Chapter 11
Putting It All in Perspective

Abstract It is vital for schools to be aware of the importance of school belonging for young people. A greater understanding of school belonging can occur by redefining school belonging to more accurately reflect the ecological landscape in which the construct resides. Through this book, we have conducted a detailed investigation into the school belonging literature. We considered what school belonging is, a variety of factors that are correlated with belonging, and brought order to the scattered literature through a critical review and meta-analysis. We then considered practical approaches for supporting school belonging at the individual, social and ecological levels. In this final chapter, we bring things together. We reconceptualise school belonging and discuss the implications of school belonging research for future practice. We hope that the combination of empirical evidence, an organising framework, and practical strategies for application provide a starting place for schools and educators to help students thrive.

Keywords School belonging · Socio-ecological · Belonging · Well-being

The advancement of school belonging research is important for researchers, educators, schools and policy makers who want to advocate for primary preventative measures to foster student well-being. Throughout preceding chapters, we have provided evidence that a sense of belonging is important as it contributes to desirable physical, psychological, social and academic outcomes, and suggested a variety of practices and strategies that might be used to support a sense of school belonging. In this final chapter, we provide a refined definition of school belonging, consider several implications and bring our investigation of school belonging to a close.
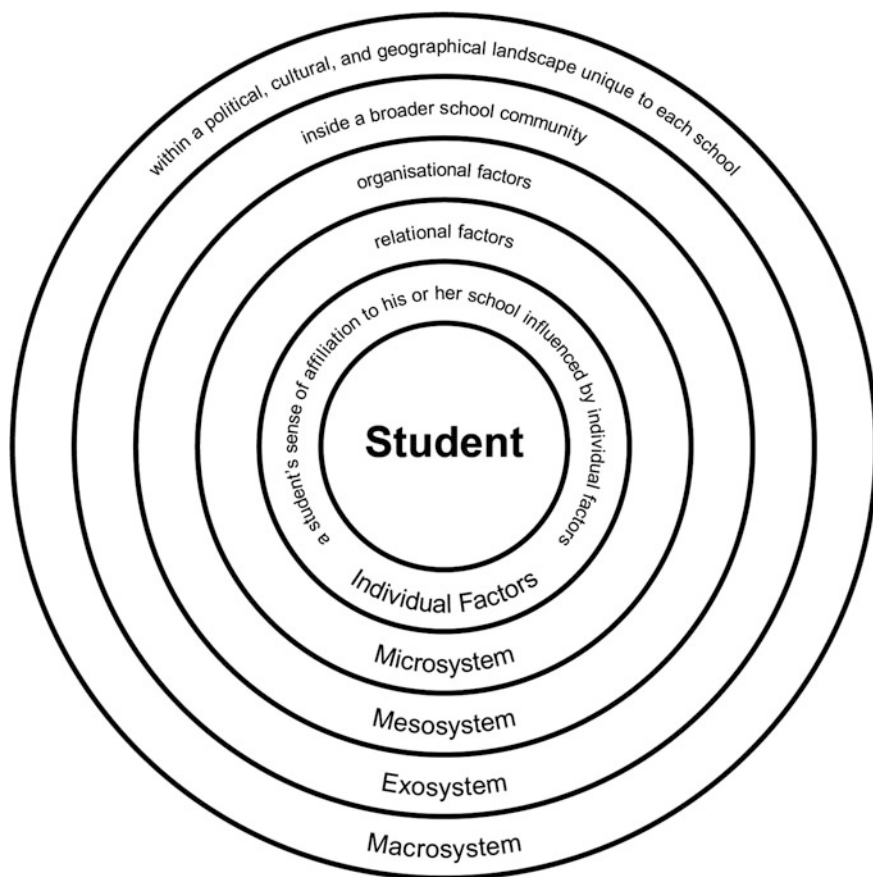
11.1 Reconceptualising School Belonging

In Chap. 2, we provided a working definition of school belonging, based on work by Goodenow and Grady (1993, p. 80):

> the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others in the school social environment.

This definition has been used widely across theory and research in this area. It captures the importance of personal factors (acceptance, respect) and social aspects. However, our synthesis of the literature suggests that there are also broader influences on school belonging. It is not just about how the student feels, but how they feel in relation to their environment and their interactions with people and structures within that environment.

