

Belonging as a Guiding Principle in the Education of Adolescents

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Belonging has been shown to have a significant impact on a range of factors associated with wellbeing. These areas include life satisfaction, general wellbeing, clinical depression, cognitive performance, academic outcomes, and physical health. Belonging is an important aspect of psychological functioning. Schools offer unique opportunities for mediating belonging for school-aged children. Research on belonging in educational settings has been unsystematic and diluted by disparities in definition and terminology. This paper provides an overview of belonging, the importance of belonging in schools, and proposes an argument as to why further research is needed. Future findings should have relevance for the design of interventions and modification of organisational structures within the school including, policy, pedagogy, and teacher training.

Keywords: belonging; school connectedness; meta-analysis; belongingness; school attachment; adolescent; wellbeing; positive psychology

Introduction

Belonging to groups, whether they are school, family, community or otherwise, positively affects a number of key factors that contribute to our overall health and wellbeing (Haslam, Jetten, Postmes, & Haslam, 2009; Holt-Lunstad, Smith, & Layton, 2010; Jetten, Haslam, Haslam, & Branscombe, 2009). Schools have an important role in building social networks for individuals and offer unique opportunities for influencing belonging for school-aged children. As a school and community priority, particularly in comparison to quantitative measures of academic success, the concept of belonging has received little interest, which is consistent with other areas of preventative interventions in schools for example, health promotion (Hagerty, Lynch-Sauer, Patusky, Bouwsema, & Collier, 1992; West, Sweeting, & Leyland, 2004). One explanation for this lack of interest may be the disparity in measurements, terminology, and definitions that make empirically-driven findings and interventions difficult to translate into school practices. Another explanation may be the lack of a model or guidelines for schools to

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follow.

While seminal work in the area has summarised factors that influence belonging (e.g., Centres for Disease Control and Prevention, 2009; Wingspread, 2004), the approaches used have lacked a strong methodological basis. The aim of this paper is not to dismiss the importance and relevance of work to date, but to demonstrate the importance of belonging in schools and posit a rationale as to why further research is needed. More statistically-robust analyses in the field may help to improve the belonging of students in schools. Future findings may have relevance for the design of interventions and the modification of organisational structures within schools related to policy, pedagogy, and teacher training.

In Pursuit of a Definition

The concept of belonging has been described in various ways. A review of literature reveals few consistent definitions for belonging in a school setting. As Libbey (2004) states, the concept of school connectedness, like belonging for school-aged children, is described using a range of terminology, including school bonding, school climate, notions of territory, school attachment, connectedness, and orientation to school. In a review of measurements, Libbey showed that terminology varied considerably but consistent factors emerged, for example, teacher supportiveness and caring, presence of good friends, engagement in academic progress, fair and effective discipline, and participation in extracurricular activities. Consistent with these findings, the Wingspread Declaration (2004) describes belonging in school settings as the belief of students that adults within their school community care about their learning, have an interest in them as individuals and have high academic expectations. It also includes students having positive teacher-student relationships and feeling safe at school.

These elements were found to be consistent within a synthesis of publications on the topic performed by the Centres for Disease Control (CDC) and Prevention in 2009 which extended these findings to conclude that belonging was associated not only with student-teacher relationships, but also with peer groups, the school environment, and a commitment towards education. Some definitions have included student engagement (Finn, 1993), social identity (Tajfel, 1972), and the physical presence of teacher support (Ryan & Patrick, 2001), which do not directly coincide with the broader findings of CDC or Wingspread or a more general understanding that school belonging is related to a student's affective experience (Libbey, 2007). Other theorists have described a 'sense of belonging' as a feeling (Adler, 1939; Crandall, 1981; Goodenow, 1993) or a need (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Maslow, 1971), but such theories do not satisfy the multifaceted salient terms specific to belonging at school.

The most precise definition is by Libbey (2007, p. 52) who describes school belonging to be when students "feel close to, a part of, and happy at school; feel that teachers care about students and treat them fairly; get along with teachers and other students, and feel safe at school [sic]". Affirming this definition is the work of Hattie (2009) who emphasises the importance of student-teacher relationships. His research shows that schools can create positive change in students' lives.

Theoretical Underpinnings

Various theories have incorporated the concept of belonging. These include the following: Parental involvement, (Epstein, 1992); Typologies of Love, (Lee, 1973); Belonging and Attachment, (Bowlby, 1969, 1973; Cohen, 1982, 1985); Social Capital (Putman & Robert, (2000); and Self Presentation (Fiske, 2004). Baumeister and Leary (2005) state that human beings have an innate psychological drive to belong to groups, concluding that "belongingness can be almost as compelling a need as food and that human culture is significantly conditioned by the pressure to provide belongingness"(p. 497-529). Bowlby (1988) argued that belonging is one of the strongest human motivational needs. His attachment theory emphasises the importance of interactions between parents and their children in the early and formative years which inform the nature and quality of their future relationships (Sroufe, Egeland, & Kreutzer, 2005).

