Facilitating a Sense of Belonging in the Primary Classroom: Translating Research into Practice

Angela Hurley[†]

Guildford Grammar School

A sense of belonging is well-established within the empirical literature as a fundamental human need. Enhancing belongingness in schools has become a focus for researchers and policy makers in such contexts. This paper outlines a range of research findings that have demonstrated the impact of a sense of belonging on wellbeing as well as other positive outcomes, such as reduced feelings of loneliness. Recurring themes within the literature include the impact of relational connectedness, taking a school wide socio-ecological approach and the necessity to consider the varying perspectives of students themselves. While references to the construct of belonging within the theoretical and empirical research literature have expanded significantly in recent years, few papers have appeared with respect to practical guidelines for translating this research into practice, particularly for primary aged students. The paper concludes with a synthesis of practical strategies for enhancing a sense of belonging based on the literature, with six recommendations for interventions that could be adopted in primary schools to support the development and maintenance of a sense of belonging in young children.

Introduction and Background

As noted by Allen, Gray, et al. (2021), the theoretical foundation for belonging and the significance of social relationships for people of all ages has been well researched across a range of disciplines, with the construct of belonging recently moving to the "forefront of public attention" following global events such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

The construct of belonging is multi-faceted. One potential consequence of this has been that the foci of school belonging research is extremely diverse. Researchers have focussed on the construct from differing

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[†]Address for correspondence: Guildford Grammar School, 11 Terrace Road, Guildford, Perth, Western Australia, 6055. Angela.Hurley@ggs.wa.edu.au

perspectives, including peer-to-peer, and student-teacher relationships, as well as focusing upon how connected students feel to school. Allen et al. (2021) note that within the broad body of research that has amassed with respect to belongingness in schools, the construct "has been used as an independent, dependent, and correlated variable in a wide range of studies" (Allen et al., 2021, p. 90).

Another consequence of the somewhat broad and multi-faceted perspectives that exist on the construct of school belonging is that instruments for measuring sense of belonging are also diverse. This has contributed further to the complexity of the research conducted thus far. It is argued by Allen et al. (2021) that the varying perspectives on belonging must be integrated to generate a better understanding of the construct and how it can be measured and enhanced in practical settings.

The neglect of primary-aged students within this literature represents another significant gap within the scope of current research. While considerable research has been published on enhancing sense of belongingness in secondary schools, research on this topic in primary schools is relatively scarce. Even more scarce are practical guidelines for teachers on how this can be achieved within primary schools. This paper, therefore, aims to respond to the key research question: How can a sense of belonging be facilitated in the primary school setting?

Schools are a microcosm of wider society and a central part of a child's life. Schools and classroom staff are, therefore, ideally placed to identify early signs of mental health issues, to promote wellbeing and create an environment in which students experience involvement and engagement, as well as feeling that they "belong" (Greenwood et al., 2018). Kern et al. (2020) concur with the view that schools have a critical role in ensuring the positive mental health of children, noting further that a sense of belonging exists "…because of and in connection with the systems in which we reside" (Kern et al., 2020, p. 709).

This paper first outlines the varied definitions of belonging that have appeared within the scholarly literature, with a specific focus on the multi-faceted nature of this construct. The conclusions drawn within the

paper are based upon the research strategy of systematic narrative review, which is appropriate given that specific seminal works since the early 1970s have been highly influential in shaping how belonging is currently conceptualised. The review also highlights the range of positive outcomes that have been associated empirically with having a strong sense of belonging, as well as some of the negative outcomes of having a reduced sense of belonging in school settings, also based on a systematic narrative review approach. Following this, existing research regarding how to facilitate a sense of belonging in schools is summarised. Finally, the author's own recommendations on how to enhance a sense of belonging in primary school settings is presented. These recommendations are based on the most pertinent and recurring themes within the review literature.

Relevant articles for the review were sourced using education-related databases such as Google Scholar, ERIC, ProQuest, Wiley Online, Sage Online, EBSCO Host and psychology and education Journals. Search terms included belonging, belongingness, relatedness, connectedness, community, and loneliness. After an initial pool of articles was generated using these databases and terms, the references used in the works retrieved were then checked and additional articles were sourced from these lists. No specific inclusion and exclusion criteria were used to define the body of research reviewed, because this would not be appropriate given the goals of the paper, which included scoping the breadth of definitions of belonging that have appeared thus far. Given also that the goal of the paper was to identify practical strategies that could be used in primary school settings, relatively broad parameters were set for the source articles, to capture any that might contribute insights for addressing the gaps identified in the current research.

Sense of Belonging as a Multi-faceted Construct

There is a well-established theoretical foundation for the construct of belonging as it is currently conceptualized in the education literature. Sense of belonging is included in Maslow's (1968) hierarchy of needs and is listed as a critical human need following basic survival and safety. The theory of attachment by Bowlby (1973) also posits that from birth,

we are biologically primed to form close connections with others, starting with the primary caregiver, and that this is fundamental both to survival and to the development of healthy relationships throughout life. Forming and maintaining positive relationships with others has, therefore, been described as a universal need. In line with this notion, Baumeister and Leary (1995) posed that human beings "…have a pervasive drive to form and maintain at least a minimum quantity of lasting, positive, and significant interpersonal relationships" (p. 497). Along similar lines to these theorists, Deci and Ryan's (2000) Self-Determination Theory describes the psychological needs of competence, autonomy, and relatedness as being fundamental to wellbeing and intrinsic motivation.

Deci and Ryan's (2000) conceptualisation of relatedness aligns with the notion of belonging, and the two terms are in fact used synonymously throughout the research literature. As discussed, the school setting has been widely identified as being an important environment in which a sense of belonging can be nurtured. Bronfenbrenner (1979) developed the Ecological Systems Theory of human development, which outlined the core social environments that influence a child's life. Schools are positioned within the microsystem of the model, and, therefore, are ideally placed to play a leading role in a child's social and emotional development.

