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REVIEW ARTICLE

School Belonging: Evidence, Experts, and Everyday Gaps

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Abstract

Belonging is central to many students' educational experiences, yet the field of school belonging contends with limited theoretical grounding specifically developed for educational contexts and unresolved tensions between research and practice. This qualitative study evaluates the applicability of the meta-theoretical *Integrative Framework of Belonging* (Allen et al., 2021) to educational contexts using narrative analysis to synthesize perspectives from expert interviews and the existing literature. Semi-structured interviews organized around four antecedents—perceptions, competencies, motivations, and opportunities—and contextual, temporal, structural, and individual factors were conducted with ten internationally recognized scholars. The findings show that unresolved conceptual and practical tensions persist, including definitional ambiguity, terminology confusion, and the conflation of belonging with related constructs. Interviewees questioned the real-world applicability of existing psychological frameworks, noting their limited attention to cultural and political contexts, historically colonized settings, structural and compositional aspects of schools, and the role of social networks. Belonging was described as context-dependent and shaped by cultural dimensions, layered and historically situated contexts, and the presence of effective leadership. This study extends the Integrative Framework of Belonging by showing that school belonging is an ongoing, negotiated, and complicated process, shaped by a range of coalescing factors including, but not limited to, attributions and beliefs about belonging, perceived relational value, social, emotional, and cultural competencies, social hierarchies, variation in the need to belong, intersecting identities, and interpersonal, instructional, and institutional opportunities for belonging.

Keywords School belonging · Belonging · Social networks · Agency · Opportunities · Perceptions · Motivation · Competencies

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School belonging remains to be a construct of considerable debate, particularly over how it is defined, described, measured and applied (e.g., Allen et al., 2018a; Murray & Greenberg, 2000; Slaten et al., 2016; St-Amand et al., 2017; Wong et al., 2019). It has been extensively linked to various positive outcomes such as academic motivation and wellbeing (Allen et al., 2018a, b; Basarkod et al., 2024a, 2024b; Korpershoek et al., 2020) and long-term outcomes like employment, engagement in higher education, future substance use behaviors, and adult mental health (Allen et al., 2024a, 2025d; Parker et al., 2022). Despite extensive literature, theoretical frameworks specifically tailored to school belonging remain limited. Meta-frameworks, however, could provide guidance by identifying practical antecedents that facilitate belonging within educational contexts, as demonstrated for other constructs (e.g., Ryan & Deci, 2002; Waters & Loton, 2019). This qualitative study aims to evaluate the applicability of the meta-theoretical, the *Integrative Framework of Belonging* (Allen et al., 2021c) for school belonging. Using narrative analysis to synthesize perspectives from expert interviews and existing literature, the paper seeks to explore how school belonging is dynamically constructed and experienced. The study further aims to identify practical implications for cultivating belonging through interventions, strategies, and policies.

Background on School Belonging

School belonging has been a subject of extensive research and discussion within educational psychology and related fields (e.g., see Allen et al., 2018a; Korpershoek et al., 2020; Štremfel et al., 2024 for reviews and for a special issue on the topic, https://link.springer.com/collections/dbaeefhihh). One of the most cited definitions comes from Goodenow and Grady, who describe it as "the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others in the school social environment" (Goodenow & Grady, 1993, p. 80). While this definition provides a foundational understanding, many researchers have also approached understanding the concept through its predictors or correlates, such as academic achievement, teacher-student relationships, or peer interactions (Arslan & Coşkun, 2023; Perales & Campbell, 2020; Wong et al., 2019). Some researchers, as noted in the work of Walton and Brady (2017), extend the definition by arguing that belonging is not based on the number of friends one has, "it is a more general inference, drawn from cues, events, experiences, and relationships, about the quality of fit or potential fit between oneself and a setting" (p. 272). Allen et al. (2021c) have also extended conventional understandings of belonging by drawing on Australian Aboriginal perspectives. For example, Moreton-Robinson (2015) frames aspects of belonging as unmistakably ontological and rooted in a spiritual and sovereign connection to land, rather than being strictly social or interpersonal. Similarly, school belonging has also been described by students not just in social terms, but as encompassing a sense of safety and autonomy (Allen et al., 2025a).

A Theory–Practice Gap for School Belonging

One significant challenge in educational psychology is the disconnect between theoretical frameworks of belonging and their limited, sometimes superficial, application in school settings. For instance, Bowlby's (1969) attachment theory describes how attachment patterns persist into adulthood, which could impact student–teacher relationships. Yet teachers are rarely asked to reflect on their own attachment styles and how these might affect the relationships they form with students. Such a practice may offer more awareness about the mechanics of relationship-building for teachers than professional development on *relationship building* alone.

Similarly, Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1995) ecological systems theory provides a framework for understanding the multiple contexts influencing a student's sense of belonging, has been used widely in school belonging research (e.g., Allen et al., 2016, 2018a, 2022a; Arslan, 2022), and found school-based policy (Allen et al., 2021b), yet its practical applications arguably remain underutilized in the day-to-day practices of schools. It is worth asking whether school leaders, educators, and policymakers have the time, capacity, and resources to engage with the ecological influences that genuinely influence students' experiences of belonging.

Baumeister and Leary's (1995) *belongingness hypothesis* and Leary's (2005) *sociometer theory* conceptualize belonging as a fundamental human need and emphasize the role of perceived relational value, yet despite their potential relevance for informing targeted interventions, these theories are rarely applied in school belonging interventions and initiatives. If self-esteem functions as a social monitor, approaches that help students rationally interpret social experiences at school could be an obvious direction for building belonging. Other theories suffer the same problems with underutilization: Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (Maslow, 1968, 1971), Epstein's Framework of Parental Involvement (1992), Glasser's Choice Theory (1986), and Cohen's (1982, 1985) work on belongingness and boundary constructs in communities, as some more examples (Table 1). Each offers valuable perspectives on belonging, yet not widely or practically applied in schools.

The underutilization of belonging-related theories in educational practice could be attributed, in part, to the complexity of translating theoretical concepts into concrete, implementable strategies. There is often-insufficient dialogue between researchers, policymakers, and educators that potentially widens the theory–practice divide. To address these gaps, there is a need for increased emphasis on translational research that connects theoretical principles to practical school-based strategies.

The State of the Literature

Research on belonging has been compartmentalized, across different disciplines and also within psychology itself. Various streams of thought in the school belonging literature have been siloed. This fragmentation can lead to a lack of understanding, as researchers may focus on specific aspects or contexts of belonging without considering its broader applications or underlying mechanisms. For example, foundational works such as Durkheim (2006) who emphasized the importance of social

Table 1 Selected theoretical frameworks traditionally referenced in belonging research

Theory	Main elements
Hierarchy of Needs (Maslow, 1968, 1971)	Belonging is a core human need necessary for self-actualization
Belongingness Hypothesis (Baumeister & Leary, 1995)	Belonging is a fundamental human need and people have an intrinsic drive to form and maintain interpersonal relationships
Choice Theory (Glasser, 1986)	Belonging is one of five basic psychological needs driving human behavior
Belongingness and Boundary Constructs in a Community (Cohen, 1982, 1985)	Communities contribute to belonging through shared boundaries, norms, and symbolic membership
Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985; 2000)	Relatedness (has been used interchangeably with belonging) is one of three basic psychological needs, alongside autonomy and competence
Sense of Community Theory (McMillan & Chavis, 1986)	Belonging (described as membership) is one of four elements of community
Communities of Practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991)	Belonging develops through participation
Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1969)	Secure attachments, especially in early life, are foundational for healthy development
Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979)	Belonging is shaped by various systems that influence human development
Framework of Parental Involvement (Epstein, 1992)	Belonging is enhanced through school–family–community partnerships
Sociometer Theory (Leary, 2005)	Individuals have an internal sociometer, which influences self-esteem, and ultimately social behavior

Note. The theories outlined in this table reflect a limited and narrow collection of traditionally cited psychological and sociological theories that have shaped dominant Westernized understandings of belonging. These approaches offer only a partial view of belonging, grounded largely in Euro-American perspectives (see Allen, 2025) and may exclude longer standing understandings of belonging (e.g., philosophical, Indigenous), many of which emphasize place-based and non-relational ideals of belonging. The table also omits newer conceptual contributions that have shaped empirical and applied work, such as research on belonging uncertainty (Walton & Cohen, 2007,2011). Finally, it does not include cultural narratives, poetry, or lived experience, increasingly recognized as important in cross-disciplinary scholarship.

integration and anomie and Lewinn (1943), whose field theory emphasized the dynamic interactions between individuals and their environment, both drew attention to the importance of contextual and structural influences sometimes overlooked in traditional psychological research. Therefore, siloed approaches in belonging research risk neglecting the very factors that shape the current understanding of belonging as complex and multifaceted, ranging from individual personality traits and identities to broader systemic considerations. Such division may have contributed to the absence of a unified theory or framework to date, while also limiting the integration of cross-disciplinary and stakeholder perspectives—not to mention ontological, philosophical, spiritual, and religious knowledge sources, including those based on traditional Indigenous understandings—all of which predates what is typically recognized as *research*, and as a consequence, may have been overlooked in

current studies of belonging and school belonging. Therefore, there is a pressing need for an integrative approach that can bridge these gaps and offer a more malleable understanding of belonging. Such an observation resembles the well-known parable of the *blind men and the elephant*, where each man touches a different part of the elephant and subsequently believes the entire creature resembles just that part (as told by Saxe, 1872/2016). Just as the blind men misunderstood the elephant, research on belonging can fail to capture the full picture without an interdisciplinary approach from various fields to form a complete understanding.

An additional concern for research, of relevance to understanding school belonging, is *recency bias* or *empirical ageism*, where older work is neglected. While there may be valid reasons for this, such as accessibility issues or critiques of ethnocentric or Eurocentric perspectives (Joseph, 2015; Shuttleworth-Edwards, 2016; Sternberg, 2018; Tettegah et al., 2023), it is worth considering whether valuable insights from older theories have been prematurely dismissed. This tension is particularly relevant in the study of complex constructs like belonging, which are deeply influenced by historical, social, and cultural contexts (Carter et al., 2014; Jussim et al., 2016). The current emphasis in social sciences to focus on the most recent research, typically published within the last five to ten years, risks sidelining valuable insights from foundational theories and ancient philosophical concepts. For instance, David McClelland's (1985) concept of the need for affiliation, Aristotle's concept of *philia* often translated to *friendship*, and the Confucian idea of *ren*—or human-heartedness, representing thought on empathy, ethics, and moral character—each contribute a relevant understanding of belonging. The potential consequences of a recency bias in belonging research risks real stagnation in the field. Scholars may overlook foundational work, leading them to circle around the same problems, gaps, and justification rather than progress the field forward. A more balanced approach would integrate both historical work with contemporary findings to advance school belonging research in a meaningful way. In the same way, intergenerational dialogue between belonging researchers is also important.

Applicability of an Integrative Framework of Belonging

Allen et al's. (2021c) Integrative Framework of Belonging is a pragmatic attempt to capture existing empirical, conceptual, and theoretical work on belonging within a unified structure. Organized predominantly around four primary antecedents—perceptions, competencies, motivations, and opportunities—shaped by both systemic features and individual experiences, the framework was never intended to be a prescriptive model. Its purpose was to synthesize the conclusions and understandings of belonging that have emerged through research and theory at the time, with the flexibility to evolve as new knowledge and research findings emerge. The framework was primarily designed as a practical guide to inform interventions and approaches for use by people working with groups and individuals to foster belonging in their respective contexts, such as leaders, psychologists, and educators. The intention responds to a broader provocation: *Why this constant pursuit of "why"?* Because within belonging research, the *why*, is already well established through its

documented benefits. The framework therefore sought to address the *how* to support the practical application of belonging and to invite continued dialogue about its components and use, including its applicability to specific contexts like schools.

