10 Belonging in Schools: A Social Psychological Perspective

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Exploring the need to belong has a long history in psychological research. For example, scholars have thought about belonging within the context of affection (Murray, 1938), affiliation (Schachter, 1959), needs (Maslow, 1943), and motives (Fiske, 2004). For the purposes of this chapter, we adopt Baumeister and Leary's (1995) conceptualization of belonging as a fundamental human motive. We address the significance of developing community, which is "a process that stimulates opportunities for membership, for influence, for mutual needs to be met, and for shared emotional ties and support" (Chavis & Newbrough, 1986, p. 335), and is inextricably connected to the person's local environmental context (Beare, Caldwell, & Millikan, 1989). As such, we emphasize the relational nature of belonging and a person's psychological sense of the quality of their social relations. We focus our discussion on the relational nature of belonging and community more broadly, within the organizational boundaries of school systems. This chapter offers an overview of the theoretical basis of, barriers to, and interventions aimed at improving belonging in schools.

Theoretical Basis

A fundamental human motive. In an influential and wide-ranging review, Baumeister and Leary (1995) found that social rejection is associated with negative emotions, increased anxiety, and detrimental mental and physical health outcomes. They proposed that belonging is a fundamental human motive, which manifests in "a pervasive drive to form and maintain at least a minimum quantity of lasting, positive, and significant interpersonal relationships" (p. 497). According to these authors, the need for belonging has downstream consequences for other psychological phenomena (e.g., self-presentation) and behavior (e.g., efforts to achieve acceptance). They emphasized the relational aspects of interactions with others as key in satisfying the fundamental need to belong. Tomasello and colleagues (2005) argued that as humans, we have biologically adapted to partake in collaborative activities and individuals have an inherent drive to understand one another and share common goals (see also Mendoza-Denton, Leitner, & Ayduk, 2018). This fundamental human motive makes it essential to take into account not only the person but also their *relationships* when trying to understand outcomes such as academic achievement.

As such, an analysis of belonging must encompass analysis at both the individual level and the contextual level, which is where relationships are situated (see Tomasello et al., 2005).

Individual differences. Although the need to belong is fundamental, research also suggests that there are individual differences that have implications for one's acceptance as part of a group (Kelly, 2001). For example, having high social competence has been found to be related to the level of social support from others as well as the size of one's social networks (e.g., Cauce, 1986; Gottman, Gonso, & Rasmussen, 1975; Procidano & Heller, 1983). Social competence has been defined in several ways, such as the ability to generate and coordinate flexible, adaptive responses to situational demands and opportunities in the environment (Waters & Sroufe, 1983), social skills that enable effective interactions with others and the ability to avoid or inhibit socially unacceptable behaviors (Cook et al., 2010), and being well liked by peers (Hubbard & Coie, 1994). Indeed, feelings of belonging have been found to be related to the skills that make up social competence (e.g., Blackhart et al., 2011; Solomon et al., 1997), and deficits have been found to be related to outcomes such as peer victimization or social exclusion (e.g., Bollmer, Harris, & Milich, 2006; Perry, Williard, & Perry, 1990).

There are many other individual differences that have profound effects on one's sense of belonging, such as rejection sensitivity (RS). RS is the tendency to anxiously expect, readily perceive, and intensely react to rejection, even in benign or ambiguous situations (Ayduk et al., 2000; Downey & Feldman, 1996). Individuals who are high in RS are at risk for experiencing interpersonal and personal distress due to concerns over rejection. Early, prolonged, or acute experiences of rejection have been found to be associated with increased sensitivity to future rejection, resulting in a negative feedback loop (Ayduk, Downey, & Kim, 2001; Pietrzak, Downey, & Ayduk, 2005). This vigilance has been found to lead to experiences of peer rejection (e.g., Downey & Feldman, 1996; Leary, 2001; London et al., 2007).

Social identity and belonging. Murphy and Zirkel (2015) agreed that the need to belong is fundamental. However, these authors stressed that the meaning and experience of belonging is not experienced similarly by everyone, depending, among other things, on whether one holds a stigmatized social identity. Research on stereotype threat (see Steele & Aronson, 1995) helps us understand how social identity affects sense of belonging. Stereotype threat is experienced when we are made aware of negative stereotypes for a group we belong to. This awareness results in a psychological state of anxiety and arousal that negatively impacts our performance and our identification with the domain being tested (Steele & Aronson, 1995).