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979) emphasises that the family is the first unit to which children belong, followed by school and community, with each student belonging

to a broader network of groups and systems. According to Bronfenbrenner (1979), all children are at the centre of “layers” of the environment that can have a significant effect on their development and psycho-social adjustment. His Ecological Model of human development (1986, 1989) deals with the quality of a child’s environment and how development is subject to multiple levels of influence, that is, the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem.

In a school system, the microsystem represents the social networks of family, friends, teachers and peers, while the mesosystem represents school resources and processes at an organisational level. The mesosystem is concerned with school management processes and teaching practices that reflect school culture (Rumberger & Palardy, 2004; Saab, 2009). The exosystem relates to the broader community interactions with other schools, parents, organisations and external services, while the macrosystem encompasses broader structures including social policies, procedures, and laws (Saab, 2009). Work that has attempted to summarise factors that foster belonging has shown that interventions and strategies fall across multiple domains in a school system including, parents, teachers, peer group, policy, practice, environment (CDC, 2009; Libbey, 2004; Wingspread, 2004). Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Model provides the most comprehensive theoretical construct to date with which to investigate belonging in an organisational setting such as a school.

The Benefits of Belonging for the Individual

Individuals who report a sense of belonging to groups and networks are likely to exhibit positive psychological functioning across a range of variables including self esteem, self-efficacy, and life satisfaction (Daley & Buchanan, 1999; Haslam, Jetten, Postmes, & Haslam, 2009). A sense of belonging protects against psychopathology and stress (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Belongingness has been found important for school-aged children. Sharma and Malhotra’s (2010) study of 500 adolescents in India found that belongingness and social support were important contributors to the variance that predicted perceived happiness. In an Australian sample of 312, O’Rourke and Cooper (2010) investigated wellbeing and happiness markers in primary school-aged students. Their findings showed three indicators of children’s happiness: friendship, belonging, and optimism. Belonging to school has also been shown as important to fostering self-esteem and self-identity (Lee & Robbins, 1998; Nutbrown & Clough, 2009) and managing stress (Jacobsson, Pousette, & Thylefors, 2001).

A range of pathological factors related to not belonging also have been defined. Belonging has been negatively associated with loneliness (Mellor, Stokes, Firth, Hayash, & Cummins, 2008; Chipuer, 2001), emotional distress, psycho-social disturbance, suicide (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Resnik et al., 1997), and mental illness (Hagerty, Williams, Coyne, & Early, 1996; McMahon, Singh, Garner, & Benhorin, 2004; Shochet, Dadds, Ham, & Montague, 2006). It has also been shown to buffer the effects of depression (Anderman, 2002; Keating & Ellis, 2007; Sargent, Williams, Hagerty, Lynch-Sauer, Hoyle, 2002). Along with the aforementioned psychological and psychosocial factors, improved physical health may also relate to a sense of belonging. A good deal of research has demonstrated the health benefits of social engagement and connectedness in relation to reduction of mortality (Forster & Stoller 1992; Holt-Lunstad, Smith, & Layton, 2010; Kawachi et al. 1996; Litwin 1998; Sugisawa, Liang, & Liu, 1994) and improved recovery rates following infectious disease (Berkman 1995). Research suggests that individuals who engage in diverse social networks live longer (Rutledge et al., 2004) and have a better prognosis when faced with a significant illness (Cohen & Janicki-Deverts, 2009).

An individual’s sense of belonging is also a predictor of good health, comparable with diet and exercise (Jetten, Haslam, Haslam, & Branscombe, 2009). Social isolation, for instance, may be a health risk equal to or greater than those associated with smoking, obesity and high blood pressure (Jetten, Haslam, Haslam, & Branscombe, 2009). Although not all related to adolescence, these studies show a relationship between belonging and health outcomes. While some of these findings relate to specific adult populations, the implications for belongingness in school-aged children should not be devalued. It is critical to recognise the importance of belongingness across the lifespan. Longitudinal research points to the importance of childhood experiences on coping with disease in adulthood (Kuh & Ben-Sholmo, 1997; Poulton, Caspi, &

Milne, 2002; Wadsworth et al., 1997). Caspi, Harrington, Moffitt, Milne, and Poulton (2006) followed a cohort of children in 1972 from birth to young adulthood. Their findings suggested that social isolation during childhood was associated with poor health in adulthood, based on cardiovascular risk. This is consistent with retrospective studies that have reported a link between a perceived lack of social support in childhood and chronic health conditions (Russek & Schwartz, 1997; Shaw, Krause, Chatters, Connell, & Dayton, 2004) as well as behavioural, psychological and social difficulties (Offord & Bennett, 1994) later in life. It seems that childhood experiences of social connectedness influence health later in life. Schools, therefore, offer an opportunity to facilitate social connectedness and belongingness for students' subsequent wellbeing.