Rationale and Research Questions

Research on school belonging continues to grow, but there remains limited theoretical guidance, siloed contributions, and consequently, limited translational value for educational settings. This paper aims to contribute towards closing these gaps through a narrative analysis of expert interviews and current research to examine the applicability of the *Integrative Framework of Belonging* (Allen et al., 2021c) to educational contexts. At the heart of this conversational, research-based approach is the intention to capture multiple perspectives. This notion aligns with the principle of *Anekantavada*, a Jain concept that emphasizes the value of considering multiple viewpoints to understand complex constructs. This study therefore examines school belonging through the lens of the integrative framework, aiming to bridge varied perspectives and be guided by the following research questions:

1. How applicable are existing theories and frameworks of school belonging to current educational contexts?
2. How do perceptions, competencies, motivations, and opportunities contribute to the concept of school belonging within educational environments?
3. What is the role of contextual, temporal, and individual factors in influencing the experience of school belonging?

Methodology

This study used a qualitative design that employed Integrated Narrative Review with Interview Methodology (INRAM) and narrative analysis to evaluate the application of the *Integrative Framework of Belonging* (Allen et al., 2021c) to theory and research on school belonging. The approach used established research methods (e.g., narrative review and interview methodology) to situate empirical and theoretical work on school belonging alongside conceptual and experiential perspectives from leading scholars through semi-structured interviews.

Participant Selection

Interviewees were purposively selected for their recognized contributions to the field of school belonging. Participants included scholars whose work has significantly advanced research, theory, measurement, or practice, and who are widely acknowledged for shaping current discourse on belonging in educational contexts. The final sample comprised Professor Emerita Lynley Anderman, Distinguished Professor Richard Lee, Distinguished Garonzik Professor Emeritus Mark Leary, Distinguished

Professor Emeritus Michael J. Furlong, Distinguished Professor Emeritus Michael L. Wehmeyer, Distinguished Professor Emeritus Vincent Tinto, Senior Full Professor (Gewoon Hoogleraar) Mieke Van Houtte, Professor Emeritus Kathryn Riley, Professor Christine Logel, and Associate Professor Gokmen Arslan.

The selection process was informed initially by the author's professional networks, with the aim of identifying scholars with recognized expertise in school belonging. To ensure representation beyond personal connections, targeted searches were also conducted using databases such as Web of Science, Scopus, and Google Scholar to identify highly cited and conceptually influential researchers in the field. The intention was to include scholars working across different research clusters, methodological traditions, countries, contexts, and theoretical orientations.

In total, 23 individuals were invited to participate. Of these, 10 accepted and completed interviews, 6 initially agreed but did not return materials, and 7 were unable to participate. Reasons for non-participation included time constraints, editorial involvement in the special issue for which this paper was prepared (raising concerns about perceived conflicts of interest), and institutional responsibilities such as senior leadership roles. Several scholars who had initially expressed interest became unreachable or were unable to be contacted following early correspondence.

Recruitment efforts included outreach to internationally recognized scholars, including those based outside the USA, in acknowledgement of the field's strong US-centric orientation. Efforts were also made to invite scholars from underrepresented groups, recognizing the existing limitations of the literature and the need for broader inclusion in conceptual and applied scholarship. In addition, invitations were extended to researchers working within structured research programs or collaborations, particularly those advancing work on social identity, social psychology, and social belonging, given the relevance of these perspectives to contemporary belonging discourse.

While the final sample does not represent all possible viewpoints, it includes a purposively selected group of individuals with extensive theoretical and applied work in the area of school belonging. The biographies and website links of the interviewees are provided in Appendix A.

Interview Approach

Semi-structured interviews were conducted via email with each expert participant. This approach allowed for thoughtful, in-depth responses and facilitated follow-up questions when needed. The interview questions (Appendix B) were crafted to align with key themes identified in the narrative review and the Integrative Framework of Belonging (Allen et al., 2021c) which served as a conceptual foundation for the interviews. Interviewees were asked to reflect on the applicability of existing theories to school belonging, comment on how the components of the integrative framework (competencies, opportunities, motivations, and perceptions) relate to school belonging, discuss the roles of contextual, temporal, and individual factors in school belonging, and identify any aspects of school belonging not adequately addressed by the framework. This approach allowed experts to draw upon their knowledge and

experience while also engaging critically with current theoretical perspectives. The open-ended nature of the questions encouraged participants to introduce their perspectives and knowledge and address any areas they felt were overlooked in existing research.

Data Analysis

The narrative analysis process for this study followed an iterative, interpretive approach to synthesize perspectives gained from expert interviews with findings from a narrative literature review. Interview responses were narratively analyzed to explore themes and components drawn from the Integrative Framework of Belonging (Allen et al., 2021c). While the framework served as the initial premise for the study, as well as for organizing and interpreting the data, as the analysis progressed, the narrative structure was continually refined and reorganized to integrate perspectives and research. Throughout the process, the researcher's expertise in the field of school belonging guided the interpretation and synthesis of data.

Researcher Positionality

The positionality of the author of this article emerges from their own perspective and their critical examination of current psychological research practices, particularly in relation to school belonging. Their position is grounded in the belief that a fundamental concern for the field is the accessibility of scholarly knowledge for educators and school leaders, who stand to benefit most from the knowledge derived from research. The author believes that the traditional academic publishing model, with its emphasis on peer-reviewed journals, can create barriers for practitioners seeking to implement evidence-based strategies in their schools. The author of this article advocates for a shift in how research is traditionally communicated and disseminated, to more accessible formats, using plain language, minimizing jargon, and incorporating different voices and perspectives, particularly from stakeholders, to bridge the gap between academic research and practical application in educational settings. Furthermore, the author also argues for an integrative approach to school belonging research, addressing the tendency towards sub-disciplinary isolation and the underutilization of foundational studies.

As an Educational and Developmental Psychologist, the author's research on school belonging has likely been shaped by her own schooling, which included experiences that both supported and disrupted her sense of belonging: grade acceleration, grade retention, bullying, racism, friendship difficulties, and socioeconomic challenges. Her mixed-race background, with an Anglo mother and a biological Indo-Fijian father and family's stories of abandonment, adoption, indentured labor, displacement, and migration, also contribute to her understanding of belonging from a historical and intergenerational perspective. Her previous work as a school psychologist further influenced her understanding of its importance, highlighted the need for all schools to have access to ways to build belonging for all students, and exposed the gap between research and practice.

Ethics

Ethical approval of this study was provided by the Monash University Human Research Ethics Committee (Project ID40200).

Results and Discussion

To support clarity and coherence in the presentation of findings, interview data and literature were narratively synthesized around the study's three primary research questions to support the exploration of how the Integrative Framework of Belonging (Allen et al., 2021c) applies to school contexts. The major narrative themes generated through this analysis provide the conceptual structure for the discussion that follows. Table 2 provides an overview of the research questions and associated themes drawn from the expert interviews, serving as a roadmap for the results and discussion.

How Applicable are Existing Theories and Frameworks of School Belonging to Current Educational Contexts?

Considerations for Theoretical Fit

The adequacy of psychological theories and frameworks in offering a practical tool in educational contexts is subject to debate (Basso & Cottini, 2023; Sternberg, 2008). One example is Piaget's stages of cognitive development (Piaget, 1952), referenced by Hattie (2012) (i.e., Piagetian programs) as impacting student outcomes. However, the stage-based, age-related nature of Piaget's model may not align with contemporary educational contexts, where student learning often occurs in non-linear ways. López et al. (2025) draws attention to other limitations, specifically frameworks that fail to address race, language, and systemic marginalization, sidestepping socio-political influences and limiting their relevance for marginalized students. Their findings challenge conventional theories by showing that approaches like cultural affirmation and the disruption of deficit discourses are critical for student belonging. As such, existing psychological theories may not be easily or readily applied to school belonging, particularly when addressing the real-world issues that schools face. This section focuses on the applicability (or lack thereof) of existing theories to current educational contexts. The interviewees raised several concerns, including definitional problems and confusion with terminology.

Definitional Problems and Terminology Confusion Leary explains, "The problem for research psychologists has been twofold: (a) we are actually dealing with a number of different, though related, psychological processes that we often combine under a single label (such as "belonging") and (b) we trust that our research participants are using the terms the way we do when they answer questions about their interpersonal

Table 2 Interview themes on school belonging

Research question	Guiding themes	Narrative themes
How applicable are existing theories and frameworks of school belonging to current educational contexts?	Considerations for theoretical fit	Definitional problems terminology confusion Multiplicity of meaning Real-world applicability Structural and compositional aspects of schools Fluctuations in belonging
How do perceptions, competencies, motivations, and opportunities contribute to the concept of school belonging within educational environments?	Perceptions	Attributions Perceived relational value Beliefs about belonging Perceptions of others
	Competencies	Social and emotional competencies Cultural competencies Social hierarchies and competence perceptions Behavior Relational skills
	Motivations	Autonomy, competence, and relatedness Variation in the *need* to belong Avoidance of rejection
	Opportunities	Opportunities for engagement Interpersonal, instructional, and institutional opportunities Opportunities for social connection
What is the role of contextual, temporal, and individual factors in influencing the experience of school belonging?	Contextual influences	Cultural and political contexts Historically colonized contexts Layered contexts Cultural dimensions and the broader context Effective leadership
	Temporal factors	Transition points Developmental stages Belonging as dynamic and evolving
	Individual differences	Cognitive factors Intersecting identities Personality traits Self-esteem and attachment styles Social identity threat Interactions with context

experiences, but they often are not. The result is a messy hodgepodge of concepts and research findings that look too complex to address from a single theoretical perspective."

Leary reflects further on the problems with definitions and terminology: "For starters, what do we (as researchers) or ordinary people (as participants) mean when we/they talk about "belonging?" My view is that we (and they) are sometimes talking about belonging, but are often talking about other related things, such as being accepted, fitting in, mattering, being included, being valued, and so on. For example, in the case of children at school, I get the sense that being accepted by peers is much more important than belonging per se: a student with some close friends at school seems to do well socially and emotionally even if they don't particularly feel like they fit in, belong, or matter in the school environment more broadly."

The definitional problems may be faced by researchers and participants, as well as also extend to educators and school leaders. Wehmeyer comments, "I think education settings struggle to define belonging. There is more discussion about 'including' all children, but that has been recently criticized as being too passive and often conflated with 'participating.' In recent years, the idea of 'inclusion' has been defined by efforts to ensure diversity, equity, and belonging, where the latter refers to being a part of and contributing to the school community. To that end, it comes closer to the ideas in Self-Determination Theory pertaining to 'relatedness', which infers a relationship with mutual benefit and the perception that one is valued and cared for. I'm not sure that 'belonging' has that deep of meaning in the school context, however. On the plus side, I do think that schools have thought about and attempted to create 'inclusive' communities for a long time… efforts in my field, special education, to promote what is now referred to as inclusion began in the 1980s. But, as discussed above, I think terms like 'including' and 'belonging' tend to be viewed mainly as students being in a classroom rather than what most theories of belonging would suggest. Belonging is too often conflated with participating."

While terminology has been a long-standing problem in school belonging research, there have been more specific challenges in distinguishing belonging from acceptance (Libbey, 2004). Leary affirms, "The big one is the failure to distinguish belonging from acceptance: much of what I've seen about school belonging is about personal acceptance by one's peers and not about 'belonging' to groups. That's partly a shortcoming of the term Baumeister and Leary used when they wrote about the 'need to belong.' Their definition was much, much broader than 'belonging' per se ('human beings have a pervasive drive to form and maintain at least a minimum quantity of lasting, positive, and significant interpersonal relationships'), but the field got stuck on the term. I have written about the importance of considering both belonging and acceptance. Both constructs involve a desire to be valued as a relational partner—either as a group member (belonging) or in a personal relationship (acceptance)—but different solutions come to mind when we think about belonging and acceptance separately."

Multiplicity of Meaning Lee states that "Belongingness is multi-faceted and context-dependent. To belong to a group is not the same as feeling like you belong. Feeling

like you belong at the moment is not the same as carrying around within you a sense of belonging that gives you the comfort and confidence to move through your social world. These different expressions of belonging often get conflated. Similarly, belonging in a school or educational setting may vary depending on the specific context, classroom, grade, or school as a whole. Belonging with peers is similarly not the same as belonging to an institution. Researchers often talk about belonging as if it is one concept or construct, but it can be many. At the same time, people use different words to describe the same phenomenon. There is, to some extent, a jingle-jangle fallacy problem."