Part of the difficulty in establishing consistent interventions to combat reduced sense of belonging in schools is that definitions of belonging, and certainly those pertaining to school contexts, are so varied. As noted by Allen and Boyle (2018), the most cited definition of school belonging is the one offered by Goodenow (1993), which refers to school belonging as the "extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others in the school social environment" (p. 80). While this definition remains the most widely cited in the literature, other researchers have offered definitions of the construct that overlap significantly with Goodenow's notion, though these definitions also diverge from one another in important ways. For example, Hagerty et al. (1992) posed that feeling involved and a sense of connection to school are fundamental to the development of a sense of belonging. Libbey

(2007) described school belonging as situations in which students feel close to, a part of, and happy at school; feel that teachers care about students and treat them fairly; get along with teachers and other students and feel safe at school. More recently, Craggs and Kelly (2018) conducted a meta-synthesis to examine how young people themselves experienced and described a sense of belonging. The key elements of their empirically-generated concept of school belonging was "…feeling safe to be yourself in and through relationships with others in the school setting" (p.1).

Based on the literature reviewed, definitions of the construct of belonging in the literature have been broad-based, multifaceted, and complex. There has also been a lack of consistency in the definitions of the key terms within these definitions. A range of synonyms are often used interchangeably to describe belonging itself, including terms such as relatedness, school bonding, attachment, engagement, connectedness, and community (Allen et al., 2018; Solomon., 1996). Furthermore, a multitude of described dimensions of belonging exist, with the emphasis on differing elements of the construct. Hagerty et al. (1992), for example, highlighted "valued involvement" (which encompasses feelings of being valued, needed and accepted) and "fit", which is when individuals perceive that their personal characteristics articulate with or complement the system or environment in which they operate as being the two most significant elements of belonging (Greenwood et al., 2019). Alternatively, Allen and Boyle (2018) noted that having sense of community (Osterman, 2000; Solomon, 1996), student engagement (Finn, 1993) and social identity (Tajfel, 1972) were some of the alternative elements of the belonging construct emphasised in other research. Despite being described in differing ways, what is often shared within the varied definitions of belonging is reference to interpersonal relationships, and a sense of feeling valued and accepted by others in the school community.

Baumeister and Leary (1995) defined the belongingness hypothesis, which further emphasises the role of interpersonal relationships to belonging and wellbeing. A sense of belonging is developed through every day, positive interactions with others and the outcomes of not

meeting these needs include feelings of loneliness and anxiety. This is mirrored in the Wingspread Declaration, which states that school connection is, "…the belief by students that adults in the school care about their learning as well as about them as individuals" (Waters et al., 2009, p. 165).

Further compounding the complexity of the construct of belonging, differing approaches for the measurement of belonging are also adopted by researchers and practitioners. These include the Psychological Sense of School Membership (PSSM) questionnaire (Goodenow, 1993) and the Patterns of Adaptive Learning Scales (PALS) (Midgley et al. 2000). The latter instrument is based on the Goodenow and Grady conceptualisation of belonging as outlined above. In a review of measurement tools for belonging, Allen, Reupert and Oades (2021, p. 90) noted that relational connectedness is key:

> Each survey reviewed referenced this variable differently, using words such as "relationships," "making friends," "spending time," and "bonding." Whatever term is used, the instruments are measuring the same thing – namely, the opportunities a person has to belong to a desired group.

One other commonality that is evident in the measures developed to date is that most aim to capture a "snapshot" of belonging at a given point in time. Thus, these instruments are all based on a conceptualization of belonging as a state, rather than as a trait. Allen, Reupert and Oades (2021), however, suggest that feelings of a state of belonging are fluid and may fluctuate throughout time. They argue further that "a trait of belongingness is more crucial for mental health and well-being; that is, a more stable and lasting sense of belonging as opposed to a state of belonging" (Allen, Reupert & Oades, 2021, p.91). This adds a further layer of complexity when attempting to measure belonging in authentic settings and contributes to the lack of consensus that exists on how the construct of belonging should be operationalised (Lim, 2021).

Additionally, how school staff and students conceptualise the construct of belonging in real-world contexts can vary quite independently of the diverse definitions used within the literature. This is critical as it is

ultimately school staff and students who will shape any belongingness intervention that is implemented in schools. As noted previously, Craggs and Kelly (2018) conducted a meta-synthesis to examine how young people themselves experienced and described a sense of belonging and found that there was considerable variability in terms of how these individuals conceptualised the construct, though the common elements tended to be feeling safe within relationships. Research by Shaw (2019) similarly explored adolescents' perspectives on belonging and found important differences in the ways in which individuals viewed this notion. Both studies reaffirm the need to hear the views and opinions of those in situ, including students and staff members, when attempting to develop interventions to enhance sense of school belonging.

This lack of a common approach for understanding, conceptualising and measuring belonging contributes to confusion around the concept. The research demonstrates that a sense of belonging is a dynamic and complex social construct; that experiences of belonging are subjective and unique to the individual; and that people have varying needs for belonging. Such confusion is likely to have a negative impact on perceptions of the importance of belonging in schools, and, on the efforts of educational policy makers and schools to develop evidence-based approaches to facilitate and enhance a sense of belonging. Given that definitions are not standardised, interventions also cannot be standardised across contexts.

Furthermore, much of the school belonging research has been conducted within secondary school settings, leaving a research gap for the experiences of younger children. As suggested by Allen and Bowles (2012), the breadth of research is difficult to translate into whole school practices, particularly for the primary school setting.

To mitigate the lack of common approach, researchers have proposed frameworks to conceptualise pathways to facilitate belonging. Following a review of literature, Allen, Reupert and Oades (2021), developed an integrative framework for understanding, assessing, and fostering belonging. The framework is comprised of four interrelated components: competencies, opportunities, perceptions, motivations which can be

applied to school settings. They posit that these are "…central elements in strategies that can be used to increase our individual and collective sense of belonging for the betterment of society" (Allen, Reupert and Oades, 2021, p. 87) "Competencies" refers to the skills and abilities necessary to build and maintain a sense of belonging. "Opportunities" refers to the availability of people and environments in which belonging can occur. "Perceptions" refers to "a person's subjective feelings and cognitions concerning their experiences." Finally, "Motivations" refers to the inner drive to seek belonging.