In the educational domain, Black and Hispanic students have long been subject to negative stereotypes about their intellectual abilities (e.g., Gonzales, Blanton, & Williams, 2002), which can make the educational context threatening to their social identities. Asian students, although not usually subject to negative stereotypes regarding intellectual abilities, face other harmful stereotypes, such as being a perpetual foreigner or not being fluent in English, that impact their sense of belonging in the US educational context (Cheryan & Monin, 2005; Johnson,

1997). Female students face negative stereotypes regarding their math ability (Spencer, Steele, & Quinn, 1999). Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) youth face barriers to academic success and adverse mental health due to the hostile environments in many educational contexts (Fedewa & Ahn, 2011; Kosciw et al., 2010) and report lower levels of belonging in schools (Seelman et al., 2011).

Recognizing that people may experience rejection concerns on the basis of group-level identities, the RS construct has been extended to race (Chan & Mendoza-Denton, 2008; Mendoza-Denton et al., 2002), gender (London et al., 2012), social class (Rheinschmidt & Mendoza-Denton, 2014), appearance (Park, 2007), sexual orientation (Pachankis, Goldfried, & Ramrattan, 2008), age (Kang & Chasteen, 2009), and weight (Brenchley & Quinn, 2016). Differences in social identity lead to unique problems and outcomes related to belonging, and, as such, a supportive school environment for all students must be constructed. When thinking about belonging, we must also take into account individual differences based on social identity in order to be able to create more supportive school structures, as the research on RS described earlier has shown.

Prevention Processes

The importance of the institution. Researchers have long argued that educational standards have historically paid little attention to the socioemotional needs of students (e.g., Goodlad, 1984; Hargreaves, Earl, & Ryan, 1996). At an institutional level, an emphasis on individualism and competition (e.g., standardized testing and academic achievement) versus community and collaboration can be detrimental to many students, and in particular those from underrepresented communities (Stephens et al., 2012). Kunc (1992) argued that these practices are due to the following institutionalized set of beliefs: (a) a sense of belonging is less important than achievement and mastery; (b) belonging is not a precondition for engagement; and (c) personal and emotional needs are met outside of the classroom. These beliefs, which influence the culture of educational settings, are clearly in conflict with research on the fundamental need to belong and its implications for academic performance. By becoming aware of the factors that either maintain, contribute to, or detract from a student's sense of belonging, practitioners to can better address the issue in a preventative fashion.

Impact of peers. Peers have a significant impact on students' sense of self and future interactions within the educational context. Having positive interactions with peers is linked with a multitude of positive outcomes, such as intrinsic motivation, accepting authority, a strong sense of autonomy, and better regulation of behavior in school (Osterman, 2000). Further, having a strong sense of security with peers is related to higher self-esteem and identity integration (Ryan, Stiller, & Lynch, 1994). Although research has shown that interaction patterns differ from student to student, students who have a stronger sense of belonging have more positive peer interactions

in general (Green et al., 1980). The relationship between peer interactions and acceptance is bidirectional, and students are much more open and engaged when they perceive and expect favorable reactions from their peers (see Osterman, 2000). These findings are important to keep in mind when thinking of building a school community because having social attachments or having acceptance from a peer group is linked with positive outcomes, such as increased helping behavior, cooperation, and high achievement (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Green et al., 1980; Jules, 1991).

Teachers' role. The type of instruction in the classroom is an important element of a student's sense of belonging. Leithwood, Cousins, Jantzi, and Patsula (1996) found that the type and quality of instruction accounted for approximately half of the difference in students' sense of belonging. Solomon and colleagues (1997) looked at how teacher practices affected different aspects of student behavior and their sense of community within the classroom. The relationship between a teacher's encouragement of cooperation in the classroom and a student's positive behavior and interpersonal influence was significantly related. In comparison to individualistic or competitive learning environments, a cooperative learning environment produces more beneficial effects on the quality of peer interactions due to the positive interdependence that is fostered for task completion (Johnson, Johnson, & Maruyama, 1983).

Conditions in the workplace can have a substantial impact on a teacher's behavior and performance, and thus affect the learning environment for students (Dewey, 1998). Research has found that collegiality is one of the most essential institutional elements influencing a teacher's sense of commitment to the job, efficacy, and performance (Johnson, 1990; Lieberman, 1988; Little, 1982). Educational institutions can influence how a sense of community develops through the processes they adopt and the values they convey. A strong sense of community among teachers leads to positive impacts on behavior and performance, such as personal engagement and support for students, as well as downstream belonging among students (Osterman, 2000).

Interventions

Practitioners' role. Understanding the role that practitioners play is essential when addressing barriers to belonging in a preventative fashion. Observing peer-to-peer interactions, paying attention to teacher working conditions (e.g., support and engagement), and examining classroom interactions to see if cooperation versus competition are at play are all key in understanding whether potential climate issues need to be addressed. When carrying out an intervention it is essential that it is subtle and tailored; and, if possible, the students should see themselves as the benefactor as opposed to the beneficiary to reduce any potential stigma around participating in an intervention. The community's knowledge, implementation, and application of standards are crucial in creating a culture in which students feel like they belong (Mendoza-Denton, Patt, & Richards, 2018). The following section highlights three interventions, which are summarized in Table 10.1.