Real World Applicability The gaps in the adequacy and applicability of current belonging theories and frameworks to educational contexts become particularly evident when examining their practical implementation in *real-world* educational contexts. As Logel observes, "Faculty have a huge role to play in creating a culture of belonging in their classroom, and administrators and leaders have a similarly huge role to play creating a culture of belonging at their institutions." This observation highlights a limitation in current theories, particularly in their insufficient consideration of how social networks influence students' sense of belonging and, consequently, their academic persistence (Tinto, 2017), which Tinto (2017) elaborates on:

"The limitations of our current theories of belonging, specifically their failure to address the importance of social networks to sense of belonging and in turn persistence, underlie the limitations of our ability to apply existing theories of belonging to real-world educational settings. For instance, it does not tell faculty how they might structure student engagement in the classroom to promote students' sense of belonging. Nevertheless, we have more than enough research to tell us that the use of pedagogies that require students to work together, such as problem and project-based learning, is more likely to promote a sense of belonging, at least to other students, than would many lecture-based pedagogies. But the degree that is the case also depends on the attributes, values, and attitudes of other students in the group. In this regard, faculty need to be intentional in how they organize their classes so as not to inadvertently marginalize some students."

Structural and Compositional Aspects of Schools Van Houtte points out the often-overlooked structural and compositional aspects of schools, challenging the predominant emphasis on individual-level factors in the discourse on school belonging and its consequences. "What we have noticed in our work on school belonging is that theories largely focus on the relevance, that is, the consequences, of belonging, and situate the causes often at an individual level, forgetting the context of belonging. At this 'individual' level, socio-demographic characteristics are considered, framing belonging in ingroup-outgroup relations. This is interesting, but in doing this, structural and compositional features of the school might play an important role, and there is relatively little empirical work focusing on this, let alone theories underpinning the impact of the school context. Theories explaining the possible impact of structural and compositional school features on sense of belonging still need to be

developed based on the research. I need to stress here that one could see this as a limitation, but at the same time, it creates an opportunity for school effects research with a sense of belonging as an outcome." Van Houtte's perspective emphasizes the need to better understand and recognize how a school's structural and compositional features can both support and limit student belonging.

Fluctuations in Belonging Drawing from her own research, expertise, and knowledge of the field (Logel et al., 2021; Mallett et al., 2011; Walton & Cohen, 2007), Logel introduces another important dimension to consider: "Standard definitions of belonging tend to see it as a continuum from non-belonging to high belonging. But there is also the degree to which a student's sense of belonging—whether in their peer group, class, school, or in education in general – is stable vs unstable. Research on belonging uncertainty shows that students can also report the degree to which they feel like that sometimes they feel like they belong and sometimes they don't, and the degree to which, when good things happen, they feel like they belong there, but when bad things happen, they feel like they don't belong there. This *belonging uncertainty* correlates with overall level of belonging but is not the same thing. Students who have belonging uncertainty will experience their sense of belonging in that context having ups and downs – getting a bad grade on a test, or having no one to sit with at lunch, can lower their belonging for a while, whereas being chosen for a lab group or having an instructor respond positively to their questions might increase their belonging for a while. Students who have a higher average level of belonging, but also have higher belonging uncertainty, will be at risk of negative outcomes if they hit enough bumps in the road of their academic journey."

Logel's identification of the importance of "belonging uncertainty" is a reminder of the dynamic element of our understanding of school belonging, suggesting that belonging is not just a static state but a fluctuating experience influenced by various contextual factors. This concept aligns with Van Houtte's call for greater attention to structural and compositional features of schools, as these elements likely play a significant role in shaping the stability or instability of students' sense of belonging.

Lee suggests the need for further research. "While significant progress has been made in the conceptualization and measurement of belonging, there is still work to be done. Of course, this is true of scholarship on most topics, so let me elaborate. Theories of belonging have been mainly driven by social psychology, such as the foundational work by Baumeister and Leary. What is missing or what is less well studied is the ways in which belonging, including school belonging, develops over time. That is, what is the developmental progression of belonging and what are the psychological mechanisms that facilitate or hinder its development, as well as explain the ways in which it manifests and changes." Arslan offers the reminder, "that school belonging is associated with various school-based outcomes and overall quality of life. A satisfied need for belonging in school fosters youth's social-emotional health and wellbeing, which in turn promotes a happier and healthier school life." Thus, ensuring research on school belonging continues is essential.

How do Perceptions, Competencies, Motivations, Opportunities and Contribute to the Concept of School Belonging Within Educational Environments?

In exploring the adaptability and relevance of current theories and frameworks to school contexts, interviewees were asked how perceptions, competencies, motivations, and opportunities as well as the contextual, temporal, and individual considerations, as outlined in Allen et al. (2021c), build an understanding of belonging in educational contexts.

Perceptions

Arslan posits that "school belonging is the feeling and belief of being an integral and accepted member of the school community and while it involves students perceiving that they are respected, supported, and connected to their peers, teachers, and the broader school environment it does not mean that all students experience belonging in the same way. Some may report a sense of belonging because they feel included and accepted, while others may report it because they do not feel rejected or excluded." One mechanism for why this occurs is because students perceive experiences differently. Perceptions encompass individuals' cognitive attributions, thoughts, and beliefs about their sense of belonging (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Walton & Brady, 2017). It includes how students perceive their social status, acceptance, and the inclusivity of the school environment (Arslan & Duru, 2017; Walton & Cohen, 2011). Logel emphasizes the important role of perceptions in belonging research: "Research and theorizing on social support, which is similar but distinct from belonging and often studied in health and health psychology, finds that social support causes better health outcomes, and it's not just objective social support that matters – perceptions of social support are excellent, and distinct, predictors of health outcomes. It is similar with belonging – you could conceptualize objective measures of belonging, like how many people in a given context choose you to join their group project, help you when you drop your pencil case, or sit with you at lunch. But researchers almost always measure belonging using self-reports of people's general perceptions of their belonging, because that's what matters for predicting people's outcomes" (see Gillen-O'Neel, 2021; Gopalan & Brady, 2020; Lambert et al., 2013; Pedler et al., 2022).

Attributions Logel further highlights the importance of attributions in shaping perceptions of belonging: "Attributions are crucial. Social-belonging interventions are designed around the idea that people, to varying degrees depending on their social identity and the context, are vigilant for cues indicating the degree to which they or people like them belong or are seen to belong. Those cues are often ambiguous, and they must make attributions – for example, having no one to be partners on a team project could be because they don't belong there, or could be because they haven't had time to get to know people yet. Interventions that provide a framework for making those attributions (i.e., "it's normal to face challenges and have times of questioning belonging, and that's not a sign of nonbelonging and will pass with time")

can, therefore, have significant impacts on people's experiences and outcomes without even changing the actual context or actual cues of belonging they are seeing."

Social belonging interventions, informed by attributional theory, demonstrate how perceptions of belonging can be influenced by providing frameworks for interpreting social cues (LaCosse et al., 2020; Logel et al., 2021; Walton & Brady, 2022; Walton et al., 2023). These interventions offer a notable exception to the general lack of applied implications from theoretical work in this area, providing a strong body of work on effective strategies (see Allen et al., 2025b), where in contrast, school belonging interventions remain scarce in general (see Allen et al., 2022c for review). The approach of social belonging interventions recognizes that past experiences often shape these perceptions and can significantly influence future interactions and feelings of belonging (Coie, 2004). Aligning with this understanding of perceptions' centrality to belonging, Leary's emphasis on perceived relational value throughout his work has been a key aspect of belonging and acceptance, emphasizing how individuals interpret their relational standing with others (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Leary, & Allen, 2011).

Perceived Relational Value Leary recalls his early work with Baumeister and their well-known and cited 1995 article, *The need to belong: Desire for interpersonal attachments as a fundamental human motivation*. "We discussed what to call this thing [belonging] at great length and finally settled on the need to 'belong.' Even though we defined the construct much more broadly than belonging per se, people started thinking of it only as 'belonging' to groups in a narrow sense. That's the reason I started talking about 'perceived relational value' as the core feature of a sense of both belonging and acceptance – to narrow my focus to what I saw as the main ingredient and move everything else to the periphery. I felt like I knew how to make people feel they were relationally valued by others better than I knew how to make them feel like they 'belonged' or 'were accepted.' It became even clearer when we showed that people felt rejected even when they belonged and were included if they didn't perceive they were relationally valued."

Building on Leary's understanding, Furlong's focus on recognizing students as valued individuals within the school environment further elaborates on the nature of belonging, highlighting the critical role of individual beliefs and experiences in shaping one's sense of belonging. Furlong adds, "My way of thinking lately is that it is more important that a student believes and experiences that some people at school recognize them as a valued human being."

The subjective nature of belonging in educational settings can also be highlighted by students' varying perceptions of their engagement and relationships within the campus community. For example, Tinto contends, "Belonging is commonly referred to as a sense of belonging and is unavoidably a reflection of how students perceive and draw meaning from their engagement with others on campus. Do they see themselves as valued by other students, faculty, and staff? Do they feel safe on campus? However, how one explains why one student will see [themselves] as belonging while another, in the same situation, will not is beyond the ability of our theories to predict." Tinto's reminder bridges these individual perceptions

to the broader context of student engagement and interaction within the campus, emphasizing the variability in how students perceive and interpret their sense of belonging in similar environments. His work over the years (e.g., Tinto, 2012, 2017), which derived from Hurtado and Carter (1997), has demonstrated just how important the role of students' perceptions are in higher education, emphasizing the subjective meanings students derive from their experiences, particularly for students from historically marginalized racial, ethnic, and economic backgrounds (Engstrom & Tinto, 2008).

Beliefs About Belonging The ongoing debate in the literature regarding the measurement of belonging, particularly in terms of how self-perceptions and beliefs shape this construct, continues to be an ongoing issue (Mahar et al., 2014). According to Van Houtte, "In [my] opinion, sense of belonging should be measured as much as possible in terms of beliefs or feelings (self-perceptions). I'm not sure whether perceptions influence a sense of belonging if this school belonging is a [self]perception in itself?".

Perceptions of Others The complexity of school belonging, in terms of perceptions, is further illustrated by the interchange between personal beliefs and the perceptions of others in the educational environment. Wehmeyer suggests that "Perceptions play a significant role, but it is a two-way street. That is, personal beliefs about oneself play a role in school belonging, but so do one's beliefs about how others perceive them. Students must believe that they are competent and that others perceive them as competent."

School belonging is concerned with how individuals perceive their relationships, social value, and fit within the educational systems (Walton & Brady, 2017). These perceptions, influenced by both individual experience and systemic conditions, reinforce the need for social and emotional competencies. It is not enough to care about how others see us alone, it is the capacity to respond and navigate these interpersonal dynamics which require a degree of social and emotional skill. These competencies are recognized as essential in the school belonging literature (Allen et al., 2017), supporting students' ability to interpret social cues, manage emotions, and sustain relationships that make belonging possible.

Competencies

Social and Emotional Competencies This aspect of belonging focuses on the competencies, capabilities, and skills that facilitate a sense of belonging. These competencies include, but are not limited to, social skills, such as communication and conflict resolution, to more complex emotional intelligence abilities, like empathy, self-regulation, and coping skills (Frydenberg et al., 2009). Arslan suggests that, "Specifically, strengths-based strategies can enhance students' sense of belonging at school." That is, the ability to recognize strengths in self and others as well as using personal strengths is an important social and emotional competency.

Cultural Competencies Competencies, as an antecedent to belonging, also includes cultural competencies (Basarkod et al., 2024a, 2024b). When students perceive their school as culturally congruent and active in intercultural education, such as learning how to represent, respect, and communicate across cultural differences, they report stronger wellbeing and a greater sense of belonging, irrespective of their background. One example can be seen in the challenges faced by monolingual English-speaking teachers in countries like the USA and Australia, where many educators quietly struggle to pronounce the names of students from cultural backgrounds different from their own (Swee-Lin Price, 2007). This difficulty is not necessarily due to a lack of effort but often reflects a practical gap in cultural competencies. This issue has potential tangible impacts: students may be called upon less frequently in classrooms or referred to less often due to others' reluctance to mispronounce their names (Kohli & Solórzano, 2012). It is possible that belonging could also be compromised when students feel pressure to alter the pronunciation of their names to fit dominant linguistic norms, or change their name altogether. Considering the repeated emphasis in school belonging literature on the importance of teachers knowing students' names for creating conditions for belonging (Allen et al., 2023), the potential alienation of certain students in educational contexts becomes a significant concern, particularly in respect to their sense of belonging (or lack of) (Cena et al., 2021; Hurem et al., 2021).