Similarly, St-Amand et al. (2017), following their inquiry of the literature into belonging, found that four defining attributes of belonging emerged. These were: positive emotions, positive social relations, involvement, and harmonization. Both the Allen, Reupert and Oades (2021) and the St-Amand et al. frameworks identify relational connectedness, social-emotional competencies and feeling valued within the school community as significant. St-Amand et al. argue that by having clearly defined attributes, teachers will be able to develop targeted interventions and researchers will be able to measure belonging more effectively. This is useful as the collection of baseline data provides schools and individual teachers with opportunities to evaluate the impact of intervention approaches and to track and measure improvements.

The Importance of a Sense of Belonging in the School Context

There is a broad and diverse range of both theoretical and empirical research that provides a sound foundation for the significance of the construct of belonging in human development, and of the importance of having a strong sense of belonging within school systems. Sense of belonging has been found to predict a range of positive educational and personal outcomes, including academic performance, self-efficacy, engagement and motivation, and reported levels of general wellbeing (Allen et al., 2016; Arslan et al., 2020; Osterman 2000; Palikara et al., 2020), as discussed later in the paper. Additionally, there is a rich array of research into the negative outcomes of a lack of belonging, which has been linked to outcomes such as reduced performance in schools, loneliness, internalising problems, behaviour problems, school refusal,

and relationship difficulties (Arslan et al., 2020; Arslan, 2021; Allen et al., 2018). These outcomes underscore the potential role that interventions could have in enhancing sense of belonging in schools, and in turn, the role that sense of belonging in schools can play in enhancing overall wellbeing and positive mental health.

Recent educational policies and curriculum documents, such as the Personal and Social capability framework by the Australian Curriculum Assessment Reporting Authority (ACARA, 2020); the Early Years Framework: Belonging, Being and Becoming of the Australian government (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009); and the 2022 Catholic Education of Western Australia Strategic Wellbeing Framework (Allison et al., 2021) make explicit references to a sense of belonging or connection. Additionally, social and emotional learning programmes and school interventions to support, promote and enhance pathways to wellbeing are becoming a common, fundamental attribute of the primary school setting (Australian Student Wellbeing Framework, 2018; Be You National Education Initiative for Mental Health, 2018). These school interventions also refer to "relationships" and "inclusive and connected learning communities". (Australian Student Wellbeing Framework, 2018). As a result of initiatives of this kind, developing strong relationships, connected school communities and pathways to wellbeing are now viewed to be essential components of all effective school environments. However, as noted by Allen et al. (2022) there is a paucity of school-based interventions that specifically aim to target a sense of belonging. Thus, further demonstrating that a sense of belonging is valued, but clear pathways to develop it are lacking.

Despite the greater focus on wellbeing within the school context, there is a raft of concerning mental health and wellbeing data as well as evidence of a decline in a sense of belonging for students. This is demonstrated by data from the 2017 report of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation's (OECD) Development Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). This showed a decline in the number of students who reported having a sense of belonging in schools since 2003 (OECD, 2017). Further to this, in the 2018 OECD assessment, one in four students

reported that they found it challenging to make friends at school. In the 2018 report, approximately one in five reported feeling 'like an outsider' at school, and one in six respondents reported having experienced loneliness at school (OECD, 2019). The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2022) similarly reported that one in seven young people aged 4 to 17 years, experience a mental health condition in any given year, with 13.9% of children and young people (aged 4 to 17 years) meeting the criteria for a diagnosis of a mental disorder in the last 12 months. Self-harm and suicide rates for young people are also alarming, with suicide being the leading cause of death for Australians aged between 15 and 24.

Recent mental health and wellbeing data following the COVID-19 pandemic provide further insight into the worrying trend of increasing mental health issues. Lockdowns and school closures have caused significant disruption to the stability of daily connection to peers, teachers and school environments, with recent research demonstrating increased loneliness, depressive symptoms for children during lockdown (Cole et al., 2021) and increased worry about the future (Commission for Children and Young People, 2020).

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, quarantine, social distancing and self-isolating have transformed the ways in which people interact, within both the school setting and within the wider society (Lim et al., 2021). This has resulted in increased attention from governments, policy makers and researchers on the impacts of social isolation on mental health, and more recently, research examining the interconnected relationship between the constructs of belonging and loneliness. Loneliness is now recognised as a major public health problem, equivalent to smoking and obesity. Reported levels have increased to the point that a "loneliness epidemic" has now been identified. Both the United Kingdom and Australian governments have developed national initiatives to address loneliness statistics. Outcomes of loneliness include a negative impact on mental health and wellbeing, and longer-term physical health impacts, including increased morbidity and mortality. Additionally, adolescents who report feelings of loneliness have an increased risk of developing suicidal ideation (Khatcherian et al., 2012).

Loneliness is defined as "a distressing feeling that accompanies the perception that one's social needs are not being met by the quantity or especially the quality of one's social relationships" (Hawkley et al., 2010). As noted by Palikara et al. (2021), feelings of loneliness do not actually depend on social isolation – so living a relatively solitary life does not always equate to loneliness. Loneliness is a subjective experience that depends on how interpersonal relationships are perceived. Outcomes of lacking a sense of belonging and loneliness share common characteristics.

Research by Qualter et al. (2010) demonstrated that feelings of loneliness can be reported by people throughout their lifespan, and that sources of loneliness at different life stages are associated with differing belonging needs. The effects of school belonging on loneliness can be identified during primary school (Palikara, 2021). For younger children, early sources of loneliness relate to the quantity of friendships. Throughout later childhood and early adolescence, peer group and friendship quality become more significant to feelings of loneliness. Experiences of loneliness for primary age students predicts symptoms of depression during adolescence and adulthood (Palikara, 2021).

Current mental health and loneliness statistics suggest that despite an increased focus in schools, wellbeing for all remains elusive and further emphasises that appropriate interventions to rebuild relationships and a sense of belonging to school are essential. Outcomes of recent research suggests that interventions designed to address a sense of belonging in schools should incorporate attention to the role that loneliness plays (Allen & Furlong, 2021; Lim et al., 2021). It is hypothesized that screening to identify children experiencing loneliness (Qualter et al., 2010) and targeted interventions during primary school may serve as a protective factor and have an impact on the trajectory of the development of mental health issues. Belonging and loneliness share similar drivers and outcomes and can be considered as different sides of the same coin – promoting a sense of belonging can be a key intervention to address loneliness (Allen & Furlong, 2021; Lim et al., 2021). Palikara (2021) highlights the role of the primary school as a key developmental context for children and posited that early promotion and support of a student's

sense of school belonging can empower the child with the social and emotional skills and strategies to navigate and cope with the challenges of loneliness. However, there continues to be a stronger representation of the importance of having a sense of school belonging and its associated outcomes within the research literature compared with at a practice-based level, within schools. Practical and evidence-based approaches are needed.

