# Engaging Marginalized, "At-Risk" Middle-Level Students: A Focus on the Importance of a Sense of Belonging at School

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**Abstract:** The philosophy of middle level education is to intentionally create a learning environment that supports every young adolescent. The literature around engagement points to the need for students to experience (among other requirements) a sense of belonging at school (SOBAS). When the need for belonging is not achieved there may be significant consequences, including an impact on intellectual performance, and hence, learning potential may not be achieved. For students with marginalized identities, an intensification of factors that create challenges places them at-risk of disengaging and their sense of belonging at school is more likely to be compromised. Nurturing SOBAS is positively associated with the retention of students who are at-risk of dropping out of, thereby being an aspirational goal of education. *Methods*: The findings of a systematic literature review related to young adolescents and the importance of SOBAS forms a focused literature base. We highlight findings from a study that explored the effectiveness of engagement strategies for marginalized students in one educational jurisdiction in Australia. Data in the form of a series of interviews and focus groups conducted with 25 students, 25 of their teachers, and 39 school leaders provides a rich data set for thematic content analysis. Inductive analysis and in vivo coding led to a framework that summarized each of the sub-group data sets to convey emergent themes. *Results*: Five themes related to SOBAS emerged from the data: (a) Relationships in School; (b) School Climate; (c) Pedagogical Practices; (d) Specific Programs and Activities; and (e) Other Issues, mainly variables such as family, mental health, trauma and poverty that impacted on a student's SOBAS. *Conclusion*: The systematic literature review and the findings of the empirical study presented in this paper highlight aspects of SOBAS that can be formalized into a series of strategies to increase retention of marginalized students.

**Keywords:** engagement; middle level students; sense of belonging at school (SOBAS); school

## 1. Introduction

The Australian education system has a variety of school structures, determined by the eight states and territories that are each responsible for their respective education system. In general, schooling is two-tiered with students attending school from around age 5 or 6, through to age 17 or 18, see Figure 1. Students undertake seven years typically in a primary school setting, with a preparatory year through to the end of Year 6. Students then move to a secondary school, which extends for six years, from Year 7 to Year 12. Increasingly, there is a trend towards identifying the middle years as a separate tier, sometimes in a separate school, covering Years 7 to 9, with students aged from 12 to 15 years. This is the age group of interest in this paper.
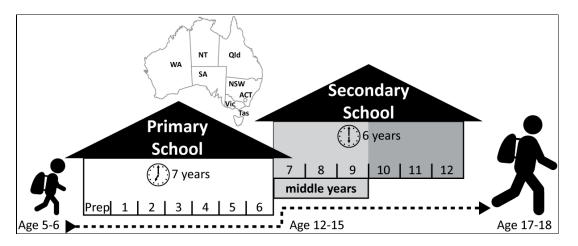
**Figure 1.** Typical Australian school structures. Diagram design: Joy Reynolds.

In recent years there has been closer attention paid to the middle years in Australia. *The Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians* [1] identified enhancing middle years teaching and learning practices as a priority, and since this time there has been a greater focus on this age range. It is argued that early adolescence, and the transition to secondary school, is "a time when students are at the greatest risk of disengagement from learning. Student motivation and engagement in these years is critical" [1] (p. 10). However, student achievement in the middle years remains of concern, and this is in part because of the vulnerability of students in this age group. Many of them enter the middle years already at-risk of underachieving, and, for some, this is directly linked to their marginalized identity. The report *Educational Opportunity in Australia* [2] investigated the academic outcomes of Australian students at Year 7, when they are aged 13 or 14. Among the findings, it was revealed that just 72% of all students aged 13 to 14 year old meet the milestone at Year 7 that increases their chances of acquiring the foundational skills they need in later years. This leaves an estimated 73,000 13 and 14 year old students (28%) who are not meeting expected standards in academic skills. Due to a combination of risk factors, the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students grows at Year 7, with Indigenous students 2.3 times more likely to miss out on the milestone than their non-Indigenous peers (62% versus 27%). Males are more likely to miss out on the reading benchmark at this milestone than females (31% versus 26%), while females are more likely to miss out on the benchmark for numeracy (32% versus 29%).

As schools attempt to address underachievement, particularly of students with complex learning needs, those who exhibit challenging or aggressive behavior, or who have additional social, health or welfare support needs, it is important to recognize the diversity of the needs represented by these young people, and the diversity of approaches that are currently in place to support and engage them in education. It is argued by some that keeping young people in education is a "wicked problem with implications for leadership, policy and practice" [3] (p. 1), involving "sociocultural, structural as well as curriculum, teaching and learning considerations" [3] (p. 11). So, who are the marginalized young adolescents at risk of disengaging?

According to Luke et al., "all students in the 'middle years'" are at risk [4] (p. 16). Researchers in the nationwide Australian study, *Beyond the Middle Years*, reported that, while initially they were skeptical of this claim, they recognized that the middle years of early secondary education "made up 'a site' where many of the key issues around community change, demographic change, economic and cultural shift were being played out" [4] (p. 13), and that schools were not adapting to these changes because of the "tenacity of the secondary school 'ethos' that failed to recognize the unique needs of this age group" [4] (p. 13). In relation to this lack of responsiveness to change, the researchers suggested that "[w]here many youth in the middle years are not already 'at risk' in the light of these new conditions, it is quite plausible that unresponsive, irrelevant and inflexible education structures can make them 'at risk'" [4] (p. 16), referring to factors including school culture, teaching styles,

student disability, learning difficulties, and issues associated with low socio-economic background. Therefore, all students may on occasion find themselves on the institutional margins during their young adolescent years of learning. For students from diverse, non-dominant backgrounds and those who are trans or gender fluid, the task of developing a sense of belonging at school may add further challenges.

Students who are at risk of disengaging from learning and schooling may experience lower levels of a sense of belonging at school (SOBAS). Furthermore, they are likely to be affected, both negatively and positively, by disparities in levels of SOBAS compared to students who are actively engaged and achieving in school [5]. Students considered at risk of school disengagement frequently include those whose circumstances involve a variety of often overlapping issues relating to, amongst other things: Personal, family, health (e.g., anxiety), educational issues (e.g., disability, giftedness), and/or societal issues (e.g., socio-economic status) [6]. In addition to being at risk from educational disengagement in middle level education, these students can be more vulnerable to disengaging during the transition from primary to middle school.