Social Hierarchies and Competence Perception Another critical aspect to consider in examining how competencies influence belonging is their role in forming social and other hierarchies within educational settings. Wehmeyer observes, "I think competencies play a role in creating social and other hierarchies within schools. Students who have limited social, emotional, or academic competence are often marginalized. Schools that promote belonging create taxonomies in which every student can be successful, perceive themselves as competent, and have others perceive them as competent." Indeed, research on bullying, which represents an extreme example of hierarchy and power differentials, and its well-established links to belonging (Allen et al., 2022a; Arslan et al., 2022; Segovia-González et al., 2023; Sharif-Nia et al., 2023), demonstrates how using social referents within a classroom is a highly effective intervention strategy (Paluck & Shepherd, 2012). Research in biology and neuroscience indicates that individuals can rapidly detect the social status of others, drawing on a range of cues, including physical strength and sociocultural indicators like job titles and educational attainment (see Koski et al., 2015).

Behavior Regarding the factors that contribute to social rejection in educational settings, Harrist and Bradley's (2002) work identifies three primary reasons for rejection: behavior, difference, or reputation. It is behavior, characterized by being aggressive, socially withdrawn, disruptive, uncooperative, hyperactive, anxious, immature, lacking prosocial skills like sharing, or just simply differing behavior, which accounts for approximately 60% of sociometrically rejected children. Leary highlights the interaction that occurs between student behavior and peer acceptance: "I know that this point is sensitive, if not taboo for some educators, a good deal of the problems that stem from low belonging and acceptance (though certainly

not all of them) are due to students' behavior. That is, some students are dismissed, avoided, and rejected by their peers for seemingly good reasons, and it seems misguided (and contrary to human nature) to try to get students to value having relationships with those who regularly behave in antisocial, disruptive, callous, rude, and antagonistic ways. As adults, we generally don't do that, steering clear of those who behave in such ways as much as possible, so I'm not sure what approach is needed to help those kinds of students with respect to belonging/acceptance. Programs that stress socio-emotional learning and social skills may help some students whose own behavior leads to rejection, but those programs are not explicitly about enhancing belonging/acceptance."

Relational Skills Exploring the significance of relationship-building in schools and the ability to build positive, trusting relationships emerges as a critical factor for school belonging in the literature (Allen et al., 2021a, 2021b, 2021c, 2021d; Drolet & Arcand, 2013). Van Houtte suggests, "Being able to build warm relationships is crucial, I think. Culture is a feature of the group and another level as such. It is important that groups establish cohesion and building trust. Students in technical/vocational schools have a lower sense of belonging than students in academic schools due to lower faculty trust in these schools. This shows that students' belonging also depends on teachers' competencies regarding trust in students." This is an important reminder. Relational skills extend beyond individual students and encompass the broader relational climate shaped by educators. The literature also strongly supports the idea that teachers play a central role in co-creating environments of trust and connection that contribute to student's feeling a sense of school belonging (see Allen et al., 2018a, for a meta-analysis of teacher–student relationships and belonging).

The relationships that surround students are indisputably important for school belonging. However, the role of individual motivation as a determinant of belonging is less commonly emphasized in the literature. This may reflect the deeply personal and internal nature of motivation, which makes it more difficult to observe, measure, or influence compared to external factors like school climate or teacher relationships. Yet, motivation serves as an important aspect of belonging.

Motivations

This domain addresses the intrinsic and extrinsic motivators influencing the desire for students to belong. Applied to school belonging, intrinsic motivators may include the fundamental need to belong or an inner drive for connection, acceptance, and meaningful relationships. Extrinsic motivators associated with school belonging relate to external rewards and could include academic achievement or social approval and recognition from peers and school staff.

Autonomy, Competence, and Relatedness Self-Determination Theory's (SDT) (Ryan & Deci, 2002) emphasis on the need for relatedness parallels with school belonging. In some research, relatedness in SDT and belonging are used

interchangeably, reflecting their conceptual similarity, particularly around the people-related aspect of belonging (Van Ryzin et al., 2009). Wehmeyer highlights the relevance of SDT by stating, "Obviously, I would point toward SDT as describing my beliefs about the role of motivation in schools. When students perceive themselves to have autonomy and choice opportunities, view themselves as competent, and have a sense of relatedness, they are more intrinsically motivated and likelier to experience belonging."

Variation in the Need to Belong Just as individuals vary in their needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness, the *need* for belonging can also differ significantly from person to person (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Current measures of school belonging typically categorize students' sense of belonging into high, moderate, or low levels. However, these assessments may be more informative if paired with a *need to belong* scale (Leary et al., 2013). This approach recognizes that a student with a low need for belonging and correspondingly low belonging levels may not require the same level of intervention or support as a student with a high need to belong who experiences low belonging. Adding to this, Tinto states, "The simple truth is that not all students feel the need to belong. While this is more likely to be the case among older students and students who commute, it is also the case that some students have little interest in belonging. Their needs may be entirely academic. Though they may persist, they may not benefit from many positive outcomes of social engagements with others on campus." Some research has found cross-country differences related to belonging scores, and one explanation for this may be related to a need to belong (Johnson et al., 2023; Liu & Lu, 2011).

Leary articulates, "If I personally had to develop a focused analysis of belonging and acceptance in any particular context, I'd fall back on the idea that people are motivated to develop and maintain relational value in other people's eyes, then dive into the specific variables that are most likely to facilitate and undermine that quest and the consequences of failing to do so for a particular population in a particular context (such as students at school)."

Building on Leary's thoughts into the relational aspects of belonging, Van Houtte provides a reminder of the importance of individual differences in motivation. "Motivation might be one of the characteristics students differ in, so it is one of the individual differences that need to be considered when trying to understand different feelings of belonging. Not all students are motivated in the same way to belong. Here, as well, reference groups might be important, which is linked to several facets of belonging. Does the student feel supported by peers or rather by teachers, and is being supported by these different groups motivating the student?".

Avoidance of Rejection Logel supports the notion of motivation people have towards belonging by noting that "one relevant source of motivation has a number of different names but can be summarized as *protecting the self* and *avoiding painful emotions*. People sacrifice opportunities to increase their belonging because they

carry risks of rejection or bad feelings – they choose not to attend a student mixer, or not to ask their classmate to study together, or not to ask a question in class, to avoid the possibility that it will result in painful rejection in the short term, but in doing so, they miss crucial opportunities to increase their belonging and have more positive experiences in the long term."

To conclude, given the well-established health and psychological benefits of school belonging (Arslan, 2018; Steiner et al., 2019), it is worth asking whether we should actively encourage an individual's motivation to belong—just as we promote other behaviors linked to positive psychological and physical health outcomes, such as physical activity or sun protection. For example, studies show that for the concept of collaboration, it is not the act of working together that predicts belonging, but students' initial willingness to engage (Allen et al., 2022a; Korpershoek et al., 2020). Motivation is an important antecedent that may assist our capacity to recognize and act on available opportunities. Building the motivation to belong may help students better access the interpersonal and institutional resources already around them.

Opportunities

This antecedent refers to the availability and accessibility of social and academic opportunities that can promote a sense of belonging. These opportunities can be formal, such as school clubs or sports teams, or informal, like peer interactions and teacher-student relationships. Numerous research studies have converged on the understanding that opportunities are fundamental for student belonging, particularly regarding opportunities for social connection (Gray, 2017; Gray et al., 2020a, b; Gray et al., 2022; Tinto, 1975; Tinto, 2003).

The importance of opportunities can be seen as implicitly related to Tinto's work (Tinto, 1975, 2003), where his model of student motivation and persistence suggests that the more opportunities students engage in academically and socially, the more likely they are to feel integrated into the college environment (Tinto, 1993).

Opportunities for Engagement Tinto explains, the greater the opportunities students must engage, the greater, on average, are students likely to feel they belong. But whether they do depend, in large part, on students' perceptions of the engagements that those opportunities provide. Not all engagements yield a sense of belonging. Be that the case, it still behooves the university to provide greater opportunities for engagements of varying types with differing students. This applies as well to the classroom and how faculty structure the classroom to provide not only student engagement but also engagement with other students with whom the student may not otherwise engage. A case in point is one of the findings of my study of students who participated in racially and socially diverse learning communities that employed cooperative group activities. When I asked one student about his experiences in such a group, the student said, "I think more people should be educated in this form of education. I mean because it's good. We learn not only how to interact

with ourselves but with other people of different races, different sizes, different colors, different everything. I mean, it just makes it better. Not only do you learn more, but you also learn better." When asked what he meant by "learn better," he replied, "I was able to hear and learn from the voices of students whose voices I would not otherwise hear."

Interpersonal, Instructional, and Institutional Opportunities DeLeon Gray's research (Gray et al., 2018, 2020a, b, 2022) has been instrumental in expanding our understanding of how opportunities impact specific student populations, particularly Black and Latinx students. His work has explored how students perceive and engage with the opportunities available to them in educational contexts, such as opportunities to receive meaningful feedback, learn communally, make real-world connections, express emotions, receive individualized support, and share ideas and opinions (Gray et al., 2022). Gray's research highlights how a sense of belonging is influenced by the availability and nature of these opportunities; these opportunities encompass more than just interpersonal opportunities but also instructional and institutional structures (Gray, 2017; Gray et al., 2022, 2018). Van Houtte concurs, "a sociological point of view is crucial" when considering opportunities to belong. She claims that opportunities "should not only be accounted for at the individual level but also at the level of the school. So, next to the opportunities seen by the student (subjectively), also objective school features need to be considered."

Opportunities for Social Connection As suggested by Gray, there are many facilitators of opportunities to belong, and Leary emphasizes the role of peer relationships. He notes, "Many of the interventions that promote belonging/acceptance in schools focus on how teachers relate to students (for example, greeting every student by name as they arrive each day), which is fine, but I suspect that most of the variance in belonging/acceptance in school arises from peer relationships. There have obviously been efforts to promote peer relationships both in providing opportunities for interaction, connection, and group memberships and in getting students to treat one another better, but these probably need more attention."

Furlong also supports the importance of relationships: "It is less important if they [children and students] have a very high level of holding a sense of belonging to the school as an entity, although feeling having positive regard for the school is an indicator that the student is likely to feel valued. Each student should be able to identify at any time, at least 2–3 adults and 2–3 peers at school that they believe hold them in positive regard."

Many researchers have also considered the "why" in why opportunities to belong may be important (Allen et al., 2022b; Gray et al., 2018; Murphy & Zirkel, 2015; Roffey et al., 2019); we see elements of such exploration especially in social identity research (Hogg, 2001; Hughes, 2010), person-centered work (George & Selimos, 2019; Tudor, 2023), and work that has focused on pride (Brannon & Lin, 2021; Hernández et al., 2017). Leary ponders, "I wonder whether many students' choices—to join an athletic team or run for student council, for example—is partly

an effort to increase status and pride in the quest for relational value within the school." Gray et al.'s (2018) work on *standing out* and *fitting in* within educational contexts may also intersect why opportunities are critical during adolescence where individuality and conformity become most important for identity formation.

To conclude, Wehmeyer summarizes that opportunities are "very important" in educational settings and, reflecting on a historical perspective to stress his point, says, "Napoleon is credited as saying 'ability is of little account without opportunity.' That pretty much sums up what I think is true in schools."

What is the Role of Contextual, Temporal, and Individual Factors in Influencing the Experience of School Belonging?

Contextual Influences

Cultural and Political Contexts Prioritizing belonging requires addressing cultural and political aspects of schooling (see Gray et al., 2018). Institutional and instructional opportunity structures within educational contexts must be designed to support the unique cultural identities of students, thereby ensuring that all students, regardless of their background, feel valued and included. Covarrubias (2024) emphasizes how institutional cultural scripts rooted in *whiteness* can complicate belonging for marginalized students by creating confusion around acceptance based on conflicting expectations to assimilate or be marginalized. Context, therefore, needs to be central to how approaches, strategies, theories, or research is applied in educational settings.