Correlates of a Sense of Belonging

Outcomes of having a sense of belonging include improved engagement, motivation and performance (Allen et al., 2017; Goodenow, 1993; Osterman, 2000). This is supported by findings from research by Anderson (2002), which demonstrated that Grade Point Average, positively correlated with school belonging. Psychological outcomes of a strong sense of belonging include improved feelings of happiness and life satisfaction (Allen et al., 2016), improved sleep, and reduced levels of anxiety and depression (Roffey et al., 2019). Additionally, having a strong sense of belonging is correlated with a reduction of behaviours that can negatively impact school life, by increasing behaviours that are disruptive or counterproductive such as bullying, misconduct and non-attendance (Roffey et al., 2019). This research clearly suggests that there are a range of positive outcomes from having a sense of belonging. Thus, feeling connected to school is critical to academic and social success.

As previously discussed, belonging as a universal human need is well established within the research. Building on Baumeister and Leary's (1995) belongingness hypothesis, being socially excluded is a painful experience that has been linked to a range of negative long-term outcomes, impacting both physical and mental health later in childhood and in adulthood. These include poor performance at school, problematic relationships, criminal behaviour, a higher prevalence of internalising problems such as depression, suicidal ideation and increased drug and alcohol use (Marryat et al., 2014; Schinka et al., 2013). A lack of sense of belonging is a significant risk factor for loneliness, as it arises from the human need to belong (Lim, 2021), and both constructs refer to differing degrees of social connection (Allen & Furlong, 2021). Palikara

et al. (2021), Arslan (2019) and Benner et al. (2017) hypothesized that having a sense of school belonging can moderate feelings of loneliness. Their research suggested that feelings of loneliness can be reduced, and wellbeing can be improved by socioemotional interventions that target students' sense of belonging in schools.

Within the research, "not belonging' is also defined using a range of synonyms including being: alienated, ostracised, disengaged (Allen & Kern, 2020) and disaffected (Riley, 2002). As highlighted by Allen and Kern, if students cannot satisfy their need to belong at school, they may seek to do so elsewhere. This may result in gang membership or radicalisation within extremist groups, which fulfil the need for acceptance and belonging (Burnett & Walz 1994; Roffey 2012; Roffey et al., 2019). In support of these propositions, Leary (2003) conducted case studies of 15 school shootings and found that most perpetrators suffered from a low sense of belonging to school, alongside other relational attributes such as a history of social rejection or bullying.

Furthermore, Van Order et al. (2012) propose that when the need to belong is unmet, "thwarted belongingness" can result. Additionally, if the need for social competence, as theorised by Ryan and Deci (2000) is unmet, "perceived burdensomeness" can result. It is theorised by Van Order et al. (2012) that when both thwarted belongingness and perceived burdensomeness are present, it can result in suicide ideation. Thwarted belongingness is said to comprise two primary facets: (i) loneliness, which refers to an affectively laden cognition that one has too few social connections, and (ii) the absence of 'reciprocal caring relationships' (Ma et al., 2019). This underscores further the important association between the constructs of loneliness and relational connectedness, which broadly represent polar opposites to one another. On this basis, it has been suggested that belonging and loneliness should be "integrated into research and practice" (Allen, et al., 2021), and that a 'research bridge' should be built between the constructs, so that interventions that target belonging can be leveraged to address the concerning loneliness statistics that have emerged in school-based surveys in recent years.

Research highlights the need to develop comprehensive prevention and intervention strategies to enhance the mental health and wellbeing of young people by addressing loneliness and sense of belonging. Although researchers agree that having a sense of belonging can play a role in addressing loneliness, more research is needed to establish the shared and distinct aspects of loneliness and belonging. Along these lines, Allen et al. (2020, p.100) posed that "Moreover, it is unclear whether the lack of a sense of belonging is equivalent to negative constructs such as loneliness, disconnection, and isolation, or if these are separate dimensions."

How to Facilitate Belonging: What Does the Research Say?

Research into how to facilitate belongingness has emerged along different pathways, which reflect the multi-faceted nature of the construct. Much of this research has a focus on the role of relational connectedness, which is a dominant and recurring theme throughout the research, suggesting that a focus on the development of positive relationships and social interactions can have a significant impact on a sense of belonging. This section highlights a few of the themes that have emerged within this existing literature.

The student – teacher relationship

Research by Uslu et al. (2016) demonstrated the substantial role that the student-teacher relationship plays in belongingness. They argue that an attachment to a teacher is necessary in order to feel a sense of belonging to the wider school community. This is supported by research by Allen et al. (2018) which proposes that having the support of a teacher was one of the strongest predictors of having a sense of belonging in school and that this has a more positive impact on a student's sense of belonging compared to support from parents and peers. Greenwood et al. (2019) suggested that, "…when students feel that their teachers care about them, are fair, and are a resource when problems occur, they feel more connected to school" (p. 12). Thus, teachers are in a powerful position to influence their students' sense of belonging.

Additionally, when students feel that they are known and cared for by their teachers, they are increasingly motivated, due in part to a positive relationship engendering genuine respect and trust (Chhuon & Wallace, 2012; Ma, 2003). In line with these notions, research by Chhuon and Wallace (2012) demonstrated that when students feel "known" by their teacher, they report having a greater sense of belonging.

The importance of the student-teacher relationship for reducing loneliness and enhancing belonging is well established within the research. The work of Hattie (2009) has established that the student – teacher relationship has a significant impact on student attainment and most teachers understand that their role greatly extends beyond delivering the curriculum. As discussed by Uslu et al. (2016), teachers should, therefore be supported to understand the significance and impact of their positive relationships with students in the classroom, rather than to be expected to intrinsically grasp this.