The societal changes mentioned above have intensified since 2003. In a 2012 report by the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) for the Queensland Government to inform the shift of Year 7 from primary to secondary school, it is noted that "a globalised*[sic]* and highly technologised*[sic]* marketplace requires mobile and flexible workers with generic and transferable skills (such as problem solving, critical thinking, good communication skills, and the ability to work with others in a team)" [7] (p. 3). The needs of students in their physical, psycho-social and cognitive dimensions remain the same, but the demands on them increase with these additional societal pressures.

In their study of flexible learning options in the Australia Capital Territory (ACT), Mills, McGregor and Muspratt [8] identified a number of factors external to schooling that impacted on young people, including homelessness and poverty. The young people interviewed were reported as saying that "the mainstream schools they had attended had not been cognisant*[sic]* of the challenges they faced in their everyday lives" [8] (p. 5) and, further, that this lack of knowledge of their individual circumstances led to their problems "being constructed in deficit ways" [9] (p. 5), making them marginalized within the education system. All these factors can have a negative effect on students' social and emotional well-being.

In a UK study [9], based on 15 focus groups of previously disengaged young people, a number of common themes emerged about the barriers to learning and the motivations for learning that could form the basis for schools wanting to recast their strategies for preventing disengagement. These included: Poor relationships with teachers, students feeling labelled, a lack of a sense of belonging, poor relationships with peers and poor quality of teaching.

With respect to the notion of engagement, Gibbs and Poskitt [10] have classified three main dimensions of student engagement in learning: Behavioral, emotional and cognitive, arguing that each needs to be present and nurtured for students to be fully engaged in their learning and that, together, they form a hierarchy of engagement. Behavioral engagement includes characteristics such as: Participation; presence; being on-task; compliance with rules; displaying effort, persistence, concentration and attention; quality contributions; and involvement in school related activities. Emotional engagement is characterized by: Understanding the value of learning; displaying interest, enjoyment and happiness; identification with school; and a sense of belonging at school. Cognitive engagement can be conceived of as: Volition learning (learning by choice); investment and willingness to exert effort; thoughtfulness (applying the processes of deep thinking); self-regulation; goal setting; use of meta-cognitive strategies; preference for challenge; resiliency and persistence; and a sense of urgency about learning. The inclusion of SOBAS as a characteristic of emotional engagement points to its importance in enabling engagement of learning for all young adolescent learners. As increasing levels of investment and commitment to learning move from behavioral through to emotional and then cognitive, it is evident that SOBAS plays a key role in enabling engagement in learning.

## 2. Systematic Literature Review—Sense of Belonging at School

To develop a comprehensive understanding of the literature related to SOBAS and middle years students, we undertook a systematic literature review. This process enables an exploration of the published literature with a specific focus on the importance and challenges for schools in creating a sense of belonging for students in middle level education. To review the empirical research, searches were conducted across three main databases: The Griffith University library journal database, the *Educational Resources Information Centre (ERIC)*, and *Expanded Academic*. The parameters included publication within the last 10 years (2007–2017) and the use of qualitative, and/or quantitative methodologies. A total of 21 publications met the parameters of the search. Table 1 outlines the search parameters used in the review.

**Table 1.** Search parameters used in the systematic quantitative literature review.

| Inclusion Criteria | Exclusion Criteria |
|---|---|
| • Conducted with middle years students Years 7 to 10 (aged 10 to 15 years)<br>• Published between March 2007–March 2017<br>• Quantitative and/or qualitative methods used<br>• Full text<br>• Peer reviewed<br>• Must be published in English<br>• At-risk student focus | • Conducted with students over 15 years of age, and/or under 10 years of age<br>• Published prior to March 2007<br>• Study methods not stated<br>• No full text accessible<br>• Not peer reviewed<br>• Not published in English<br>• Excl. books/dissertations<br>• Excluded literature exploring a sense of belonging at school (SOBAS) in specific ethnic populations of students (e.g., refugees, Latino, ethnic minorities, immigrants/migrants, international students)<br>• Excluded primary and elementary schools<br>• Excluded specific adolescent health articles (e.g., drug, alcohol abuse, health-risk behavior) |

The concept of SOBAS appears throughout this literature using a number of associated terms, including: Connectedness, attachment, belongingness, belonging and, fitting-in. Despite these varied terms, much of the literature describes SOBAS in similar ways, and our systematic literature review shows that the same or similar themes have been generated across a number of studies worldwide. These will be explored later in this paper. Riley and White describe sense of belonging as the experience of feeling "accepted, appreciated, and understood" at an individual level [11] (p. 211) in relationships with other people. Somers elaborates on this definition, describing SOBAS as:

> . . . the need to be and perception of being involved with others at differing interpersonal levels ( . . . ) which contributes to one's sense of connectedness (being part of, feeling accepted, and fitting in), and esteem (being cared about, valued and respected by others), while providing reciprocal acceptance, caring and valuing to others. [12] (p. 3)

SOBAS has been shown to provide students with a powerful source of resilience to strengthen them against their vulnerability to disengagement [13], and it is from this perspective that we are interested in gaining a deeper understanding of what it is for middle years students to feel they belong at school.

There was general agreement across the 21 articles that SOBAS is a protective factor for students' social wellbeing, health and educational outcomes, and that, as such, it is a multidimensional construct. The nurturing of receptive, school-based interpersonal connections with students, which are characterized by being both social and academic, emerged in many of the studies as being a major influence for students' SOBAS in middle level education [14,15]. This is noted as being especially important in the transition from primary school to high school [16,17] where social support

in particular is a major protective factor against students' development of depressive symptoms during this time [16].