Historically Colonized Contexts School belonging must be considered within broader social, cultural, and historical contexts. This is especially relevant in settler colonial contexts like the USA, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand—countries that dominate the school belonging literature and where schools have been historically informed by white-cultural dominance (Georgiades et al., 2013; Graham et al., 2022; Kohli & Solórzano, 2012). Such contexts can advantage white students while problematizing the sense of belonging for students of color. This can be further compounded for students of color who also identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer or questioning, and/or as being transgender, gender non-conforming, or gender diverse (Hatchel et al., 2019; Lloyd et al., 2024). Literature on this topic, such as that by Anderson (2015), Bonilla-Silva and Peoples (2022), and Diamond and Lewis (2022), highlights the challenges faced by students of color in these environments. Therefore, understanding school belonging requires consideration of how racial, cultural backgrounds (see Fong et al., 2019, 2023) and sexual and gender identities (Millers & Lewis, 2024) may impact experiences of belonging for students.

Layered Contexts All interviewees agreed that contextual factors inform school belonging. These factors range from the immediate classroom environment to

broader societal norms and structures (Johnson, 2009). Van Houtte suggests, "contextual factors have an impact, and not [for] only policies and culture. This is more than the impact of the schools' student composition (cf. supra), structural features like the curriculum offered in a school might have an impact." The result of this is that a child might feel a strong sense of belonging within a specific context, such as a sports team, but may not experience the same level of belonging in their classroom setting. Van Houtte offers another example from her research: "We showed, for instance, that students in technical/vocational schools have a lower sense of belonging than students in academic schools, and this is due to the faculty trust, which is lower in technical/vocational schools" (Van Houtte & Van Maele, 2012). Such discrepancies require educators, teachers, and school leaders to understand the role of context in school belonging, an area that has been less explored, especially in smaller group settings like classrooms.

Cultural Dimensions and the Broader Context How educational settings incorporate cultural narratives, languages, and histories can help or hinder a child's sense of belonging (Lacoe, 2015; Murphy & Zirkel, 2015). This cultural inclusion, or lack thereof, plays a role in how students perceive their place in the educational system (Murphy & Zirkel, 2015). Furthermore, socioeconomic inequalities and institutionalized forms of discrimination based on ethnicity, disability, or gender can significantly impact a student's sense of belonging (Aerts et al., 2012; Celeste et al., 2019; Cooper & Sánchez, 2016; Nikolaidis, 2023; Yang et al., 2021). These systemic issues can inadvertently perpetuate exclusion and undermine belonging, especially in cases where international students are forced to integrate into a context vastly different from their own or where students of color feel singled out in lessons (Celeste et al., 2019; Voight et al., 2015). However, perhaps the context is too complex to change in many educational settings. Given the complexity of these contexts in educational settings, it raises the question: Are we overlooking the real impact these factors have on students' sense of belonging due to an inability or unwillingness to address these complexities?

Lee emphasizes, "There is no doubt that contextual factors like culture and policies can affect a person's sense of belonging in schools. In the case of students from historically underrepresented and underserved communities, developing a sense of belonging can be more difficult based on the demographic makeup of the school, the attitudes and practices of educators and administrators, and the ways in which their experiences are validated, minimized, or dismissed. Belonging is an unspoken privilege among those in power, and yet we expect everyone to be able to equally develop a sense of belonging in school." Anderman agrees, noting, "As an educator, I have a strong inclination to understand malleable factors that shape students' experiences so I cannot imagine examining their sense of school belonging without considering contextual factors."

Tinto's work has long emphasized the cultural dimensions of educational environments (Tinto, 1975, 2003). Drawing from his work, he explains, "Students' sense of belonging is invariably influenced by the cultural context in which they find themselves. How could it not? The cultural and/or political values that inform the actions of faculty, for instance, shape students' engagements within the classroom and the meanings they draw from those engagements, particularly their sense of belonging

in the classroom. Seeing yourself as not belonging in the classroom or not being valued as a classroom member undermines both learning and persistence. The same can be said for the university. Its cultural and value orientations also influence students' sense of belonging." Gray et al.'s (2022) work shows that instructional practices rooted in communal values, or "we-ness," significantly support the academic motivation and sense of belonging among Black students by validating cultural identities and encouraging a collective responsibility.

Anderman strongly believes that "Context needs to be included in school belonging frameworks and theories somehow. I think there is a parallel to some motivation theories (e.g., Eccles EVT; goal theories) that place student motivational beliefs within a broader context. I also think this question should be informed by Bronfenbrenner's model. We tend to focus on the classroom (teacher-student and peer interactions and relationships; instructional practices) as a context, but more macro-level influences make a difference. Groups of students stopped attending school (and college classes) following the 2016 U.S. presidential election because they didn't feel safe. Similarly, family culture and history, and parents' experiences with schooling are going to create expectations and shape interpretations of students' experiences."

Bronfenbrenner's socio-ecological model (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1995) has been a frequently utilized model in school belonging research, partly because of its systemic lens and adaptability to educational settings (Allen et al., 2022a, 2018, 2021a). It is through this model that a student's context can be best examined, as Anderman alluded to. A student's relationship with their teachers, educators, and parents or primary caregivers are all important determinants of school belonging within a school context (Allen et al., 2018a), but what of school culture and policy? Leary finds "school culture and policies are both very important," but goes on to state, "unfortunately, too many things I've seen are efforts that create an artificial and superficial veneer of friendliness but that don't really create the connections and social bonds that are necessary for belonging and acceptance. Perhaps that's unavoidable because we're wired to form social connections that are meaningful to us, and you can't really impose that from the outside so that people have relational value to one another. Any theory should be able to account for all the contexts that raise and lower a sense of belonging/acceptance, but I think the contexts should be conceptualized broadly enough in a theory that they are potentially applicable in all settings, including in all organizations."

Van Houtte makes the point that "School policies and school culture can follow from or are associated with structural and compositional features of the school, and need to be studied, or even scrutinized, alongside structural and compositional features." This need is also demonstrated by Anderman, who recalls her firsthand experiences: "The question about school policies was illustrated for me, particularly in the recent election for new school board members in our local district. In the past few years, school policies related to using School Resource Officers (SROs, i.e., specially trained, armed police officers) in schools have been a topic of heated debate in this district. Parents concerned about bullying and the potential for violent incidents have been demanding the reinstatement of SROs, especially in our high schools. In contrast, members of the school board and other parents have pointed to the research showing that students of color experience worse outcomes than their White peers do

with the presence of SROs. Similar debates underlie current battles in U.S. school districts (including ours) over the degree to which teachers, librarians and other personnel can discuss (or provide texts/material related to) sexual minorities or non-traditional family structures. What these parents are debating (to put it politely) is school belonging. The challenge for educators and policymakers is to create an environment (physical, social, and emotional) where all students feel accepted, represented, and safe. As school board members and educators have worked to make our schools more inclusive, they have run up against parents from historically dominant groups whose long-established assumptions are being challenged. In our district, this was manifest as parents claiming that their White, conservative Christian children were being bullied for expressing their opinions. This problem was the focus of my former student, Dr. Amanda Baker's dissertation; she showed that religiously conservative undergraduate students felt excluded and avoided participating in class discussions in college (and, thus, did not undergo any conceptual change). Whatever we may think about these responses to efforts to make schools more inclusive, the reality is that some students feel less sense of belonging. In contrast, others feel more—that is a massive challenge for educators (and researchers!)."

Anderman's recollections highlight that educators, teachers, and researchers should avoid making assumptions about who belongs and who does not. Instead, it is about knowing and understanding the individuals within the context where a sense of belonging should be experienced. This is because, as Van Houtte suggests, "there is not one school culture in a school- there can be as many cultures as there are different groups in a school, starting with a student and a teacher culture. These can have a different impact on students' and teachers' sense of belonging."

Effective Leadership Good leadership plays an important role in navigating the multiple cultures within an educational context. Wehmeyer emphasizes, "Contextual factors play a more important role in promoting inclusion and belonging than do individual student factors and because of this, schools that are true communities in which every student belongs have leaders who have created high expectations for all students, cultures of valuing all students, and infusing a basic sense of dignity, value, and worth for all students. Policy does play a role, but often to remove barriers to creating inclusive communities where all children belong."

Echoing the findings of broader research on the impact of leadership in educational settings (e.g., Daniëls et al., 2019; Day et al., 2016), Riley suggests that leadership is integral to context: "School leaders are the mediating force whose values shape the culture of the school, and I have come to conclude that belonging and compassionate leadership go hand in hand." She reflects on her experiences in the project *Leadership of Place*: "I had the opportunity to explore contextual issues in three very different, although equally challenging, localities: New York's Brooklyn; South Africa's Eastern Cape and London's urban East End. These communities often felt left behind and ignored by society, finding themselves on the outside looking in. For those leaders who were successful in creating schools, which were places of belonging, 'reading' the context went far beyond listing the socioeconomic challenges. They were finely attuned to these communities, and their leadership extended beyond the borders of the classroom into the heart of communities. The

focus was on active engagement in ways that reached beneath the surface life of those communities, seeing the gifts and possibilities: social capital in action."

Van Houtte sums up the importance of context: "School belonging is not just an individual matter but is affected by the context. It is essential to consider the context. Only that way can a complete understanding of school belonging be reached, as it can clarify students' perceptions. Moreover, it can be more accessible in the first instance to change the school context, or at least to take measures when certain context features might negatively influence a sense of belonging."

Role of Temporal Considerations in School Belonging

Temporal context refers to how different stages of academic life, specific events, or developmental milestones influence an individual's perception of belonging. The significance of temporal factors for school belonging is often overlooked in educational research. Bronfenbrenner's socio-ecological model (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1995) includes a final iteration known as the Process-Person-Context-Time (PPCT) model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). This model extends the original framework by incorporating time temporal factors (e.g., short-term transitions or long-term developmental phases) on an individual's experiences and interactions within their ecological systems (see Melzac et al., 2025 for an example as applied to teacher school belonging).

Transitions Points Research has shown that students' progression through school has different outcomes for school belonging (Neel & Fuligni, 2013). While there is no definitive agreement in the literature, there are clear indications that a sense of school belonging can decline at middle year points and be highest at transition points, where schools arguably provide the most attention or intervention, or at graduation, which could be associated with a sense of achievement and completion and time spent bonding with a particular cohort (Burger, 2023; Neel & Fuligni, 2013). Furthermore, students' feelings of school belonging have been found to significantly decline when their racial or ethnic group representation decreases during school transitions adding a further consideration for institutional practices, particularly around racial composition in shaping student belonging during transition points (Graham et al., 2022). Wehmeyer believes, "temporal contexts do impact school belonging. I know that students who struggle academically over time often feel excluded and marginalized and that as students get older and have a more difficult time keeping up with peers, they inevitably feel excluded. So, I think there are definite 'sensitive periods' that will be important to fostering belonging and temporal contexts will need to be considered."

Developmental Stages Developmental stages, marked by cognitive, emotional, and social shifts, can further influence how students interpret and experience belonging (Anderman, 2003; Neel & Fuligni, 2013). For example, a young child may have different needs related to belonging in an educational context compared to an adolescent. While there will always be some similaries, such as the importance of

educator-student relationships and safety, development should be a factor that helps guide how we build, measure, and maintain belonging for different age groups and developmental stages (Allen et al., 2025c). Leary states, "Given that the social environment in which students live—both in and out of school—changes greatly with age, the causes and effects of belonging/acceptance play out differently. In addition, developmental changes in cognition, meta-cognition, perspective-taking, social skills, expectations, self-image, motives, and other personal characteristics mediate students' reactions to their peer relationships."

Van Houtte touches on developmental considerations as well, noting, "Different stages of academic life coincide with developmental stages, and I think that there might be a huge difference between primary and secondary education, corresponding with differences between being a child or an adolescent. In adolescence, peers become more and more important as a reference group, for instance, so adolescents' sense of belonging will be affected more by their relations with peers in school than by their relations with teachers.

Belonging as Dynamic and Evolving The dynamic nature of belonging, particularly during adolescence, a period marked by emotional variability, adds complexity to its measurement. This parallels to the challenges faced in measuring other dynamic constructs such as emotions like happiness or wellbeing, which are also prone to fluctuations (Diener et al., 2002). Mood variability in adolescence has been reported to mirror the levels of emotional fluctuation seen in adults with mood disorders (Casey et al., 2008). Just as these sometimes intense shifts in mood can be turbulent, so too can the experience of belonging.