Drawing on data from the Australian Temperament Project, a large longitudinal data set tracking adolescent development, O'Connor et al. (2010) investigated five factors related to healthy adolescent adjustment in a group of 19 to 20 year olds: social competence, life satisfaction, trust of others and trust in authorities; and civic responsibilities. School bonding in the secondary school years significantly predicted early adult wellbeing across each of the five factors measured. Analyses showed that "how students felt about their school" was strongly associated with their wellbeing - specifically, their relationships with teachers and a perception that school was a place where they were respected and had a voice (O'Connor, Sanson, & Frydenberg, 2012).

These results reinforced earlier findings that school belonging is an important factor in the successful psychosocial adjustment of young adults and offers justification for schools to engage in interventions that promote school belonging. Young people with a sense of belonging at school report a greater overall sense of psychological wellbeing and feel happier than young people without (World Health Organisation, 2006; Battistich, Watson, Solomon, Lewis, & Schaps, 1999; Bizumic, Reynolds, Turner, Bromhead, & Subasic, 2009; Sanchez, Colon, & Esparza, 2005).

Belonging Specific to School Settings

While belonging has been operationalised in a range of settings (e.g., Ginsberg, 2008; Grange & Ming, 2001; Walton & Cohen, 2007), research into a sense of belonging in educational settings has highlighted additional benefits over the last decade. Sanchez, Colon, & Esparza (2005) found that a sense of school belonging significantly predicted academic outcomes, influencing motivation, effort, and low absenteeism. This finding is supported by previous research which has shown that feelings of connectedness to school can lead to more positive attitudes towards learning and, specifically, academic self-efficacy (Battistich, Solomon, Kim, Watson, & Schaps, 1995; Roeser, Midgley, & Urdan, 1996).

In 2003, The Centres of Disease Control and Prevention and the Johnson Foundation funded the creation of the Wingspread declaration on school connectedness (Wingspread, 2004). The declaration summarised research showing that school connectedness influences academic performance (Goodenow, 1993; Voelk, 1995), incidents of fighting, bullying, and vandalism (Wilson & Elliot, 2003), absenteeism (Croninger & Lee, 2001), and school completion rates (Connell, Halpern-Flesher, Clifford, Crichlow & Usinger, 1995). The declaration presented evidence that showed school belonging increased student motivation (Croninger & Lee, 2001; Resnick et al., 1997) and classroom engagement (Klem & Connel, 2003). In addition to such protective factors, the research showed a relationship between school connectedness and decreased disruptive behaviour, emotional distress (Lonczak, Abbott, Hawkins, Kosterman & Catalano, 2002), risk taking behaviours related to substance and tobacco use (Goodenow, 1993), and early sexualisation (Samdal, Nutbeam, Wold, & Kannas, 1998).

Factors influencing belonging

As well as outlining the benefits of belonging, The Wingspread Declaration is one of few documents that summarises factors that influence belonging.

Based on current research evidence, the most effective strategies for increasing the likelihood that students will be connected to school include:

- Implementing high standards and expectations, and providing academic support to all students
- Applying fair and consistent disciplinary policies that are collectively agreed upon and fairly enforced
- Creating trusting relationships among students, teachers, staff, administrators, and families
- Hiring and supporting capable teachers skilled in content, teaching techniques, and classroom management to meet each learner's needs
- Fostering high parent/family expectations for school performance and school completion
- Ensuring that every student feels close to at least one supportive adult at school
(Wingspread, 2004 p. 233–234)

The declaration reflects a detailed body of work. This type of literature review can lean heavily on statistical significance when evaluating and comparing studies (DeCoster, 2004). While the Wingspread Declaration provides a detailed analysis of constructs that foster belonging in a school setting, it lacks methodological rigour that could be obtained from experimental research. To the authors' knowledge, no published peer-reviewed synthesis of research has been conducted on factors that influence belonging. However some research does attempt to summarise constructs related to a measure of belonging or school connectedness in an educational context (CDC, 2009; Libbey, 2004).

The CDC (2009) expanded the work of the Wingspread declaration, combining both a literature review with a synthesis of publications (including, peer reviewed journal articles, books, reports and websites). They conceptualised four factors that foster belonging in a school setting:

- **Adult Support:** School staff can dedicate their time, interest, attention, and emotional support to students.
- **Belonging to a Positive Peer Group:** A stable network of peers can improve student perceptions of school.
- **Commitment to Education:** Believing that school is important to their future and perceiving that adults at the school are invested in their education can engage students in their own learning and involve them in school activities.
- **School Environment:** The physical environment and psychosocial climate can set the stage for positive student perceptions of school.