Less is known, however, about how these relationships might be fostered, developed and maintained. Research by Chapman et al. (2014) emphasised the significant impact that nurturing and supportive relationships can have on students' sense of belonging and further demonstrated that this can be supported by adults showing an interest in the lives of students. Teachers can enhance relationships with their students by showing care, empathy and offering encouragement; having high expectations of students; using culturally inclusive curricula; providing opportunities to participate in extra-curricular activities; and providing access to pastoral and mental health support (Allen & Bowles, 2012; Cockerill, 2019; Cole et al. 2021; Osterman, 2010).

Cole et al. (2021) further posit that it is imperative to explore how children report their experience of loneliness as well as how teachers feel about their skills to address loneliness with their students in order to provide appropriate interventions, with students in this study suggesting that having "a little chat" with adult attachment figures was seen as a positive form of support.

Sense of safety in school

Uslu et al. (2016) argue that a positive student- teacher relationship may contribute to the creation of a greater sense of safety for students in school, and that this, in turn may support the development of positive peer relationships. Research by Libbey (2007) also highlights the importance of creating a safe environment in schools.

Clear and consistent behaviour management strategies contribute to a safe classroom environment, as students know that they will be treated fairly. Research by Ma (2017) demonstrated that students showed a negative sense of belonging if they perceived school disciplinary rules as unfair. This is supported by Huang (2020) whose research with secondary-aged students suggested that consistent and fair strategies for behaviour management are essential, as teacher unfairness has a range of negative outcomes on adolescent life satisfaction and is negatively correlated with a sense of belonging. A report by the OECD in 2017 further affirmed these propositions, noting that "students who reported that they are treated unfairly by their teachers (they perceived that their teachers discipline them more harshly than other students, ridicule them in front of others or say something insulting to them in front of others) are 1.6 times more likely to feel like an outsider at school".

Student voice and agency

Providing opportunities for students to have a say and give their feedback is another strategy that can be employed by teachers to facilitate both positive student-teacher relationships and a sense of belonging. Research by Connor et al. (2022) demonstrated that teacher care can be demonstrated through enabling student voice and that this was a key driver of sense of belonging.

Despite student voice being identified by the researcher as a simple yet powerful intervention, only 37% of the secondary aged students in the study felt truly 'heard' by their teachers on a regular basis (Connor et al. 2022). Research by Mitra (2004) and Anderson et al. (2006) suggested that if student voice is supported, students can develop a stronger sense

of ownership and autonomy in their schools, which can promote both competence and a sense of belonging within the wider school context.

Social and emotional competencies

As noted previously, Allen et al. (2021) developed a framework for addressing sense of belonging, which suggested that social and emotional competencies can support the development of a sense of belonging, as well as to support individuals to cope with feelings of not belonging. The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) developed five core social and emotional competencies. These are: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (CASEL, 2015).

These competencies form the basis of many Social and Emotional Learning programmes and are reflected in the ACARA personal and social capability curriculum. This component of the framework encompasses the fundamental role that skills and abilities play; for forming connections with others and experiencing belonging. This is supported by Ma (2003) who found that students' self-esteem was the most important predictor of student's sense of school belonging. Again, explicit teaching of the CASEL competencies can support the development of self-awareness and character strengths, which may impact on self-esteem, thus enabling students to improve their competency for belonging.

Peer-to-peer relationships

As discussed, students can learn strategies to build and maintain good quality relationships, this can be supported by the explicit teaching of skills. This is essential, as positive relationships with peers are correlated with a higher sense of belonging and wellbeing (Allen et al., 2018; Gowing, 2019; Ma, 2003; Osterman, 2000; St-Amand, 2017). Much of the research into the impact of peer-to-peer relationships on sense of belonging focusses on adolescents. During the often-turbulent teenage period of development, positive friendships are important for identity

formation and can act as a buffer against school challenges (Faircloth & Hamm 2005). Gowing (2019) and Heinsch (2020), found that positive peer relationships served as a protective factor that supports students to develop resilience and adjust throughout the transition from the primary school setting to senior school, which is often a time of stress and anxiety and during the transition into adulthood. To contrast with the propositions of Allen et al. (2018), Gowing (2019) suggested that peer relationships, rather than teacher relationships, were the most significant in determining sense of belongingness in schools. This proposition is supported by research by Ma (2003) which highlighted the importance of long-standing and supportive relationships in school and how the presence of a stable group of friends throughout the years of schooling can have a positive impact on a sense of belonging. Qualter et al. (2015) further postulated that poor friendship quality, being rejected by peers and having few friends are factors that predict loneliness during adolescence. This further underscores the interconnectivity of the constructs of belonging and loneliness.

Research by Cole et al. (2021) highlighted that loneliness can present differently in the classroom setting, compared to in the playground, where signs of loneliness are easier for teachers to recognise. Typical interventions for loneliness overlap with some belonging interventions. Cole et al. demonstrated that peer to peer interactions were considered by the children to be more relevant than peer to adult interactions for addressing loneliness. This further emphasises the importance of considering the perspectives of primary aged students and the significance of positive peer-to-peer relationships, which can be promoted by teachers through the facilitation of play and structured activities.

The significance of the development and maintenance of healthy relationships is clear, and by beginning to develop these skills during the primary school years, students may build a stronger foundation for more positive relationships and resilience during adolescence. Research by Bouchard et al. (2017) underscores the importance of "teacher attunement" in providing support for peer relationships. It is suggested by Bouchard et al. that skills of teacher attunement can be enhanced via

professional development, for teachers to have a good understanding of peer group social dynamics and appropriate interventions.

Midgen et al. (2019) also highlight the importance of gathering the perspectives of children in order to facilitate belonging in school. This research focussed on the experiences of children with special educational needs and found that this group experienced a lower sense of school belonging. Recommendations from this research include supporting school staff to understand ways to promote positive relationships to peers and adults in school for this group as a pathway to enhancing their sense of belonging. Uslu et al. (2016) posit that to enhance social competence and provide appropriate support within the adolescent peer group setting, teachers are required to have a good understanding of their social needs and capabilities.