Van Houtte has also observed fluctuations in belonging. "Specific events might determine how students respond to questions regarding their school belonging; that's rather a question of the timing of the data gathering. Theories need to consider students' developmental stage since these determine what and who is important to them (peers, for instance) and, as such, determine their sense of belonging. Specific events shouldn't be part of theories, I think, because they are specific, so no general statements can be made – except then maybe that in certain circumstances, it might not be wise to try to capture students' sense of belonging, for instance during an exam period."

Tinto has observed these shifts in higher education as well, saying, "As regards the impact of sense of belonging on persistence, it is evident that sense of belonging is most fluid during the first year when students first experience the university and before student networks stabilize. Early adverse experiences in the first year may undermine further academic and social engagement, a sense of belonging and, in turn, persistence. Parenthetically. This is one reason student transfer is most common at the end of the first year. Research on student development for traditional-aged students (i.e., 18–23) also tells us that students mature and change over their years in the university in various ways, cognitively, emotionally, and morally. As students engage with other students, many better understand their purpose and identity. Those changes may influence their sense of belonging if students develop in ways that are at odds with others with whom they engage. Nevertheless, it is unclear how knowledge of how students change over time can be applied to educational practice and policy

other than pointing out the need for the university to be alert to the developmental changes that occur during their students' stay in the university."

Temporal also refers to the dynamic nature of belonging and how perceptions of belonging can shift throughout a school day or even a moment. The importance of time is encapsulated in a model developed by Lee and colleague Peter Titzmann (Tizmann & Lee, 2022), which posits acculturation as a dynamic, evolving process. Lee elaborates on this model, stating, "My colleague Peter Titzmann and I have developed a temporal model of the acculturation process which suggests acculturation (which one could argue is the process by which a person adopts behaviors and values needed to belong to a new culture or environment) is a dynamic, temporal process that needs to be studied longitudinally to capture the tempo, pace, timing, and synchrony of acculturation."

Individual Differences in School Belonging

To examine school belonging, we also need to consider the influence of individual differences. These differences include a broad spectrum of countless factors such as personality traits, cultural backgrounds, cognitive abilities, and past experiences, each playing a distinct role in shaping the experience of belonging.

Cognitive Factors *For instance, cognitive abilities and learning needs can significantly affect how students engage with their educational environment. Research shows that there is strong interdependence between executive functions (e.g., working memory, cognitive flexibility, and inhibitory control) and self-regulated learning, indicating that cognitive processes can support students' capacity to engage in their educational environments, which has potential for increasing their sense of school belonging (Dörrenbächer-Ulrich & Bregulla, 2024).*

Intersecting Identities Factors such as gender identity, sexual orientation, immigration status, and socioeconomic status introduce layers of complexity, highlighting the need for a person-centered understanding of school belonging (Allen et al., 2024b). Empirical evidence from a scoping review of postsecondary studies found that associations between belonging and academic achievement can be stronger for marginalized student groups, yet identity-specific data remains inconsistently reported and theorized in the literature (see Fong et al., 2024), which means that there is still more work to do in appreciating the full impact of individual characteristics, without undermining the importance of context.

These individual differences and, importantly, their intersectionality contribute to the wide-ranging experiences of belonging in educational settings. Just as we cannot ignore the context, we also cannot ignore the importance of the individual for their sense of belonging. Leary articulates, "Like most psychological phenomena, the sources, and outcomes of belonging/acceptance (and of rejection) are probably about equally due to situations/contexts and to the personalities/backgrounds of the people involved. Every theory of belonging must account for individual differences, but that part of the narrative springs from the theoretical assumptions about

the causes and effects of belonging/acceptance and of rejection." Van Houtte further emphasizes the significance of these individual distinctions by noting, "These differences might explain why in the same school context certain students manifest a low sense of school belonging, while others don't."

Wehmeyer emphasizes the significant impact of individual differences on the experience of belonging, particularly for students with disabilities. He suggests that, "Clearly, individual differences impact the experience of belonging. I know most about the experiences of students with disabilities, and when disabled students are seen as, in some way, different from the rest of the students, they are inevitably excluded and marginalized. I think there are personal factors that a person possesses that can increase the probability that one will have the experience of belonging in schools, but ultimately, I think the perception that one belongs to a school community is as much about what others believe and perceive and how they act as well as the culture established by school leaders."

Tinto places significant importance on individual differences, remarking, "It is an understatement to say that individual differences matter. How could they not? But how they do it is beyond our ability to predict. While one student may perceive a particular engagement as affirming, another student with similar attributes may not. Other than overall differences in how groups of students, on average, see themselves as belonging, as may be the case for minority students attending a university where minority students are few, our social theories are unable to explain differences among individuals. Knowing that is the case; it behooves the university, their faculty, staff, and administrators to be extremely cautious in making assumptions about how different students perceive their engagements and the sense of belonging they draw from their engagements."

Personality Traits Lee's research has contributed to a deeper understanding of the role of individual differences in school belonging through the examination of personality (Lee et al., 2008). He explains, "In past research conducted by my graduate students and me, we have identified extraversion as a key personality trait that overlaps with belongingness. It is not surprising, given the many facets of extraversion. We also have found identity, such as ethnic-racial identity, to be highly correlated with belongingness measures, again given the conceptual and measurement overlap between them. Discrimination is another key factor that drives the extent to which people can feel like they belong. Again, in these cases, we are studying belongingness or one's sustained feeling of belonging over time, not whether a person is a member of a group or feels like they are accepted by others."

Self-Esteem and Attachment Styles Building on this understanding of individual traits, Logel highlights the importance of self-esteem and attachment styles in shaping perceptions of belonging (Çikrikçi & Gençdoğan, 2017; Hernández et al., 2017): "There are also large literatures in social psychology on self-esteem and on attachment styles that show that both of these traits heavily influence people's perceived belonging. Trait-level lower self-esteem and/or anxious attachment styles (and we could write entire narrative reviews about integrative frameworks for those!) make people more likely to anticipate, notice, and even create social contexts in which they are not

highly valued or accepted. There is even evidence that people with lower self-esteem are motivated to keep seeing themselves as not worthy of acceptance, to have a stable sense of self." This aligns with Leary's sociometer theory, which positions self-esteem as an internal gauge of social belonging, functioning as a psychological warning system that alerts individuals to potential social exclusion (Leary, 2005, 2012).

Social Identity Threat Logel further emphasizes the role of social identity threat in educational settings: "There is a whole literature in social psychology on social identity threat (e.g. Steele, 1997; see also Spencer et al., 2016). People are well-aware of the way others see them and "people like them". When they enter new contexts, they are vigilant for cues about the degree to which they or people like them might be valued or devalued in a given context. And when these cues are present, it makes them have a more negative experience there and measurably impairs their performance at difficult tasks. This vigilance can significantly impact students' experiences and performance, particularly for historically underrepresented groups."

Logel explains, "For students, this means that they are aware of the way their social group is seen in education ([minoritized] students, for example, are aware of negative stereotypes that allege their intellectual inferiority) and they are watching for signs that people in their classroom, their school, or their academic field, might endorse those stereotypes and/or devalue them because of stigma. It is crucial to take this into account when theorizing about belonging, because it means that there are groups of people, we can predict will be especially vulnerable to cues of non-belonging—and especially sensitive to cues of belonging and can really flourish in environments where they are welcomed. Minoritized students can thrive, have positive psychological experiences and perform academically even better than their past performance would predict, when their social identities are safe in an environment, and they can truly feel like they belong. Similar results are found for women in male-dominated STEM fields, among many other groups and fields that have shown these effects" (see Blackburn, 2017; Fisher et al., 2019; Szelényi et al., 2013).

Interactions with Context Individual traits, experiences, and backgrounds interact with contextual factors in complex ways, influencing how students perceive and experience belonging in educational settings. This interaction shows the necessity of considering individual and contextual elements to comprehend the dynamics of school belonging fully. As Van Houtte notes, "Individual considerations need to be made for school belonging, in interaction with context factors: the context will not impact all students in the same way or to the same extent. Taking individual differences into account might create a more complete understanding of who is affected by certain context factors and who's not – and why."

To summarize, school belonging requires much more consideration than the context alone. It ultimately hinges on student perceptions, especially considering the predominant methods of how it is measured. Therefore, addressing the individual aspect of belonging is both essential and inescapable. One of the most significant roles for teachers and educators is to understand their students, who they are as people, their backgrounds, and the strengths they possess. As Anderman rightly points out,

"Although students bring individual differences to their schooling experiences, it is the job of public education to meet those varying needs and to provide an adaptive environment for everyone who enters the classroom; this includes meeting their need for belonging."

Evaluating the Need for an Integrative Framework for School Belonging

The integrative framework (Allen et al., 2021c) aims to capture current understandings and conceptualizations of belonging, bridge divides in scholarly perspectives, and, though it is unlikely to capture all aspects, especially those found in older works, perhaps offer a practical approach to those who work in educational contexts. But does it represent school belonging and belonging in educational contexts? Interviewees were asked to reflect on whether they felt that the integrated framework of belonging captured the different empirical and conceptual perspectives of belonging in the literature and how well the framework fits within educational contexts.

Anderman believes that the framework has all the right "parts" but says, "I'm not sure about the placement of some components. I think we're at the point where we could show some of these as causal or perhaps hierarchical. I'm thinking particularly about Perceptions – of course, opportunities and competencies matter, and these are areas for potential intervention—but in the end, students' perceptions of opportunities and their own competencies are going to be the filter that determines whether those interventions are successful. Perceptions can also be an entry point for intervention, perhaps through individual therapy—I'm thinking of some of the sociometric research that's focused on changing rejected students' attributions related to interpersonal interactions—but that may be more labor/time intensive than changing opportunities."

Van Houtte offers, "In this integrative framework, the context of belonging is captured by the opportunities to belong, although structural and compositional school features are not mentioned explicitly. Obviously, however, these school features can be considered as creating opportunities to belong. For instance, adolescent girls might display a higher sense of belonging in schools with most girls, or students from an ethnic minority might have a higher sense of belonging in an ethnically mixed school. It would be more accurate and complete, I think, to make this school level more explicit in this integrative framework. As it stands now, the individual remains the focus, while it might be more complete to also consider the context, irrespective of the perceptions of the individuals. Another point I would like to make about school belonging is how this might be connected to school engagement. Fredricks and colleagues (2004) see school engagement as a multifaceted concept with a distinction between cognitive, behavioral, and emotional engagement. In our studies on engagement, we tend to capture emotional engagement in terms of a sense of belonging, as such, presenting school belonging not just as something the student is undergoing but something a student is engaging in. Maybe this can relate to the motivation to belong?".

Agency in Belonging

The other contributors pointed out what could be missing, specifically student agency, network dynamics, and powerful people. Engaging students, teachers and educators, school leaders, or any individual within the contexts where they experience belonging (or not belonging) transforms the way we see participants or stakeholders into being active participants in their own stories. Riley's work exemplifies this approach, illustrating how people can actively shape and understand their sense of belonging (Riley, 2013, 2017, 2019). Riley suggests, "the framework is particularly helpful in enabling schools to see the ways in which school belonging can be nurtured and grown. One important element I would like to add to the framework is that of agency. For young people, agency and 'belonging' go hand in hand. I have defined agency as a belief that what you do makes a difference and the skills and opportunities to do that. In a world that is on the move and full of uncertainties, key questions for young people are: How can I learn to develop my own sense of belonging? How can I help others to feel that they belong? The challenge is how to put young people into the driving seat. In the project 'Place, Belonging and School Leadership: Researching to make the difference', we trained young people to be the researchers who asked the question: Is our school a place where everyone feels they belong? I don't think I've ever learned so much from a project or had so much fun! The experience of being a researcher changed the students-researchers' experience of school life. In one school, for example, the team of young researchers were all recent arrivals to the UK. They developed a nuanced version of the research question and asked: How good is our school at welcoming newcomers? These young researchers went on to help rewrite the school's policy on newcomers, translated into eight languages, as I recall, and set up a programme to train their younger peers in how to support new arrivals in the school…Agency in action!".