(CDC, p. 5)

CDC (2009) found that these factors underpinned six strategies for schools:

- “1. Create decision-making processes that facilitate student, family, and community engagement; academic achievement; and staff empowerment;
2. Provide education and opportunities to enable families to be actively involved in their children's academic and school life;
3. Provide students with the academic, emotional, and social skills necessary to be actively engaged in school;
4. Use effective classroom management and teaching methods to foster a positive learning environment;
5. Provide professional development and support for teachers and other school staff to enable them to meet the diverse cognitive, emotional, and social needs of children and adolescents and;
6. Create trusting and caring relationships that promote open communication among administrators, teachers, staff, students, families, and communities.”

(CDC, p. 4).

The resulting document was a first attempt to synthesise these factors. However, the strength of the methodology suffered as a result of the inclusion of non-peer reviewed articles and studies with only one variable. As the CDC (2009) points out, in such cases “it is difficult to isolate which components of the overall intervention contributed to observed positive changes in behaviour and outcomes” (p 4). Libbey’s (2004) analysis of school connectedness measures provided a statistically sound approach and found key themes in a large number of measures used to describe school belonging. These included: academic engagement, discipline and fairness, student likes school, student voice, involvement in extracurricular activities, peer relations, safety, and teacher support. Limited somewhat by the self-report nature of each of the questionnaires explored, environmental factors may have been difficult to detect despite being identified in other studies investigating belonging (e.g., Brandi, 2006; Robins et al., 1999).

A Theory to Practice Gap

While it is understood that the concept of belonging is beneficial and that humans are motivated by a need to belong and form attachments (Baumiester & Leary, 1995), there appears to be a disparity between the understanding of the importance of this construct in research and reference to it in day-to-day practice. Jetten, Haslam, and Haslam (2012) suggest this may be a failure by practitioners, theorists, and the general public to acknowledge the importance of social relationships to life satisfaction, health, and wellbeing. They see this as a “blind spot.” Despite the fact that for most people opportunities to belong are present in the form of family, friends, schools, teams, organisations, and community groups, as suggested by Bronfenbrenner (1995), one cannot underestimate the complexities of creating and maintaining satisfying social relations.

Jetten et al. (2012) queried whether the relative absence of interventions related to social connectedness was fostered by society’s tendency to prioritise medical, pharmacological, or technological innovations and discourse over more humanistic interventions. However it may be that this absence, particularly in schools, is due to the lack of a clear framework or model. With the emerging popularity of Positive Psychology (Seligman, 2010), schools may be more open to looking at ways to foster belonging. Positive psychology focuses on strengths and abilities rather than focusing on the psychopathology of mental illness. It emphasises prevention by finding and nurturing positive aspects of human psychological functioning. Such movements have popularised preventative strategies in schools in recent decades (Seligman, 2010).

Future Research

We need to consider ways of prioritising and fostering belonging. Investigating the ways belonging is defined and represented in educational settings and understanding students’ conception of belonging is important because schools arguably offer the second most important set of relationships available to most people (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Anderman and Freeman (2004) argue that little attention has been paid to the role of school contexts, for example, class size, seating arrangements, and recreational space, on belonging. While there is research demonstrating the importance of belonging, few attempts have been made to show how it may be fostered.

Previous studies (Goodnow, 1992; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Juvonen, 2006) have focused on definition, measurement, and importance of belonging without defining the precursors of the sense of belonging in school settings or its practical implications. The literature shows variations in definition and terminology. As Libbey (2004) notes, one author’s definition of school connectedness may be different from another’s. There is no agreed upon terminology to describe many concepts. A synthesis of research is needed to provide a clearer perspective on which factors influence belonging. This will benefit

schools and shed light on which organisational features, practices, and policies should be prioritised.

Research has shown that group life and feeling a part of a community have a significant impact on our wellbeing. This has been demonstrated across a range of measures including life satisfaction, wellbeing, clinical depression, cognitive performance (Chanokruthai, Williams, & Hagerty, 2005; Turner, 1981), demographic data (Maa, Hannum, & Esplage, 2005; Ostrove & Long, 2007), and settings (Goodnow, 1992; Morrow, 2008). If school belonging is an important factor in understanding life satisfaction, health and pathology, a more rigorous approach to reviewing the literature is needed. Future research should address discrepancies in terminology and translate findings so they may be more accessible to schools. Factors that influence belonging should be identified through a meta-analysis of relevant studies. Such findings would have relevance for the design of interventions and changes to organisational structures in schools.

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