

The European Journal of Social and Behavioural Sciences  
EJSBS Volume V, Issue II (e-ISSN: 2301-2218)

## THE IMPORTANCE OF BELONGING FOR ADOLESCENTS IN SECONDARY SCHOOL SETTINGS



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### Abstract

It has been shown that belonging has a significant impact on a range of factors associated with wellbeing. These factors include general life satisfaction, cognitive performance, academic work and physical health. These associations have been demonstrated across a range of settings, including secondary schools. This paper provides an overview of belonging and its importance in secondary schools.

*Keywords:* Belonging, school connectedness, meta-analysis, belongingness, school attachment, adolescent, wellbeing, positive psychology

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doi: 10.15405/ejsbs.72



## 1. Introduction

There is a growing acceptance that belonging to groups, such as schools, families, or communities, contributes to general health and wellbeing (Haslam, Jetten, Postmes, & Haslam, 2009; Holt-Lunstad, Smith, & Layton, 2010; Jetten, Haslam, Haslam, & Branscombe, 2009). Additionally, not belonging has been shown to be a health risk equal to poor diet and lack of exercise (Holt-Lunstad, Smith, & Layton). It has been linked to psychological distress, mental illness, and even suicide (McMahon, Singh, Garner, & Benhorin, 2004; Shochet, Dadds, Ham, & Montague, 2006; Resnik et al., 1997). It has previously been argued that schools are important for building social networks and offer unique opportunities for belonging (O'Brien & Bowles, 2012). Health promotion and prevention have received some interest in schools (Hagerty, Lynch-Sauer, Patusky, Bouwsema, & Collier, 1992; West, Sweeting, & Leyland, 2004), but interventions concerned with fostering belonging have received far less, particularly when compared to the attention shown towards rudimentary measures of academic success. According to research (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2009; Wingspread, 2004), schools could better serve students with interventions designed to foster belonging.

### 1.1. First, a Definition

The concept of belonging has been described using a variety of terms: bonding, climate, territory, school attachment, school connectedness, and orientation towards school (Libbey, 2004). Libbey noted great variance in the way school belonging is described in the literature, but despite this, suggested consistent themes emerged, like "teacher supportiveness and caring, good friends, engagement in academic work, fair and effective discipline, and participation in extracurricular activities" (p. 274-283). The Wingspread Declaration of 2004 defines belonging in school as the students' belief that adults in their school care about their learning, have high expectations of them, and are interested in them as individuals. Positive relationships with teachers and feeling safe at school are also included. Finn (1993) describes student engagement and Tajfel (1972) describes social identity, while Ryan and Patrick (2001) describe the physical presence of teacher support, concepts that are not included in the Wingspread definition, or representative of belonging being a feeling, that is, a students' affective experiences of school (Libbey, 2007). Libbey's (2007) definition of school connectedness, "feeling close to, a part of, and happy at school; feeling that teachers care about students and treat them fairly; and feeling safe at school," is consistent with other theorists' description of a sense of belonging as an affect (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Hagerty, Sauer, Patusky, Bouwesma, & Collier, 1992), and will be used for our purposes. This definition is consistent with John Hattie's (2009) research, highlighting that student-teacher relationships

can create positive changes in students' lives. Alternative terminology, such as school connectedness will only be used in this paper if consistent with Libbey's (2007) definition.

### *1.2. Theoretical Underpinnings*

According to Epstein (1992), Lee, (1973), Bowlby (1969), Cohen (1982), Putnam (2000), and Fiske (2004), belonging is one of our strongest motivations. Interactions of children and their parents form the foundation of the nature and quality of future relationships (Sroufe, Egeland, & Kreutzer, 2005). Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Model (1986) defines family as the first unit to which a child belongs, followed by layers of other groups that affect his or her psychological and social development (Bronfenbrenner 1979). He went on (1986; 1989) to define the multiple layers as microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem. In school, Saab (2009) eloquently suggests that the microsystem contains informal social networks, friends, teachers, and peers, while the mesosystem is characterised by school resources and processes at an organisational level. The mesosystem entails school management and teaching practices reflecting school culture, while the exosystem comprises the broader community, including other schools, parents, external organizations and services, and the macrosystem is made up of the policies, procedures, and rules (Rumberger & Parlardy, 2004; Saab). Interventions and strategies involve many factors, such as parents, teachers, peers, policies, practice, and environment (CDC, 2009; Libbey, 2004; Wingspread, 2004). The above makes Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Model useful for investigating the school community as an organisational setting.