Network Dynamics in Student Belonging

Tinto emphasizes the need to consider social network analysis. He argues, "Current frameworks of belonging have yet to incorporate what we are learning from social network analysis about how student engagement with others on campus influences their sense of belonging. It proves to be the case that what matters for student persistence is less student engagement, though some engagement is surely better than none with whom the student engages, individually and/or in groups. It is possible for students to feel they belong to one or more groups in the university but not to the university. But to the degree that is the case depends on the character of the network, whether it is tightly or loosely knit, and on the student's location in the network, whether they are at the centre or periphery of the network. Networks such as those in a fraternity or sorority are typically tightly knit. Students in the network frequently engage with most other members in the network. As a result, participation in such a network is likely to have a greater impact on a student's sense of belonging than would be the case in a loosely knit network such as an intermittent group of friends. The impact of a network on sense of belonging will also be greater for those at the center of the network, as is

the case for the president of a fraternity or sorority. Those students will typically engage frequently with all other students in the network. Students at the periphery of the network, however, will tend to engage with relatively fewer students in the network and, as a result, may not feel as strong a sense of belonging to students in the network."

Tinto continues, "Though the integrative framework does not include the impact of social networks, it does highlight the importance of opportunities for engagement and belonging. In doing so, it opens the yet unanswered question of the character of opportunity structures in the university and how they promote or hinder belonging. Together with social network analysis, it also opens the exploration of how student networks may influence access to opportunity structures within the university and the degree to which that access may further inequities in the university. Information of this sort can be especially useful to university administrators as it allows them to identify areas where greater and more equitable opportunities for belonging would promote belonging and persistence."

Powerful People

Logel suggests an often-overlooked aspect of school belonging: the role of powerful individuals within the educational context. She notes, "The framework makes a lot of sense! In school belonging, it is worth considering the role of powerful people in that social context, and how they can create cultures of belonging or of exclusion." Logel draws a parallel to Mary Murphy's work on culture creators (Murphy, 2024; Murphy & Zirkel, 2015; Murphy et al., 2020), applying this concept to the school environment: "For belonging, and in schools, that can mean teachers and leaders, who can convey explicitly and implicitly messages about who belongs here and how we treat people. Additionally, even if teachers and leaders aren't part of the peer group to which students might want to belong, they can shape opportunities for peer interactions and the quality of those interactions, for example by creating a cooperative rather than competitive structure for grading, by encouraging students to work together in a jigsaw classroom style in which all students' contributions are needed for success."

Logel mentions that within the current framework, these influential figures could be categorized under the Context domain: "In the current framework, I think powerful people like teachers could be put under *Context*. Powerful people in the context can create more opportunities to belong to social network, and shape perceptions of what signals belonging, and can help students build competencies."

This perspective adds a new dimension to understanding school belonging, emphasizing the active role that educators and leaders play in creating an environment conducive to belonging. Synthesizing the insights from Anderman, Van Houtte, Riley, Tinto, and Logel, it becomes clear that an integrative framework for school belonging needs to account for hierarchical relationships, contextual factors, student agency, network dynamics, and the influence of powerful individuals in the educational setting. Incorporating these elements, Fig. 1 presents a reimagined integrative framework specifically applied to school belonging. This revised model attempts to capture the multifaceted nature of school belonging as discussed by our expert interviewees (Anderman, Lee, Leary, Furlong, Wehmeyer, Tinto, Van Houtte, Riley, Logel, and Arslan).

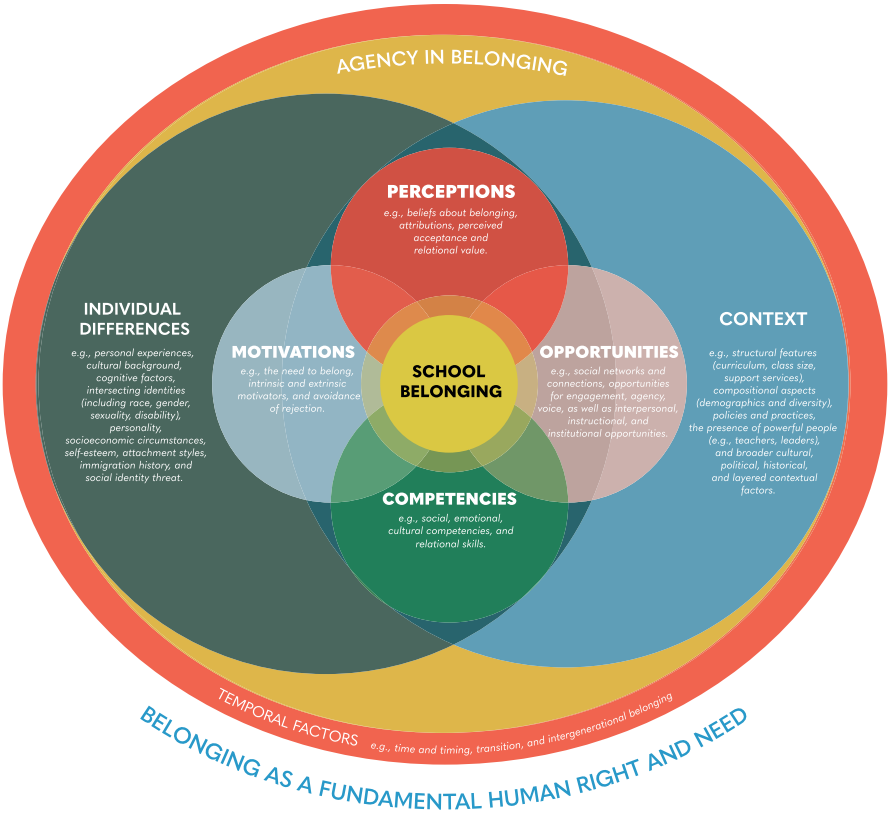

Fig. 1 Integrative framework of school belonging. This figure is licensed under CC BY 4.0 and is available at FigShare: (https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.28701764). Artwork by Kathryn Kallady

It is likely true to say that a framework such as the integrative framework will constantly evolve as new research prevails. Wehmeyer reminds us here that "change takes time, and I certainly have seen progress in positive education over the past decade that provides hope for changes. And, again, belonging is being emphasized as part of efforts to ensure diversity, inclusion, equity, and belonging, so that will be important and will open opportunities for theory and research in belonging to influence practice."

As such, the framework—as a representation of empirical and conceptual work in the field of school belonging—has implications for policy and practice. School leaders, for example, with an understanding of the opportunities in their context, could enact multiple interventions to address barriers to belonging for many students. Preventative, proactive, and universal approaches could also be applied with little time or expense, particularly around perceptions, motivations, and competencies, where strategies could be integrated into existing interventions and approaches (e.g., social and emotional competencies development, wellbeing education, current school policies). Additional supports addressing individual differences and perception could be offered through existing services (e.g., psychological supports and school counseling).

Future Directions

Interviewees were asked to reflect what future directions hold for theory and frameworks related to belonging in educational contexts.

Effects of Online Engagement

Rapidly evolving digital technologies open new avenues for research and theory related to belonging. Tinto believes, "The theories [related to belonging] have not changed in any substantial way. The students have changed, at least as it applies to their modes of engagement. The pandemic served to highlight the role of the internet in student engagement. Evidence suggests that online communities can provide, sometimes, critical support to students as well as enable students to frequently connect to one another. But it is unclear, at least to this observer, that those online engagements yield the same benefits as face-to-face engagement. So much of the meaning we draw from our engagements comes from a variety of subtle, and sometimes not so subtle, gestures, expressions, and body language that online engagement cannot easily convey." The potential for digital platforms to cultivate a different, yet meaningful, sense of belonging warrants further research. Tinto continues, "The recent development of AI-driven chatbots offers another possible way the internet can promote a sense of belonging." These technologies, especially in their early stages, present unique opportunities and challenges for student belonging in virtual environments. Tinto adds "that such platforms can be used by students to express their needs and concerns and by institutions to respond to their needs and concerns; that they matter and belong. Investigating the effectiveness and impact of such technologies on student belonging is a promising area for future research."

Bridging Social Contexts and Existing Theories

As we look towards the future, there is also a need to consider the adaptability and universality of belonging theories across changing social contexts. Leary suggests that "A good theory [or framework] of belonging should be applicable in any social context. If it's not, then I think the theory itself needs to be elaborated or expanded in a broad, general way to address processes that occur in all situations." The challenge lies in creating frameworks that are both specific enough to be meaningful and general enough to be universally applicable. Leary continues, "This isn't a matter of addressing situations that arise in certain social settings such as schools, teams, or the workplace because we don't want different theories for every social setting. Rather, a good theory should inherently be applicable across all situations." Future research should focus on identifying and understanding these universal aspects of belonging while recognizing unique settings. Leary offers, "So, for example, if we assume that belonging and acceptance are fundamentally about perceived relational value, that notion should apply to all contexts even though the ways in which relational value is perceived

may differ in different settings. Or, if we assume that behavioral reactions to low belonging/acceptance fall into three basic categories (prosocial, antisocial, withdrawal), those should be seen everywhere, even though their specific forms may differ by context and age. I don't know whether any single theory of belonging can be applied everywhere (because I'm not sure any theory has been laid out that explicitly and clearly), but I don't see anything happening in schools that people haven't written about more generally." In terms of whether the integrative framework could be suitable to represent school belonging, Wehmeyer says, "I think the integrative framework of belonging captures the richer sense of belonging that is needed in school settings. I see direct overlap between this integrative framework and ideas of self-determination that have made inroads in schools, with an emphasis on strengths-based approaches to education (competencies), taking advantage of opportunities, and beliefs in oneself as causal agents in one's life." The potential for this framework to be adapted and applied in various settings like schools should be investigated in future research to fully understand the extent to which this knowledge, drawn from belonging research and theory, applies to different contexts.

Belonging as a Fundamental Human Right

Van Houtte stresses, "One of the important changes is the growing diversity in education, as well in terms of ethnic diversity but also in terms of gender, for instance. I am not sure that theories and practices related to belonging take this into account to the fullest. To do this, differences between students must be put to the fore much more, realizing that there is no one-size-fits-all. Moreover, these students, with their different characteristics, must be considered in their specific contexts, which are changing rapidly."

Complementing Van Houtte's thoughts on the growing diversity in education and the necessity for a personalized approach to belonging is Faircloth's work (see Faircloth et al., 2021) advocating for school belonging as a fundamental human right. Like the interviewees, Faircloth advocates for us to examine and challenge the structural and policy-driven impediments that create barriers to belonging. This work is a reminder that a sense of belonging is more than academic jargon or a word buried within a vision or mission statement. It's a societal obligation that requires the contribution of every individual, group, community, and institution. This is because belonging is a right that must be accessible to everyone.

Conclusion

Exploring school belonging within educational contexts through an integrative framework highlights the complexity of the construct. Current perspectives of school belonging raise several challenges about its ambiguity and variability in how it is defined and operationalized. Scholars like Leary and Wehmeyer draw our attention to definitional ambiguity, complicating future research, but also challenging the flow of implications into education practice as mentioned by Van Houtte. Van

Houtte emphasizes the struggle of educational settings to define and apply belonging adequately. It is worth considering Furlong's sentiment here: "I have always thought of school belonging not as an end itself, but as a vehicle that supports positive youth development to help them learn the skills they need to develop a sense of belonging to lifelong communities." Belonging and school belonging, in this sense, is much more than a theoretical construct. This thing we call *belonging* is very much an important and valued experience of great benefit to student wellbeing and outcomes.

The limitations of current theories, as noted by Tinto and Lee, particularly in addressing the role of social networks and the dynamic nature of belonging, indicate a significant gap in how we understand it. This gap presents an opportunity to develop future work that integrates individual and contextual factors. The Integrative Framework of Belonging (Allen et al., 2021c) attempts to synthesize existing knowledge into a practical guide; however, this framework, along with other emerging models, requires empirical testing and validation in a range of educational contexts, globally. Anderman's emphasis on the hierarchical nature of belonging components and Van Houtte's call for explicit inclusion of school-level factors demonstrate the importance of context. Riley's emphasis on agency, Tinto's emphasis on social network dynamics, and Logel's suggestions around the influence of powerful individuals in shaping belonging cultures broaden current school belonging perspectives. Furthermore, the collective emphasis on temporal factors and individual differences by Leary, Wehmeyer, and Lee reinforce the need for more personalized considerations in respect to belonging. These contributions enhance the theoretical depth of the integrative framework evaluated in the current study as well as its practical applicability.