As presented in Figure 2, the review of the 21 articles generated six broad and overlapping themes associated with middle level students' SOBAS, namely: (a) School climate; (b) social belonging and relationships; (c) students' personal attributes; (d) academic belonging; (e) School transitions; and (f) other factors (e.g., gender, socio-economic status). Each of these themes will now be explored in turn to demonstrate the multidimensionality of the construct of SOBAS in the middle years.
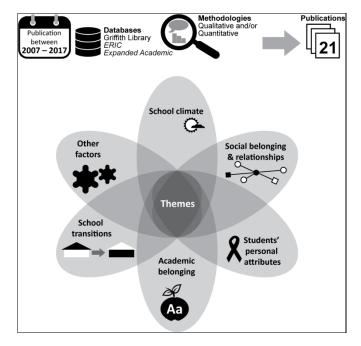


**Figure 2.** Visual overview of the SOBAS Systematic literature review process and themes. Diagram design: Joy Reynolds.

*2.1. School Climate*

Cemalcilar refers to school climate factors as being "the overall tangible and intangible aspects of the school setting" [18] (p. 248), which can also be referred to as the "school atmosphere" (p. 248). School climate factors alone are not the sole factors affecting students' SOBAS, but need to be considered as part of the broader multidimensional picture that makes up students' belongingness and the connections that students believe they have with their school.

A systematic, in-depth exploration of a comprehensive, whole-school approach that addresses the school organizational environment in relation to SOBAS, was conducted by Rowe and Stewart [15]. They explored the effectiveness of involving the whole school in developing students' school connectedness and SOBAS across three school sites—a secondary school, a primary school, and a special needs school. Findings from this study confirm that using a whole-school approach for developing connectedness is vital in improving and maintaining students' SOBAS. These findings provide insight into differing levels that shape whole-school approaches—at school level, class level, and school-class boundaries. A significant finding from Rowe and Stewart's study relates to the recognition that "whole-school community activities" [15] (p. 410) were important for developing connections across all levels of the school community. These activities included: Whole-school social and academic connections, where students and staff worked and planned activities together; school celebrations; and activities that encouraged the development of social connections between students and the school's physical environment (e.g., engraving pavers for the school grounds).

Similarly, Cemalcilar [18] conducted a study of 799 middle school students' experiences of attending high schools in both low and high socio-economic contexts in Turkey, finding that

social factors played important mediating effects that were intrinsically connected with the school environment. Both satisfaction with social relationships in school and with the school environment showed that students had a positive SOBAS. However, satisfaction with social relationships was a clearer forecaster of SOBAS than students being satisfied with the school environment. Cemalcilar [18] emphasized the importance of the structure of the school in promoting and maintaining students' safety and sense of feeling safe at school, in combination with satisfactory social relationships, with each one having a direct connection to students' SOBAS. A student's family background, their individual characteristics, and academic factors were not found to impact on students' SOBAS in Cemalcilar's study [18]. This finding is contrary to conclusions reached within much of the literature on SOBAS which firmly suggests that family background, individual characteristics, and academic factors are highly influential in this area. For example, Chiu, Chow, McBride and Mol [19] found that family characteristics (e.g., immigration, home language, socio-economic status, books at home, family wealth), and student characteristics (reading achievement, self-efficacy, and self-concept) were linked to students' SOBAS, and were responsible for much of the variance between students feeling a sense of belonging or not. Moreover, Newman et al. [16] found that variations in parental support were significantly associated with depressive symptoms during transition to high school, further suggesting the importance of family support in students' SOBAS.

### 2.2. Social Belonging and Relationships

The concept of social capital [20] is important in understanding social belonging and relationships, and that the degree and quality of social support, including from friends, parents/carers and teachers, and a supportive school environment, are all necessary for students to draw upon in terms of their interpersonal networks.

Within schools, teachers and other key personnel can support students' personal wellbeing and growth by being available for students. It is widely acknowledged that students with less social capital, that is, those with fewer personal connections with others, are more at risk of poor academic outcomes and disengaging from education [21,22]. Peer relationships play a vital role in shaping students' social and emotional experiences at school [23]. Furthermore, satisfaction with social relationships in school demonstrates that students have engaged with schooling on emotional and behavioral levels [18].

Ellerbrock et al. [14] found that interpersonal relationships at school supported the development of a sense of belonging in sixth grade young adolescents in a large, diverse, urban middle school. Students' SOBAS was shown to increase where teachers were responsive and intentionally created relationships that fostered caring relationships with students, and were responsive to students' needs. When students felt that their peers knew and understood them, and when they received academic and emotional support from peers, their SOBAS increased [14].

A study by LeBaron Wallace, Feifei and Chhuon [24] further supported the notion that adolescents' sense of belonging in high school serves as a protective factor that connects school-based relationships to positive academic and social outcomes for adolescents. Findings from this study exploring 14 to 20 year-old students' SOBAS, suggest that adolescents' SOBAS includes four distinctive school-experience factors: (a) A sense of connection with teachers in the school; (b) connection with a specific teacher; (c) identification and participation in official school activities; and, (d) perceptions of fitting-in with peers [24]. Again, this study adds to the understanding that SOBAS is a multidimensional construct.

In a study by Drolet and Arcand [25], 20 school staff members and youth workers in high school, and 12 students (aged 12 to 13) were interviewed to ascertain the supportive roles that peers, teachers and non-family adults played in the lives of young adolescents. These supportive roles included listening to and being with students during daily activities, and demonstrating understanding of their problems [26].

Curran and Wexler [25] systematically reviewed 24 articles from the literature describing students' protective factors and strengths fostered by positive youth development programs (Years 6 to 12,

approximately aged 12 to 17), finding that these programs increase intrinsic measures of well-being, social confidence and healthy behaviors in adolescents. Moreover, these measures were shown to be important in encouraging positive peer-to-peer relationships [25]. This suggests that where these intrinsic intra-psychic measures are not present, for example for at-risk students, these students might have more difficulty in developing supportive peer relationships.

Shochet, Smith, Furlong and Homel [27] posited that SOBAS was a one-dimensional construct that, they suggested, would be a significant forecaster of adverse emotional issues in adolescents (e.g., depression and anxiety symptoms). The study explored 504 Year 7 students' feelings on relations between three factors on Goodenow's Psychological Sense of School Membership scale: Caring Relations, Acceptance, and Rejection [28]. The study showed that feeling accepted by peers and significant others at school was a significant forecaster of current and future emotional symptoms in adolescents, particularly for females; and furthermore, that feeling rejected by peers and significant others was directly connected to adverse emotional outcomes. This has immense implications for at-risk students: Females seemed to be more relationship orientated than males were, suggesting a possible increase in the level to which relational valuing and SOBAS has an influence on their well-being [27].

