2001

Sense of Belonging in the School : Impact on Young Adolescents

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Sense of Belonging in the School:
Impact on Young Adolescents

Diane F. Broderick

A Report Submitted in Partial Fulfilment of the
Requirements for the Award of
Bachelor of Arts (Psychology) Honours
Faculty of Community Studies, Education and Social Sciences
Edith Cowan University

29 October 2001

Declaration

I declare that this written assignment is my own work and does not include:

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Signature __________________________ (Diane Broderick)
Abstract

The transitional nature of adolescence predisposes the adolescent to the effects of evolving biopsychosocial development changes. However, these transitional processes do not occur in isolation in the adolescent. Using a systems approach, this paper examined the issues surrounding adolescents’ sense of belonging (SoB) at school. SoB was identified as a means of providing an understanding of belongingness as a linking and stabilising mechanism for adolescents as they successfully negotiate their biopsychosocial changes. SoB at school appears to be positively reflected in the adolescents’ peer competencies, student-teacher relationships, motivation and achievement, participation skills, and the ability to relate to the school environment. An examination of the literature, pertaining to the risk and protective factors associated with adolescence, suggested that a SoB at school contributes to the development of such factors as the adolescents’ relationship skills, and to problem-solving abilities. Conversely, when adolescents experience deficits in a SoB at school, there is a sense of alienation and isolation, and a loss of identity and self-esteem. Much of the literature examined involved the use of quantitative methodologies to examine adolescent students’ SoB. Recently this focus has changed as is reflected in several qualitative studies that examined adolescents’ SoB in the school environment relative to specific problem issues. The need was identified for future normative research in adolescents’ SoB at school.

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Submitted: October 2001
Declaration

I certify that this thesis does not incorporate, without acknowledgement, any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any institution of higher education and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

Signature: __________________________

Date: 15th February 2002
Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the generous assistance and support from a number of people without whose help this thesis would not have been completed.

I wish to thank my supervisor, Dr Lynne Cohen, and my co-supervisor, Dr Neil Drew, for sharing their expertise. My sincere thanks, Lynne, for your excellent supervision, patience, sense of humour, and for making the learning experience beneficial and valued.

My thanks are due to the students at Clarkson Community High School (CCHS) for their willing, informative participation in the study. Also to Mrs Angela Verevis, Associate Principal CCHS, for her supportive assistance in the study’s process.

Special thanks to Dr Christopher Sonn for making qualitative methodology meaningful and memorable. Thanks to the following staff members from the School of Psychology who cheerfully assisted me along the undergraduate journey: Carole Gamsby, Sue Haunold, and Nicky Stenson.

My appreciative thanks to Dawn Darlaston-Jones for her boundless generosity, support, and advice through my last two undergraduate years. Thank you for your respected friendship, Dawn.

To my special friend and colleague, Sharon. Many thanks for giving me extraordinary encouragement, sharing many happy hours, and making this final year one of the best in my undergraduate experience.

I wish to thank my family for their love and support, with special thanks to my mother, Veronica, and my sister, Mary. To my late husband, Bill (who believed in me), this is the final product. To you I dedicate this project.
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Adolescence may be conceptualised as a transitional phase between childhood and adulthood which suggests that adolescence is an evolving state. The strengths and resources, including belongingness, that the adolescent draws upon during this transitional period contribute greatly to his or her eventual adult status in the wider community context (Coleman & Hendry, 1999). Coextensively, a critical part of the young person’s social and cognitive development is the construction of a unique sense of self-identity that is positive and coherent (Erikson, 1982; Swanson, Spencer, & Petersen, 1998).

The adolescent’s development, however, does not occur in isolation. Rather there are associated and inter-related biopsychosocial processes (Kail & Cavanagh, 1996) within a life span and systems context (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). These processes encompass a series of accelerating and staged growth phases (Schickendanz, Schickendanz, Forsyth, & Forsyth, 1998), which are integrated by the individual in a climate of social change (Bee, 2000; Coleman & Hendry, 1999). Part of this integration takes place during the high school years (Borich & Tombari, 1997).

Throughout the adolescent’s development continuum his or her entire being can experience change related effects (Bee, 2000). For example, the adolescent’s escalating pubescent physical changes may be accompanied by his or her need to adapt to psychosocial issues, such as relocating to a new school in a different area or needing to make new friends in high school. To varying extents adolescents experience disruptions and uneasiness during the adjustment cycles (Coleman & Hendry, 1999; Erikson, 1982). Obtaining the maximum beneficial outcomes for the adolescent requires a detailed understanding of these processes to lessen the potentially negative consequences.

In order that adolescence is a positive meaningful experience, and maladjustment outcomes are precluded, several issues need to be addressed. Firstly, it is
crucial that the interactive factors associated with the transition to adulthood are understood (Bee, 2000) by those people with whom the adolescent interacts, such as family members (Steinberg & Morris, 2001), peers (Hopkins, 1994), and teachers (Woolfolk, 1998). Secondly, it is important that this knowledge is understood by the adolescents themselves. Finally, in addition to these factors, it has been reported that understanding the adolescents’ belongingness needs in the school environment (Beck & Malley, 1998a; Seidman, 1991; Williams & Downing, 1998) is a key factor in the transitional processes (Routt, 1996).

Scope of Review

The focus of this review is an examination of the adolescents' sense of belonging (SoB) in the school environment as a means of assessing the impact of the belongingness relationship during the transitional phases of adolescence. To achieve this, SoB will be defined in the context of what the literature suggests is its relationship to the individual in the school environment. In an overview, adolescence will be presented with sufficient depth to provide a contextual understanding of the multidimensional issues affecting adolescents at school. A biopsychosocial change framework will be used to provide a context for reviewing the adolescents' belongingness as it relates to the adolescent cognitively and socially. Illustrations will be given of how the developmental changes affect the adolescents' identity construction and self-esteem, and how in turn this impacts on feelings of belonging.

SoB will be reviewed in the school environment to outline the impact that teacher and peer relationships, and educational factors exert on the young adolescent student. An exploration of the risk and protective factors associated with belongingness will be incorporated as a means of identifying the potential impact of SoB on the well-being of adolescents within the school system. SoB is the framework for understanding the transitional experiences of adolescence in the social context of the school. In
conclusion, this review will include the debate from both qualitative and quantitative research findings on these issues, and identify future research issues using qualitative research methods to explore adolescents' concepts of a SoB at school.

**Belonging at School**

Operationally, there appears to be a dichotomy associated with a SoB and the individual (Felton & Shinn, 1992). The term belonging implies a relationship (Reber, 1995) or social integration, suggesting that belonging in the individual does not occur in isolation. For example, when students perceive they belong at school, they are more inclined to use "us" and "we" rather than "me" and "them" when describing their interactions with other students (Schmuck & Schmuck, 1992). However, this belonging relationship requires factors external to the individual, such as a group or a community, and involves commitment and belonging to familiar people and places (Felton & Shinn, 1992). Therefore, this implies that adolescent relationships need to be understood within the context of what is meant by community.

The concept or term community has received much attention since the establishment of community psychology in the 1960s (Newborough, 1973). A community is "an environment characterized by mutual support and concern, and collaborative work and decision-making" (Battistich, Solomon, Watson, & Schaps, 1997, p. 143), and as a constructed entity a community is non-existent without the diverse and dynamic interactions of its members (Wiesenfeld, 1996). From this premise, schools have the capacity to encapsulate tangible examples of a community within which individuals were said to experience a SoB, and which subsequently resulted in their membership of the wider community (Schaps & Solomon, 1997). A further outcome of this membership for the individual is shared emotional connections with the community, and there is also the potential to promote the individual's personal needs.
and a sense of community (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). This community perspective permits the individual’s SoB, as a social construct, to be examined.

**Defining a Sense of Belonging**

Defining a SoB requires an eclectic approach. Belonging in the individual has been linked with the early caregiver relationships and infant’s social attachments (Bowlby, 1988a, 1988b), human needs (Maslow, 1968), and somewhat more consistently with the understanding of human motivations, behaviours, and emotions (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). When disparity occurs in attaining belongingness, Maslow (1968) contended that the individual is exposed to maladjustment and emotional illness. Western society’s value system has used belonging as a means of enforcing its general membership patterns. This has been to the extent that social exclusion has punishment connotations implying adversity and penalty (Coleman & Hendry, 1999). Conversely, social inclusion has been used as a reward mechanism (Baumeister & Leary, 1995) that fostered such facets as mutual recognition and mutual exchange in the community (Sennet, 1999). Belonging, therefore, has been reported to contribute to the adolescent transcending the potentially negative or positive personal and social divides within the school environment (Beck & Malley, 1998b).

Sense of belonging for adolescents at school has been described as a “sense of being accepted, valued, included, and encouraged by others...and of feeling oneself to be an important part of...life and activity...” (Goodenow, 1993a, p. 25). This definition was extended by Massey (1998) to include “a feeling of connectedness” associated with the “desire to belong,” given that the individual experiences “involvement” and has an “opportunity to belong” (p. 18). When these issues have been addressed positively in adolescence, the adolescent has the capacity to look towards the experience of belongingness at school, the implication being a positive adolescent-school relationship (Massey, 1998). Additionally, the belongingness relationship has the potential to
contribute towards meaningful participatory roles for the adolescent at school during the transitional experiences associated with adolescence (Schumacher, 1998; Williams & Downing, 1998).

In the last two decades there has been an expansion in the overall interest in adolescent growth and development by psychologists (Steinberg & Morris, 2001). This interest has been linked with the establishment of specific adolescent research centers and with the growth in the number of adolescent related publications (Steinberg & Morris, 2001). An increasing number of pages in psychology publications have been given to adolescent-related issues, for example those ranging from Child Development to the American Psychologist (Lerner & Galambos, 1998). Also publications with an adolescence-focus, such as the International Journal of Adolescence and Youth and Educational Psychologist, have been produced in the intervening period. The augmented interest in adolescence, however, has not precluded fragmentation in the knowledge, rather than contributing to a global understanding, of adolescents (Steinberg & Morris, 2001). One of the contemporary goals of educationalists and psychologists in addressing this issue has been to rationally draw together the findings from a wide variety of research that will further the community’s understanding of adolescents’ development within the school environment (Borich & Tombari, 1997).

Creating a comprehensive understanding of the adolescent’s normative progression from adolescence to adulthood (Steinberg & Morris, 2001) allows the formation of a meaningful conceptual and analytical framework of adolescence (Coleman & Hendry, 1999; Segall, Dasen, Berry, & Poortinga, 1999). The use of this framework offers psychologists and educators insight into the adolescents’ psychosocial health status, and, as in this review, specifically into that of the young adolescent (i.e., 11 to 15 year olds). Adolescent belongingness, relationship issues, educational needs, and environmental interactions and outcomes are some of the factors that have been
examined and have contributed to a body of knowledge on adolescence (Borman & Schneider, 1998; F. P. Rice, 1996; Scales, 1991; Schickendanz et al., 1998; Woolfolk, 1998). The use and application of this knowledge, particularly in educational psychology, has taken many forms, albeit not without ongoing dialogue (Battistich et al., 1997). An example of the application of psychology in education (Emmer, Evertson, Clements, & Worsham, 1997) has been in the introduction of “effective classroom management” (p. 20) programmes that have been (Emmer & Everston, 1982), and are currently, widely used in secondary schools in Western society (Woolfolk, 1998).

Psychologists and educationalists have continued to anticipate and respond, by way of policies and programmes, to the debate on social, cultural, and economic factors confronting adolescents at school (Borich & Tombari, 1997; Segall et al., 1999). Critically analysing the observational outcomes resulting from adolescent programmes in schools, and importantly from the adolescents’ own narratives, has served several purposes for psychologists. This has included opportunities for specific research issues in adolescent education to be addressed including the SoB at school in adolescents with special physical needs (Williams & Downing, 1998), and education as a means of preparing for life (Evans & Poole, 1987). Other research outcomes have created the potential to promote empowerment and well-being in the adolescent (Nelson, 1995).

The research has proposed that when adolescents fail to experience belongingness at school their psychological well-being may be jeopardised (Battistich et al., 1987). In the absence of belonging, the young adolescent is unable to develop and maintain the concepts of personal significance, such as self-esteem and fulfilment (Edwards, 1995; Royal, 1997). In environments where deficits occurred in the adolescent’s sense of purpose and identity, he or she may experience reduced psychological health (Beck & Malley, 1998a; Schmuck & Schmuck, 1992), and depression (Roberts, 1999).
Educational environments that are conducive to maximising the individual’s psycho-physiological and emotional growth have the capacity to expedite the adolescent’s ongoing learning and psychosocial development (Borich & Tombari, 1997). As a social structure, the school environment is recognised as being well placed to promote and facilitate shared physical and emotional connections between adolescents, their peers, and their teachers (Beck & Malley, 1998a, 1998b; Edwards, 1995). Conversely, a number of young adolescents who experienced deficits in these factors while they are at school experienced alienation both in the classroom and in the broader community (Edwards, 1995; Seidman, 1991). These and the preceding factors will be explored in the latter sections of this review.

The school and the classroom environments share the distinction of being related to the adolescent’s SoB rather than being concepts that have been associated with the individual on the one hand, and with individuality on the other (Goodenow, 1993a; Pretty, Conroy, Dugay, Fowler, & Williams, 1996; Schmuck & Schmuck, 1992). Young adolescents encounter conflict between their sense of belonging at school and with their own individual identity (Wilks, 1992). In the event that this personal conflict remains unresolved, the individual experiences negative consequences, such as alienation (Baker, Terry, Bridger, & Winsor, 1997), social isolation and exclusion (Beck & Malley, 1998b; Edwards, 1995; Schmuck & Schmuck, 1992), and poor academic outcomes (Royal & Rossi, 1996). The challenge, therefore, remains for the school environment to preclude student identity conflicts such that schools are promoted as nurturing, caring communities in which students’ SoB may prevail (Scales & Taccogna, 2000; Schaps & Solomon, 1997; Wiesenfeld, 1996).
Defining Adolescence

The literature suggests that assigning a concise operational definition to adolescence is a multi-faceted endeavour (Bee, 2000; Berk, 2000). Cumulatively, adolescence is a sequential and transitional part of human development that occurs between childhood and adulthood (Bynner, 2000). Adolescence signifies the onset of puberty and culminates in the individual’s biopsychosocial maturity (Reber, 1995) in late adolescence (Bee, 2000). This transitional period is recognised as a time of significant change in the individual’s physical, social, and cognitive experiences (Bee, 2000; Bynner, 2000). It is also a time when various external influences that ranged from cultural and societal issues to environmental factors impacted on adolescents’ daily lives (Borman & Schneider, 1998; Coleman & Hendry, 1999; Crockett & Silbereisen, 2000).

