Guest editorial

School belonging – Why are our students longing to belong to school?

Sue Roffey, Christopher Boyle & Kelly-Ann Allen

SCHOOL BELONGING is commonly defined as: *'the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included and supported by others in the school social environment'* (Goodenow & Grady, 1993).

It has been found to be a predictor of a range of broad academic, psychological and physical health benefits in young people. A sense of school belonging can not only buffer the effects of student anxiety and depression but also boost academic engagement and motivation. It has been related to a myriad of further beneficial outcomes including resilience, gratitude, sleep, and self-esteem. School belonging has also been shown to decrease the incidence of factors that are not conducive to education, such as bullying, misconduct, school dropout and truancy. And it does not take much to increase a sense of belonging. There is a plethora of brief interventions that demonstrate that with very little cost and effort, the issue can be effectively addressed. (e.g. Booker, 2018; Craggs & Kelly, 2018; Diebel et al., 2016).

There are a range of factors that strongly predict connectedness, with teacher support and social and emotional competencies taking a strong lead in fostering this for young people (Allen et al., 2018). With all this evidence regarding the importance of school belonging, and the fact that even brief interventions have been shown to make a difference, why is it that international data suggests that one in four students do not feel a sense of connection to school (OECD, 2017)? This statistic transcends continents and has become an international concern. Why are so many of our students longing to belong to school?

Loneliness has been brought to the fore recently both in the UK and elsewhere, heralded as a burgeoning issue for both teenagers and the elderly that requires critical attention (Goossens, 2018). Given the compelling research demonstrating the moderating power of a sense of school belonging for loneliness (e.g. Benner et al., 2017; Cavanaugh & Buehler, 2016), should not schools and society at large be making a concerted and targeted reproach to address the loneliness epidemic in teenagers through school belonging interventions? After all, schools are often a constant feature for most people, perhaps fulfilling a similar function to places of worship in creating a catalyst for social bonds and community connections.

It seems that there is no one panacea for students who do not have a sense of belonging. Race, ethnicity, culture, individual psychological assets, the family context and other systems involved in fostering school belonging may all have a role. A sense of school belonging is an individual experience – for the student and for the school. Given that these multiple variables have a significant relationship with school belonging, our understanding of the concept can be unclear. It is for this reason that ongoing research into school belonging, with high utility for practitioners, has never been more important.

This issue of *Educational and Child Psychology* is notable, not just for the breadth of the articles on school belonging, but also the international scope of contributions. The importance of feeling connected to school is clearly an area of concern globally with authors not just from the UK but also across Australia, the United States and Hong Kong.

The issue begins with the voice of the child. Midgen et al. explored the views of pupils, aged 3 to 16 who had a range of special educational needs. They found four themes that contributed to school belonging: the quality of relationships, the provision of extra-curricular activities, the school environment and the curriculum. Cockerill also honours student experiences by asking pupils, whose education was split between a mainstream school and a special unit, what school belonging meant to them. Interestingly, the comparison of feeling more valued in the off-site setting than in mainstream led to poorer behaviour in the mainstream. Whiteway's research on the views of teenage fathers about feeling connected within education also unearthed some important findings; namely that primary school often compensated for a lack of security and belonging at home but this disappeared once pupils were in secondary school. Becoming a father had, for several of these young men, provided a role and a sense of belonging in a new family situation, somewhere where they could experience pride and feel valued.

Slaten and colleagues used an eco-systemic model to look at the various influences on school belonging and its impact on bullying behaviour. They discovered that home and school environment were more significant than peer relationships. This contrasts with the following paper that focuses on peer to peer connection. According to Gowing, relationships between students are the driver for school connectedness. This raises the issue of what happens for pupils who are isolated and have few other supports. Dobia and colleagues write about an intervention that specifically addresses this issue. Circle Solutions aims to build positive connections between students, handing over to them in a structured format, responsibility for the inclusiveness of the classroom. The qualitative element of this research indicated an increase in inclusive and considerate behaviour.

So far, papers have highlighted the impact of school connectedness for school climate, self-worth and behaviour but there is also evidence that students will be more engaged with learning where they feel welcomed, wanted and valued. The second paper by Slaten and colleagues makes links between school connectedness and learning, specifically a correlation between belonging, self-regulated learning and self-efficacy.

Many of the papers in this issue have used various surveys to measure school belonging and often found these wanting in some way. Parada has developed a new scale – the School Belonging Scale – introduced in this final paper where he explores the psychometric properties. His study shows this to be internally consistent and reliable and applicable to both genders, offering researchers a further resource in this ever growing and important field.

In essence school belonging is good educational practice and should be regarded as part of the wider inclusive approach to education (Anderson & Boyle, 2015). It is essential that all students feel a sense of belonging to their school. Many students at different stages require some level of support, whether it be minor or towards the other end of a continuum. This special issue highlights many of the approaches which highlights good practice as well as facilitating a new method of assessing the level of school belonging. There are many arguments for and against support in schools (Boyle, 2007) but the main issue remains that success is dependent on a positive school ethos which facilitates belonging for all students.

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