We suggest that an alternative framework and definition of school belonging is needed, which is broader in nature the **bio-psycho-socio-ecological model of school belonging (BPSEM)**. There is no one simple determinant of school belonging, but rather it is a mix of internal **biological** and **psychological** qualities of the young person combined with their dynamic **social** interactions with people across the **ecological** environments and contexts through which they experience the world. Each of these influences dynamically interacts with one another to impact upon how connected the young person feels to their school.

Fig. 11.1 An alternative definition of school belonging conceptualised within the BPSEM framework

A refined definition of belonging, then, must acknowledge the systemic and dynamic aspects of how a young person interacts with and experiences their world. As illustrated in Fig. 11.1, we suggest that school belonging is a student's sense of affiliation to his or her school, influenced by individual, relational and organisational factors inside a broader school community and within a political, cultural and geographical landscape unique to each school. Put simply, school belonging is one's feeling of being connected to a school within a school social system.

11.2   Implications

The refined framework of school belonging brings several significant implications for research and practice in this area. In Part IV, we presented strategies and practices that might be trialed at different levels to create environments that support a sense of belonging, help make external resources available, and develop the internal capacities of young people, all informed by the research literature. However, what these strategies and practices look like within different schools environments is unknown. There are no best practice guidelines that will guarantee that students have a strong sense of belonging. Indeed, the broad and diverse nature of the BPSEM implies that any such guidelines would be overly prescriptive. Each student arrives at the school with their unique personality, set of experiences, and perceptions of and interpretations about those experiences. As such, different strategies might be best for different students and in different schools and communities.

Policy makers and school leaders play a role in setting the expectations for schools under their jurisdiction. While academic performance is core business for education, we should also be equipping our young people to be productive, functional citizens in the world. Overcrowded curricula make it challenging for schools to prioritise school belonging, even if they desire to do so. Change agents within governments and schools need to highlight the value of school belonging for psychosocial functioning and academic outcomes (Lonczak et al., 2002; Nutbrown & Clough, 2009; Sari, 2012), and proactively develop policies and structures that explicitly value *both* academic performance *and* wellbeing.

Schools have the opportunity to create a climate and culture that is supportive of belonging. Educators and school psychologists should take into account the unique cultural makeup of the school. Schools should not undermine the importance of student–teacher relationships (Hattie, 2009). Structures need to be in place that give teachers time and energy to connect with their students, and teachers need to be committed to being supportive of those within their care.

Young people can further benefit from learning strategies and practices that encourage them to take responsibility for their own school experiences and do their part in connecting with the school, as well as helping other students to feel a sense of connection. Such skills might be taught in specific classes, through co-curricular activities and groups, or incorporated into lessons. They can happen through

mentorship relationships, and in implicit and explicit ways. Even those adolescents that disconnect from parents may still benefit from supportive relationships at home, and the parents themselves can benefit from learning additional skills and strategies for supporting their child.

The BPSEM demonstrates how school leaders and educators can be encouraged to foster students' sense of belonging by building qualities within the students *and* by changing school systems and processes. The framework is also a reminder of the importance of intervention at a governmental, organisational, relational and individual level. Schools have an important role in building school belonging for individuals and ensuring that school belonging is prioritised as a guiding principle in education.

11.3   Finale

School belonging matters for each member of an educational community. A sense of belonging relates to good outcomes both for the years when students are at the school, and the years that extend well beyond the school gates. It builds a foundation for subsequent life experiences, impacting both current and future generations.

While school belonging is something that students desire, belonging does not simply happen. It needs to be proactively emphasised and encouraged, through multipronged approaches that simultaneously create supportive environments, develop social relationships, and equip young people with mindsets, behaviour, characteristics and skills that help them relate with others around them and perceive their experience in a positive light. Even then, a good sense of belonging is not inevitable. While schools can invest considerable time and effort into supporting their students, some students will still feel lost and disconnected. But if even some students benefit, then it is a worthwhile endeavour, for "to affect the quality of the day, that is the highest of arts" (Henry David Thoreau). School belonging provides a pathway to do so for our young people.