Arbitrary chronological time-frames have been associated with delineating adolescence (Bee, 2000; Schickendanz et al., 1998). However, the following two periods have been identified in the literature: young or early adolescence is said to be between 11 to 14 years, whereas middle or late adolescence has been delineated as 15 to 19 years with 15 years of age posited as a bench-mark either way by both psychologists and educators (F. P. Rice, 1996; Schickendanz, 1998). In this review the discussion has been principally confined to young adolescence unless otherwise stated.

Adolescence has been negatively characterised with an emphasis on problem behaviours, risk taking, and by the serious consequences in adolescents’ lives when things go wrong, such as in peer relationships (Newcombe, 1996). However, adolescents experienced different rates of social change and individual development, and their problems may have been over-stated (Bee, 2000; Newcombe, 1996; Steinberg & Morris, 2001). In support of this, Scales (1991) reported that in excess of 80% of
young people encountered stress-free adolescence. This factor does not suggest that the problems associated with adolescence have been identified disproportionately, nor does it suggest that adolescents’ behaviours resulted from individual factors only. For example, when adolescents’ ethnographic profiles at school are examined, the coercive nature of the school environment was found to contribute to alienation in the student-adolescents (Kagan, 1990). The nature and extent of the issues that have been associated with adolescents’ development and behaviours are complex (Coleman & Hendry, 1999; Crockett & Silbereisen, 2000; Segall et al., 1999; Steinberg & Morris, 2001).

Observing the developmental and functioning aspects of adolescents in the context in which these developments occur, including the family and school environs (Eccles & Midgely, 1993), offers a multi-dimensional approach to understanding adolescence (Steinberg & Morris, 2001). This premise supports the argument that the adolescent is strongly influenced by both genetic factors and non-shared environmental influences (i.e., aspects of the environment that other family members do not share in common), such as different parenting styles (Darling & Steinberg, 1993), peer relationships, and school experiences (Steinberg & Morris, 2001). Foremost, however, is attaining an understanding of the potential personal impacts that the individual adolescent’s developmental processes have on him or her, and then relating these issues to belongingness in the school environment and visa versa.

*Development in the Young Adolescent: A Systemic Approach*

Adolescence has been characterised by specific psychological developmental needs in addition to a range of physiological maturity rates that vary with each person (Erikson, 1982; Maslow, 1968). Paradoxically, these needs can be all the more complex and perplexing to the adolescent when they occur in the individual simultaneously (Bee, 2000). Feeling connected and supported throughout the transitional stages of adolescence contributes to the adolescent’s on-going maintenance of belongingness
(Routt, 1996), and to the advancement of his or her identity formation and self-esteem (Harter, Waters, & Whitesell, 1998). Prior to a discussion of these aspects, a review of the factors associated with adolescents’ biopsychosocial and cognitive development and social cognition is presented using an ecological systems approach (Bronfenbrenner, 1977).

Conceptually, Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological framework has the adolescent occupying a focal position, surrounded by concentric systems: the micro, meso, exo, and macro systems. The micro system represents the adolescents’ immediate surroundings, for example the family, the school, and the peer group with whom the adolescent directly interacts. Between the micro system and the next layer is the meso system that provides linking influences between the systems, such as between the adolescents’ school life and family life. Contained in the next layer, the exo system, are aspects that indirectly affect the adolescent, such as the parent’s employment or social welfare policies. Finally, the outermost macro system contains the cultural aspects of the adolescent’s broader society, for example ethnicity and cultural and social value systems. The system effects are bi-directional, such that any part of the adolescent’s ecological system has the capacity to affect the other parts of the system (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), and there is also a feedback link (Segall et al., 1999). This ecological framework supports furthering the psychologists’ understanding of the contextual nature of factors, such as the sociocultural influences (Segall et al., 1999; Seidman, 1991) within which adolescent development takes place, and it has important ramifications for the adolescent (Steinberg & Morris, 2001).

Due to the complexity and range of issues associated with the adolescent’s overall biopsychosocial development during puberty and adolescence (Evans & Poole, 1991), research argue in favour of a multidisciplinary approach to understanding adolescents (Coleman, 1978; Crockett & Silbereisen, 2000). The use of
Bronfenbrenner's (1977) inter-related systems approach has permitted psychologists and educators to conceptualise and understand the adolescent’s psychosocial developmental processes, interactions and outcomes (Bee, 2000; Borich & Tombari, 1997; F. P. Rice, 1996; Schickendanz et al., 1998; Woolfolk, 1998). Although the literature pertaining to adolescence has tended to delineate between the biological, psychological, and social processes, essentially they are inextricably linked (Bee, 2000; Kail & Cavanagh, 1996; Steinberg & Morris, 2001). During puberty, the linking processes have important implications for adolescents, and according to the systems theory, the structured layers surrounding the individual form an interactive ecological framework (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). This precludes any notion that the young adolescent develops biopsychosocially in isolation within his or her own environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

**Biological context and puberty.** As a biological identifier, puberty signifies the onset of secondary sex changes in the maturing young adolescent, and the timing of the puberty-related changes taking place in the individual is influenced by both genetic and environmental factors (Bee, 2000; F. P. Rice, 1996; Schickendanz et al., 1998). Researchers (e.g., Arnett and Taber, 1994; and Coleman and Hendry, 1999) expressed concerns that some adults working and interacting with young adolescents have restricted knowledge of the psychological impact of puberty issues on adolescents. This knowledge deficit has potentially been to the adolescents’ detriment as it precluded empathetic understanding of the adolescent, and it also has the potential for avoidable interpersonal conflicts (Battistich et al., 1997; Eccles & Midgely, 1993; Loda, 1995; Seidman, 1991).

In addition to the development of secondary sex characteristics, the most obvious of the puberty-related changes relate to sex differences in a physical growth spurt (F. P. Rice, 1996). In instances where boys matured earlier and girls matured later (than their respective peers), and where both sexes were culturally matched in physical
attractiveness, these young adolescents experienced a more positive body image, accompanied with greater tendencies towards exhibiting confident leadership skills (Ge, Conger, Lorenz, Shanahan, & Elder, 1995). Conversely, late maturing boys and earlier maturing girls appeared not to match their peers physically, and both sexes experienced social and emotional adversities (Ge et al., 1995). Psychosocially, these changes potentially have a profound impact on the adolescent in terms of their self-concept and self-esteem (Coleman & Hendry, 1999; Crockett & Silbereisen, 2000; Segall et al., 1999).

**Psychosocial influences.** In attempting to adjust to the physical changes, the adolescent tends to experience physical awkwardness with related periods of self-consciousness and self-doubt (Coleman, 1978). The adolescent’s physical changes are associated with heightened sensitivity and anxiety. This is most noticeable with the adolescent’s focus on his or her physical appearance to which they assigned idealised characteristics. While both sexes were very aware of their own body images, adolescent girls (rather than adolescent boys) expressed disappointment with their body image to a greater extent (Harter & Monsour, 1992). The media and stereotyping played an influential part in the adolescents’ focus on physical attributes particularly when attractiveness and success were combined (Coleman & Hendry, 1999; Perry, Kelder, & Komro, 1993). This personal body-image emphasis tended to remain throughout adolescence (Harter & Monsour, 1992). However, what appeared to have strengthened during adolescence is the adolescent’s overall ability to process detailed information about themselves, and their social development needs (Scales, 1991).

In a comprehensive overview of the implications for advancing adolescents’ growth and development needs, (Scales, 1991) proposed that young adolescents have a number of identified psychosocial developmental needs. These include: the need for “positive social interaction with adults and peers”; identified “structure and clear limits”
needs; the need to demonstrate “competence and achievement” abilities; the need for equitable “meaningful participation in families, schools, and communities”; and the need to have “opportunities for self-definition” (p. 13-14). Fundamentally, the adolescent wants to believe in his or her successes, and to be liked and respected in a just world (Coleman & Hendry, 1999; Loda, 1995). Failing to meet these needs during the adolescent’s school years results in the adolescent experiencing alienation (Edwards, 1995), loss of a SoB and general self-esteem (Beck & Malley, 1998a; Finn, 1989; Seidman, 1991), and subsequently resorting to adverse negative coping behaviours such as substance abuse (Wigfield & Eccles, 1994).

Psychosocially, behaviour patterns and schemes that worked well for the adolescent in childhood need to be replaced with newer behavioural patterns as the older more familiar patterns have become outdated (Erikson, 1982). Achieving this process cognitively has been reported to be highly individualistic both in the context of time, and the extent of the adjustments required (Bee, 2000; Coleman & Hendry, 1999; Crockett & Silbereisen, 2000).

Cognitive development. Cognitive development in the young adolescent has a tendency to be subtle and covert (Coleman & Hendry, 1999; F. P. Rice, 1996; Steinberg & Morris, 2001). In spite of this, the continuing changes in the adolescent’s intellectual functioning contain wide ranging implications in the individual’s behavioural responses and attitudes (Steinberg & Morris, 2001). The young adolescent attains a stage of formal operational thinking and has the capacity to think logically in abstract terms, solve problems, and create ideas that can be tested (Piaget, 1972). Critics of Piaget’s mental development stages suggested that this reasoning process required qualification (Sutherland, 1992). For example, adolescents capably demonstrate sophisticated reasoning in situations that are relevant to themselves (Ward & Overton, 1990). However, this was less so when the situations are not applicable (to them). This
illustration was pertinent to understanding how adolescents can think in certain situations, rather than suggesting that their cognitive processing will be consistent (Kail, 1991).

Although a number of theories have been proposed to comprehensively understand of the adolescent’s cognitive development (e.g., Piaget, 1972), the information processing approach has been advanced as being more fundamental to the adolescent as an individual (Bee, 2000; F.P. Rice, 1996; Schickendanz et al., 1998). This approach focuses on the adolescent progressively stepping through, acting upon, and utilising a wide variety of information (Coleman & Hendry, 1999; Crockett & Silbereisen, 2000), including their knowledge of interpersonal relationships (Kail, 1991).

Social cognition. Prior to being able to take an in-depth societal perspective (at 14 years and beyond), the young adolescent’s social cognition processes are concerned with such factors as generalised perspective-taking, interpersonal problem-solving, and self-knowledge (Selman, Beardslee, Schultz, Krupa, & Podorefsky, 1986). These factors have been identified by researchers with particular reference to the adolescent being able to take another person’s perspective, negotiating peer-friendships, and adopting positive social development roles (Coleman & Hendry, 1999).

Adolescents experience a desire for independence, and accordingly, while they have aspirations for social change they also demonstrate a preparedness to challenge the status quo (Coleman & Hendry, 1999; Segall et al., 1999). However, the young adolescent’s psychosocial experiences in the world around him or her are such that these experiences do not match his or her cognitive ability when it comes to processing his or her own experiential information (Kail, 1991). In support of these findings, researchers (e.g., Crockett and Silbereisen, 2000) argued that the adolescent has the cognitive and behavioural abilities and the capacity to influence his or her environment
without the necessary socialisation abilities. A corollary to these concepts relates to the adolescent’s increasing demands for attaining new social skills (Steinberg & Morris, 2001).

When the demand for social skills is coupled with environment demands (e.g., at school) and balanced with a constant need to form an adult identity, adolescence is viewed as a time when the adolescent requires assistance to achieve these challenges (Bee, 2000). Specifically, during their high school years, adolescents are confronted with reconciling their personal intellectual abilities, while they strive for independence and identity (i.e., individuation) (Coleman & Hendry, 1999). Unless adolescents have support systems in place, the outcome of these developmental processes can be frustration and confusion in personal identity (Cunningham & Spencer, 2000).

Identity. The essential facilitating components that constitute adolescent identity formation, particularly in respect to wider community issues, include social approval and emotional support, and personal achievement (Coleman & Hendry, 1999; Crockett & Silbereisen, 2000). These factors lead to the adolescent using positive coping mechanisms, rather than the use of avoidant or reactive coping mechanisms (Swanson et al., 1998). The concept of identity is associated with two main perspectives. The first is the individual’s own personal identity, and the second relates to a social identity whereby the individual identifies with, and has an attachment to, a location within the community (Chavis & Pretty, 1999), such as the school (Battistich et al., 1997). This construct has been referred to as social identity (Cover & Murphy, 2000). In support of these arguments, identity is proposed as a factor in the mediating relationship that co-exists with belongingness (Puddifoot, 1996). For example, the adolescent has a social identity which is part of a school community membership, as well as the individual’s own self-identity that he or she brings to the classroom environment from the home
environment. A potentially inextricable link between belongingness and self-identity has been suggested and supported within the literature (Puddifoot, 1996).

The search for self-identity in the young adolescent is intense due to the various rapid biological and social changes that occurred during adolescence (Erikson, 1982). A corollary to this is identity diffusion, during which the young adolescent has high levels of psychological and interpersonal confusion, a tendency towards social withdrawal, and associated deficits in social skills with their peer group (Kroger & Green, 1996).

Identity formation in adolescence has been linked to a number of social and environmental factors including socio-cultural issues and relationships (Coover & Murphy, 2000). As the socio-cultural environment is external to the individual's locus of control, certain aspects of identity formation may be altered (Nurmi, Seginer, & Poole, 1995). Subsequently, belongingness stemming from the adolescents' socio-cultural environmental development is affected (Nurmi et al., 1995). Recent trends, however, suggested that the context in which identity formation takes place is particularly significant (Coleman & Hendry, 1999; Coover & Murphy, 2000), as the principle undertaking during adolescence is the formation of an identity that incorporates the acquisition of an integrated sense of self (Crockett & Silbereisen, 2000).

The adolescent has a number of self-concepts that facilitate psychosocial adaptation (Swanson et al., 1998). Idiosyncratic life experiences form the basis to the young adolescent's unique personal identity (Coover & Murphy, 2000), whereas social identities (including those at school) tend to identify the adolescent as a group member (Coover & Murphy, 2000; Crockett & Silbereisen, 2000). Combining these two identities has the potential to promote a unique sense of belongingness in the young adolescent, and to contribute to the maintenance of a positive ongoing social identity.
The adolescents' evolving multifaceted social self allows the individual to adapt to the prevailing cultural norms in relationships (Kerpelman et al., 1997), and to situational constraints arising from social interactions (Coover & Murphy, 2000). This adjustment process is particularly relevant for the adolescent in the school environment (Seidman, 1991). Adolescents' understanding and perception of themselves in relation to these issues affects their reactions, adjustments, and self-esteem (Coleman & Hendry, 1999; Crockett & Silbereisen, 2000).

