Chapter 3
School Belonging

Abstract In this chapter, we turn from a general discussion of belonging to focus specifically on the sense of school belonging. The term itself has been used in a variety of ways, and similar terms abound, including connectedness, attachment and bonding. At times the terms are used interchangeably, at other times distinctions are made. We unpack relevant terminology and consider a range of measures that have been developed to evaluate it. We consider the benefits of school belonging for adolescence—especially with respect to psychological well-being, good academic outcomes and fewer negative behaviours. Despite these benefits, gaps exist between research and practice; while it is generally understood that a sense school belonging is desirable and beneficial for students, there are very few interventions that aim to specifically address it.

Keywords School belonging · Belonging · School connectedness · School bonding · Community · Attachment · Adolescence

Lucy grew up in a loving family. Her mother was a homemaker, her father an engineer. She was shy, warm, caring and sensitive by nature. Yet she always felt inferior to her more intelligent siblings, and struggled socially. While other neighbourhood kids attended the nearby government high school, she was sent to an elite private girls' school. There, she continually felt inferior to her peers. Though she had a few friends at school, she never felt like she belonged.

She put her time and energy into working hard as a student, spending extra hours each day to try and perfect her assignments. The hard work paid off, as she earned a full tuition scholarship to go to university. The school was a better fit for her, and she started to connect better with others. Still, she often struggled with feeling inferior and unacceptable to her friends, with a constant need to prove herself. She increasingly struggled with depression, anxiety and self-harm behaviours. Therapy helped, and she ultimately graduated from university and went on to have a very successful career. Still, mental illness remained a lifelong battle.

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School belonging is a growing area of research, which holds great promise for fostering well-being and promoting mental health. But its application is by no means easy or straightforward, which perhaps is why even as educators recognise the importance of belonging, they can be at a loss in terms of how to effectively support it.

Even though research has identified physical and psychological health benefits associated with a sense of belonging, many students report not feeling a sense of belonging to their school. The importance of school belonging is given significantly less attention than student academic success (Allen & Bowles, 2013), even though a sense of belonging plays a key role in student success (Gillen-O'Neel & Fuligni, 2013).

Part of this may be due to misunderstandings about what school belonging is, the role that it plays in adolescent development, and the best ways to support it at individual and collective levels. We begin by breaking down what school belonging specifically is, and then consider why it matters. In later chapters we will examine what the research has to say about the best approaches for positively supporting and impacting student belonging.

3.1 What Is School Belonging?

The construct of school belonging has been used interchangeably with numerous other terms, at times with the same meaning and at other times with different meanings. A review of the literature reveals more consistency in how school belonging is *defined* than in the terminology used to *describe* it. Indeed, terms such as bonding, attachment, engagement, connectedness and belonging have all been used. Contrary to this, students without a sense of belonging to school have been described as alienated, disengaged, socially isolated or disaffected (Willms, 2003). We first review some of these terms, and then bring them together to think about what school belonging really is.

3.1.1 School Belonging

A commonly used term, and the one that we use throughout this book, is that of school belonging. Perhaps the most agreed upon definition for school belonging comes from Goodenow and Grady (1993): 'the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others in the school social environment' (p. 80).

3.1.2 School Connectedness

The term that has been used most interchangeably with school belonging is that of connectedness, which has also been defined in a myriad of ways. Definitions range from observable characteristics (e.g., social networks) to affective states (Townsend

& McWhirter, 2005). It has been described using a range of terms including school belonging, school bonding, engagement, connectedness, school climate, notions of territory, school attachment, acceptance, membership, orientation to school, social identify and the physical presence of teacher support (e.g., Finn, 1993; O'Farrell, 2004; Osterman, 2000; Ryan & Patrick, 2001; Tajfel, 1972). School connectedness is also often conceptualised according to what it is not (e.g., loneliness, alienation and social isolation), rather than what it is.

School connectedness reflects a student's affective experience (Libbey, 2007), and Libbey (2004) suggests that it reflects how much a young person *feels* they belong at school. Karcher and Lee (2002) suggest that it includes both affective and behavioural aspects. Affectively, it reflects a feeling of relatedness to others, activities and groups. Behaviourally, it involves taking an active interest in and being a part of groups, activities and affiliations.