Responsive student to student relationships are important in fostering a SOBAS and in ensuring students feel known and accepted by their peers [14]. The importance of teachers being available to listen to students, accompanying them in day-to-day activities, and understanding issues as they arise, are all important factors for teachers and other school staff in recognizing how to be understood as trustworthy, reliable, genuine, and approachable for students [14]. Encouraging responsive, relational connections with students, which are both social and academic, has been found to be essential in laying the foundations for young adolescents' sense of belonging in the middle years of schooling [14,29].

These collective findings strongly indicate that educators need to understand the importance of teacher and peer relationships in supporting young adolescents, responding to their needs, encouraging their academic engagement and motivation, and in turn, strengthening their SOBAS [29].

## 2.3. Students' Personal Attributes

Perhaps not surprisingly, the personal attributes that students possess were identified in the literature review as strongly affecting students' SOBAS. We have already explored the concept of social capital and the effect this has on students' SOBAS; other personal attributes acknowledged in the literature as being important in students feeling a SOBAS related to: Socio-emotional skills [23]; self-efficacy and self-image [25]; motivation, academic achievement and competence [29]; coping skills [17]; and locus of control [30]. As can be seen from this list, some of these personal attributes can act as protective factors in terms of students feeling a SOBAS, whereas others may act detrimentally in this respect.

To further broaden theories of adolescent belonging in school, Schall et al. [30] focused on how individual differences in locus of control occur across adolescents with different levels of belonging at school, specifically in relation to fitting in with peers. An internal locus of control refers to a student's internal ability to regulate their own behavior, while an external locus of control exists when a student's behavior is regulated externally and controlled by others [30]. In Schall et al.'s study, 34 adolescents (aged 15 to 19 years old, and hence at the oldest end of the secondary school years) who were primarily African American students from working class, urban communities, were interviewed to determine the differences across their locus of control. These were found to vary according to students' levels of perception of belonging in school. This research points to a relationship between student behaviors and their SOBAS, and consequently shows the importance of developing pedagogical practices when designing and implementing school-based intervention. Furthermore, Schall et al. [30] argued that teachers are considerable influencers of peer relationships at school, which has important implications for the ways in which teachers engage with and teach young adolescent learners.

### 2.4. Academic Belonging

Another facet of students' SOBAS is that of academic belonging. A quantitative study by Fong Lam, Chen, Zhang, and Liang [31] explored the relationships between a sense of belonging to their school, perceptions of academic efficacy ('academic emotions'), and academic achievement in 406 junior high school learners. Students who had a greater SOBAS had positive academic emotions that supported their school belonging and academic achievement. These students experienced more positive emotions (e.g., pride, happiness, hope, satisfaction and calmness) and less negative emotions (e.g., depression, anxiety, shame, anger, boredom, hopelessness and fatigue), which contributed positively to their academic achievements [31]. A lack of a sense of belonging at school was shown to have a negative effect on schooling achievement, with students feeling helpless and anxious about their learning.

Conversely, Green, Emery, Sanders, and Anderman [32] found that there was a clear distinction between social and academic SOBAS. Green et al. surveyed 76 middle school students and conducted nine qualitative interviews as part of a larger, longitudinal project. Their study focused on students' understanding of the factors that influenced their sense of belonging in an academically rigorous schooling environment; finding that social belonging resulted from students' explanations of relationships with teachers and peers in a free, accepting social environment. Academic belonging resulted from students' experiences in meeting high academic expectations, taking part in a variety of educational opportunities, obtaining academic support from teachers, and having shared academic interests with peers. There was evidence to suggest that social and academic belonging are discrete features of students' overall SOBAS; this was evident in that some students experienced one type of belonging without the other [32]. This has important implications for the connection of both academic and social belonging in school, particularly for at-risk students, where greater success is evident when both factors are in place.

Hope [33] explored students' experiences of education in a democratic school where all students, parents, and staff had an equal voice in school decision-making. Students in that context were found to experience a strong sense of belonging to the school, to teachers, and with peers which appeared to make a significant contribution to students' academic outcomes. Results from Hope's study suggest that students' SOBAS was partially affected by the democratic structure of the school (also linking to school climate factors explored earlier).

Likewise, Sari [34] found a greater SOBAS for students with higher academic achievements. This suggests that for at-risk students who may be achieving poorly at school, their sense of not belonging academically may be having a negative effect on other areas of belonging. As Green et al. [32] suggested, however, one type of belonging may be present without the other, yet, when both are present students' academic achievements can be profound.

As part of academic belonging and creating school relationships, Niemi and Risto [23] focused on school celebrations and co-curricular activities in their quantitative Finnish study. A total of 696 students (aged 13 to 16 years old) participated in this study, which aimed to gain a better understanding of the factors affecting students' SOBAS, in order to see how schools can better support the development of students' SOBAS across the whole school. Findings indicated that Year 9 students had lower SOBAS than Year 8 students, suggesting that students' SOBAS declines over their school years. Students' socio-emotional and educational experiences of school celebrations and co-curricular activities were found to be deeply connected to their SOBAS. Peer relationships played a vital and substantial role in shaping students' social and emotional experiences during school celebrations, and in increasing their connections to school. This finding advocates for the importance of these types of celebrations at school, particularly for the continuation of this practice from primary schooling into high school contexts. Niemi and Risto's [23] research supports earlier studies (e.g., References [35,36]) and is important in broadening our understanding of the social and emotional importance of these types of events in developing students' SOBAS [23]. Furthermore, these conclusions also strengthen earlier research by LeBaron Wallace et al. [24] who found that participation in official school authorized

activities was one of the distinct school-experience factors that was identified as being important in creating a SOBAS for students.

Taken together these findings indicate that all schools need to attend to the psychological and social needs of students, in addition to their educational needs. This is further supported by LeBaron Wallace et al. [26] who suggested that the multidimensionality of the SOBAS construct serves as a protective factor connecting school-based relationships to positive academic and social outcomes for young adolescents.