**Self-esteem and self-concept.** References to the young adolescents' self-esteem in the literature suggest that there are several relevant terms associated with this construct. A number of these terms have been used interchangeably, albeit at times inappropriately (Borich & Tombari, 1997; Scales, 1991). Among these self-terms referred to in the literature is the individual's ideas of his or her own self-worth, that is the adolescent's personal belief system that relates to his or her unique value as a person. Also, other frequently used expressions are self-efficacy which equates to adolescents having a belief that personal objectives are achievable (Scales, 1991), and self-concept that refers to the schemata of the adolescent's attitudes and feelings (Bee, 2000; Coleman & Hendry, 1999; Kail & Cavanagh, 1996). Moreover, possibly the most significant phrase is self-esteem which is indicative of the adolescent's global evaluation of his or her own worth or ability (Bee, 2000). Marsh (1990) proposed that, given the variations in the strength of the relationship, the students with higher self-esteem appeared to have greater successes at school. However, although self-esteem is also related to more positive attitudes to school, and positive classroom behaviours (Marsh, 1990), this correlation does not imply causation. Rather those students with
higher self-esteem may or may not be higher achievers, or the opposite process may
have been occurring (Marsh, 1987).

Several key factors have been identified in the adolescent’s self-esteem process
(Harter, 1990). The main factor is the degree of discrepancy between what the
adolescent wants to achieve on the one hand, and what the adolescent thinks has been
achieved on the other (Harter & Monsour, 1992). This latter factor refers to the overall
sense of support the adolescent has received from other important people, including
teachers and peers and is part of the multi dimensional model of self-concept (Harter,
1990). Self-esteem and self-concept are related to a number of issues including
adjustment to school (Beck & Malley, 1998a), peer support, and success at school
(Steinberg & Morris, 2001).

Variations have been identified in the connection between the adolescent’s self-
concept and self-esteem (Steinberg & Morris, 2001). For example, self-concepts can
differ relative to the context, including school, from which the young adolescent views
themself (Harter, Marold, Whitesell, & Cobbs, 1996). Within the school environment
the adolescent’s behaviour patterns may vary in response to a number of factors
including their relationships with teachers (Baker et al., 1997; Scales & Taccogna,
2000), and with their peers (Loda, 1995; Perry et al., 1993; Schumacher, 1998; Tate,
2001; Williams, 1998). The adolescent’s self-esteem, therefore, has been associated
with the perceptions of self and of significant others (Harter, 1990). To the adolescents,
being held in positive regard by peers and teachers strengthens their feelings of being
accepted (Battistich et al., 1997; Wehlage, 1989). However, adolescents experiencing
low self-esteem are often isolated and experience a diminished SoB (Beck & Malley,
1998a; Finn, 1989).

The adolescent’s social support systems are interrelated to a number of factors
including the people with whom the adolescent interacts (including peers and teachers),
and the influences exerted by the characteristics of the social context. The school, with its educational practices, associated customs and cultural influences (Segall et al., 1999), has been proposed as a social context illustration (Canter & Canter, 1992; Glasser, 1990).

Using the systems framework, a number of ecological factors have been instrumental in the adolescent's developmental and identity formation at school, including peer relationships, and school experiences (Swanson et al., 1998). Adolescent's identity formation is linked to various factors including the exploration of different domains such as preparation for the future, and to positive educational experiences (Swanson et al., 1998). This suggested a potential for dual influences of school factors and peers on adolescent students' identity during this period (Nurmi, 1991).

Sense of Belonging and the Adolescent at School

Young Adolescent Students

In addition to furthering the young adolescent overall well-being, researchers (e.g., Perry et al., 1993) have emphasised the importance of positive socialisation at school where opportunities were provided for role modeling and social support. The social integration skills acquired by the adolescent extend beyond the school environment into the wider social community activities (Coleman & Hendry, 1999). Schooling, therefore, appeared to exert powerful positive ongoing influences when it is both socially pertinent and culturally applicable to the adolescent’s societal development (Segall et al., 1999).

Among the many facets involved in establishing and maintaining the adolescent’s positive social interactions at school is a SoB (Beck & Malley, 1998a; Edwards, 1995). SoB is recognised as an essential aspect of adolescents' identity and behavioural interactions in the school environment (Battistich et al., 1997; Beck &
Malley, 1998a, 1998b; Brandt, 1992). Other positive factors linked to belonging at school for adolescents include motivation and achievement (Goodenow, 1993b), the enhancement of life skills (Baker et al., 1997), personal well-being (McCullough, Huebner, & Laughlin, 2000), and participation in school activities (Fine, 1989; Scales & Taccogna, 2000). Where there are deficits in SoB in the school environment, in addition to alienation, students experience a lack of trust and understanding (Baker et al., 1997) some of which stems from other factors, including differences in socio-economic status and ethnicity (Fine, 1990; Seidman, 1991), and which lead to poor academic outcomes (Goodenow, 1993b).

Within the school environment, the classroom has been negatively (Bergin, 1999; Eccles & Midgely, 1993; Wigfield & Eccles, 1994;), and positively identified (Wilks, 1992; Williams, 1998; Woolfolk, 1998) with the adolescents' functional learning skills and belonging (Battistich et al., 1997). Primarily, negative outcomes are related to the mismatch between the developing social adolescent and the opportunities provided for him or her at school (Eccles & Midgely, 1993). This appears to relate to problematic person-environment issues such as transition from primary to high school (Battistich et al., 1997), and changes in the classroom learning environment (Eccles & Midgely, 1993). However, there appears to be a number of factors common to both negative and positive learning skills factors including the students' motivational aspirations relative to being at school (Elliott & Dweck, 1998), and intrinsic motivation (Harter & Monsour, 1992). Further to this, the adolescent student's perceptions and descriptions are integral in the teachers' understanding of the specific classroom membership characteristics that contributed to belongingness to the school and to the community (Williams & Downing, 1998). A major factor in adolescents' achieving this membership and understanding is predicated on teachers listening to their students (Beck & Malley, 1998a; Williams & Downing, 1998).
Schools may be viewed as learning communities within Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems framework (Coleman & Hendry, 1999; Segall et al., 1999). Schools operate reactively and interactively at both the micro and meso systems levels (Swanson et al., 1998). Such an approach has facilitated the examination of the adolescent's school related issues, such as social and emotional factors that include social networks (Battistich et al., 1997; Baumeister & Leary, 1995). There are several strategies for understanding social networks including the use of interactive networks and exchange networks. Interactive networks were those associated with daily social exchange (e.g., the classroom learning environment), while the exchange networks provide material and symbolic support structures, such as those derived from the school systems (e.g., student reward/recognition processes) (Milardo, 1992). In addition to these structures, is an over-lapping network of significant others that, in addition to family members, included personal associates (Milardo, 1992). Teachers and peers form part of the personal associates category for the adolescent at school (Borich & Tombari, 1997).

**Teachers**

Although the transition into adolescence is a time when adolescent-adult relationships undergo testing processes, maintaining the relationship ties requires concerted bilateral efforts on behalf of all concerned, especially teachers and parents (Laursen & Collins, 1994; Steinberg & Morris, 2001). Successful transitional process outcomes for adolescents have their foundation in appropriate levels of autonomy and individuation, and in academic achievements (Battistich et al., 1997; Goodenow, 1993b; Laurens & Collins, 1994; Schmuck & Schmuck, 1992). Furthermore, despite periods of adolescent-teacher conflict (Edwards, 1995; Ge et al., 1995) significant adults, including teachers, remained an important part of adolescents' lives (Battistich et al., 1997; Laursen & Collins, 1994), particularly when teachers are role models in the classroom (Massey, 1998). The teacher as a role model influences the adolescents' identity, self-
concept, and aspirations (Galbo, 1989), suggesting that effective teachers required positive relationship skills (Benard, 1995) in the event that belongingness relationship are to be achieved (Edwards, 1995).

Teachers provided supportive classroom environments when they established caring understanding relationships with their students (Barry & King, 1998; Benard, 1995). However, when an atmosphere of alienation is present in the classroom neither the teacher nor the student experiences a SoB (Battistich et al., 1997; Edwards, 1995), and academic outcomes are likely to be poor (Royal & Rossi, 1996). As a means of improving negative student-teacher relationships and promoting belongingness at school, these relationships may be built and developed in an atmosphere of bipartisan participation and cooperation, the outcome being a school climate of mutual trust and respect between teachers, students, and their peers (Wehlage, 1989; Williams & Downing, 1998).

**Peers**

Positive peer relationships (at school) are linked to a number of factors including the adolescent’s literacy achievements (M. L. Rice, 1989), school related anxiety levels (Beck & Malley, 1998a), the adolescent’s student-learner-self-concept (Wigfield & Eccles, 1994), as well as academic competencies and prosocial behaviours (Battistich et al., 1997; Mounts & Steinberg, 1995). These factors culminate in the student’s negative or positive attitude towards the school (Zeichner, 1980), and with their peers in the classroom (Battistich et al., 1997). In arguing in support of the adolescent’s need to belong and be accepted by their peers in schools, Beck and Malley (1998a) suggested that this belonging relationship constitutes a dominant primary psychosocial impetus during adolescence.

In response to the significant changes associated with adolescence in such areas as the transitional nature of adolescence and the adolescent’s emerging personal
identity, peer-dependency is also been posited as an important issue (Hopkins, 1994).

Eccles and Midgely (1993) identified the positive outcomes associated with promoting the student-learners’ socially active roles with their peers as a means of providing ongoing psycho-social support for the adolescents at school and developing a resilient SoB. Peer relationships are social predictors for school achievement (Anderman & Anderman, 1999), and the adolescent’s perceptual gauges of self-worth (F. P. Rice, 1996). Adolescents and their peers look towards being accepted at school for who they are, that is with mistakes and experimentations, and without rejection (Steinberg & Morris, 2001). However, adolescents and their peers do not exert coercive influences on each other, rather they choose each other based on similarities (Hartup, 1996), admiration and respect for their opinions (Susman et al., 1994), and their mutual tendencies towards similar behaviours and attitudes (Hogue & Steinberg, 1995). These mutual characteristics augur well in the school environment in promoting bilateral SoB between adolescents and their peers (Anderman & Anderman, 1999).

**Educational Factors**

School membership has been predicated on the students’ belief that the energy and time invested in the school is worthwhile, and feelings of being valued (Arhar & Kromrey, 1995). However, these interrelated factors are not the only influence on the adolescent’s beliefs and experiences at school. Transition from primary to middle school (Eccles & Midgely, 1993), school size (Beck & Malley, 1998a) and classroom issues, such as mastery in grades (Cotton, 1996), also influence the adolescent’s SoB (Edwards, 1995; Williams & Downing, 1998). Of these factors, the small school and classroom size are considered to have the most wide-ranging effect on adolescents in high school and on their teachers (Cotton, 1996). Smaller schools are associated with a greater SoB plus positive academic achievement, and greater self-esteem (Raywid, 1996). Cooperative learning in smaller classes has led to a number of reported gains for
the students. These have include positive academic outcomes, and high self-esteem, plus in the smaller classes adolescents have demonstrated effective use of their social skills in the learning environment (Good & Brophy, 1997).

Learning at school has been described as an interactive process that involves experience and social interaction (Barry & King, 1998). The school is where young people

...develop...a variety of competencies that come to define self and ability, where friendships with peers are nurtured, and where the role of the community member is played out...during a highly formative period of development. Thus the building of self-esteem, interpersonal competencies, social problem solving...becomes important in its own right and as a critical underpinning of success in academic learning. (Good & Weinstein, 1986, p. 1095)

Meeting the students' learning and belonging needs in the classroom had a greater chance of success when teachers demonstrate warmth and are competent in their teaching skills (Glasser, 1986). In order that these needs were met, researchers (e.g., Canter and Canter, 1992; and Glasser, 1990) advocate taking a whole school approach to the management of student learning such that this system reflected the school's personnel, culture, and environment. Such a school management programme incorporates concepts that relate to developing and maintaining adolescents' skills specifically in peer relationships, classroom management, and problem-solving abilities (Canter & Canter, 1992). Nurturing and caring school environments where there is an atmosphere of belonging potentially augmented the adolescent's psychosocial well-being and coping skills during the transitional phases of adolescence (Borich & Tombari, 1997; Schaps & Solomon, 1997).
Risk Factors

Adolescents who experience deficits in their psychosocial well-being and coping skills are considered to be at-risk (McCullough et al., 2000). In addition to the negative outcomes from risk factors, at risk adolescents face the added burden of academic failure due to deficits in their social, emotional, cognitive, and behavioural skills that are required for academic success and that traditional schooling demands (Baker et al., 1997; Kagan, 1990). The at-risk category characteristics for these adolescents includes low socio-economic status, poverty, alienation, family dysfunction due to parenting styles, and marital discord or divorce (Baker et al., 1997; Roberts, 1999). A number of risk factors are related to behavioural difficulties and these risk factors include deficits in personal competencies including low self-esteem, negative self-perception, reduced social skills, poor problem solving skills, ineffective peer relationships, substance abuse, violence, suicide, undiagnosed learning disabilities, adolescent pregnancy, depression, and deficits in their SoB (Baker et al., 1997; Battistich et al., 1997; Beck & Malley, 1998a; Finn, 1989; Kagan, 1990). However, the literature was unclear as to whether lacking a SoB is a precursor to all of the adolescents' risk factors, or whether a number of the risk factors results in deficits in the adolescents' SoB (Rueter & Conger, 1995; Steinberg & Morris, 2001).

In the event that adolescents fail to experience feelings of belonging at school, their SoB can be acquired via membership of antisocial or marginalised groups (Beck & Malley, 1998a). For example, economically disadvantaged or minority group students tend to have a weak sense of identity at school and subsequently may join gangs to achieve their SoB (Beck & Malley, 1998b), and hence they were exposed to further marginalisation (Cotton, 1996). As a result, the school environment has a critical role in arresting negative processes in adolescents, and also in the provision of factors that
ultimately protect and contribute towards the development of resilient, confident competent adults (Benard, 1995).