### *1.3. The Benefits of Belonging*

A sense of belonging to groups and networks has been associated with self-esteem, self-efficacy, and life satisfaction (Daley & Buchanan, 1999; Haslam, Jetten, Pstmes, & Haslam, 2009), ease of transition from adolescence to adulthood (Lyer, Jetten, Tsivrikos, Haslam, & Posmes, 2009), and coping ability (Battistich, Watson, Solomon, Lewis, & Schaps, 1999). Sharma and Malhotra's (2010) study of 500 Indian adolescents found that social support and a feeling of belonging were important for predicting perceived happiness. O'Rourke and Cooper (2010) found that belonging, friendship, and optimism were indicators of wellbeing and happiness in a sample of 312 mostly school-aged Australian students. Belonging in school has been shown to be important, fostering self-esteem and self-identity (Lee & Robbins, 1998; Nutbrown & Clough, 2009) and managing stress (Jacobsson, Pousette, & Thylefors, 2001; Hale, 1998). While acknowledging that stress is a normal aspect of childhood development, Hale (1998) looked at children's experience of stress related to family, friends and school. He

concluded that to lower children's stress to manageable levels, teachers must create a sense of belonging within their classrooms.

Pathological factors related to failing to belong have also been explored. Belonging has been negatively associated with loneliness (Chipuer, 2001; Mellor, Stokes, Firth, Hayash, & Cummins, 2008), 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). Belonging has also been shown to buffer the effects of depression (Anderman, 2002; Keating & Ellis, 2007; Sargent, Williams, Hagerty, Lynch-Sauer, Hoyle, 2002). Woodgate (2006) explored adolescents' experience of depression, finding certain themes in buffering the symptomatology associated with depression, including "feeling valued as a human being" and "maintaining a sense of belonging" (p. 268).

Physical health can also be related to a sense of belonging. Significant 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 from infectious diseases (Berkman, 1995). Research suggests that individuals who engage in diverse social networks live longer (Rutledge et al., 2004) and have better prognoses when faced with significant illnesses (Cohen & Janicki-Deverts, 2009). As a predictor of good health, an individual's sense of belonging is comparable with diet and exercise (Jetten, Haslam, Haslam, & Branscombe, 2009). Conversely, social isolation can be a health risk equal to or greater than those associated with smoking, obesity, and high blood pressure (Jetten et al, 2009). Plenty of longitudinal research points to the importance of childhood experiences on disease in adulthood (Kuh & Ben-Sholmo, 1997; Poulton, Caspi, & Milne, 2002; Wadsworth, et al., 2001), hence there is a need to acknowledge the importance of social networks and belonging in young people.

Caspi, Harrington, Moffitt, Milne, and Poulton (2006), followed a cohort of children born in 1972 to young adulthood. They found that social isolation during childhood was associated with increased cardiovascular risk in adulthood. This is consistent with retrospective studies that have reported a relationship between decreased social support in childhood and chronic health conditions (Russek & Schwartz, 1997; Shaw, Krause, Chatters, Connell, & Dayton, 2004) and behavioral, psychological, and social difficulties (Offord & Bennett, 1994) during adulthood. Since experiences in childhood affect health later in life,

schools offer a unique opportunity to help assure students' future good health by fostering connectedness.

Drawing on the Australian Temperament Project, a large longitudinal study of adolescent development, O'Connor et al. (2010) investigated five factors related to healthy adolescent adjustment in a group of 19-to-20-year-olds. The factors, based upon Hawkins, Letcher, Sanson, Smart, and Toumourou's (2009) Model of Positive Development in Emerging Adulthood, are:

- 1) Social competence, including empathy and responsibility in social relationships
- 2) Life satisfaction, or feeling good about one's life and where it is heading
- 3) Trusting others in the community and tolerating ethnic differences
- 4) Trusting authorities, such as the police and courts, to act fairly and responsibly
- 5) Taking on civic responsibilities, such as involvement in community groups and donating to charitable organisations (O'Connor, 2010, p. 24).

Their research revealed that school bonding in adolescence significantly predicted early adult wellbeing across each of the five above factors. On closer analysis, student feelings about school, their relationships with teachers and perceptions that school was a place where they were respected and had a voice was associated with their wellbeing (O'Connor, Sanson, & Frydenberg, 2012). These results reinforced earlier findings that school belonging was an important factor in the successful psychosocial adjustment of young adults and offered a reason for schools to engage in interventions and strategies to promote bonding in school. Young people with a sense of belonging at school report a greater overall sense of psychological wellbeing and feel happier (World Health Organisation, 2006; Battistich, Watson, Solomon, Lewis, & Schaps, 1999; Bizumic, Reynolds, Turner, Bromhead, & Subasic, 2009; Sanchez, Colon, & Esparza, 2005). Hence, secondary school settings offer a highly relevant place for belonging and furthering wellbeing.

