implementation in schools
Respect and inclusion		
Acknowledge diversity/inclusive practices	Goodenow & Grady (1993) Holt & Espelage (2003) Reschly et al. (2008) Sakiz (2012)	• Establishing a school culture that values diversity and is respectful, inclusive and tolerant (Goodenow & Grady, 1993; Reschly et al., 2008). • Ensuring teachers and staff model respectful and inclusive behaviours in all of their interactions and that they use fair practices and consistent, agreed upon approaches to disciplinary issues (e.g., Allen et al., 2016; Hawkins et al., 1991; Garcia-Reid et al., 2005; Sakiz, 2012; Whitlock; 2007).
Respect and equity	Anderman (2003) Chapman et al. (2014) Hallinan (2008) Sakiz (2012)	

"Try this" for Students

Table 2. Rapid literature review: school belonging practices evidence-base (school-level factors)

School-level factors		
Social and emotional support	Allen et al., (2018) Wang & Eccles (2012) Wentzel (1998)	• Fostering a school culture which emphasises respectful and supportive relationships across all levels of the school community; that reminds students of their value; and that maintains an enduring positive regard for all students (e.g., Anderson et al., 2006; Greenwood & Kelly, 2019). • Prioritising the emotional wellbeing of both students and staff and the importance of the student-teacher relationship alongside academic indicators of effectiveness in school strategic planning processes (e.g., Allen et al., 2018; Hattie, 2009; Stirling and Emery, 2016). • Supporting teachers to provide general pastoral support to students in addition to academic support and providing the conditions to facilitate this, such as time and resources (e.g., Allen et al., 2016; Biag, 2016; Greenwood & Kelly, 2019).
Activities and opportunities for social connection	Blomfield & Barber (2010) Dotterer et al. (2007) Knifsend & Graham (2012) Shochet et al. (2007) Waters et al. (2010)	• At a school-level, ensuring students have multiple opportunities for social connection through extra-curricular and group activities (e.g., Allen et al., 2016; Blomfield & Barber, 2010; Dotterer et al., 2007; Flitcroft & Kelly, 2016; Greenwood & Kelly, 2019; Shochet et al., 2007). • Allocating time in the curriculum to teach social and emotional learning to students (e.g., Allen et al., 2016; Frydenberg et al., 2009; Wyn et al., 2000; Schonert-Reichl & Lawlor, 2010).

School-level factors		
Respect, equity and diversity	Chapman et al. (2014) Holt & Espelage (2003) Sakiz (2012)	• Involving students and the broader school community in the development of whole school policies and procedures that ensure fairness, student safety and consistent disciplinary practices and ensuring these are implemented consistently by all school staff (e.g., Allen et al., 2016; Greenwood & Kelly, 2019; Hawkins et al., 1991; Garcia-Reid et al., 2005; Whitlock, 2007). • Creating school cultures that value diversity and support the inclusion of all students (e.g., Bower et al., 2015).
Positive school culture	Battistich et al. (1996) Cunningham (2007) Osterman (2000) Shochet et al. (2007)	• Establishing a school-wide vision and mission that prioritises school belonging (e.g., Allen et al., 2016; Bryson, 2004; Legters et al., 2002; Owings & Kaplan, 2003; Stemler et al., 2011; Teddlie & Reynolds, 2000). • Creating policies and procedures to ensure a positive, safe, nurturing and inclusive environment for all students (Chapman et al. 2014; Biag 2016). • Having high expectations for the learning of all students (e.g., Biag 2016). • Nurturing strong connections between staff, enabling collegial support (e.g., Bower et al., 2015). • Strong leadership that values and models practices that support school belonging (e.g., Anderson et al., 2006).

School-level factors		
		• Creating a positive school identity to encourage student sense of belonging to their school (e.g., Flitcroft & Kelly 2016).
Supportive and effective teachers	Allen et al., (2018) Garcia-Reid et al. (2005) Garcia-Reid (2007) Van Ryzin et al. (2009) Wentzel (1998)	• At the school level, ensuring staff wellbeing and connectedness is prioritised at a policy and practice level (e.g., Allen et al., 2018; Bower et al., 2015; Noble & McGrath, 2008).
Environment/safety	Allen et al., (2018) Garcia-Reid et al. (2005) Hallinan (2008) Samdal et al., 1998 Whitlock (2007)	• Establishing a safe environment for all students (including zero tolerance bullying procedures) (e.g., Biag 2016; Cunningham, 2007; Garcia-Reid et al., 2005; Shochet et al., 2007).
Student voice/choice	Zimmer-Gembeck et al. (2006)	• Ensuring opportunities for student voice and choice making are embedded within the school culture (e.g., Anderson et al., 2006; Greenwood & Kelly, 2019; Sakiz, 2012; Stirling & Emery, 2016).