**Protective Factors**

Although no firm answer has been established in support of the reasons behind different levels of resilience in adolescents (Werner, 1993), adaptability appears to be a major factor (Berk, 2000). According to the literature, the adolescent’s processes of successfully adapting and transforming risk factors into protective factors evolves from an innate capacity for resilience (Benard, 1995). Engaging and supporting disconnected or underachieving adolescents in schools is thus identified as a risk-reduction protective process (Scales & Taccogna, 2000).

Moreover, adolescents draw protective support from a number of broad factors: individual inherent positive self-perceptions, social support systems from friends and peers, family cohesiveness, adversity buffers including problem solving skills, and finally support beyond the immediate family, including the school environment (Berk, 2000; Roberts, 1999). Support factors for adolescents at school also include related protective aspects, such as caring and supportive student-teacher relationships, schools that promote high and positive expectations, and an environment where the adolescent has opportunities for meaningful involvement, responsibility and a SoB (Bergin, 1995; Brandt, 1992; Scales, 1999).

Belongingness in adolescents forms the part of the development process underpinning ongoing positive interpersonal relationships (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). This relationship has been linked to understanding the individual’s motivations and achievement behaviours (Goodenow, 1993b). The adolescent’s motivation towards interpersonal behaviours, belonging, and problem solving skills at school arise from personal psychosocial attributes, peer competency skills, and the adolescent’s willingness to participate in school activities (Newcombe, 1996; Williams & Downing,
1998). Although adolescents’ SoB at school has received attention in the literature, most of the research has been quantitative (e.g., Goodenow, 1993a; 1993b; Seidman, 1991) and has addressed specific areas of SoB, such as relationships issues (Laible, Carlo, & Raffaelli, 2000), social networks (Cauce, 1986), group processes (Hopkins, 1994), sense of community (Pretty, Conroy, Dugay, Fowler, & Williams, 1996; Royal & Rossi, 1996), and schools as caring communities (Baker et al., 1997).

Those research projects that have used a qualitative methodology in the study of adolescents have also focused on specific problem areas including economic and cultural issues (Fine, 1990), substance abuse (Pearson & Mitchell, 2000), and disadvantaged adolescents (Williams & Downing, 1998). The opportunity currently exists to use qualitative methodologies to broaden psychology’s knowledge-base pertaining to adolescents. In this way adolescents would be using their own words to share their perceptions and experiences, and the risk and resilience factors associated with SoB at school and in the broader community could be examined. Firstly, future research could include identifying associated childhood factors that may have influenced adolescent behavioural and emotional problems. Secondly, qualitative research would permit an examination of the individual-specific factors that may have contributed to the adolescent managing adverse experiences without incurring personal detriment, and in identifying those factors that may have had a positive personal impact. However, using the adolescents’ personal experiences and perceptions to establish a normative base-line for SoB at school would be an appropriate qualitative study to be undertaken prior to assessing the factors that may contribute to their resilience factors.

Conclusions and Future Directions

In this paper a range of factors that may impact on adolescents’ SoB and belongingness in the school environment has been presented (Goodenow, 1993a; Scales, 1991; Scales & Taccogna, 2000; Seidman, 1991). Initially, defining the
adolescents' SoB requires an eclectic approach to encompassing the multifaceted nature of the construct that includes such factors as individuality, attachment, motivation, overt behaviours, and social inclusion (Beck & Malley, 1998a, 1998b; Goodenow, 1993a; Massey, 1998). Although psychologists have demonstrated an interest in SoB beyond the need to combat its negative effects on adolescents and to promote adolescents' self-esteem and well-being, the knowledge base is fragmented (Steinberg & Morris, 2001). However, recent trends in promoting and understanding adolescents' adaptation and transitional processes that occur in the school environment, demonstrate attempts to forestall the deleterious effects of being excluded at school and to maximise adolescents' SoB (Williams & Downing, 1998).

The transitional processes facing adolescents do not occur in isolation; rather the whole individual may be affected thus creating a need to understand the associated biopsychosocial change and developmental aspects of adolescence (Coleman & Hendry, 1999; Crockett & Silbereisen, 2000). In addition to adolescents themselves being aware of these processes, having an understanding of the interactive nature of adolescence is an important for those people with whom the adolescent relates, particularly teachers and parents (Edwards, 1995). In view of the relatively large time adolescents spend at school, another significant factor is being aware of the negative or positive issues that affect SoB, particularly relationship issues, for example student-teacher, or student-peer relationships (Battistich et al., 1997; Laursen & Collins, 1994).

A systems approach provides a way of explaining and interpreting the complex range of interactive relationship issues confronting the developing adolescent at school (Seidman, 1991), and of identifying the impact of biopsychosocial influences during adolescence (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). A number of major issues affect the adolescent including the formation of a unique identity which has been linked to idiosyncratic social, cultural, and relationship issues (Coleman & Hendry, 1999; Selman et al., 1986).
Another important issue is the adolescents' self-esteem (Harter et al., 1998). This relates to the adolescents' personal and social self-worth, and impacts on most aspects of the adolescents' interactions at school, particularly their relationships with their teachers and their peers (Steinberg & Morris, 2001).

In addition to the effects of the education system on the adolescents' SoB, factors that protect or place the adolescent at risk at school are identified in the literature (McCullough et al., 2000). From the literature, it appears that belongingness is an important positive factor underpinning the adolescents' interpersonal relationships, and in the motivational and achievement factors associated with the adolescents' academic achievements (Baker et al., 1997; Kagan, 1990). However, where SoB is not present, the adolescent experiences alienation and deficits in self-esteem (Beck & Malley, 1998b).

Most of the studies available for review use quantitative methodologies, and tend to focus on specific issues in adolescence including relationship issues, social networks, or substance abuse (Kagan, 1990; Pearson & Mitchell, 2000; Seidman, 1991; Tate, 2001). From the small number of qualitative studies that have examined SoB (e.g., Pearson & Mitchell, 2000; Williams & Downing, 1998), there appears to be insufficient information available relating to the factors that assisted in the formation and maintenance of the adolescents' perspective of a SoB in high school. Moreover, there is a need to identify the adolescents' normative experiences and perceptions (Steinberg & Morris, 2001) of belonging within the school environment, and to focus on the aspects that contribute to the formation and maintenance of the adolescents' SoB at school. Using a qualitative methodology, the factors that adolescents think are associated with their SoB could be examined, and any of their risk factors could be identified and ameliorated wherever possible. Coextensively, the identified factors, such as the role of SoB, that have the potential to mitigate against any deleterious risk factors could be
promoted as protective and supporting mechanisms for the adolescent in the school environment. Perhaps more important is the need to examine the role of adolescents’ SoB within a framework that acknowledges the impact of systemic factors on its formation and maintenance. An ideal example of this is the investigation of the SoB in the school environment.
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Sense of Belonging at School in Adolescents


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Sense of Belonging in the School:

Impact on Young Adolescents

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For the adolescent at high school, successful examination outcomes can take precedence over social interactions at school. A number of strategies are required for the adolescent to negotiate the educational climate and classroom instructions including a sense of belonging (SoB). This current study aimed to identify the factors that contributed to the adolescents' formation and maintenance of SoB at school, and to determine the extent that relationship and identity issues contributed to adolescent belongingness. Using a semi-structured interview schedule, five male and five female year eight students were interviewed to examine their experiences and perceptions of SoB in the school environment. A question ordered matrix was used to detect themes and sub-themes from the data, and the data was analysed using thematic analysis. An eclectic approach using several SoB studies was employed to order and detect the themes. These included student-teacher relationships, peer relationships, school ethos, shared experiences, and social roles. These findings suggest that there are a number of significant factors associated with adolescents' SoB. As a qualitative study, it provides an illustration of the value in giving adolescents an opportunity to share their experiences and perceptions using their own words. Several areas for future research have been outlined, including extending the current study to include a cross-sectional methodology to obtain comparative data from students and teachers at similar profile public and private schools.
Sense of Belonging in the School: Impact on Young Adolescents

For students, the high school environment may give the appearance of being a place dominated by curriculum outcomes as opposed to a place where they can meaningfully engage, connect, and belong with others. School success has long been tied in with meeting educational objectives, and in this same climate, belonging at school has not always been recognized for its far-reaching contributions to adolescents' life long learning (Williams & Downing, 1998). Recent research papers illustrating the role of belonging for adolescents at school have offered psychologists and educationalists opportunities to further their understanding of such issues as teachers as role models (Edwards, 1995; Massey, 1998; Schaps & Solomon, 1997), the sociocultural complexities of the school environment (Benard, 1995; Nelson, 1995), and the adolescent's development of the self (Harter, Waters, & Whitesell, 1998; Phinney, Cantu, & Kurtz, 1997). However, these concepts do not occur in isolation. For the adolescent they are inextricably linked to a number of environmental factors including the school context (Royal & Rossi, 1996), and to adjustments in the educational roles and processes operating within the school environment (Borich & Tombari, 1997).

The contemporary view of schools is influenced by an ever changing social environment that requires the preparation of adolescents for an increasingly complex, rapidly changing technical world (Borich & Tombari, 1997; Coleman & Hendry, 1999). Simultaneously, the adolescents' traditional sources of belonging in families have been altered. For example, changes in family demographic and parent employment patterns have led to fragmentation in belonging in the adolescent’s immediate and extended family support structures (Beck & Malley, 1998a; Royal & Rossi, 1996). This has resulted in an accentuation in the adolescent’s need to have supportive affiliations and attachments throughout the school systems to combat the negative consequences of alienation and isolation (Beck & Malley, 1998b). Consequently, the role of psychology
in school education systems is identified as being well placed to assist educators in identifying and overcoming any deficits in the many psychosocial issues confronting the student (Woolfolk, 1998). An acknowledged deficit factor is the need to bridge the gaps in understanding the issues that impact on adolescents' sense of belonging (SoB) within the school environment (Beck, 1998a,b; Williams & Downing, 1998).

The students' SoB is defined as a "sense of being accepted, valued, included, and encouraged by others...and of feeling oneself to be an important part of...life and activity..." at school (Goodenow, 1993a, p. 25). This definition was extended by (Massey, 1998) to include "a feeling of connectedness" associated with the "desire to belong," given that the adolescent experienced "involvement" and had an "opportunity to belong" (p. 18). When these issues are addressed positively during adolescence, the adolescent has the potential to experience belongingness while he or she is at school, thus indicating an adolescent-school relationship. Additionally, this SoB relationship contributes to the adolescent having meaningful social roles at school during the transitional experiences of adolescence (Schumacher, 1998; Williams & Downing, 1998).

A Systems Approach to Sense of Belonging at School

An ecological systems framework approach has been used to examine the complex inter-related psychosocial factors operating for the adolescent at school (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Coleman & Hendry, 1999; Seidman, 1991). In this analytical framework the adolescent student at school occupies the middle position (in a psychosocial context) within the school environment. From this focal point any number of the adolescent's reciprocal or bi-directional interactions with the school environment, have been examined using an interactive system of layers. These layers have been termed the micro, meso, exo, and the macro systems (Borich & Tombari, 1997;
Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The proximal and distal factors that exert influences on the adolescents' psychosocial well-being are embodied in this analytical approach.

In the closest social context from which the (theoretical) micro system level operates, the adolescent at school relates directly to other settings, including home and community, and on a one-on-one basis to people including his or her peer group, and to teachers (Perry, Kelder, & Komro, 1993; Segall, Dasen, Berry, & Poortinga, 1999). In the school environment the adolescent experiences independent psychosocial influences from these people-related factors, for example, in teacher role modeling and in interpersonal relationships with peers and teachers (Pretty, Andrews, & Collett, 1994; Williams & Downing, 1998). Connecting the next layers are two or more meso systems (or subsystems) that form links, for example, between the adolescent at school and the adolescent's family life, such that one setting is likely to affect another depending on the strength of the interactions. Further to this concept, school initiatives instigated for the adolescent have greater chances of succeeding with parental support (Perry et al., 1988). At the next layer, the exo system influences the adolescent at school through such factors as the school board, the education curriculum, and parents' work-patterns. Finally, the layer furthest from the adolescent, the macro system level, comprises societal influences, including political factors, that exert oblique effects on the adolescent (Segall et al., 1999).

In support of this layered contextual framework, Segall et al. (1999) advocated taking a broader view of the adolescents' environment when exploring their developmental and behavioural patterns and problems. This approach suggests that comprehensive explanations for, and understanding of, adolescents' psychosocial outcomes may have their origins in any of the surrounding contextual layers. Community issues from beyond the adolescents' immediate classroom environment have been embedded in these layers, and may include cultural and socio economic
issues (Segall et al., 1999). However, giving adolescents a 'voice' provides an opportunity for them to indicate their perceptions of the influential factors at the micro level, for example at their school (Rapley & Pretty, 1999). Aided by this information, psychologists and educationalists have opportunities to further their overall understanding of the related issues from the adolescents' perspective. For adolescents, who spend a large amount of their time engaged in school related activities, the issues surrounding belongingness in the school community are important factors worthy of ongoing research and understanding (Pretty, Conroy, Dugay, Fowler, & Williams, 1996; Williams & Downing, 1998).

Sense of Belonging in Adolescents at School

The school is a learning community that has shared values and ideals operating towards communal goals (Baker, Terry, Bridger, & Winsor, 1997). In the school environment, the classroom is a place where functional learning skills are acquired (Woolfolk, 1998). The student-learner in the classroom as a “key player” whose “descriptions, perceptions, and meanings of [the] classroom” contributed greatly to the understanding of classroom membership characteristics, and feelings of belongingness to the school and community (Williams & Downing, 1998, p. 98). In addition to the strong implications for positive academic student outcomes, Battistich et al. (1997) argued that the school community’s influence and the effects of belonging extend beyond the classroom and have the potential to influence the adolescent’s future life skills.

Belongingness in adolescents has several components including a “sense of security” coupled with a “sense of significance and importance” that permits the adolescent to experience “feeling(s) of inclusion” in a school environment where a “psychological membership of a group” is possible (Edwards, 1995, p. 191). Within the school community, researchers have identified a number of developmental needs that
are characteristic of adolescence and that contributed to a SoB (Scales, 1991; Scales & Taccogna, 2000). These characteristics included positive interactive relationships with peers and adults, clearly stated behavioural expectations with explicit boundaries, opportunities for creative expression, opportunities to demonstrate competencies and achievements, being able to meaningfully participate in the school’s activities, and opportunities to construct a consistent self-image (Scales, 1991). In summary, the young adolescent looks towards belonging while he or she is at school, and belonging is also important for the adolescent to have meaningful participatory roles within the school community (Schumacher, 1998; Williams & Downing, 1998).