Table 10.1 *Summary of Belonging Interventions*

Intervention	Goal	Suggestions for Implementation
Challenging psychological perceptions of threat	Have students shift the way they typically see and interpret social adversity, thereby lessening their psychological perceptions of threat on campus.	Maintain subtlety when implementing the intervention, as their success depends on it.
Changing the climate	(a) Provide a nonthreatening lens to view cases of adversity and (b) have students to embody the diverse aspects of their identity into their everyday academic lives, effectively aiding students in managing the stress that accompanies social marginalization.	Do not advertise "changing the climate" as an intervention. Make the students feel as if they are the benefactors.
Promoting cross-group friendships	Have students create diverse friendships to bolster feelings of institutional belonging.	Encourage contact and self-disclosure between individuals from different groups. Pair this intervention with games such as Jenga.

Challenging psychological perceptions of threat.
Walton and Cohen (2011) developed an intervention to tackle the issue of sense of belonging in college freshmen and examined the effects over a three-year period. The goal of the intervention was to have students shift the way they typically see and interpret social adversity, thereby lessening their psychological perceptions of threat on campus. The intervention itself was subtle, and a key component was that the students' self-generated content formed a critical part of the intervention. The intervention was to situate social adversity on campus as common, shared, and temporary. It allowed students to shift the attributional nature of social adversity from themselves to something external (e.g., a common college experience).

The intervention began with students reading a survey report, which included results and quotes from upperclassmen at their institution. It stated that a majority of students had fears or worries about their sense of belonging during their first year, but after surpassing the initial difficulties of their freshman year they became confident in their sense of belonging. Following the reading, students wrote an essay regarding their own college experiences and relating them to those from the survey report. Next, students turned their own essay into a speech that was recorded. Students were told that these videos would be used to help future students cope with their transitions to college. Black students in the social-belonging intervention had significant increases in subjective well-being and grade point average (GPA) over the three-year period observed, while Black students in the control condition had no improvement in subjective well-being and GPA over time. For White students, subjective

well-being and GPA rose over time regardless of being in the social-belonging or control condition.

Changing the climate. Walton, Logel, Peach, Spencer, and Zanna (2015) created an affirmation intervention to combat the effects of the "chilly climate" that females face in male-dominated fields, such as engineering. The goal of the affirmation intervention was to encourage students to focus on themselves and embody aspects of their identity into their everyday academic lives, effectively aiding students in managing the stress that accompanies social marginalization. First, students in the affirmation intervention condition received a one-page "summary of results" explaining that almost all upper year students' in the engineering program (across ethnicity and gender) felt overwhelmed by the demands of their program, but that most students found ways to manage their stress and find balance in their daily lives by incorporating broader aspects of self-identity based on one of six values (e.g., maintaining social relationships, staying healthy, learning for learning, being religious or spiritual, gaining financial security, making a difference).

After reviewing the "summary of results," students listened to nine audio recordings (four female and five male) that were paired with a visual presentation of the transcription of the recording, the name of the student, and photos of the engineering building. This presentation was said to be "illustrative" of students' experiences of the transition to engineering. Then, students participated in two "saying is believing" writing exercises where they described their own experiences with the summary of results in mind. The first writing exercise was an essay on how students can learn to "incorporate broader aspects of their self-identity in their daily lives to manage stress in engineering" using examples from their own experiences. The second writing exercise was to rewrite the first essay, but as a letter addressed to a future student who could "learn ways to manage stress by thinking about things they value outside school." The final step was creating a keychain that reinforced the message of the affirmation training intervention (e.g., the students wrote a word or phrase that reminded them of their most important value). Note here, again, the use of self-generated content as an important aspect of the intervention.

Walton and colleagues (2015) found that women's engineering GPA was significantly higher in the affirmation intervention condition compared to the control condition. The higher performance of women in the intervention condition eliminated the gender gap in engineering GPA seen in the control condition. The intervention also changed the way women perceived their daily adversities (e.g., as more manageable) and boosted academic attitudes. Women in the affirmation intervention condition compared to the control condition showed a deepened identification with their gender and had better-developed external resources, thereby reducing the chilly climate.

Promoting cross-group friendships. Mendoza-Denton and Page-Gould (2008) looked at the benefits of cross-group friendship on attenuating belonging concerns among minority students. To isolate the causal effects of cross-race friendship on

institutional attitudes, the authors conducted an experimental intervention in which friendship was induced. To allow for interpretation of the direct effect of cross-group versus same-group friendships, White and Hispanic participants were randomly assigned to form both same-group (White–White or Hispanic–Hispanic) and cross-group (White–Hispanic) pairs. The pairs met once a week for a total of three meetings to complete the friendship intervention. The friendship intervention, designed to promote closeness through self-disclosure, was developed using the Fast Friends procedure (Aron et al., 1997).