*2.5. School Transitions*

School experience factors relating to students' SOBAS were evident across many of the studies reviewed. These can be related directly to school climate factors, such as the transition from primary to secondary school. This transitional period is known to affect students both socially and academically [4] and has been shown to be particularly impactful on students who are at risk of disengaging from education [6]. In their discussion of effective middle school programs, Chadbourne and Pendergast asserted that, far from being seamless, "traditionally the transition [from primary to secondary school] has been disconnected, discordant and dysfunctional" [37] (p. 30).

The significance of this transitional period on students' SOBAS is reported in disparate ways in the literature. A study by Vaz et al. [18] suggests that students' perceptions of SOBAS were constant across the transition from primary school to high school with no evidence of variability in students' SOBAS because of socio-economic status, gender or ability/disability. However, there were some reported individual student factors (e.g., competence and coping skills) and school factors (e.g., low-level classroom task-goal orientation) that had influenced some students' SOBAS in primary school, and these were shown to persist in influencing students' SOBAS in secondary contexts. Furthermore, family features were not seen as influencing students' sense of belonging in high school [17]. However, these findings are contended in other literature where research has suggested direct associations with students' SOBAS and problems in transitioning to high school. For instance, Newman et al. [16] found that Year 9 students faced more symptoms of depression and lower levels of a SOBAS in comparison to Year 8 students after their transition to high school. Furthermore, variations in peer support and parental support were significantly associated with depressive symptoms during transition to high school for these students. Newman et al. [16] also found that peer support, family support, and school belonging were directly related to adolescent adjustment after transitioning to high school. Suggestions here support the notion that students already deemed to be at risk from disengagement may be more likely to be adversely affected by school climate factors, such as transitions, than those with more resilience and protective factors (e.g., supportive parents, teachers and peers). Thus, school belonging is predicated on the positive relationships that students form with peers, teachers and those that extend outside school to families/carers. This is a relatively consistent finding across the studies.

*2.6. Other Factors*

Other factors that were identified from the literature review as being important in creating a SOBAS were interrelated aspects such as: Gender; socio-economic status; culture; and, parental education, some of which we have touched on in earlier sections. For instance, differences across cultures were identified in the Chiu et al. [19] study, where students in more hierarchical cultures were identified as having lower SOBAS, and that the hierarchical societal SOBAS link was stronger than the collectivism societal SOBAS link. Furthermore, the relationships between teachers and students mediated any hierarchical SOBAS link. However, family, peer and teacher characteristics explained more of the difference in SOBAS than did cultural and societal attributes. Chiu et al. also established that socio-economic status was likewise linked to students' SOBAS [19].

In a Turkish study investigating the SOBAS of 364 elementary school students (aged 11 to 16 years), Sari [34] observed that students who attend schools of middle and high socio-economic statuses had a

greater SOBAS than students attending schools with lower socio-economic statuses. This has important implications for the sense of belonging that students may feel towards their school if their experiences of schooling are set against a background of low socio-economic conditions.

In terms of gender differences, the literature is inconclusive. Some findings point to female students having considerably higher SOBAS and less of a feeling of rejection at school [34], while others suggest that female students feel more vulnerable to social rejection [27]. Girls from all ethnic backgrounds reported higher SOBAS than boys in the Hughes, Im, and Allee [38] study. During middle school years SOBAS was found to be neutral for girls and boys from Latino backgrounds and positive for African American and Euro-American boys [28]. Further research is needed in this area, particularly in respect of gender fluidity and non-heterosexual sexual identities.

*2.7. Summary of the Systematic Literature Review*

This systematic review of the literature reveals SOBAS to be a multidimensional construct of importance to middle years' students and their engagement in learning [14,27]. There is agreement that SOBAS is a protective factor for students' social wellbeing, health and educational outcomes. The nurturing of receptive, school-based interpersonal connections with students, which are characterized by being both social and academic, was consistently identified in the literature as being of major influence for laying the foundation for middle level students' SOBAS [14,15]. This was noted as being particularly important in the transition from primary school to high school [16,17] where, in particular, social support served as a major protective factor against students' development of depressive symptoms during this time of transition [16].

In future research, there is scope to extend the theoretical and methodological frames and parameters around studies into SOBAS to include consideration of the impact of factors such as bias in the curriculum and disciplinary enforcement, which can be particularly disadvantageous for Indigenous students and students from other marginalized backgrounds. More work is needed into how power dynamics influence young adolescents' experiences in the classrooms and in the curriculum and, hence, shape their SOBAS. Students experience these types of influences in conscious and subconscious ways, thus requiring researchers to investigate SOBAS from a range of perspectives and approaches.

## 3. Materials and Methods

In this section, the paper presents data from interviews with middle years students, teachers, and school leaders who provide their reflections on the importance of SOBAS. The interviews come from a larger study that explored the factors affecting students deemed to be at-risk of disengaging from their education in high schools (Year 7 to 10, aged 12 to 16) in one Australian education jurisdiction. The study sample comprised a cross-section of all government high schools in the jurisdiction, with participants drawn from across the schools and school communities. The context in which the jurisdiction is situated performs well on most national indicators, such as median weekly income, post-school qualifications, work participation rates, health, levels of life satisfaction, and levels of participation in sport, recreation and culture.

The data were derived from a combination of telephone interviews with some school leaders along with face-to-face and focus group interviews at five school sites with young adolescent students, teachers, and additional school and community leaders.

Eighty-nine stakeholders were interviewed during the study (see Table 2). Five school sites were nominated by the education district for visits. Three sites were middle schools, encompassing Year 7 to 10; one kindergarten to Year 10 setting; and one school that was a Year 11 to 12 College, with a Year 10 at-risk program attached to it. The purpose of the site visits was to document perspectives from a range of stakeholders about engaging at-risk and disengaged students in learning. Specifically, we sought to gain views on *what works* and what *does not* work in engaging young adolescents, along with supporting evidence. We also sought stakeholders' views about interventionist programs that

should be continued or discontinued and/or how such programs might be changed or improved. Criteria for the selection of the sites included diversity in terms of location, SES, school size and the types of programs available for at-risk and disengaged students.