For the adolescent student the importance of a SoB as a contributing factor to the individual’s well-being has been identified in a number of different areas. These included the creation of quality environments that foster belongingness at school (Beck & Malley, 1998a; Scales & Taccogna, 2000), improved student-teacher relationships (Beck & Malley, 1998b; Edwards, 1995), the promotion of student participation in the classroom (Royal & Rossi, 1997), and contribute to students’ motivation and achievement (Anderman & Anderman, 1999; Goodenow, 1993b). Conversely, where adolescents at school do not experience belongingness, higher incidences of alienation, deficits in self-esteem (Edwards, 1995), isolation, and poor academic outcomes (Beck & Malley, 1998b) are evident. Personal and social variables affect the adolescents’ SoB (Schmuck & Schmuck, 1992). These ranged from being liked (by friends and peers), to having effective social skills, and personal (to the adolescent) concepts of physical attractiveness (Harter & Monsour, 1992). School environments where the relevance of these variables are recognised and endorsed, and where an atmosphere of belongingness prevails, have the capacity to maximise the adolescents’ psychosocial development and well-being (Borich & Tombari, 1997; Schaps & Solomon, 1997).
In a review of adolescents' developmental outcomes at school, Seidman (1991) argued in favour of using an overarching analytical systems approach to examine the outcome related issues for the adolescent including aspects of belonging. This system evolved from examining the ecological-developmental and transactional themes associated with adolescence, and applying these themes to the adolescent in the school environment. Encompassed within Seidman's (1991) analytical system were three broad mediating categories for the adolescent. Firstly, a category of risk and protective factors that related to such individual issues as social/cultural identity, major life events, and family and school structures. Secondly, a category which comprised the individual's developmental outcomes. Finally, the third category, which related in part to Bronfenbrenner's (1979) systems approach, involved mediating (transitional) factors. The adolescent was said to have (a) person-centered issues that included problem-solving abilities; (b) a micro system of social support and participation; and (c) a meso system from which the individual's relationships and social support systems were evaluated (Seidman, 1991).

Although Seidman's (1991) study involved disadvantaged urban adolescents, the findings supported the more widespread use of a systems approach in the study of adolescents at school. The current quantitative study was designed to examine the psychosocial and developmental factors that positively or negatively influenced the adolescents' SoB at school (Seidman, 1991). The systems approach was also used in this study as a means of conceptualising the adolescent's social support systems (e.g., peers and teachers), and identifying the factors that influenced the adolescent's participation in school activities. A number of other studies have also examined the adolescents' SoB in the school environment using specific psychological or social issues. These studies included the following: adolescents' motivation and achievement issues (Goodenow, 1993b), the effects of social and cultural issues at school (Fine,
Sense of Belonging at School in Adolescents

1990), the role of social networks in the school environment (Pearson & Mitchell, 2000), students with special requirements at school (Williams & Downing, 1998), the role of school counsellors (Edwards, 1995), creating belongingness in the classroom (Beck & Malley, 1998b), schools as caring communities (Battistich et al., 1997; Benard, 1995; Nelson, 1995; Schaps & Solomon, 1997; Schumacher, 1998), and promoting student competencies (Scales, 1999; Scales & Taccogna, 2000). The majority of these studies were quantitative while several used both quantitative and qualitative methodologies.

The aim of this current qualitative study was to explore adolescents’ own accounts of their experiences and perceptions of SoB while they were attending year eight at high school. The purpose of the study was to determine which aspects of his or her experiences fostered the adolescent’s formation and maintenance of a SoB at school. The specific areas of interest were relationship and identity issues, particularly those that may ultimately increase the likelihood of successful future school outcomes for adolescents. Therefore, the research questions in this study are: What does SoB look like for year eight students? What factors promote or inhibit its development in the school environment?

Method

Design

This exploratory qualitative study was designed to address the research aims and objectives and to answer the questions relating to adolescents’ SoB at school. Qualitative inquiry methods operate within the naturalistic paradigm and have an interpretive approach to describing the individuals’ multiple perspectives associated with social reality and social interaction (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998). Step-by-step processes were used to link factors in the adolescents’ experiences and perceptions of belongingness at school. Using these processes, the actual connections detected between
adolescents' interactions at school and their SoB were identified, analysed, and clarified (Wicker, 1989).

A qualitative approach allows an exploration and understanding of the complex nature (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998) of adolescents' perceptions and psychological concepts of a SoB at school when their experiences were expressed in their own words (Rappaport, 1995). The emphasis of this study was directed towards the meaning of the adolescent's experiences obtained from their responses (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998), and to the inductive processes operating during the data analysis.

Setting

This study was undertaken at a metropolitan community high school (CHS) that had a total student census of 1050 students of whom 255 were in year eight. CHS has been established for five years, and (under the auspices of the Education Department of Western Australia) resulted from community consultations between parents, community members, and school representatives including the inaugural principal, teachers, and the administration staff. From these consultations, a number of CHS-specific policies were identified and integrated into the school's management practices including a Care About People (CAP) Programme priority (A. Verevis, personal communication, September 13, 2001).

In addition to CHS's management structures providing for the essential functions in education, personnel, and environment policies (Glasser, 1990), the CAP programme is prioritised as a specific student social support function (R. White, personal communication, September 25, 2001). In conjunction with the school's primary objective of assisting the students with their academic skills, the school's CAP programme aims to develop and maintain the adolescent students' skills in peer relationships, classroom management, and problem-solving abilities (Canter & Canter, 1992; Glasser, 1990), while facilitating the adolescents' SoB in the school environment.
The CHS's CAP programme is augmented by collaborative teacher role modeling and parental involvement (A. Verevis, personal communication, September 13, 2001).

Participants

Participants were year eight school students, five males and five females all aged 13 years. According to Creswell (1998), studies conducted within a phenomenological context generally require up to 10 participants to reach saturation whereby no additional information obtained with increasing numbers.

Nine of the participants originated in Australia and the tenth was born in Singapore. A public school was chosen over a private school because 71% of students receive their education in government schools in Western Australia (Education Department of Western Australia).

A convenience sample of participants was recruited (Patton, 1990), and as this data rich population could not reasonably be accessed in any other manner, taking this approach was justified (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998). As this study was part of a five-year longitudinal community study initiative by Edith Cowan University (ECU) School of Psychology, the participants were recruited via a take-home information letter issued under the auspices of ECU (Appendix A). With the support of the participating school's principal, the information letters were distributed to all year eight students by their class teacher. Due to the nature of the study, this information letter included a consent form for the parents/guardians.

Instrument

A semi-structured interview schedule containing 15 open-ended questions was designed to assess aspects of adolescents' belongingness. These included both individual and school identity (Appendix B). The questions were derived from literature specifically oriented towards the young adolescents' SoB (Edwards, 1995; Goodenow, 1993a; Scales, 1991; Seidman, 1991), and were designed to answer the research
questions (Minichiello, Aroni, Timewell, & Alexander, 1995). Examples of the questions included “What are the things about school you like the most? And “What makes you feel part of your school?”

In order to determine the clarity of the questions, the questions were trialed (Smith, 1995) with a male adolescent aged 13.5 years who was not part of the final study. As a result semantic changes and potential probes were added to the questions. Changes included the use of adolescent vernacular (e.g., “mate” in place of “friend” for male participants). Face validity was ascertained by two colleagues with experience in research methods and with adolescents.

**Procedure**

The participants completed a consent form which contained a brief description of the study (Appendix C), and a demographic data sheet (Appendix D). The demographic information included: the participant's age, sex, country of origin, the immediate family members at their home, and the sex of their teachers at school. This information was requested to identify areas of personal sensitivity for the participants during the interviews, and to aid interpretation of the findings.

An interview time-table extending over a two school-day period was arranged. On the day of their interview, the participants were given notices for their class teachers providing formal permission by the principal to be released from their routine classes (Appendix E).

Prior to the commencement of the interview, the participants were given a verbal and written explanation of the study, and they were made aware of their right to refuse to answer any question plus their right to withdraw from the study at any time. Participants were assured of confidentiality, and an alpha-numeric data coding system was used throughout to maintain anonymity beyond the researcher. The audio-taped interviews, averaging 45 minutes in duration, were conducted in a private office at the
participants' school. The office was a familiar environment for the participants and it ensured an uninterrupted interview (Smith, 1995).

If issues and experiences were raised during the interviews that were particularly pertinent to aspects of belongingness, the researcher used a funnelling approach (Smith, 1995). In this way broader questions were narrowed down to obtain specific, and at times unexpected, information. Following the interview, participants were debriefed and thanked for their participation. Participants were also provided with the contact phone number of the researcher in case they wished to discuss any further issues following the interview.

At the conclusion of each of the 10 interviews, brief notes were made onto each participant's interview schedule. Throughout the study, a tracking system of accumulated hand written notes and raw data for analysis and reduction-processing (Morse, 1994) was maintained, and a process of authentication was used including member checking (Silverman, 1993).

Data Analysis

Following the interviews, the participants' data was transcribed verbatim to ensure accurate authentic records for analysis. Qualitative analysis has the potential to reduce a large amount of data to smaller units (i.e., chunking and sorting) to assist in search for factors that may contribute to the participants' perceptions and behaviours (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The factors previously reported to be associated with adolescents' SoB (Edwards, 1995; Goodenow, 1993b; Massey, 1998; Scales, 1991) contributed to the data analysis and data reduction (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

The researcher conducted a thematic content analysis using a question ordered matrix (Appendix F) (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Sonn and Fischer (1996)). This matrix was achieved by ordering each of the participants' identifying codes in rows, and then ordering the study's questions and the participants' key responses across into the
columns. The aim was to identify recurring themes and issues within the data in a logical and systematic way (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

The data were selected and entered in the matrix to represent the participant's direct responses as a means of indicating their intention and meaning (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Smith, 1995). The data were arranged into similar or diverse phrases or statements of commonalities, and meaningful patterns that captured the individual's experiences (Valle, 1998). Principally, by posing questions relating to the data (e.g., "How?" "Why?"), several theme definitions and summary statements were generated. Significant statements that supported the data and illustrated the defined themes were then identified (Hayes, 2000). A number of potential themes and sub-themes emerged, and when these were verified and re-defined, a master-list of themes containing several categories resulted (Smith, 1995).

In addition, to preclude researcher bias and corrupting the data, an independent co-analyst cross-checked the master-list of themes and categories (Miles & Huberman, 1994) with the question ordered matrix. Consultation and negotiation with the co-analyst followed and the themes were traversed a number of times to test the assumptions for duplication. Several of the initial categories were combined enabling the construction of five themes. Finally, following further data-reduction, three major themes and two minor themes, each containing several categories, were identified (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The relevant participant statements had been listed within these final themes and categories to assist in the analysis.

Further authentication of the data was achieved using a process of triangulation (i.e., converging, completing, and crosschecking) (Grbich, 1999), and reviewing the journalised data resulting in part from memoing (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Firstly, this involved comparing hand-written notes made immediately after each interview with the re-read transcribed data to detect inconsistencies or inaccuracies. Secondly, with their
consent, two participants were randomly selected to member check the researcher's interpretation of their interview data. This was achieved by the participants reading a summary version of their transcripts and responding to several data related questions (Silverman, 1993). These data summaries contained a list of five points as condensed statements from the participants’ responses. For example, one summary response read as: “For me a good school is a place where I can meet my friends, where we do interesting school work together, and where the teachers listen to us.” Finally, a colleague checked the data for the identified themes and labels (Patton, 1990) within the context of the relevant literature.

Findings and Interpretations

The aim of this study was to increase the understanding of adolescents’ SoB while attending year eight at high school. SoB in this cohort was explored using the adolescents’ accounts of their experiences and perceptions within the school environment. The study identified five themes that appeared to be related to the adolescents’ formation and maintenance of belongingness in the school.

Table 1 contains the five major relational themes identified from the analysis of the participants’ responses: teacher traits, school social support structures and systems, student perceptions of self and others, lived experiences, and identity factors, plus the related sub themes. Captured within the dimensions of these themes was a specific school psychosocial contextual issue. This issue related to the prevailing ethos at the participants’ school and it has been elaborated on within the discussion of the relevant theme.

In this current study, an ecological systems approach has been used to link the themes and issues with the participants at school (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The aim was to further the understanding of the multiple interactions and communications that have contributed to, or detracted from, the student-learners’ experiences at school (Barry &
King, 1998; Seidman, 1991) and to their SoB (Beck & Malley, 1998a; Williams & Downing, 1998).

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Main themes</th>
<th>Sub-categories</th>
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<tr>
<td>Teacher traits</td>
<td>Teacher characteristics and style</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Teaching processes</td>
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<td>Classroom management</td>
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<td>School social support structures and systems</td>
<td>Peer friendships</td>
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<td>School climate</td>
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<td>Physical environment</td>
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<td>Student perceptions of self and significant others</td>
<td>Identity at school</td>
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<td>Being a good student</td>
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<td>Perceptions of significant others</td>
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<td>Lived experiences of school connectedness</td>
<td>Exclusion</td>
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<td></td>
<td>School connectedness</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Acknowledgement of competencies</td>
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<tr>
<td>Identity factors: self-concept and self-esteem</td>
<td>Self-description</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Who am I?</td>
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*Teacher Traits*

Participants' perceptions of teacher traits were contained within three context-related categories. These categories were directly attributed to the teachers in terms of teacher idiosyncrasies and style, teaching processes, and teachers' classroom
management. In the classroom at Bronfenbrenner's (1977) micro systems level, with the adolescent student-learner in the central position, these categories constituted a network of patterned roles and relationships that existed between the student-learner and the teachers. This level also contained various settings including different classroom activities, for example, sport or environmental sciences, that influenced the dual relationships. Most participants alluded to their classroom relationships with their teachers. Accordingly, one participant’s view of a teacher was:

...someone who like lets us have fun and...sometimes like...with

...my...teacher we did this fun activity...to show us how the miners and everything worked. So we got to pretend that we were miners and police officers and shop-keepers and we had fake money...to buy the ways they used to...just something different and maybe more interesting. A strict teacher's okay but not one that's always strict...like that helps you like feel good.

Relationship skills have been identified as crucial in the role of being an effective teacher (Benard, 1995). An atmosphere of alienation prevailing in the classroom, may be a reaction to a lack of belonging such that neither the student-learner nor the teacher feel they belong (Edwards, 1995). Improving belongingness at school required participation between the student-learners and the teachers (Edwards, 1995; Wehlage, 1989; Williams & Downing, 1998), and resulted in the adolescent feeling included (Goodenow, 1993b) and involved at school (Massey, 1998).