This procedure entails having pairs ask and answer questions, which start off topical (e.g., "Given the choice of anyone in the world, whom would you want as a dinner guest?") and eventually transition to be more personal and self-disclosing (e.g., "Who is the most important person in your life? What could you do to improve the relationship? Will you ever do it?"). Mendoza-Denton and Page-Gould (2008) found that students who had been assigned to the cross-group friendship condition reported greater institutional satisfaction at the conclusion of the intervention. It is important to note that even though the intervention involved *individuals*, the effects of the intervention were observed in students' attitudes toward the *institution*, reinforcing the idea that relationships are paramount in determining people's overall experience at the institution.

Utilizing this intervention in a school setting allows for a shifting of the traditional institutional goals of most schools. It would allow for teachers to address concerns about belonging in a diverse context and create an inclusive community that encourages social competence. This intervention can even be used between teachers and students. Using a similar paradigm, Leitner, Ayduk, Boykin, and Mendoza-Denton (2018) found a reduction of negative emotions and increase of rapport amongst mentor–mentee relationships. This reduction, in turn, led to more useful feedback to mentees. Even without using the exact Fast Friends procedure, teachers could create a space that encourages relationships using mutual self-disclosure to elicit the same positive outcomes.

Creating a culture of structure. Although the previous three interventions focused on changing individual attitudes, Mendoza-Denton, Patt, and Richards (2018) noted that another target for intervention is the institutions themselves and the practices built around them. These authors' research suggests that academic disparities may stem, at least in part, from the differential effect that having ambiguous expectations has on students from underrepresented backgrounds (relative to majority-group students). The authors suggest that in environments where guidelines for student progress are unclear or left at the discretion of individual assessors or instructors, two processes come to dominate.

First, teachers' stereotypes and prejudices, whether subtle or explicit, can affect these assessors' perceptions of the quality of student work and of student progress. Second, students who come to the educational context with reasons to be concerned about their acceptance (e.g., due to a stigmatized social identity) may divert attentional resources away from their studies in search of belonging and acceptance cues, while also avoiding contexts where they might experience rejection (e.g., group

study sessions, meetings with teachers). Mendoza-Denton and colleagues concluded that beyond individual-level interventions, it is imperative for educational institutions to standardize assessment practices so as to make sure that the same standards are applied systematically and equally for all students, which can boost a sense of fairness and belonging for everyone.

Conclusion

The need to belong is fundamental to all of us (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), but members of stigmatized groups may be particularly uncertain about their sense of belonging in educational settings (Walton & Cohen, 2007). Further, research has found that feelings of belonging in school and the quality of peer and teacher relationships are significant predictors of academic outcomes (Goodenow, 1992). When students have high-quality peer and teacher relationships, they have a higher sense of belonging, and are in turn more motivated in the academic context (Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Wentzel, 1997, 1998). Having a strong sense of belonging at school is significantly related to higher liking for the school, achievement motivation, intrinsic academic motivation, and prosocial behaviors (Solomon et al., 1997; 2000).

Yeager, Walton, and Cohen (2013) highlighted three underlying mechanisms of successful educational interventions: (a) changing students' subjective experiences in school; (b) using psychologically wise methods of framing and carrying out the intervention in a powerful yet subtle way; and (c) utilizing self-reinforcing processes that sustain the effects of the interventions. It is also important to realize that educational interventions are powerful and context-dependent tools that must be used thoughtfully. This may mean combining techniques to improve existing interventions (see Cramwinckel, Scheepers, & van der Toorn, 2018). When used strategically, social psychological interventions can help bolster belonging in schools.

Resources

Challenging Psychological Perceptions of Threat Intervention Resources: https://science.sciencemag.org/content/suppl/2011/03/15/331.6023.1447.DC1

Changing the Climate Intervention Resources: http://gregorywalton-stanford.weebly.com/uploads/4/9/4/4/49448111/waltonlogelpeachspencerzanna_2015supp.pdf

Gay Lesbian Straight Education Network: www.glsen.org/

Gay-Straight Alliance Network: www.gsanetwork.org/

Guide on Academic Tenacity Mindsets and Skills That Promote Long-Term Learning: https://ed.stanford.edu/sites/default/files/manual/dweck-walton-cohen-2014.pdf

Promoting Cross-Group Friendships Intervention Resources: https://rascl.berkeley.edu/tools.html

Safe Schools Coalition: www.safeschoolscoalition.org/

The Social-Belonging Intervention: Getting the Message Right Resources: https://s3.wp.wsu.edu/uploads/sites/2111/2018/05/Walton-A-Social-belonging-Intervention.pdf
Wise Interventions: https://www.wiseinterventions.org/

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