**Table 2.** Participant details.

| Stakeholder Groups | Number of Participants | Number of Schools |
|---|---|---|
| Students (self-nominated/nominated by schools as representative samples of disengaged/at-risk students) | 25 | 5 |
| Teachers (self-nominated/nominated by school based on their experience with at-risk and disengaged students) | 25 | 5 |
| School leaders (e.g., principals, deputy principals, specialist teams) | 39 | 40 |

Schools were requested to select participants who they believed might offer a richness and diversity of views on engaging at-risk and disengaged students in their learning. For the purposes of this study, we did not develop detailed case studies of individual students in terms of their backgrounds. The parameters of the research did not allow sufficient time. Thus, our focus is on the perspectives of young people in terms of their experiences of what works/does not work to keep young people engaged in learning.

Interviews were conducted with school principals, teachers, and students. Some students opted to be interviewed alone while others chose to participate in small focus groups.

For us the inclusion of student voice was an important component of the research design aligning with the model of marginalization underpinning our study, as outlined earlier in this paper. Messiou [39] (p. 86) argued that:

> . . . marginalisation *[sic]* can be addressed in schools from three perspectives: first, by taking specific actions regarding individual students, or in relation to issues that create barriers to student participation; secondly, by engaging with all students' voices; and thirdly, by focusing on the involvement of 'forgotten groups of learners' in the process of data collection and analysis.

In our data collection design, we sought coverage of all three perspectives. First, we sought information about actions taken with individual students. Second, we engaged with a wide range of student voices. Third, we ensured representation of the forgotten learners through our careful construction of questions. Identification measures used by school leaders for at-risk and marginalized student participants included suspension data, attendance data, school grades, and tests of literacy and numeracy levels. Other identification measures, particularly for at-risk students, included referrals from teachers, parents/caregivers, year level coordinators, other students, and external agencies; and those with disabilities, learning disabilities, mental health issues, and behavioral difficulties.

For all interviews, a protocol allowed for semi-structured discussions. Set questions targeted key information, and participants were encouraged to voice their opinions and experiences on a range of matters relevant to schooling disengagement, at-risk students, and appropriate solutions to the issues. Interviews, which lasted between 30 minutes and two and a half hours, were audio recorded and professionally transcribed. The interviews resulted in 43 transcripts, which were analyzed for emergent themes that included responses to the core concerns of this project: (a) The range and numbers of students; and (b) the types of educational services required to meet the needs of at-risk and disengaged students.

For this paper, we have focused in depth on one topic that emerged from the data analysis—SOBAS. A general inductive analysis approach was used to analyze the qualitative data, the process consisted of grouping the transcripts according to each stakeholder participant group (sub-group data sets)—students; teachers; and school leaders. Then, the sub-group data sets for each sub-group

were individually reviewed by all members of the research team. This review took the form of initial reading of the transcripts, discussing possible emergent themes and creating summaries of the data. The transcripts were then re-read by one member of the research team to explore themes across the sub-group data sets. Patterns across these data sets were coded for emergent themes that related to the phenomenon of a SOBAS, allowing repeated, significant and overarching themes to emerge from the raw data. Coding for the themes took the form of reading and re-reading each of the sub-group's data sets and noting utterances, passages of text and key words that related to a-sense-of-belonging (e.g., friendships, caring teachers, uniforms), and any elements that the participants identified as creating and supporting a-sense-of-belonging (e.g., understanding teachers, student surveys, teachers/administration staff learning about student's families). The inductive analysis and in vivo coding led to a framework that summarized each of the sub-group data sets to convey emerging themes. Initially, coding labels were utilized to refer to specific themes from the data sets (e.g., relationships in schools, pedagogical practices, school-wide activities). In consultation with the other members of the research team, the coding labels were organized according to an agreed meaning for the category, including limitations to those categories (e.g., a coding label of for instance, medical category and where this may fit). Phrases and text were then organized under the agreed upon categories, and connections made within sub-group data, and then across all of the sub-groups' data sets.

## 4. Results

The resulting themes appeared to be an open set of connections with no clear hierarchy. The final five themes specifically relating to SOBAS are presented below in the order in which they were identified from the data:

1.  Relationships in School, e.g., students being able to realize their potential, building relationships among students, teachers and parents and the school community.
2.  School Climate Factors, e.g., attendance, transitioning from primary to high school, and school culture.
3.  Pedagogical Practices, e.g., assessments and grading, academic engagement, personalized learning and curriculum differentiation.
4.  Specific Programs and Activities, e.g., interventions and programs designed to build students' capacity in making connections and building relationships; these were frequently in partnership with other agencies.
5.  Other Issues, e.g., family, mental health, trauma, and poverty, that impacted a student's SOBAS.

Table 3 maps these themes against the six themes identified in the literature review to identify where synergies emerged. The themes both from the literature review and this study reveal there are strong connections between and across the themes so that in practice they are not entirely discrete.

**Table 3.** Themes relating to SOBAS identified from the data analysis and mapped against the literature review findings.

| Themes Relating to SOBAS from Stakeholders | Mapped Literature Review SOBAS Themes | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | School Climate | Social Belonging and Relationships | Students' Personal Attributes | Academic Belonging | School Transitions | Other Factors (e.g., Gender, Socio-Economic Status) |
| Relationships in school | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| School climate factors | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ | | |
| Pedagogical practices | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| Programs | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ |
| Other issues | ✓ | | | | | ✓ |

The analysis from the project data maps the six broad areas of school belongingness identified from the literature review compared to the themes derived from the study, in terms of what each stakeholder group had to say with reference to a SOBAS; thus, telling a story around the differing perspectives of creating and maintaining students' SOBAS. Each of these will now be explored in turn.

### 4.1. Students' Insights about SOBAS

Twenty-five students participated in the project across five different schools and schooling contexts, including mainstream classes and specific programs and classes for disengaged and at-risk students. The students were nominated by the school leaders in response to the research study criteria for hearing the voices of students across a range of engagement and achievement groups. The main findings relate to the students' relationships at school with friends and teachers, and the intersection of how teachers taught them and related to them.

For many of the students it was important that they were able to connect with teachers and build strong ongoing relationships. The students felt that having approachable and caring teachers gave them support within the school and someone they could turn to when they had problems—a trusting, caring adult who was prepared to listen to them, gave them attention and genuinely cared about their wellbeing and their academic progress. Students felt that on many occasions those who were at the school to support their wellbeing, such as counsellors, were often fully booked and inaccessible. However, certain teachers, with whom they had developed ongoing relationships over time, were more approachable and easily accessible. For example, the year level coordinator whom the students had over two to three years was often their 'go-to' person for support when they needed it.