An overview of the results indicates that, irrespective of the level of intervention, teachers remain a central point of focus when considering best practices for fostering school belonging. Indeed, as has been evidenced in both Tables 1 and 2, teachers heavily influence school belonging mainly through a supportive pastoral role. The success of this role is first determined through school-level factors by, for example, establishing policies which would encourage the well-being of the students and especially potentially vulnerable students such as Sam. An additional, but less obvious requirement, would also be the school's recruitment process which would ensure that teachers must be conversant with the principles of positive school belonging and thus able to directly contribute to that concept. These two approaches help to ensure that mainly supportive and positive teachers are available to interact and support students. Moreover, teachers should not be expected to be inherently cognisant of all the principles of belonging and/or positive psychology and it would be prudent to provide appropriate training in this regard thus strengthening the notion that good belonging is good teaching. As is clear from the case study, Sam needs support – at least at the beginning of her new school life – and a teacher trained to recognise the level of support is key to ensuring an effective culture of belonging. In this case, as reflected in the results, the role of teachers as a supportive figure encompasses emotional support, social support as well as other additional support in learning which may be required. The authors of this chapter have also noted that the process of developing close connections with students is dependent on the teachers' characteristic personality in terms of whether they have the ability to build and maintain positive relations while devoting time to understanding individual students.

In addition to practices which involve teachers, adopting measures that specifically target students has been found to be a commonly cited approach for promoting school belonging. In this context, the schools' core mission should be such that it promotes school belonging by, for example, having a school culture where diversity and respect are valued

while ensuring that such values are instilled and adopted by all students. Furthermore, both the school system and the teachers should aim to create a particular school environment where student wellbeing is important. Moreover, such an environment should not only encourage them to develop positive relationships but also provide them with the opportunities to do so. The fact that these measures are widely cited by various researchers provide evidence that they are recognised as effective practices which can help in fostering school belonging.

Case Study

Sam is 13 years old and had just transferred to an urban high school after moving with her family from a more rural setting. Beginning at a new school is always difficult but in Sam's particular situation this is exacerbated by the size of the new school and the difference in culture that exists between urban and rural lifestyles. By having to make new friends and join new groups the facilitation of this through school structures and with teachers who are cognisant of the importance of creating an atmosphere of positive school belonging has been invaluable.

Conclusion

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological framework for human development serves as a reminder that within any school setting, each student is a part of a greater whole influenced by formal and informal groupings and overarching systems that are common and typically represented within all schools. In this chapter, a rapid review of literature was undertaken to identify commonly cited measures which are considered to contribute to a sense of belonging within school settings. The results supported Bronfenbrenner's ecological framework in that the practices identified were not only limited to students but also involved surrounding factors such as the school systems, policies and teachers which, altogether, exert some degree

of influence on students. Hence, it can be concluded that measures which can be adopted for improving school belonging should not be limited in focus but instead should include all the different levels encompassed with the framework. In addition, this text makes an original contribution to the field of psychology and education through the use of a socio-ecological framework to better understand the relevant themes that influence school belonging within a secondary school system.

Discussion Points

1. What were some pivotal moments at school that influenced your sense of belonging to school (either positive or negative)?

2. Think about your favourite teacher at school. What attributes did they have? What did they do that made you like them? What did they say? What strategies could you adopt in your own teaching that could be inspired by them?

3. If you work in a school today, what are your own feelings about your workplace? Would you say you had a high, moderate, or low sense of school belonging to your school? What are some of the facilitators and barriers to your belonging?

4. Think about the last time you felt like you 'did not belong' somewhere? What strategies did you put in place to overcome those feelings?

Suggested Resources

Evidence-based school policy including a policy on school belonging

Allen, K. A., Reupert, A. E., & Oades, L. G. (Eds.) (2021). *Building better schools with evidence-based policy: Adaptable policy guidelines for teachers and school leaders* (1st ed., pp. 1–#369. Routledge. ISBN: 9780367458898. Free to download here:

https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/oa-edit/10.4324/9781003025955/building-better-schools-evidence-based-policy-kelly-ann-allen-andrea-reupert-lindsay-oades

A repository of school belonging measures

https://www.globalbelonging.org/repository

Do you feel like you belong? An article written for young people

https://kids.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/frym.2020.00099

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