Brown and Evans (2002) argued that student connectedness included things such as commitment to school, student autonomy, belonging to school and having a firm belief in rules of school. Barber and Schluterman (2008) suggested that connectedness had four components: the quality of a relationship (e.g., family bonding), the degree of liking of an environment or relationship (e.g., liking school), a feeling or attitude (e.g., sense of belonging) and perceptions of antecedent conditions (e.g., feeling close to people). Blum and Libbey (2004) described school connectedness as the belief, by students, that adults within their school community care about their learning, have an interest in them as individuals and have high academic expectations; teacher–student relationships are positive; and students feel safe at school. McNeely, Nonnemaker and Blum (2002) described connectedness in terms of students' feelings of closeness to the people at school, feeling happy at school, feeling a part of school, feeling that teachers treated them fairly and feeling that they were in a safe environment.

3.1.3 School Attachment

A third common term is school attachment, or a student's emotional attitude towards their school (Moody & Bearman, 2004). It refers to a student's sense of connectedness to their school and the degree to which the student is attached to the people at school, is happy at school and feels a part of it (Zwarych, 2004). As such, it is relatively interchangeable with the concept of school belonging that we discuss here.

3.1.4 School Bonding

School bonding, first described by Hawkins and Weis (1985), refers to a specific type of attachment to school that includes subjectively feeling attached to one's

peers, committed to academic outcomes, engaged in social activities and believing in specific norms for conduct and behaviour at school. The concept of bonding arose from social control theory, which emphasises the importance of societal order (Simons-Morton, Crump, Haynie, & Saylor, 1999). It reflects students feeling connected to—or bonded with—their school.

3.1.5 School Engagement

Quite a bit of research focuses on school engagement. School engagement is a multidimensional construct that includes affective/psychological, cognitive and behavioural components (Appleton, 2008, Brewster & Bowen, 2004). It includes accepting the school's values (affective), being interested in and attentive to one's learning (cognitive), and participating in school activities (behavioural). Finn (1989, 1993) describes engagement in terms of participation, which focuses on behavioural aspects, and identification, which focuses on the students' subjective sense of belonging. In contrast, disengaged students feel disconnected from school, are bored in class and withdraw from school activities (Willms, 2000).

While some definitions of school engagement are akin to descriptions of school belonging, the term should be used with caution. While affective and behavioural definitions overlap with other conceptions of school belonging, cognitive aspects speak more towards engagement in learning than belonging to a school community. For example, according to Skinner, Wellborn and Connell (1990), school engagement incorporates students' 'initiation of action, effort, and persistence on schoolwork, as well as ambient emotional states during learning activities' (p. 24). In such cases, a sense of belonging contributes to engagement, rather than being defined by it.

3.1.6 School Community

At times community and belonging have been used interchangeably. For example, Sanchez et al. (2005) described a sense of community as encompassing school belonging. Osterman (2003) suggested that a community exists when the members feel a sense of belonging. Such a community might refer to the school as a whole, or to a small group within the school.

There is, however, the question of whether the two are the same, or if one is a necessary but insufficient component of the other. If school community is defined in terms of feeling cared for, supported and emotionally connected with others (Osterman, 2000), then one needs to have feelings of belongingness first. Belonging, thus, is a prerequisite for community to exist. Alternatively, a school community can be defined in terms of the school that a student attends, with community being defined by the school, teachers, or students within the school.

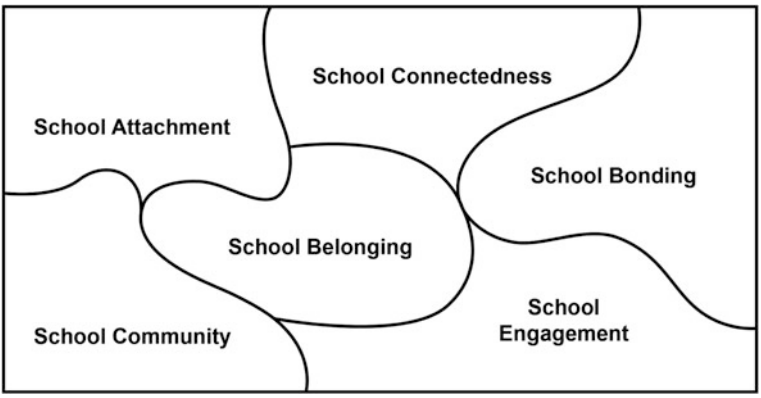

Fig. 3.1 Key terms that have been used to describe a sense of school belonging

Like Jenna's story above, she was a part of a school community, but did not feel like she really belonged. From this perspective, community then is necessary for belonging, but insufficiently captures the emotional aspects of belonging.

3.1.7 Towards a Consistent Terminology

Even though the terminology varies considerably, there are a number of consistent themes, including emotional attachment to others, having a place within the school, and a sense of inclusion. As illustrated in the Fig. 3.1, these different terms can be thought of as pieces of a puzzle. Together, these pieces create a picture of what school belonging is.