In terms of peers, the students felt that friendship groups were important in terms of fitting in and belonging at school, particularly for someone to "hang out" with in class and during school. Not having friends at school had led some students to seek alternative schools, colloquially described in the quote as dropping out of school, as illustrated by one student when she stated that:

> I dropped out of two schools because of friends ( . . . ) obviously the teachers weren't great either, but I think the biggest factor were the people. My first school I didn't fit in and everyone was quite harsh to me. My second school everyone just was really mean to each other, and everyone was really petty. They were just like, well you know what? You're not good enough because you're not as high as everyone else. I think that's why I left the second school as well. (Student Focus Group, Site 3)

Although some students felt that in-class friends were more important in classes where teachers were not engaging them in learning, where the classes/subjects were deemed "boring" (Student Focus Group, Site 5), others felt that if the class/subject was engaging then it did not matter so much if they had no friends in that class. In those classes, students felt it was more about how the teacher had developed a safe and supportive climate in their classroom. This was exemplified by one student who stated that:

> I didn't have any real close friends in Miss [X's] class, but because I was in her class, she made it feel so good and brought us all together, that I didn't care. We would all have conversations all over the class, and I would talk to people that I would never talk to, because I was like, we're all this class. She really brought us all together. She was having fun with us . . . normally if you had an average teacher, and you had no friends in that class, it would just be like I don't really want to go to that class because no one's really my friend and it's just uncomfortable. (Student Focus Group, Site 3)

Students also revealed their academic sense of belonging was affected by school climate factors such as grouping, streaming (arranging classes by academic level), and limited variety in the subjects that were offered. Frequently students commented on not having control over the subjects or topics they could study, and that when they did have some control this led to greater engagement and interest.

This was also heightened when students saw the teachers as engaging and interested in them as a person, and in their academic and social relationships. Our results show an example of this in one school where project-based learning was incorporated into the curriculum, and students stated how engrossed and focused they were on their personal projects. Students felt that they engaged more when the teacher showed interest in how they learned best and in their learning in the classroom. This was illustrated by one student who stated:

> Teachers have realised*[sic]* that they need to take a step back and look and listen to us and they might need to change the way that they're teaching stuff; but if we're actually learning it, they realise*[sic]* that that's an advantage for them, because it's not as much of a struggle where they need to keep kids in at lunch or they need to keep on going over stuff. (Student Focus Group, Site 2)

*4.2. Teachers' Insights about Creating and Maintaining a Sense of Belonging at School*

Twenty-five teachers participated in the project across five different schools and schooling contexts, including those who taught in mainstream classes and specific programs/classes for students who had been identified as disengaged or vulnerable to disengagement.

The main findings related to the teachers' sense of their roles at school in terms of just teaching their subjects, or teaching the whole child and engaging with children on a personal level, getting to know the students and building rapport with them. Many teachers felt that if they provided students with the opportunity to learn then the students should be able to engage and learn. Teacher attitudes to their roles and responsibilities provided a glimpse into the complexities of teachers' responsibilities.

Teachers discussed their thoughts on positive and mutually respectful relationships with students in creating a SOBAS. There was consensus among participants about needing to have teachers who were genuinely interested in creating opportunities for success for their students. These teachers discussed creating safe spaces at school where students were able to come and engage with a supportive teacher. In some schools this occurred in home groups where some teachers had created personalized spaces where students came at the beginning of each day:

> Home group ( . . . ) it looks slightly different in different year groups. For example, in Year 8 we see them every morning from 9:00 until 11:00, their (home) teacher is the first person they see. They walk in, they get rid of all their issues and say I had a bad night, I'm sleepy, I'm hungry, I'm this, I'm that; all of that gets dealt with first thing in the morning when they walk in the door and that's their home group—they've got their own desk, their own space in which they've got their things, they've got their photos, their things around. So it's like that's where they check in every morning. (Teacher Focus Group, Site 2)

As this teacher explained, home groups were particularly important for the middle level classes in developing a SOBAS and connection with teachers and peers. Other teachers suggested that their schools no longer valued the connections with 'home' teachers and that roll taking and other usual start-of-day practices were undertaken in different classes, depending on which subject the students began each day with, meaning that students had different teachers for roll call on different days of the week, and thus limiting the consistency of connection with one supportive teacher. The need for more time for pastoral care and continuity of support emerged as important factors in creating a SOBAS as teachers discussed the importance of learning about students' backgrounds and following up on issues as they emerge:

> Probably working more, well working more with a student as the individual, I think that's really important, also spending time finding out their background because I think a lot of teachers just have them in their class and that's it. Then following up with kids if they're not there, and engaging with the families as well. (Teacher Focus Group, Site 1)

Developing trust with students and engaging with them in 'fun' activities even before academic learning and engagement could occur emerged as significant factors in teacher relationships and school climate towards creating a SOBAS for the more vulnerable students:

> [When] they spend enough time with us, build that trust and then let you know what's not right in life, so it's a whole lot of things really—we get into play-based activities like colouring*[sic]* in, puzzles, nail polish and all that kind of thing to try and get them in to start with because some kids can be really reluctant; they're looking at a room full of people that they don't know and they think they don't want to be there. (Teacher Focus Group, Site 1)

Further evidence of the importance of the home group teacher came from another Teacher Focus Group at Site 3:

> The role of the home group teacher is important too because we're talking about disengaged kids; [the teachers are] the ones who are the first contact with the parents; the kids aren't turning up, they're the ones who actually call the parents and they're supposed to develop some sort of relationship. The idea is they get a relationship with the kids; it doesn't always work that way. Some home group teachers are excellent, others will mark their roll and sit on the computer and not chat to the kids at all, but they're supposed to develop a relationship with the kids and also a relationship with the parents.

Pedagogical practices that teachers saw as important in creating a SOBAS for at-risk students were academic engagement, room to concentrate on students' learning, adapting and using students' interests to engage them in the curriculum, sharing information with other teachers and support personnel to ensure wrap-around services and continuity of support, and, upskilling themselves to keep up with what students needed in terms of 21st century pedagogical practices, such as engagement and skills with technology.