*Teacher characteristics and style.* Over half of what the participants’ liked about school and reacted to strongly, either positively or negatively, related to their relationships with particular teachers. Positive responses included: “nice”, “friendly teachers [who] actually listen to you” and “when you need help they help you,” and “teachers know[ing] what you can do and what you can’t do.” Negative statements
included: “Teachers [that] didn’t care…” “and [were] not listening to what you have to say.”

Student-learners responded with “mutual trust and respect” (p. 100) to a number of personal teacher characteristics (Barry & King, 1998, p. 100). These included teachers being “natural”, “approachable”, and “tolerant” (Barry & King, 1998, p. 100) in a positive interactive manner (Scales & Taccogna, 2000). These conclusions were supported in this study’s findings when, for example, a participant indicated that good teachers: “...talk to kids...in a nice way...even when they’re like in trouble...[and] like they’re fun to be with and they’re kind...and help when I didn’t [sic] understand things.” Another participant affirmed this as: “A good teacher would probably be like someone...[who] can help you with any problems...and they’re always kind of strong...and you could go to for help.”

Similarly, teachers may diminish the student-learner’s desire to belong, and consequently detract from his or her connectedness, by not demonstrating respect (Massey, 1998). Hence, according to one participant, a not so good teacher: “...yells at you....and doesn’t really teach you much...and like you have to work on your nerves...and no one would know it...” Participants described other negative teacher idiosyncrasies as “always being angry,” “isn’t interested in me,” and “is a grouch.”

The issue of teachers’ deficiencies in maintaining their students’ confidentiality and mutual trust was raised by a participant as follows:

So with teachers the only problem is you don’t like to tell them your whole story cos with teachers...they get the parents involved. It happened with my friend like she was going to the teacher and she said something and then you knew straight away she had told your mum cos your parents started talking to you about it like it had to come from the school.
From the micro systems perspective, this form of interaction has several potentially negative repercussions. Lack of mutual trust and respect may have resulted, and may have been evidenced either directly at school between the teacher and the adolescent, at home between the parents and the adolescent, or in combination between the parents, the teachers and the adolescent. A consequence for the adolescent of these types of interactions is alienation and poor self-esteem (Edwards, 1995). However, when these person-centered issues were handled effectively the outcome was an improvement in the adolescents’ problem-solving skills, and his or her SoB was maximised (Seidman, 1991).

*Teaching processes.* Effective teachers are aware that no single method of teaching suits all student-learners and an eclectic teaching approach is more beneficial (Joyce & Weil, 1996). The adolescents’ SoB is as an antecedent to student-learner participation in the classroom, student educational aspirations, and successful student academic outcomes (Battistich et al., 1997; Beck & Malley, 1998a; Edwards, 1995; Schmuck & Schmuck, 1992).

From the participants’ responses, at the meso systems level, several relational teaching concepts appeared to be operating for them at school, and were possibly indicative of their SoB. One identified issue was a direct relationship between classroom teaching processes and the participants’ future employment opportunities. For example, when the participants were asked to describe what contributed to good experiences at school for them (in the classroom) they reported using conventional terms such as: “learning...about different things...and...the good things you get to learn so when you’re older you can get a good job.”

In addition, there were the combined effects of teachers’ input and the participants’ application of what they had learned (at school). The majority of the
participants referred to these issues as being characteristic of their teachers' style, indicating that the style of teaching enhanced learning insofar as:

...maybe do some fun things like its good that they have work but every now and then...use[s] different projects and like an activity...like when we watched the video...and we were allowed to do a few notes like our essay plan...[it] was sort of easy and I...did all the paragraphs that I planned to do.

In summary, these teacher traits were endorsed by other participants who responded that the school process was about:

...having fun and learning as much as I can in the day....and like...[not] having work-sheets you can’t understand...and they’re...going to tell you what to do [with it]. They...let you do the work....Sometimes...like if they come around and can like help you...without waiting to be asked.

*Teachers’ classroom management.* Adolescents responded positively to their teachers when they feel they belonged and were respected as part of class-room/school experiences and activities (Williams & Downing, 1998). Also, listening to and acknowledging the adolescent (in the classroom) as an individual appears to promote a SoB (Edwards, 1995). These earlier findings were also identified by the participants who reported their negative and positive classroom experiences as follows:

[Teachers] that want to trick you all the time...some teachers are just not nice um they’re always angry....and...some of the teachers like to favour the good people so other people don’t get a chance to be good. So even when you’re good no one knows....[and] sometimes you get blamed for something you didn’t do... like...everyone gets punished for doing something rather than the two or three people who do it....[It helps] being understood...[and it] doesn’t make you feel stupid...
Treating student-learners equally, without favouritism, and within recognisable boundaries (Scales & Taccogna, 2000) results in positive classroom relationships and the prevalence of a SoB (Williams & Downing, 1998). In this current study, when teachers demonstrated fairness and reasonableness in the classroom, the participants responded: "...you feel like studying and...you know what you want to get out of school....[when you]...get told...you have to do this and that and...what for."

Potentially positive consequences of the teachers’ classroom management processes were identified from the participants’ replies. The participants were aware of the reciprocal nature of the student-teacher relationship in the classroom, explaining it as: "...[a good student] does the right thing....like not speaking after you’ve been told to stop. Maybe you might do something bad like once in a while but not like every day..."

And for the participants, learning was a positive experience when teachers: “Listen to us...[and] don’t get mad at us when things happen....[we] can be good, and [just] get along with them....I get along with most of them that I like.”

**School Social Support Structures and Systems**

Social support structures and educational practices in schools are viewed as an integral part of a whole school management structure (Canter & Canter, 1992). Although school management processes are directed towards overall management practices that reflect each school’s personnel, culture, climate, and environment, the processes can have additional benefits for adolescents. Incorporated within school management programmes are concepts that relate to developing and maintaining the student-learner’s skills in peer relationships, classroom management, and problem-solving abilities (Canter & Canter, 1992). These concepts coexist within the student-learners’ systems context at the micro systems level in relationships at the school and in the classroom, at the meso systems level in the form of direct and combined peer
relationships and interactions, and at the exo systems levels, for example, as the influences of the education curriculum (Borich & Tombari, 1997).

The participants’ responses indicated they were cognisant of a number of factors and issues that were associated with their interactions and relationships at school, and that ultimately contributed to whether or not they belonged at school (Beck & Malley, 1998a; Scales, 1999; Seidman, 1991). These factors have been categorised as: relating to peer issues, school climate factors, and the school’s physical environment. Consistent with Bronfenbrenner’s (1977) systems framework, the identified social support structures for the student-learner were operating predominantly within the micro-systems level exerting various degrees of influence (Seidman, 1991). Also, the student-learners’ social support structures had the potential to exert bi-directional or reciprocal influences at the meso systems level.

Peer friendships. Within their school social networks young adolescents have been exposed to a heterogeneous broad range of friendships (Rice, 1996). However, there appears to be little distinction in the literature between the adolescent’s friends, who represented support and companionship factors, and his or her peers, other adolescents of the same age and same sex (Coleman & Hendry, 1999). From the context of the participants’ responses, the role of peer friendships was central to the participants’ school relationships as follows:

...someone who...[is] honest, caring, and who listens...like a good mate would...be someone...that’s there for me and has fun and understands me....[and] who doesn’t get angry. You know who likes the things that I like....[and] doesn’t want to change me.....Kind of likes me for who I am....[and] like if I’m in trouble or anything that’s someone to talk to...[that] you have more in common with.
The majority of the participants alluded to the friendships that the peer relationships entailed as being "very important" such that: "I would fall apart without them...." and "...I probably wouldn't be so happy and confident." The participants' peer friendships also meant for them: "You don't feel alone...they're always on your side...[and] you don't have to impress them" such that "you can...tell them something bad and they won't tell on you." These responses indicated the reciprocal and bi-directional nature of peer relationships operating at the adolescents' meso systems level (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Several participants qualified their responses to include "[I'm] not sure how I feel about [them]", and "[it] ...depends on who [the friend] is." Also, from the participant's responses there appeared to be an overlap in their concepts of a good student or a good friend. This was indicated as:

...I guess like...[it's someone] who is nice...friends with everyone...does their work. It's like someone who like cares about me...one that listens to me and...like to other people's point of view...[and] does their work.

The participants' appeared to recognise their peer relationships as mediating factors at school (Seidman, 1991). These factors were associated with the value of peer friendships which were seen as offering mutual support (Selman, Beardslee, Schultz, Krupa, & Podorefsky, 1986), increasing their perceptions of self-worth (Laible, Carlo, Raffaelli, 2000), mutual reciprocity (Cauce, 1986), and the making of friends contributed to a SoB when the interactions with peers at school were positive (Scales & Taccogna, 2000; Schmuck & Schmuck, 1992).

School climate. Associated with the CAP programme, several SoB initiatives were operating as part of the management ethos at the participants' CHS, and these initiatives related to the school's objectives (A. Verevis, personal communication, September 13, 2001). The initiatives coexist with formally instilling in each student-
learner an understanding that one of the school’s main aims is to assist the individual in their academic achievements (Parker et al., 1998).

Within the context of participants’ responses that were associated with school ambience, two factors relating to the participants’ school were identified. These were the CAP programme, and issues surrounding anti-social behaviours and students’ value systems at the school. From the participants’ feedback, it emerged that the school’s objective in promoting and supporting the CAP initiative was an instrumental factor in making a difference for the student-learners and in initiating belongingness (Scales & Taccogna, 2000). Most of the participants reported being aware of the significance of the school’s care programme. The participants’ comments included:

My regular day at school starts with the care group…it’s for 15 minutes each day where the teacher counts the roll….if you’re good at something…[or have] done something [good] they give you CAP tokens….They’re little yellow tokens and you get them for caring about people at school….You get Freddos with the right number of cap tokens….Then you get a raffle ticket…[when you get the right]…number of tokens for the big draw, and you can like get bigger prizes like a big block of chocolate.

And from another participant:

Care group is when they kind of organise you [each] day…it’s not like regular classes…it’s kind of where you’re going in the day or they just tell the news items to you and like when someone’s sick…and they help you to know each other like. They teach you about bullying and ways to cope with not trusting other people. Before you go then they read us the school’s newsletter and tell us what’s going on…like there’s the CAP quiz on alternate Fridays…[and we] got to vote for the name the canteen competition.
The adolescents experienced a sense of being integrated and involved in their interactions in the school environment, which was a positive response to a number of factors including the school’s integrated management strategies (Glasser, 1990). An example of this is the CAP programme. The participants also appeared to endorse the anticipated outcomes from programmes such as the CAP initiative, as being heightened self-determination and motivation, feelings of being valued and safe, and a SoB (Woolfolk, 1998). These factors have the potential to augment the student-learners’ abilities to interact in the wider community in the future (Parker et al., 1998).

In addition to the people-care factors, the majority of the participants specifically volunteered a comment on an anti-social behaviour issue or a values-based issue which was of concern to them. These responses, possibly resulting from recent CCHS care group discussions on bullying, were linked to illustrations in the participants’ responses to questions relating to their perception of a good school which was reported as having:

...no fights and....it happens cos there’s not enough control. Sometimes there’s fights cos kid can’t get their own way...there’s no picking on people...and ...name calling. Like we had a play about bullying, and everyone liked it. Maybe we could have more of them...saying bullying isn’t cool any more. Leave the bullying at home or something like that and make this place nice. You don’t come to school to be disturbed by [the] bully people...so it would be great if there were no bullies...like there’s not many bullies [here] but there’s some out of school.

Preserving social networks and providing a safe, secure school environment is a priority for the adolescents’ positive psychosocial well-being (Coleman & Hendry, 1999; Weldy, 1995). However, when adolescent’s social networks break down at the meso systems level, impaired social behaviour patterns and poor academic performance may result for the individual at the micro systems level (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This
may be indicative of the effects of malfunctioning in the adolescent, possibly due to, or resulting from, an absence of a SoB (Battistich et al., 1997; Edwards, 1995; Pearson & Mitchell, 2000; Scales & Taccogna, 2000; Williams & Downing, 1998) and the reciprocal effects on the student environment at the meso systems level (Coleman & Hendry, 1999; Crockett & Silbereisen, 2000). Moreover, beyond the meso systems level the individual is exposed to social influences that were not part of the immediate environment, such as cultural and general value systems (Segall et al., 1999).

*Physical environment.* Student-learners who were disengaged from their school experiences are less likely to care for their environment (Scales & Taccogna, 2000) as they were lacking the SoB to a caring community (Battistich et al., 1997). Over half of the participants in this study volunteered their environmental concerns. The participants indicated that a good school required “a clean environment” with “good buildings and canteen arrangements” and “no graffiti or smashed windows.” The following was one participant’s observations:

With the environment...well if the place is all messy and you’ve got rubbish everywhere it’s not like good...you know it’s a good place if its nice and tidy with no mess and not vandalised ever... people respect the environment and respect you.

Other participants’ responses indicated shared concerns for the classroom environment:

No bubble gum under the desks...it’s not nice. Some people draw on the desks and they should stop. At care group we organised to like cleanup the classroom...to get rid of the bubblegum and put up posters and everything, and like we chose them...it was...cool.

The participants indicated an awareness of the negative images portrayed by the overall lack of respect for the school environment (e.g., the use of graffiti), including the classroom, and the people in the environment. By highlighting their environmental
concern relating to their school, the participants appeared to be articulating that belonging to a school for them involves having a well cared for environment that they contributed to maintaining and preserving.

*Student Perceptions of Self and Significant Others*

The participants recognised that several social identity and social role factors were operating at their school for them as student-learners. These factors included the participant’s identity at school, their role as a student-learner, and the participants’ perceptions of how they are understood by the significant adults in their lives. From the systems perspective these factors were operating as part of the student-learners’ micro systems level with interactive and at times bi-directional effects from the surrounding meso systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Crockett & Silbereisen, 2000).

Adolescents develop social roles and identity at school through a process of trial and error (Erikson, 1982), and by observing others, and sharing experiences (Scales & Taccogna, 2000; Selman et al., 1986). Selman et al. (1986) advanced the concept of social role-taking wherein the adolescent was able to understand the self and others, suggesting that interpersonal relationships were governed by social cognitions. The young adolescent is gradually aware of his or her own and others thoughts, actions, motives, and feelings. From this perspective he or she is able to acknowledge and utilise interpersonal perspective-taking skills (Selman et al., 1986).