While substantial progress has been made in understanding school belonging, the field continues to evolve through new challenges and opportunities which present opportunities and needs for collaborative, interdisciplinary approaches that recognize individual experiences within a variety of contexts as emphasized by Anderman and Van Houtte. The Integrative Framework of Belonging offers a structure to support this work, remaining open to critique, complexity, and adaption, providing a flexible foundation for addressing the constantly evolving understanding of what it means to belong and how belonging can be sustained within a variety of contexts (e.g., schools, universities, workplaces, groups). As Tinto suggests, "Whether students feel they belong in the institution depends on a range of issues, not the least of which are the attributes, attitudes, and values of other students in the network and how students in the network view their place in the life of the institution. Regrettably, it is sometimes the case that some groups of students, for instance, minority students in a predominantly majority institution, may see themselves as outcasts in the institution. Though they were admitted to the institution, they may feel they do not belong, do not matter, to the institution." In practical terms, a dynamic, multidimensional construct requires dynamic, multidimensional approaches, along with an ongoing commitment to evidence-based strategies that respond to the evolving needs of students and schools, so that every student can feel a sense of belonging within their educational community. As Riley's work suggests, perhaps we just need more compassion: "Marry the intellect with the heart to ask the questions that matter, like, what holds people together?" Many people would agree that the answer to this is belonging.

Appendix A

Table 3 Participant biographies and institutional websites

Professor Emerita Lynley Anderman Institutional website: https://ehe.osu.edu/educational-studies/directory?id=anderman.2	Lynley H. Anderman is Professor Emeritus of Educational Psychology at Ohio State University. Dr. Anderman is a Fellow of the American Psychological Association and has held several leadership positions in the American Educational Research Association. Previously a classroom teacher in New Zealand, she has focused her scholarship on educational practices and policies that promote students' motivation and engagement, particularly in terms of interpersonal relationships with peers and teachers, and perceptions of school belonging. She has co-authored two textbooks, widely used in teacher preparation programs: Educational Psychology: Developing Learners (Pearson) and Classroom Motivation (Routledge/Taylor Francis). Dr Anderman was recognized in the 2024 Stanford/Elsevier list of the World's Top 2% Scientists for Career-Long Impact.
Distinguished Professor Emeritus Mark Leary Institutional website: https://scholars.duke.edu/person/leary	Mark Leary is Garonzik Professor Emeritus of Psychology and Neuroscience at Duke University. He earned his Ph.D. in social psychology from the University of Florida and taught previously at Denison University, the University of Texas at Austin, and Wake Forest University. His research focuses on social motivation and emotion (particularly the need for acceptance and belonging) and on the effects of excessive self-preoccupation on psychological well-being.
Distinguished Professor Emeritus Michael L. Wehmeyer Institutional website: https://specialedu.ku.edu/people/michael-wehmeyer	Michael L. Wehmeyer, Ph.D., is Distinguished Professor Emeritus in Special Education at the University of Kansas. His scholarly focus has been on issues pertaining to self-determination, positive psychology and disability, transition to adulthood, the education and inclusion of students with extensive support needs, and technology use by people with cognitive disabilities. He is the author or co-author of over 500 peer-reviewed journal articles or book chapters and has authored/edited or co-authored/edited 50 books on these issues. His most recent book is the second edition of the Oxford Handbook on Positive Psychology and Disability.
Senior Full Professor (Gewoon Hoogleraar) Mieke Van Houtte Institutional website: https://www.ugent.be/psync/en/who/van_houtte_mieke	Mieke Van Houtte is a senior full professor of sociology and head of the research team CuDOS at the Department of Sociology, Ghent University, Belgium. Her research interests cover diverse topics within the sociology of education, particularly the effects of structural and compositional school features on several diverse outcomes for students and teachers, and sexual minorities. She is a member of the Royal Flemish Academy of Belgium for Science and the Arts
Professor Christine Logel Institutional website: https://uwaterloo.ca/social-development-studies/profiles/christine-logel	Dr. Logel develops, tests, and disseminates psychological interventions and promotes institutional change to help foster belonging and growth, increasing equity in academic achievement and improving well-being for disadvantaged students In her recent scholarly research, she studies identity and belonging among structurally disadvantaged students including racialized minorities, financially stressed students, students with disabilities, students with higher body weight, English Language Learners, and students contending with the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic. Dr. Logel is a faculty affiliate of the Equity Accelerator, a nonprofit with a mission to create more equitable learning and working environments.

Table 3 (continued)

Distinguished Professor Richard Lee Institutional website: https://miamioh.edu/academic-affairs/awards-professorships/spotlights/lee-richard.html	Richard M. Lee, Ph.D., is a Distinguished McKnight University Professor and Morse-Alumni Distinguished University Teaching Professor in the College of Liberal Arts at the University of Minnesota. Lee focuses on aspects of culture, ethnicity, and race that function as risk or protective factors for well-being, mental health, and achievement. These factors include acculturation and enculturation, ethnic identity development, discrimination/racism, parent-child acculturation conflicts, and cultural socialization. Lee's current research projects are organized into three domains. First, he is interested in advancing theory and measurement related to culture-specific risk and protective factors including the importance of belongingness in life. Second, he examines the transracial and transnational experiences of Korean children who were adopted internationally by White families. Third, he engages in community-based research to improve engagement in evidence-based prevention programs for racial and ethnic minority populations.
Distinguished Professor Emeritus Michael J. Furlong Websites https://linktr.ee/mjfurlong https://www.covitality ucsb.info/michaeljfurlong/	Michael Furlong, Ph.D., is a Research Professor and Distinguished Professor Emeritus in the School Psychology program at the University of California, Santa Barbara. He received the 2022 School Mental Health Research Award from the U.S. National School Mental Health Center and the 2021-2022 University of California Edward A. Dickson Emeritus Professorship in recognition of his contributions to the field. Dr. Furlong's expertise includes providing consultation and support to the California Department of Education and WestEd regarding the California Healthy Kids Survey. Additionally, he is a co-editor of the Handbook of Positive Psychology in Schools, with editions published in 2009, 2014, and 2022.
Distinguished Professor Emeritus Vincent Tinto Institutional Website: https://soe.syr.edu/about/directory/vincent-tinto/#:~:text=Vincent%20Tinto%20is%20a%20Distinguished,of%20the%20Higher%20Education%20Program	Vincent Tinto is a Distinguished University Professor Emeritus at Syracuse University and the former Chair of the Higher Education Program. He has carried out research and has written extensively on higher education, particularly on student success. His book, Leaving College, published by the University of Chicago Press, lays out a theory and policy perspective on student success that is considered the benchmark by which work on these issues are judged. His subsequent book Completing College, also published by The University of Chicago Press, lays out a framework for institutional action for student success, describes the range of programs that have been effective in enhancing student success, and the types of policies institutions should follow to successfully implement programs in ways that endure and scale-up over time. His most recent work focuses on the student perspective. It asks how an understanding of students' perceptions of their experiences in college opens up additional ways of thinking about how institutions can further improve student success in higher education.

Table 3 (continued)

Professor Emeritus Kathryn Riley https://profiles.ucl.ac.uk/48005-kathryn-riley	Distinguished educator Kathryn Riley is Emeritus Professor of Urban Education at the IOE, UCL's Faculty of Education. She began her work in education as a volunteer teacher in Eritrea, later teaching in inner-city schools, before holding political office as an elected member of the Inner London Education Authority (ILEA) and becoming a local authority chief officer. Born in Manchester, she now divides her time between London and Bali, with her family who have settled there. As a practitioner, policymaker, academic and change agent, Kathryn's work has focused on equity and social justice. Her extensive international profile includes heading up the World Bank's Effective Schools and Teachers Group. Her engagement in research, policy and development work on educational reform and school leadership has taken her to many parts of the globe, involving her in partnerships with a range of organisations, including the OECD, UNICEF and the British Council. Kathryn is currently supporting three system-wide initiatives on school belonging. With the late DancePoet TioMolina, she co-founded TheArtofPossibilities, working to help create vibrant school communities which foster young people's sense of agency and belonging. Kathryn, and Australian academic Dr Kelly-Ann Allen, co-lead the Global Leaders in Belonging Roundtable. She has published extensively and has a distinctive style, possessing the rare skill of producing material that is both lively and original, and based on robust evidence. Her many books include: Whose School is it Anyway? (Falmer Press, 1988); Why children lose interest in school and what we can do about it (with E. Rustique-Forrester (Chapman Sage, 2002); Leadership of Place: Stories from the US, UK & South Africa (2013) and Place, Belonging & School Leadership: Researching to Make the Difference (2017). Her 2022 book, Compassionate Leadership for School Belonging is fast becoming a seminal work: access at www.uclpress.co.uk/products/171324 Kathryn is currently completing Leading for School Belonging: HOW to navigate the way ahead. London: Bloomsbury, 2026. Her blogs, videos and publications can be found at www.theartofpossibilities.org.uk alongside her podcast series on belonging - with its popular and specially commissioned raps!
Associate Professor Gokmen Arslan Website: https://gokmenarslan.com.tr/	Gökman Arslan is a psychological counsellor and psychotherapist certified in Cognitive Behavioural Therapy by the Academy of Cognitive and Behavioral Therapies (USA). He is also accredited by the European Association for Behavioural and Cognitive Therapies. His recent work has focused on Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, which has become a central interest in both his clinical practice and research. Dr Arslan is a faculty member at Burdur Mehmet Akif Ersoy University and, since 2021, has served as an Honorary Senior Fellow at the Centre for Wellbeing Science at the University of Melbourne, where he continues his academic work.

Appendix B

Interview questions

The questions relate to the integrative framework of belonging, published in the *Australian Journal of Psychology* and authored by Kelly-Ann Allen, Margaret L. Kern, Christopher S. Rozek, Dennis M. McInerney, and George M. Slavich. The framework's purpose was to provide an inclusive summary of belonging research to create a framework that could be used by practitioners to build belonging. While most of our research has been on school belonging, this model looks at general belonging. The paper is here: https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/https://doi.org/10.1080/00049530.2021.1883409.

Questions

Applicability of Existing Theories

Do you believe that existing theories of belonging adequately capture the complexities of school belonging? Explain your answer.

What limitations have you observed in applying existing theories of belonging to real-world educational settings?

The integrated framework of belonging aimed to capture the different empirical and theoretical perspectives of belonging in the literature. How well do you think it accomplishes this in the context of school belonging?

Role of Context in School Belonging

How do you think contextual factors like school culture or school policies influence the experience of belonging in schools?

Should context be a consideration in school belonging theories and why?

Role of Individual Differences in School Belonging

How do individual differences such as personality traits, cultural background, or learning needs influence the experience of belonging in schools?

Should individual differences be integrated into theories of school belonging and why?

Role of Temporal Context in School Belonging

How do you think temporal contexts, such as different stages of academic life (e.g., elementary, middle, high school) or specific events (e.g., exams, transitions), or developmental stages (e., childhood, adolescence) influence the experience of belonging in schools?

Should theories of school belonging incorporate temporal contexts, and if so, how?

Adaptation to School Belonging

If the framework were to be adapted to specifically consider school belonging, what should be included?

Comment on Each Domain

Perceptions: How do perceptions of belonging influence school belonging? These are the attributions, cognitions, and thoughts people have about whether they belong.

Competencies: What roles do social and emotional competencies play in fostering a sense of belonging in schools? What about other competencies concerned with social skills or culture?

Motivations: How do motivations to belong or needs to belong influence the experience of belonging in school?

Opportunities: How important are opportunities to belong?

Adaptability and Future Directions

How have theories and practices related to school belonging adapted to the changing educational landscape?

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Data Availability The data supporting this study are contained within the article.

Declarations

Ethics Approval This research project has received ethical clearance from the Monash University Human Research Ethics Committee under Project ID40200.

Competing Interests The author declares no competing interests.

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