Teachers' conceptualisations and experiences of belonging

Teachers' own conceptualisations and experiences of belonging can also be an important consideration. A teachers own sense of connection to school has been found to predict their students' sense of connection. Allen et al. (2021) note that the views of teachers are often missing within the research into belonging and that more research is necessary to establish how a sense of belonging is developed and maintained for adults in the school community. Additionally, teachers' own understanding of the associations between having a sense of belonging and wellbeing and their own sense of efficacy to address these concepts should be considered.

A sense of belonging is a critical component of the Early Years Learning Framework: Belonging Becoming Being, further positioning relational connectedness as a central facet of belonging, stating that "In early childhood, and throughout life, relationships are crucial to a sense of belonging. Belonging is central to being and becoming, in that it shapes who children are and who they can become" (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009). Tillet and Wong (2018) conducted a case study into the perspectives of Early Childhood educators working with this Framework.

Despite belonging being a fundamental component, their research showed that the concept of belonging is not well defined, and that teacher's conceptualisations of belonging were varied and that this needs to be developed for the framework to be adequately enacted. Furthermore, this research highlighted the significance of teachers' own sense of belonging, suggesting that this may be "…critical to their professional and personal well-being and may affect their ability to work effectively with children" (Tillet & Wong, 2018, p.48).

Research by Reinke et al. (2011) demonstrated that teachers reported a global lack of confidence and experience in addressing wellbeing and belonging in school. Furthermore, Graham et al. (2011) highlighted the importance of teachers' own sense of mental wellbeing. Teachers are faced with the concerning mental health and wellbeing data and it is a huge responsibility for teachers to address their student's wellbeing. Thus, support is needed to avoid teacher burnout and overwhelm within a crowded curriculum. Teachers are part of a larger and interconnected whole school system, so it is essential to grasp the limitations of individual teachers and consider how the wider school environment supports belonging.

A whole school approach

There are a range of theoretical models for conceptualising belonging within the secondary school setting. It is argued that the most effective way to build a sense of belonging is by supporting the individual student to develop the capacity for belonging as well as by enhancing wider school approaches. Research by Waters et al. (2009) reinforced the importance of the wider school structure and culture and its impact on belonging. Based on Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Socio-ecological model and Deci and Ryan's (2000) Self Determination Theory, this model emphasizes that a student's sense of connectedness to school is not only about whether a student feels like he or she belongs, but is also a product of being part of a responsive and developmentally appropriate school ecology (Waters et al., 2009). Allen et al.'s (2016) socio-ecological framework is aligned with this view, exploring the themes that influence school belonging within a secondary school. The latter authors also noted

that effective interventions to foster and maintain school belonging must operate at multiple levels within a school system.

Additionally, Allen and Kern (2020) argue that a "multi systemic approach" is required in order to foster a sense of belonging in schools. They devised the 'rainbow' model of school belonging, which outlines different layers that influence a student's sense of belonging. This model "…visually captures the seven systems concerned with school belonging: a student's individual characteristics, primary social groups, the school climate, the local village, the environ, the culture, and the ecosystem" (Allen & Kern., 2020, p. 7). They acknowledge that this model is detailed and complex, but that it is essential to understand the complexity of the concept and from there, target the layers of the model to address.

Further, research by Midgen et al. (2019) identified four key themes to support the development of a sense of belonging in the primary school setting: Relationships (friendships and relationships with school staff); School Environment; Teaching and Learning; and Extra Curricular Activities (which provide opportunities to be involved with other students). Within this research, the views and perspectives of children were central. Both models identify relationships and the wider school environment as key. These models provide practical-level approaches and evidence-based strategies to facilitate and foster belonging in schools.

Primary-aged Students: An Area of Persistent Neglect in Sense of Belonging Research?

Much of the research into belonging and loneliness has been conducted for older students – leaving a research gap for the experiences of primary students. Within this setting, a substantial proportion of the responsibility lies with the class teacher to promote and facilitate belonging, as students have a significant amount of face-to-face contact with one teacher throughout the day. Thus, the relationship between class teachers and students has the potential to have a powerful effect on the development of a sense of belonging.

The primary classroom provides a relatively stable and consistent social setting where children can begin to navigate relationships with their peer group. The scope of research supporting the significance of having a sense of school belonging for adolescents, suggests that interventions that target belonging in the primary school setting may have significant and positive future implications and outcomes. The limited amount of belonging research with primary students often investigates student viewpoints on belonging and loneliness (Bouchard et al., 2017; Cole et al., 2021; Midgen, 2019; Palikara, 2021; Qualter, 2010). In developing recommendations that can be applied to the primary setting, it is useful to combine these perspectives with research findings from studies with older students.

A sense of belonging is a dynamic and complex construct that is unique to individuals. There are a wide range of positive outcomes for a sense of belonging and the research has suggested that constructs such as loneliness should be considered when developing interventions. The scope of research findings suggests that at the heart of belonging is relational connectedness. Although there is a lack of specific school-based interventions that intentionally aim to develop the construct (Allen et al., 2021), the most recurrently cited pathways to facilitating a sense of belonging are the development and maintenance of positive relationships. This is supported by the development of social and emotional competencies and the creation of environments where members of the school community feel valued and accepted. The scope of research has also demonstrated that a sense of belonging is not a simple set of cause-and-effect associations (Porter et al., 2021). Thus, effective school-based interventions for belonging are interconnected and should be multi-systemic (Allen & Kern., 2021), rather than being a stand-alone, targeted intervention. The interconnectivity of the range of systems within the school setting that can have an impact on sense of belonging is represented within Figure 1.
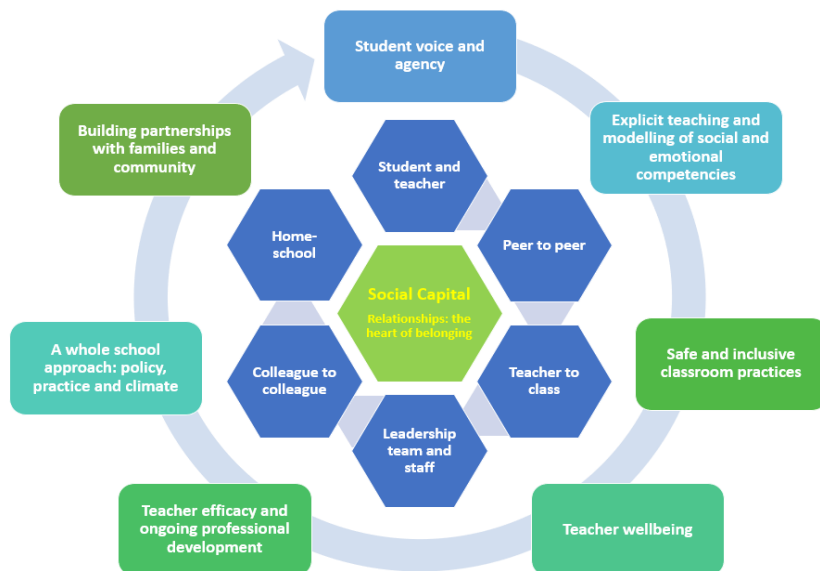
Figure 1: The interconnected nature of school systems