Like the students, teachers also discussed the importance of specific programs and activities for creating a SOBAS for at-risk students in terms of programs like boys' sport and leadership development:

> Yeah and we have the [X] program which is where Year 9 and 10 boys, they do their [health] and their PE together, it's just about building role models, leadership etcetera, we do our best with them, some kids that are disengaged, we select them, if they want to be in the program, we select them to be in the program. We have a mixture of kids who are really good leaders and disengaged kids, kids who have struggled with school work and that sort of stuff. (Teacher Focus Group, Site 3)

Some other issues that we identified from the teacher interviews as affecting at-risk students' SOBAS related to outside school factors such as students' home life/conditions (trauma, drug use by students and/or parents); parental practices; mental health and wellbeing, particularly the negative effects of student anxiety; socio-economic factors, and cultural factors.

*4.3. School Leaders' Insights about Creating and Maintaining a Sense of Belonging at School*

Thirty-nine school leaders participated in the project from across 40 different schooling contexts. School leaders included principals, deputy principals, senior advisors/managers, multidisciplinary teams, school system leaders and specialists working across schooling sectors to re-engage at-risk students in their education. Initial focus group interviews were conducted with 33 of these school leaders. Follow-up individual telephone interviews were undertaken with nine of these school leaders to further interrogate the initial focus group discussion themes that had emerged.

Five site visits were conducted, and six school leaders were individually interviewed at these sites that were nominated by the education jurisdiction. These six participants consisted of three principals and three deputy principals. All of the interviews were transcribed, and preliminary analysis was

undertaken to identify themes across the interviews. Further in-depth analysis was conducted to review specific themes relating to SOBAS for this paper.

School leaders focused more holistically on students' SOBAS in terms of the bigger picture of school relationships, academic engagement, school climate factors, and variabilities in other issues that impact on students' SOBAS. School leaders saw school attendance as a key indicator of a student's engagement/disengagement with school and learning; stating that this factor was the main determinant as to whether a student could feel a sense of academic and social belonging to school. The rationale for this came from their feelings about students needing to be physically present at school to engage socially and academically. This was illustrated by one principal who stated that:

> I mean one of the key factors that we often look at is attendance or lack of attendance or just not very good attendance and not very good engagement from parents in willingness to communicate with us about why a child is not attending school. (School Leaders' Focus Group)

School leaders recognized the inherent problems in working with teachers who may hold differing views on pedagogy, as one school principal noted:

> The word "pedagogy" is thrown around just terribly in terms of pluralising*[sic]* and all sorts of things; essentially it is the "art and science of teaching", which encapsulates everything. For some people, that is "the conveyance of", whereas from my view, teaching is a holistic thing; it is to do with the relationship; it is to do with finding the way for that student; not expecting all 30 students to only be able to relate to the one way I do it. (School Leaders' Focus Group)

## 5. Discussion and Conclusions

Participants in our research project agreed that the school environment should be supportive, with safe spaces where students could go to talk to a significant adult and where they could receive support without being judged. However, there was a point of divergence in that some teachers were less willing and capable of going beyond teaching their subject and offering additional support to students. Teachers and school leaders suggested that the transition from primary to secondary school could be problematic for some students in terms of school structural factors, such as seeing one to two teachers a week in primary school, to experiencing seven or more teachers a week. This is consistent with findings in the literature about the potential negative effects on students in terms of transitioning to high school [16,17,27]. Specifically, Newman et al. [16] noted that changes in support structures (e.g., friendships) were significantly associated with depressive symptoms in the transition to high school.

A number of participants in our study commented on their experience of typically traditional schooling structures driven by timetabling, subject groupings and subject choices, as latent influencing factors in students not feeling a SOBAS. These findings are consistent with the literature where school climate factors were identified as being instrumental in building a SOBAS. Rowe and Stewart [15] suggested a whole-of-school approach is needed to build student SOBAS, a view that is supported by Cemalcilar [18], who further suggested that school climate/culture and structural/contextual characteristics should be designed in ways that internally foster students' SOBAS.

The importance of building school community is highlighted in our findings, as is the importance of creating a strong bond and connection between students and their school. This was emphasized in the student interviews when they discussed the importance of school activities that connected them with peers and teachers, for example school camps, school dances, and opportunities for teachers to join in and interact with the students. This suggestion is consistent with Rowe and Stewart [16], who noted that effective approaches to creating a sense of belonging in the school environment included intentionally designed activities that built connectedness and fostered interaction among the whole school community.

The insights from the literature review and the data from our own research sites reveal that a sense of belonging at school is, indeed, a key element of emotional engagement, sitting firmly between the behavioral and cognitive indicators of student engagement [10]. SOBAS is relevant for all students, and particularly so for students who are marginalized and at-risk of underachieving. Furthermore, nurturing a sense of belonging in school is positively associated with the retention of students who are at-risk of dropping out of school [17].

The systematic literature review and the findings of the empirical study presented in this paper highlight aspects of SOBAS that can be formalized into a series of strategies to increase retention of marginalized and at-risk students. First, there is a need to nurture relationships in school so that students are able to realize their potential, building relationships among students, teachers and parents and the wider school community. Second, school climate factors such as attendance, transitioning from primary to high school and school culture should highlight the importance of SOBAS. Third, pedagogical practices, for example, assessments and grading, academic engagement, personalized learning and curriculum differentiation, can be employed that enable a sense of participation and authenticity and contribute to developing SOBAS. Next, specific activities such as interventions and programs designed to build students' capacity in making connections and building relationships, including partnerships with other agencies should be nurtured. Finally, more personalized issues related to the individual student, such as family circumstances, mental health, trauma, and poverty, should be appreciated as likely to have an impact on a student's SOBAS. Consequently, school leaders need to build collaborations with professional agencies and communities who are able to value-add to schools by providing material, medical, emotional and psychological support to students with high needs [40]. Given our clear appreciation that nurturing a sense of belonging in school is positively associated with the retention of students who are at-risk of dropping out of school, employing these strategies is crucial for achieving effective middle level education for *all* students.

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