*Identity at school.* In response to questions relating to a social identity at school, the participants viewed themselves as: “helping people” especially “when they’re in...trouble,” and “...you just do it cos...and in that way things are pretty good.” One participant responded: “I enjoy caring for people...and like helping. It...feels good.” The majority of the participants appeared to have a pragmatic approach to being acknowledged by peers or teachers for their positive empathetic social roles. Rather, the
participants explained themselves as: "I just know I'm like doing the right thing. It's kind of good achieving...." and "I'm like enjoying it sort of."

At the opposite end of the helping spectrum, one participant indicated that although "you could feel good [helping]...[I] don't like it much."

*Being a good student.* The characteristics of a "good" adolescent student-learner have variously been described as active participation in classroom activities, observance of class routine, and being liked and respected by their peers and teachers all of which had contributed to the adolescents' SoB (Scales & Taccogna, 2000; Seidman, 1991; Williams & Downing, 1998). The majority of the participants reflected coherently on their social roles as student-learners in the school environment, and from their statements seemed to view this as a contributory factor in their belongingness at school. This was reflected in the participant's response indicating that:

Being good is nice...you can do your work like and you [can] be friends with everyone...and this person doesn’t get told off. Some people like have good personalities and they’re kind of popular cos they’ve got lots of friends...and like everyone wants to be your friend.

Another participant responded that a good student was:

...someone who does the right thing...and is only bad once in a while and like doesn’t muck around in class...[so] doesn’t get told off. So I do my work and like be good...and [I] listen.

*Perceptions of significant adults.* At the micro level, although there may be other significant adults in their lives, adolescents mainly look towards being accepted by their teachers and parents for *who* they are, without qualification (Steinberg & Morris, 2001). In addition to adolescents having a strong wish for autonomy as well as individuation, adults remain an important part of their lives such that taking steps to maintain cohesive student-teacher relationships at school is identified as worthy of the
significant effort required in the dyad relationship (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Laursen & Collins, 1994; Wigfield & Eccles, 1994). In support of this finding, researchers (e.g., Laursen and Collins, 1994; and Edwards, 1995) linked adolescents' self-esteem, successful academic outcomes, cohesiveness, and a SoB to positive interactive relationships between the student-learner and their teachers and parents.

The majority of the participants were aware that important adults in their lives understood them to varying degrees. These perceptions were viewed as: “some do know”…and “some think they do...[and] they tell us they do,” while other adults based their understanding of adolescents “...[as] if they’ve had the same experiences as kids.” According to several participants some adults “assume they’re right” about kids “cos they were one once.” Over half of the participants indicated they felt adults had an understanding of what kids are like inside, and equally the participants qualified this understanding as adults “know[ing] a lot [about kids] but not enough.”

Lived Experiences of School Connectedness

Adolescents confront a number of complex tasks associated with fulfilling their developmental needs for peer relationships, connectedness, and for social acceptance by significant others at school (Pretty et al., 1996). Another important and associated developmental task factor for the student-learner is attaining levels of personal competence (Rice, 1996). Personal perceptions of competence for students are influenced by their willingness to engage in activities in which they are competent and have been acknowledged (Bergin, 1999). In the event that one or more of these tasks factors are not achieved by the adolescent, negative psychosocial consequences may result (Rice, 1996) including loneliness (Pretty et al., 1996), and disengagement from school (Bergin, 1999).

Participating meaningfully, and being accepted in the school environment appeared to be related to three issues for the participants in this study. These issues were
associated with the participants' understanding of the concept of being excluded, with their sense of being part of their school, and whether or not they were made aware of their level of competency.

**Exclusion.** Being excluded and feeling alienated from the school community has profound effects on the adolescent and include low levels of self-esteem, social isolation, school drop-out, and depression (Beck & Malley, 1998a; Edwards, 1995). However, being able to meaningfully participate in school activities with peers is recognised as a significant factor in the adolescent SoB (Beck & Malley, 1998b; Edwards, 1995; Scales & Taccogna, 2000). The majority of the participants offered intuitive accounts of their understanding of exclusion at school. Their responses indicated they equated exclusion to a lack of belonging. For example:

> [It means] not being included....Some of my friends....have been left out like...and they look kind of bored...and...you feel shy so no one might like you...[and] like you don’t belong.... and there’s no reason....and it’s a sort of ache thing like there’s no one...to help...you.....You’re left out and you’re really there....Belonging is fairly important like with my family and friends.

Additionally, from the systems perspective, these exclusion issues appeared to arise from a number of sources, including from peer relationships. They did not arise, as Coleman and Hendry (1999) proposed, in response to negative (undermining) school practices. However, peer relationships appeared to act as positive reinforcers for the participants when incidences of exclusion occurred. For example, one participant indicated: “Well, if someone in your other group is like not with anyone...and you [they] don’t have a group to hang out with...you should go out of your comfort zone...and help [them to] make...friends...”

Several participants reported they were not personally aware of being excluded and explained: “I don’t know cos I’ve never really been left out...I have seen someone
but I don’t know how they feel...” and “I can’t imagine what it would be like....” “Sort of like you haven’t got...anybody...[and] it’s difficult.”

In summary, the majority of the participants’ reports inferred that while they did not feel excluded, they were aware of the negative effects of exclusion and they would take steps to initiate belongingness if exclusion was imminent for themselves and their peers. This action by the participants appeared to support one of Scales’ (1999) concepts that positive interactive relationships, such as those between the participants and their friends, contributed to a SoB at school.

School connectedness. The school has been identified as a central component in young adolescents’ lives (Royal & Rossi, 1996) where a significant period of time is spent (Battistich et al., 1997). In the classroom, when student-learners’ feel wanted, welcomed, and part of the classroom environment, these components contribute significantly to student-teacher interactions in learning, enhanced student motivation, feeling connected, belongingness, and to successful academic outcomes (Edwards, 1995; Scales & Taccogna, 2000; Weiner, 1990; Williams, 1998). The definition of to connect refers to joining things that are associated with each other, and with being meaningfully part of something in a secure relationship (Grandison et al., 1991). Additionally, definitions of belonging at school for the adolescent involved the student being both a part of something and personally feeling important and connected, and responding to relationship issues, such as acceptance, inclusion, and being encouraged by others (Goodenow, 1993b; Massey, 1998).

Participants revealed belongingness at school related strongly to people factors and also to emotional factors. The following participant descriptions illustrate these factors: “Being here and being together,” “being happy and not left-out,” and “people know me...and you kind of fit in and you...get to know people and the place.”
Additionally, school and sharing factors were moderately integrated with belongingness according to the participants' responses: "You get to share and a chance to do everything...and people listen and don't ignore you...like you're there and...get to meet up with your friends and do things together," and "without people in this place there wouldn't be a school."

One participant appeared to have a succinct functional approach to the issue of belongingness at school. In an uncomplicated response, he stated that: "I go to it. I wouldn't go to it if it wasn't good."

The belongingness theme was reflected throughout the participants' statements. This concept appeared to be endorsed by the participants understanding that they were connected and involved at school (Massey, 1998), such that they felt an important part of their school (Goodenow, 1993b; Scales, 1991; Seidman, 1991).

**Acknowledgment of competencies.** Adolescents demonstrate different weaknesses, strengths and abilities in both aptitude and motivation in the classroom environment (Goodenow, 1993b; Williams & Downing, 1998). Variations occur in adolescents' levels of competency (Scales & Taccogna, 2000), and problem-solving skills, all of which have been linked to the individual's SoB (Seidman, 1991). Elkind (1978) suggested teachers use different approaches to encourage problem-solving abilities in student-learners. These approaches included establishing effective communications with adolescents (Seidman, 1991; Beck & Malley, 1998a), and helping adolescents to modify their existing knowledge and competencies by adding new learning material such that an enthusiastic desire to learn was maintained (Elkind, 1978; Williams & Downing, 1998).

All of the participants in this study were able to identify an area of competence at school. These included "doing sport", or a particular subject such as "science", "drama", "woodwork", and using their socialisation skills, for example "being nice to
people”, “being kind” and “making friends.” When it came to identifying who communicated the verbal rewards (for their competencies) to the participants relating to school issues, the majority of the participant’s said it was their friends. Teachers came second in their endorsement of the participants’ competencies, followed by their family members. The value and importance placed on verbal rewards by the participants generally related to their own experiences, for example: “My friends tell me that I’m good at something...so being told makes you feel good ....You get good feelings...like I feel proud and I can try again.”

One participant realistically, and intuitively, identified the deleterious effects of failing to acknowledge or reward someone in the following manner:

My parents and friends tell me and when I get my report some teachers do. It’s cool to tell people...cos if no one tells you that you’re doing something good then the person might think they’re doing bad at it and they won’t like it and then they won’t want to do it and then they will just get bad at it.

When asked about their experiences of being praised at school, less than half of the participants related to the term praise even when an explanation of the term praise was given by the researcher. Conversely, the participants had a clearer understanding of sharing and their responses showed that:

Sharing kind of helps being here a lot...maybe sharing ideas...and sharing with friends cos they take you seriously and give good advice....it’s fun to share good things...and sometimes it helps to share not so good things with friends...cos you can trust them and they stay the same.

The participants’ answers appeared to indicate that when verbal acknowledgement of skills at school was linked to the person who gave the commendations, their peer group was largely responsible. This would seem to suggest that the participants’ peers significantly contributed to their sense of belonging at
school, and to the participants being aware of opportunities for creativity and having their achievements acknowledged (Scales & Taccogna, 2000; Williams & Downing, 1998). Seidman (1991) linked student competencies, or task achievements in the classroom, to problem-solving skills as antecedents to a SoB, particularly where there were opportunities for creative expression. The participants' teachers were an important part of this acknowledgement process, albeit to a lesser degree (Bergin, 1999).

Identity Factors: Self-Concept and Self Esteem

The adolescent's self-concept has been equated to being a part of his or her personality (Bee, 2000; Rice, 1996), and includes the individual's self-evaluation, plus any number of personal opinions that pertain to the individual themselves (Erikson, 1982). The use of physical characteristics for self-descriptions is widely practiced during adolescence (Elkind, 1978; Harter, 1990). The adolescents' physical characteristics are also critically important factors as they were related to the adolescents' relationships with peers, and to self-identity and self-esteem (Coleman & Hendry, 1999; Harter, 1990).

The individual's global evaluation of his or her own self-worth is referred to as self-esteem (Harter, 1990). Also, self-esteem evolves from human interactions where the self has significance for other persons, and both factors involved evaluative judgments (Harter & Monsour, 1992). The individual variations in the adolescents' self-esteem at school, including belongingness issues (Beck & Malley, 1998b), result from a number of factors. These included the adolescent's own direct positive or negative experiences in environments such as the school (Finn, 1989; McCullough, Huebner, & Laughlin, 2000), and from the values and labels that are attached to the adolescent's attributes by themselves as individuals (Harter, 1990), their peers and other significant adults, including their teachers (Bee, 2000; Woolfolk, 1998).
Analysis of the participants' replies suggested that there are dual issues operating in the participants' self-identity and associated belongingness. The first factors involves self-description that entailed several perspectives of the total-self, namely physical appearance and the social-self that included family members. The second factor relates to the participants' personal psychological self. For the student-learner these personal concepts are influential within the immediate meso system and included his or her friends. These dual identity factors contribute to the participants' SoB at school and at home.

**Self-description.** The responses of the participants reflect the participants' self-identification and self-evaluation factors, principally at school, as predominantly referring to their personality, age, and appearance factors, and to a lesser extent to family members. The participants' described themselves as:

I'm good at most things...and I'm a good listener when...need[ed]...when there's problems...and well I'm nice and um kind...and my age. And I'd tell them about my family, my dog, and what I like to do.

And from another participant:

I've got blond hair, big smile, happy face, I'm excessively happy...and I'm caring and kind. I think my personality makes me interesting like it's the way I feel I do things...I don't just say I will, I do it. I'm good at sport...I'm interested in other people...[and] I help people.

The majority of the participants did not appear to have obvious concerns relating to their self-esteem as they offered positive personal self-evaluations to describe themselves. From their physical characteristics descriptions and positive personality statements, the participants' self-esteem was linked to belongingness at school, and lends support to self-esteem being a factor in the participants' formation and maintenance of a SoB at school (Harter & Monsour, 1992).
Who am I? Nine of the participants responded positively to enquiries relating to their own perceptions of self-importance, with well over half indicating there was nothing about themselves they wished to change. Several examples of their responses are as follows:

I like me as I am. I like my interests and me as a person...just me as my identity...and I wouldn’t change anything...well if my mum got another person in her life that would make me happy, cos I like to see other people happy around me...

And from others:

I think I really like me for being me....and there’s nothing I would change...cos there’s nothing I’m unhappy about...like I don’t want to be anyone else...

One participant’s response appeared to speak for more than half of the of the respondents when the following personal perception was conveyed:

I just like me for myself and I like my friends...I enjoy school...its fun. No I guess I wouldn’t change anything cos if I wanted to change something other people around me could be unhappy so its best not to do it.

This concluding participant reply was of particular significance as it encapsulated the ecological systems approach used as a framework in this study. With the individual occupying the central position within the school environment, and significant people beyond in the micro and meso layers, the participant was able to capture the essence that confident, well-adjusted adolescents at school do not develop in a vacuum, rather many other factors have contributed to their well-being, including their sense of belonging at school and relationship issues (Battistich et al., 1997; Beck & Malley, 1998a; Scales & Taccogna, 2000; Seidman, 1991; Williams & Downing, 1998). In summary, this concept appears to be endorsing the participant’s understanding that
changes for one person have the potential to affect others either negatively or positively, indeed reflecting the wisdom of "...out of the mouths of babes..." (Psalm 8: Verse 2).

Conclusions

This study's findings contribute to a valued understanding of the adolescents' perceptions of SoB at school. According to adolescents' experiences, a number of significant factors appear to contribute to this belongingness. Their personal accounts suggest that student-teacher relationships, student-peer relationships, their shared experiences and perceptions (Beck & Malley, 1998a; Williams & Downing, 1998) influence how they as students-learners feel about themselves and their school (Seidman, 1991; Williams & Downing, 1998).

When teachers are approachable, tolerant, and in-touch with their students there is an atmosphere of mutual trust and respect within the learning environment (Barry & King, 1998). Positive and interactive student-teacher relationships, therefore, appear to contribute to the adolescent aspiring to and feeling like they belong in the school environment (Edwards, 1995; Seidman, 1991; Williams & Downing, 1998).