Social capital: Relationships are at the heart of belonging

As discussed by Roffey (2012), the concept of social capital (also a broad based and multi-faceted concept) within educational settings encapsulates *all* in-school relationships and extends to the interactions and relational quality between *every* stakeholder: staff, students, peers, families and community, as illustrated in Figure 1. It comprises "…expectations and interactions that promote trust, respect, value, and collaboration" (Roffey, 2012, p.1). All members of the school community play a fundamental role in supporting a child to feel that they belong. Therefore, positive social capital within school settings supports all stakeholders to flourish, and should be considered as the foundation of an approach for generating a sense of inclusive belonging (Roffey, 2010). Furthermore, as illustrated in Figure 1, positive social capital within the school culture both impacts and is influenced by other key elements. Thus, school-wide efforts to improve social capital is effective in many dimensions (Roffey, 2012).

Specific examples of this are further illustrated in Figure 2 and Figure 3, as follows: Positive leadership-staff relationships contribute to staff feeling supported and valued, which can support the development of teacher wellbeing and personal sense of belonging, as well as support colleague to colleague relationships. This, in turn, can have a positive impact on students and the whole school climate (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Outcomes of positive leadership team to staff relationships

A supportive and positive teacher to whole class relationship can also support the development of a safe learning environment and promote inclusive practices, where all members of the group feel accepted and

valued and student voice and agency is welcomed and encouraged. A sense of belonging is nurtured within this environment. Relationships can be supported by ongoing professional development that aims to develop the social-emotional competencies of teachers (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: Outcomes of a positive teacher to class relationship

Table 1 provides a synthesis of the key approaches to developing a sense of belonging, generated from the literature review conducted by the author. These form general recommendations for actions that can support the development of positive relationships, thus contributing to the

development of social capital and therefore, a sense of belonging within the primary school setting.

Table 1: Building social capital in the primary school setting: A summary of approaches.

Relationships are at the heart of a sense of belonging.	
Approaches to developing student- teacher relationships	• Listening to students • Showing interest in the lives of students (i.e., students feel "known" by their teachers) • Showing care and concern • Having high expectations of all students • The use of culturally inclusive curricula (i.e., diversity is accepted) • Providing pathways to pastoral and mental health support
Approaches to developing peer-to-peer relationships	• Explicit teaching of social and emotional skills • Providing opportunities to participate in extra-curricular activities - this supports children to build social capital as interaction with a wider range of fellow students is enabled (Cole et al., 2021) • Provision of buddy programmes and peer mentoring initiatives encourage relationship building between students and different year group levels • Teacher attunement to peer group dynamics (Bouchard et al., 2017) • Teachers recognise signs of loneliness or social exclusion and respond appropriately
Approaches to developing leadership team to staff relationships	• Leadership encourages staff to reflect on personal and whole school values • Promoting school values that are embedded into whole school policies and practices • Valuing the strengths of individuals • Recognising and valuing the efforts of staff; this enhances motivation and contributes to a positive school culture • Facilitating authentic consultation with staff members, so that staff feel seen, heard and valued
Approaches to developing	• Frequent communication with families via a range of formats • Sharing of work and positive feedback

school to home relationships	• Inviting parents to be actively involved in the school community (all are welcome and diversity is valued) • Communicating the aims and objectives of school programmes to families using information sessions and workshops - in this way, parents can support what is being explicitly taught
Approaches to developing teacher – whole class relationships	• Creating an environment that is welcoming • Valuing and accepting diversity • Facilitating opportunities for interactive group and pair work to practise interpersonal skills • Facilitating opportunities for structured play and connection between peers (Cole et al., 2012) • Classroom management strategies must be fair and consistent • Encouraging and developing student voice and agency • Creating a classroom culture where students feel safe to explore their understanding - mistakes are welcomed as part of this process (Hattie, 2009; Roffey, 2011)
Approaches to developing relationships between colleagues	• Collaborative and supportive teams are supported by school leadership • Inter-staff communication is friendly, respectful and supportive • Gossip is discouraged

A socio-ecological approach

Individual teachers can facilitate relational connectedness as well as student competencies for building and maintaining a sense of belonging, which can ultimately reduce feelings of loneliness and promote wellbeing in the classroom and potentially the wider school community. However, whole school, integrated approaches that address multiple systems will have the greatest impact on a student's sense of belonging. Table 2 provides a summary of ways to enhance a sense of belonging in the primary school setting using a socio-ecological approach.

Table 2: Multi-systemic approaches to building a sense of belonging in the primary school: A summary

Multi-systemic approaches to building a sense of belonging in the primary school: A summary of approaches	
Note: See Figure 1 – Table headings below align with Figure 1	
Student voice and agency	- Authentic student voice is an essential part of a school's approach. Research has shown that when students can contribute to school decision making and feel heard, their achievement and engagement in learning improves. (Mitra, 2004, Anderson et al., 2006) This active engagement helps to build student agency and enhances sense of belonging and connectedness to the school community. - Students are engaged to raise concerns, offer their opinions and lead positive action - Regular opportunities for facilitated student voice are provided and follow-up actions are based on students' expressed ideas and perspectives
Explicit teaching and modelling of social and emotional competencies	- Explicit teaching of the five core social and emotional skills, as defined by CASEL (2015) supports students to develop the competencies to interact well with others, build and maintain friendships, to enhance group working skills and resolve conflicts. - A school wide approach to social and emotional competencies is necessary - Development of shared language, which is modelled by staff and reflected in policy and practices - Opportunities for students to practise using social and emotional skills are provided - Opportunities for cross-age shared activities with a common goal are provided (e.g., mixed year level incursions) - Positive social and emotional competencies are modelled within all in-school relationships
Inclusive classroom practices	The agency of students is supported