These terms tend to share three similar operational aspects (1) school-based relationships and experiences, (2) student–teacher relationships and (3) students' general feelings about school as a whole. In this book, we use the term school belonging as an umbrella term to describe the many variants that occur in the literature, and will only use alternative terminology (e.g., school connectedness, school bonding) if it is consistent with Goodenow and Grady's (1993) definition of school belonging.

3.2 Measures of Belonging

There are a wide variety of measurement tools that have been developed and used to assess school belonging. We consider a few of these here. The measures used for school belonging can help us understand what is really meant by school belonging, and provide hints towards what factors might impact it. We discuss this further in Chap. 4.

3.2.1 Psychological Sense of School Membership (PSSM)

One of the main measures of school belonging is the PSSM scale (Goodenow, 1993). The measure was designed to capture adolescents' perceptions of belonging, or psychological membership, within a school environment. The scale can be used to identify a sense of belonging versus alienation, as well as to identify social and contextual factors that influence this sense of membership. The scale measures three main constructs: connection to school, connection to adults and connection to peers. Some items include: 'I feel like a real part of this school', 'People here notice when I'm good at something', 'I can really be myself at this school', 'Most teachers at this school are interested in me'. Across these items, the PSSM measures perceived acceptance, feelings of inclusion, respect, encouragement for participation in school endeavours, and satisfaction with the support provided by teachers. It has a well-researched foundation to support its validity and reliability, with an internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha) ranging from 0.77 to 0.88 across different samples.

3.2.2 Hemingway Measure of Adolescent Connectedness (HMAC)

A second measure is the HMAC (Karcher, 1999). Karcher and Lee (2002) suggested that there are three distinct sub aspects of connectedness: belongingness, or the adolescent's perception of how much social support he or she generally receives; relatedness, their perception of support within specific relationships; and connectedness, or how much the individual is involved with and values the specific and general supports that are there. Based on these distinctions, the HMAC focuses on the third factor (connectedness), across three sources: schools, teachers and peers (classmates and friends). The 74-item measure asks how much an adolescent is involved in and cares about 15 different relational and institutional contexts, across four domains: family, friends, school and self.

3.2.3 School Connectedness Scale (SCS)

A third relevant measure is the School Connectedness Scale (SCS; Parker, Lee, & Lohmeier, 2008). The 54-item measure assesses relationships with school, adults and peers, across three different levels: general support (or belongingness), specific support (or relatedness) and engagement (or connectedness). The measure has demonstrated good psychometric properties across different populations (Furlong, O'Brennan, & You, 2011; Lohmeier & Lee, 2011)

3.2.4 Student Engagement Instrument (SEI)

A fourth commonly used measure is the SEI (Appleton et al., 2006). The 25-item measure assesses cognitive and psychological engagement at school. Engagement is assessed across six subscales: control and relevance of schoolwork, extrinsic motivation, future aspirations and goals, family support for learning, peer support for learning, and teacher-student relationships. Internal consistency for each of the subscales ranged from 0.72 to 0.88 (Appleton et al., 2006)

3.2.5 Other Measures

Other studies have used smaller sets of questions. For example, in the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health), a longitudinal analysis of adolescents in Grades 7–12 in the United States, McNeely and colleagues (2005) used five items to assess the impact of school connectedness:

1. feeling close to people at school
2. feeling happy to be at school
3. perceiving to be part of the school
4. feeling safe at school
5. having the perception that teachers treat students fairly.

Follow-up studies drawing from Add Health have used a varying number of items ranging from five (Bonny, Britto, Klostermann, Hornung, & Slap, 2000; Ozer, 2005) to eight (Jacobson & Rowe, 1999; McNeely, 2003). For example, Brown and Evans' (2002) used four items directly related to belonging:

1. I can be myself at school
2. I feel like I belong at school
3. I have friends at school
4. I am comfortable talking to teachers about my problems.

Moody and Bearman (2004) included three items:

1. I feel close to people at school
2. I feel happy to be at school
3. I feel like I am a part of this school.

In later research, Moody and Bearman added a school attachment measure to investigate students' sense of belonging. The items investigated the degree to which the student felt attached to the people in the school, felt happy to be at school, and felt like they were a part of the school.

Although frequently used, such scales have been criticised for being too brief to capture the complexity and multiple dimensions of school belonging (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004). Thus, although measures such as the PSSM, SCS and SEI are longer, they are generally the preferred option for assessment.

3.3 The Benefits of School Belonging

Regardless of how it has been defined and measured, the research literature finds compelling evidence for the importance of school belonging, across academic, psychological and behavioural outcomes.