#### *1.4. Belonging Specific to School Settings*

While belonging has been studied in many settings (e.g., Ginsberg, 2008; Grange & Ming, 2001; Walton & Cohen, 2007), research into a sense of belonging in educational settings has highlighted even more benefits over the last decade. Sanchez, Colon, and Esparza (2005) found that a sense of school belonging correlated with academic outcomes, including heightened motivation, effort, and decreased absenteeism. This finding is supported by previous research, which has shown that feelings of connectedness to school can lead to

increased positive attitudes towards learning and, specifically, academic self-efficacy (Battistich, Solomon, Kim, Watson, & Schaps, 1995; Roeser, Midgley, & Urdan, 1996).

In 2004, 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, vandalism (Wilson & Elliot, 2003), absenteeism (Croninger & Lee, 2001) and school completion rates (Connell, Halpern- Flesher, Clifford, Crichlow & Usinger, 1995). Moreover, the research upon which the declaration was based, presented evidence through existing literature demonstrating that school belonging increases student motivation (Croninger & Lee, 2001; Resnick et al., 1997) and classroom engagement (Klem & Connel, 2003). In addition to such protective factors, the research also showed a relationship between school connectedness and decreases in disruptive behavior, emotional distress (Lonczak, Abbott, Hawkins, Kosterman, & Catalano, 2002), risk-taking behaviors related to substance and tobacco use (Goodenow, 1993) and early sexualisation (Samdal, Nutbeam, Wold, & Kannas, 1998).

### *1.5. Gap Between Theory and Practice*

While the concept that belonging is beneficial and that humans are motivated by a need to belong and form attachments (Baumiester & Leary, 1995) is clearly understood, there appears to be a disparity between the understanding of this idea and putting it into practice. Jetten, Haslam, and Haslam (2012) interpret this as a “blind spot”. Although diverse social networks: family, friends, schools, teams, organisations, and community groups are available, as suggested by Bronfenbrenner (1995), perhaps it is the simplicity and ease with which most people form and maintain social relationships that leads to the dangerous assumption that individuals require little encouragement to join groups (Jetten, Haslam, & Haslam).

In a review of literature on social identity and social connectedness, Jetten, Haslam, and Haslam (2012) queried whether the absence of interventions related to social connectedness were fostered by a societal tendency to prioritise medical, pharmacological, or technological innovations and discourse over more humanistic interventions related to wellbeing. 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 meaningful ways to foster belonging. Positive psychology emphasises the importance of focusing on strengths and abilities. It takes a non-pathological approach; rather than focusing on pathology and simply treating mental illness, it focuses on prevention through finding and nurturing positive aspects of human psychological

functioning. Such movements have popularised preventive strategies in schools in recent decades.

### *1.6. Future Research and Application*

There is a growing need to look at meaningful ways of prioritising and fostering belonging. Investigating how belonging is defined and represented in educational settings and understanding students' conception of belonging is important because schools are theoretically one of the most important set of relationships available to most young people next to family (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Educational settings have long provided an ideal environment for exploring the concept of belonging. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological model of human development demonstrates that schools offer multiple opportunities for group life simply through their structure and placement within a broader community context. Belonging is an important aspect of adolescent development (Cooper & Cooper, 2008), with research indicating that group life and social identity can assist adolescents make transitions, cope with changing social groups, and separate from their parents (Barber, Eccles, & Stone, 2001) as well as providing a buffer against depression (Sargent, Williams, Hagerty, Sauer & Hoyle, 2002) and improving academic outcomes (Walton & Cohen, 2011).

These implications appear to have a long-term impact on lifetime satisfaction and psychosocial adjustment (O'Conner, Sanson, & Frydenberg, 2012). The emerging popularity of preventive interventions in schools (e.g., Seligman, 2010) has made institutions like schools more open to supporting student wellbeing. The Wingspread Declaration (2004) shows that schools need to have a greater awareness of the relationship between belonging and both academic success and psychological and physical health. Anderman and Freeman (2004) argue that little attention has been paid to contextual influences on the sense of belonging in adolescents. Very few studies have investigated the objective characteristics of schools (McNeely, Nonnemaker, & Blum, 2002) and several studies (Goodnow, 1992; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Juvonen, 2006) have only focused on the definition, measurement, and importance of belonging without defining the precursors of the sense of belonging in school settings or its practical implications. There is significantly more research demonstrating the importance of belonging, very few attempts have been made to summarise how it may be fostered. Further work into practical ways of nurturing school belonging will undoubtedly give families, educators, and communities the nuts and bolts they need to advance students' emotional and physical health and success, address the gap in theory to practice, and clarify inconsistencies in definition.

## Acknowledgements

The author(s) declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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