	- Gratitude journaling has been shown to have a positive impact on primary aged students' sense of belonging (Diebel et al., 2022) - Opportunities for play as a tool to reduce loneliness and increase belonging (Cole et al., 2011) - Creation of a classroom that serves as a caring community (Solomon, 1996), in which positive and respectful communication is modelled and encouraged - Fair and consistent classroom management strategies - Teachers have high academic expectations - Academic motivation and school belonging are connected - planning, goal setting is encouraged - Inclusive teaching and learning culture catering for the range of diversity in learning styles - Representation matters - curriculum materials represent diversity - Students feel safe to be themselves, feeling that they are valued and accepted - Creation of a safe learning environment, in which students feel safe to contribute to lessons without fear of being ridiculed or shamed by the teacher or peers - Teach relationship skills and strategies - explicitly teaching social and emotional learning skills
Teacher wellbeing	- Priority must be given to teachers' sense of belonging and wellbeing in an already crowded curriculum and pressurised environment - Support for new teachers - new staff feel welcomed - The agency of staff is enhanced via authentic staff consultation - Mentoring programmes and ongoing support are provided for individual teachers - Teams work collaboratively towards a shared goal (Cherkowski, 2018)

Teacher efficacy and ongoing professional development	• Teachers receive adequate support to identify early signs of mental health issues or to identify students who are experiencing low levels of wellbeing, and are aware of the appropriate referral pathways that should be taken • Teacher understanding, competence and confidence to understand the construct of belonging, to deliver social and emotional programmes effectively and to provide appropriate interventions should be supported through ongoing professional development (Lendrum et al., 2012; Uslu, 2016) • Professional development can support teachers to become more attuned to peer group relationships and provide necessary support (Hamm et al., 2011) and recognise the signs of loneliness and respond appropriately (Cole et al., 2012)
A whole school approach: policy, practice and climate	• A clear implementation plan, with support from the school leadership will ensure the long-term sustainability and viability of an approach • A school-based definition of belonging is generated in authentic consultation with students, staff and families • A sense of belonging should be made explicit within the school values and belonging is a valued priority within the school community • "Non-exclusionary Attitudes" (Solomon, 1996) are promoted - less ability streaming and ability grouping, students learn together in mixed-ability groups • The practices of schools and agencies must be improved to respond to the needs of children who are lacking a sense of school belonging - Midgen et al. (2019) recommended "Individual Belonging Plans" to support students as opposed to 'behaviour management plans" • Measures devised to regularly track student and staff feelings of belonging, loneliness and

	wellbeing - data monitored and responded to on an ongoing basis • Approaches to behaviour management are fair, consistent and built around trust and mutual respect, for example restorative justice practice • Access to extra- curricular activities, which strengthen feelings of connection to school and build social networks (Cullinane, 2020; Midgen, 2019; Craggs & Kelly, 2018)
Building partnerships with families and community	• Schools reach out to others within the wider school community and build a culture of trust, safety and wellbeing for all school stakeholders • Positive partnerships between school and families established, in which families are genuinely engaged through ongoing consultation and collaboration • The agency of community is supported • Partnerships with the wider community are strengthened via service-learning initiatives - social networks can be expanded and developed (Koliba, 2003) • Diversity is valued and respected to encourage all members of the school community to feel that they are connected and belong • Inclusive behaviours and practices are modelled by staff • Parents are welcome in school • Access to pastoral and mental health support is provided via multi-agency collaboration • Students understand how they can access help when it is needed

Recommendations

The review of the literature has demonstrated that the construct of belonging is complex, broad-based and multi-faceted. Therefore, interventions are also required to be broad based and multi-faceted and target multiple layers within the school system, as illustrated in the summary of key findings above. Presented below are six key recommendations for the development of a sense of belonging in the

primary school setting, condensed from the above summaries and based on the most pertinent and recurring themes found within the literature review.

1. Generate a whole-school vision for developing a sense of belonging. This strategic approach, supported by school leadership is developed to address school belonging at multiple layers within the school setting; individual factors, relational connectedness to peers, teachers, family and community and school policies and practices. The approach incorporates measurement of a sense of belonging and monitoring of progress.
2. Generate a school-based working definition of "sense of belonging" via authentic consultation with key stakeholders and shared with the whole school community.
3. Embed sense of belonging into school policies, school values and practices. Stakeholders contribute to the development of these policies and values.
4. Give priority to the development of positive social capital: in-school relationships are the heart of sense of belonging. This is supported by the explicit teaching of social-emotional skills and positive engagement between all school stakeholders.
5. Provide ongoing professional development to all staff to support the approach. Staff understand the outcomes of a sense of belonging and of a lack of sense of belonging, including loneliness and reduced wellbeing. Staff are supported to deliver social and emotional learning programs and to develop their understanding and competencies.
6. Leadership teams should prioritize, value and support teacher wellbeing and personal sense of belonging.

Conclusion

Teachers can play an extremely important role in facilitating belonging in the primary school classroom by seeking to know the individual children in their care, showing care and concern for the wellbeing of students and supporting student's peer relationships. Research findings

have demonstrated that belonging is complex, dynamic and unique to individuals. Thus, listening and respecting the views of children is important, as well as awareness and understanding of the diversity of needs. A 'one size fits all' approach cannot work. The development of these relationships as well as developing positive social capital for all key stakeholders must be valued by school leadership teams and time and space be given to prioritize these relationships. There are limitations on the impact that individual teachers can have, as they are operating within a dynamic and complex school system. Thus, a socio-ecological approach, which encompasses a multi-systemic, whole school strategy is the most effective approach to developing a sense of belonging in the primary school setting.

Brief Author Biography

Angela Hurley is a teacher and the Wellbeing Coordinator at Guildford Grammar School in Perth, Western Australia. She holds a Master of Education, specialising in mental health and wellbeing. At the heart of her pedagogical practice is an understanding of the power of positive relationships to shape learning and wellbeing.

Acknowledgements

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