School belonging is positively related to academic outcomes, such as higher levels of drive, motivation, engagement and academic self-efficacy (e.g., Battistich, Solomon, Kim, Watson, & Schaps, 1995; Booker, 2007; Gillen-O'Neel & Fuligni, 2013; Roeser, Midgley, & Urdan, 1996; Sanchez et al., 2005; Sari, 2012). Other research has also found direct correlations between academic achievement and school belonging (e.g., Pittman & Richmond, 2007; Sari, 2012).

School belonging has been positively associated with psychological well-being such as happiness (O'Rourke & Cooper, 2010; Sharma & Malhotra, 2010), psychological functioning, adjustment (Law, Cuskelly, & Carroll, 2013), self-esteem and self-identity (Nutbrown & Clough, 2009). For instance, Jose, Ryan and Pryor (2012) assessed school belonging in 10 and 15 year olds, and found that a greater sense of belonging significantly predicted higher levels of well-being. This finding has been supported across a range of populations including refugees (Correa-Velez, Gifford, & Barnett, 2010); gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender populations (Mayock, Bryan, Carr, & Kitching, 2008); and African American students (Booker, 2006).

Other research has demonstrated that a lack of belonging links to anxiety, depression and suicide ideation (McMahon, Parnes, Keys, & Viola, 2008; Moody & Bearman, 2004; Shochet, Smyth, & Homel, 2007). A high sense of school belonging has been found to buffer the relationship with emotional instability. For instance, Anderman (2002) found that students' higher individual levels of school belonging were related to lower levels of depression. McMahon et al. (2008) suggest that students face social stressors at schools (e.g., peer rejection, peer victimisation and peer harassment), which can correlate with psychological problems such as increased levels of depression.

School belonging has been associated with fewer negative behaviours. It relates to a reduction in absenteeism (Croninger & Lee, 2001) and truancy (Connell, Halpern-Flesher, Clifford, Crichlow, & Usinger, 1995; Hallinan, 2008) and higher rates of school completion. It also correlates with fewer incidents of fighting, bullying and vandalism (Wilson & Elliot, 2003), resulting in the decrease of disruptive behaviour and emotional distress (Lonczak et al., 2002). It is negatively associated with risk-taking behaviour related to substance and tobacco use (Goodenow, 1993a) and early sexualisation (Samdal, Nutbeam, Wold, & Kannas, 1998). A review of over 300 programs shows that socioemotional learning programs that emphasise connection can buffer students from antisocial behaviours (Durlak et al., 2011). Belonging also relates to prosocial outcomes, including contribution to the local community and civic engagement in young adulthood (Duke, Skay, Pettingell, & Borowsky, 2009; Torney-Purta, Richardson, & Barber, 2004).

3.4 A Research-Practice Gap

Considerable research points to the importance of school belonging across a range of outcomes. Schools offer opportunities for students to connect and play an important role in building groups and social networks for students. Students also contribute to the school community (Allen & Bowles, 2013). Schools are recognised as essential institutions that can build social networks for students and offer unique opportunities for them to develop a sense of belonging.

Yet many students across the globe struggle to feel like they belong (Allen & Bowles, 2013; The Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning [CASEL], 2003; Hirschokorn & Geelan, 2008). For instance, the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) found that as of 2003, across 42 countries, 8354 schools and 224,058 15-year olds, student disaffection with school ranged from 17 to 40% (Willms, 2003). On average, one in four adolescents were categorised as having low feelings of belongingness and about one in five reported low levels of academic engagement.

Notably, belonging is given relatively little attention within education compared to academic performance. Little attention has been paid to interventions that foster school belonging in students or to the importance of belonging more generally (Allen & Bowles, 2013; CASEL, 2003). There appears to be a disparity between the understanding of the importance of this construct from research and how it is transferred into everyday practice within schools.

Jetten, Haslam, and Haslam (2012) suggest that this gap could be due to a failure by practitioners, school leaders and the public to acknowledge the importance of social relationships to life satisfaction, health and well-being. Further, the authors queried whether the absence of interventions related to social connectedness was fostered by a societal tendency to prioritise medical, pharmacological or technological innovations over more humanistic approaches.

It could also be that there is no clear guidance on the best approaches for positively impacting a sense of belonging. One cannot underestimate the complexities of creating and maintaining satisfying social relations. It takes effort at individual, social and communal levels—levels that often function independently. Psychologists might target individual behaviours and emotions; teachers might focus on their relationship with their students, and schools might focus on the activities and groups that are offered at the school. Yet with limited resources available, it can be challenging for educators to know how to best prioritise time and energy to be most effective.

What factors impact a sense of belonging? Which have the greatest and least impact? We now turn to the literature to start to make sense of these questions.