This study illustrates that student-peer relationships at school are central to how student-learners "fit-in" at school (Seidman, 1991; Selman et al., 1986). Adolescents tend to use peers relationships as a gauging mechanism for the presence and depth of their belongingness at school (Schmuck & Schmuck, 1992). Also, the prevailing school ethos and an environment-friendly atmosphere are important contributing factors to the adolescent feeling wanted at school (Canter & Canter, 1992; Glasser, 1990). In situations where adolescents and their peers have meaningful relationships with each other, and with their school in a safe (Weldy, 1995) interactive environment, they have a sense that belonging at school is worthwhile for them particularly when they feel included (Massey, 1998; Selman et al., 1986).
The adolescents' shared experiences and perceptions of belongingness at school offered worthwhile insight into the issues that contribute to, and form part of, their social identity and social roles in the school environment (Erikson, 1982; Scales & Taccogna, 2000; Selman et al., 1986). This seems to suggest that understanding what belonging at school has to offer the adolescent (Royal & Rossi, 1997) extends from a number of factors including his or her socialisations (Selman et al., 1986). When a sense of belonging is maintained it has the potential to augment the adolescents' desire to work towards successful academic outcomes (Anderman & Anderman, 1999; Battistich et al., 1997; Beck & Malley, 1998a; Goodenow, 1993b; Schickendanz et al., 1998; Schmuck & Schmuck, 1992).

Although this study yielded valuable information, there were some limitations. One was the size of the study, in that it was relatively small and was conducted at a single CHS. This introduced the potential to diminish its generalisability particularly as there were few published qualitative studies on adolescents' SoB at school with which to compare the study's findings. However, whilst it is recognised that the findings cannot be generalised in terms of quantitative methodologies, what can be said is that the emergent themes are likely to have validity for adolescents in similar settings and contexts. In future research, it would be advantageous to extend the current study to include a cross-sectional qualitative methodology to obtain data for comparative analysis from students attending similar profile public and private schools in the metropolitan area. In addition to determining the extent of the students' SoB in these studies, it would also be pertinent to establish the presence and influences of the schools' ethos and programmes such as the CAP initiative.

The findings from this study represented the students' view of the classroom as a learning environment, and teachers' views were not represented. However, the student-teacher relationships and interactions formed a major part of this study's qualitative
outcomes. In taking steps to rectify this limitation, future SoB studies could include interviews with teachers' to establish their perceptions of belongingness issues in the classroom and comparing this information with their students' perceptions.

Having identified a number of SoB themes in this study, a comprehensive analysis of these themes was precluded on the basis that it was not possible to determine the participants' relative importance attached to each of these elements within the themes. However, this study did establish the value of the participants' experiences of SoB when they told of them in their own words, also the information obtained has the potential to extend SoB research. Furthermore, several interesting studies cited in this review (Pretty et al., 1996; Rapley & Pretty, 1999) used both qualitative and quantitative research methodologies. These studies illustrate the value of combining information from qualitative studies, such as the themes in this study, and using this information to develop questionnaires for quantitative research in community psychology. Future studies using these combined methodologies would have the advantage of accessing larger populations in addition to using different forms of data analysis, such as multiple regression, to determine the variances and to predict factors that may, for example, influence adolescents' belongingness.

Notwithstanding the limitations, this study contributes to an understanding of the adolescents' SoB at school in several important ways. Using a qualitative research methodology, it has demonstrated that adolescents at school are able to tell others how they feel about being at school, what is important for them in the school environment, and their areas of concern. It also affirms that adolescents may not have troublesome relationships at school, rather a number of adolescents are happy and seemingly well-adjusted particularly those in a supportive caring environment during their first year of high school.
References


Appendix A
Letter to Participants’ Parents

Dear Parents,

We are conducting a longitudinal study in partnership with your child’s school. This study is focusing on adolescence and the transition from primary to high school. It is anticipated that the study will track participants until Year 12. The study will involve researchers meeting with the children once per year at the commencement of term 3. These meetings will take a maximum of 40 to 45 minutes and will be held on the school premises.

During early adolescence, children are exposed to a number of risk factors that may result in depression, suicide, offending, school drop out etc. However, there are a number of protective factors, such as healthy self-esteem, good coping strategies and resilience that may mitigate against the development of these conditions. Sense of belonging has been posited as a protective factor that may influence levels of risk. However, there is a relative dearth of empirical evidence to delineate the relationship between risk and protective factors.

The aim of the study is to further explore some of these risk and protective factors focusing on coping strategies, bullying, juvenile offending, eating disorders, self-esteem and drug and alcohol use and, in particular, the role of sense of belonging.

We expect that the results of this research will have particular relevance for understanding the transition from primary to high school and for the development of interventions designed to minimize risk and promote well-being within the schools and for the young people in general. The study has been approved by the University Ethics Committee.

If you have any queries please contact our research co-ordinator, Sue Haunold on 9400 5551.

If you wish your child to participate in the above research please complete the following section and return it to the school by ______________________

I ___________________________________ give consent for my child or child in my care (Parent/Guardian’s name)

________________________________________ to participate in this study.

(Child’s name)

____________________  ___________________  _____________
Parent/Guardian’s name  Signature  Date
Appendix B
Interview Schedule

To Participant: I hope you like these questions I have for you today. They should be good fun too. I guess some of them may sound the same. That's because I would like to know more about how you feel. If you don't want to answer a question just tell me and we can leave it out or go onto the next question. Remember it's OK to stop at any time - just tell me.

Identity (at school)
(1) Let's start with being at school. What are the things about school you like the most?
   (a) Is it people, or being here...
   (b) So tell me a little bit more about...
   (c) What makes you feel rewarded at school?
   (d) Tell me about your regular day at school?

(2) What makes a good or not so good school?
   (a) What are some of the things that could be changed at school?
   (b) Or maybe even make it the best school for you and your friends at school (relationships, what you get out of it, helping?).
   (c) Well what could you do to make it a great school?
   (d) How did you like primary school?
      So why is that...
   (e) How is this school different from primary school?

(3) Teachers and kids are what schools are all about. What do you think makes a good or not so good teacher?
   (a) Like, do they know your name or something you're good at, that sort of thing?
   (b) So what do you think makes a good student at your school?

(4) What could you do to make your relationship with teachers better?
   (a) Tell me a little more about...
   (b) Do you think adults really know what kids are like deep-down?
   (c) So tell me what would make a good friend for you?

Belonging
(5) What can teachers do to make things better for you when you're at school?
   (a) Is that so?...go on.
   (b) Being left out of things does happen, can you tell me about being left out?

(6) When you're at school, what are the things you're good at doing?
   (a) Does anyone tell you you're good at things, or do you just know?
   (b) So, it's kind of good - to tell people that they're good at something?

(7) What makes you feel part of your school?
   (a) So you mean...
   (b) What is important about these things (or people)?
   (c) Aim towards discussing "sharing" - ideas, praise, attention - help or hinder?
   (d) What are some of the reasons you would stay on at school after, well Year 10?
(8) Do you feel you have any input in what goes on/ happens in your school?
   (a) Can you give anyone your opinion about what should happen at your school?
   (b) How do you feel about that?

(9) When important things happen for you, you know maybe good or no so good
   things, how do you deal with it?
   (a) Who would you tell?
   (b) So would it be OK to say that when something bad happens you would
       react...?

(10) Can you tell me about things that other people do when they are, say happy...?
    (a) When something good happens for them...?
    (b) Or maybe something happy or funny...?

(11) So now you have told me about sharing, so who would these people be for you?
    (a) What is it about...that makes you want to share with them/him/her?

Alternatively
(12) Although you didn’t mention sharing, can you think of who you would
     share what is important for you with?
    (a) What is it about...that makes you want to share with them/him/her?

Identity (self)
(13) So how do you think these people feel about you?
    (a) How do you think they would describe you to someone else?

(14) Some people describe themselves as...a good runner, or they say “I’m good at
    spelling” or the clothes people wear.
    (a) So how would you describe yourself to someone over the phone or even over
       the net?
    (b) What makes people interesting for you?

(15) How important are your friends at school?
    (a) Can you tell them things?
    (b) So they make you feel...?
    (c) What is it that makes you friends with your group?

(16) What are the things you like most about being you?
    (a) So from what you’ve told me, what would you like to change?
    (b) Is there anything that would make you feel happier if it changed?
    (c) You mean....

I’ve really enjoyed our time together and the great things you have shared about
yourself. Thank you... Now is there anything you would like to discuss with me or
go back over before we finish our interview? Anything I’ve missed about you or
your school or anything that you would like to tell me?

Study code_________(Researcher’s Use)
A sense of belonging means different things to each one of us particularly while we are at school. I would like to find out what this belonging actually means to you. To do this I have a series of questions that I would like to ask you. Your participation remains voluntary, and you may stop the interview at any time.

Although our conversation will be audio-taped, I am the only one who will hear them. My university supervisor may read the transcript, however there will not be any way of identifying you or anything you tell me.

Thank you for being part of my study.

The information about this study has been read to me by Diane
I had an opportunity to ask questions
The answers I received satisfied my inquiries
I understand the information I have been given today
I understand I am not obliged to participate in this study
I am aware I can withdraw from the study at any time
My interview data will be removed if I withdraw from the study

Initials: ____________________

Date: ____________________

Study code _____________ (Researcher’s Use)
Appendix D
Participant Demographic Form

Student initials: ______________________ (to be deleted later)
Age: Years _____ Months _____
Sex: M/F

The significant people at my home are:

Mother □
Step-mother □
Father □
Step-father □
Parent’s partner □
Brother(s) □
Sister(s) □
Grandparent(s) □
Other □

My main teachers at school are:

Mostly male □
Mostly female □

I describe my nationality as: ____________________________

Study Code __________ (Researcher’s Use)
EDITH COWAN UNIVERSITY INTERVIEWS FOR YEAR 8 STUDENTS

Please allow __________________ to leave class in sufficient time to attend an interview in the front office at __________________ on __________________

Thank you,

(Signed by the Associate Principal)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Questions</th>
<th>What do you mean?</th>
<th>(b) Rewards at school.</th>
<th>(c) What does it feel like?</th>
<th>(d) Tell me about your regular day at school.</th>
<th>(2) What makes a good school?</th>
<th>What makes a not so good school?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SB 20</td>
<td>I like learning about new places in Science and Environment</td>
<td>Learning about other people</td>
<td>If you're good at something or do something good they give you CAP tokens.</td>
<td>I feel rewarded sometimes and its good.</td>
<td>Learning, having fun with my friends.</td>
<td>Good students, with good personalities. Tidy environment.</td>
<td>Graffiti, broken windows, teachers that don't care.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SB 22</td>
<td>I like the way they teach some things here.</td>
<td>Most teachers are nice.</td>
<td>Told by teachers sometimes. Things get easy when they're understood.</td>
<td>With my marks &amp; my parents tell me.</td>
<td>Talk with my friends, the classes are good, care group.</td>
<td>No bullying, you feel safe, good teachers.</td>
<td>Teachers not listening when there's a problem.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SB 24</td>
<td>Being here with my friends and learning about different countries.</td>
<td>One teacher doesn't care what I do. No mucking around.</td>
<td>Helping someone with the questions or when they're in trouble.</td>
<td>I just enjoy doing things especially when my friends tell me I'm good at it.</td>
<td>Mucking around sometimes, fun at recess, science can be boring.</td>
<td>People accepting you for who you are. Nice teachers.</td>
<td>People that allow weapons, bullies, graffiti, &amp; people that don't want to do anything &amp; like discredit us.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SB 26</td>
<td>Not the homework.</td>
<td>Range of different people, and getting to know different people.</td>
<td>Getting out early to get to the canteen before the lines (form).</td>
<td>Like it's the right thing and you know.</td>
<td>Care group, different classes, I am a student counsellor like through care go.</td>
<td>The people. The environment if its clean and no graffiti.</td>
<td>Teachers not knowing what to teach when they come to class. Kids playing up.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SB 28</td>
<td>Just being here. The form of teaching.</td>
<td>I like the environment (what's outside, buildings &amp; layout).</td>
<td>It's important to get the CAP tokens cos it means you're going ok.</td>
<td>Like you know the rules and keep doing the right thing.</td>
<td>Normal day is just going to classes, occasionally we have relief teachers &amp; that's not always good.</td>
<td>Friendly people, no bullying.</td>
<td>Drugs and stuff.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix G
Instructions for Authors

*Community, Work & Family* welcomes original contributions from all parts of the world on the understanding that their contents have not previously been published nor submitted elsewhere for publication. All submissions will be sent anonymously to independent referees. It is a condition of acceptance that papers become the copyright of the publisher. **There are no page charges.**

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**Manuscripts**

Manuscripts may be in the form of: (i) regular articles (between 5,000 and 10,000 words); or, (ii) short reports for rapid publication (not exceeding 2,000 words); or, (iii) personal accounts for the ‘Voices’ section (not exceeding 2,000 words). Four complete copies should be submitted to:

The Editors, *Community, Work & Family*, Department of Psychology and Speech Pathology, Manchester Metropolitan University, Elizabeth Gaskell Campus, Hathersage Road, Manchester M13 0JA, UK (E-mail: cwf@mmu.ac.uk). Authors in the Americas should send their manuscripts to The Editor, Community, Work & Family, School of Social Work, Boston University, 264 Bay Street Road, Boston, Massachusetts, 02215, USA. (E-mail: jgonyea@bu.edu)

All submissions should be in the style of the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association (4th edition, 1994). Papers should be typed on one side of the paper, double spaced throughout (including the references), with margins of at least 2.5 cm (1 inch). All pages must be numbered. The first page should include the title of the paper, first name, middle initial(s) and last name of the author(s), and for each author a short institutional address, and an abbreviated title (for running headlines within the article). At the bottom of the page give the full name and address (including telephone and fax numbers and e-mail address if possible) of the author to whom all correspondence (including proofs) should be sent. The second page should repeat the title and contain an abstract in English of not more than 200 words. Authors are invited to submit additional abstracts in French and Spanish. The third page should repeat the title as a heading to the main body of the text. The text should normally be divided into sections with appropriate headings and subheadings. Within the text section headings and subheadings should be typed on a separate line without numbering, indentation or bold or italic typeface.

**Electronic Submissions.** Authors should send the final, revised version of their articles in both hard copy paper and electronic disk forms. It is essential that the hard copy (paper) version exactly matches the material on disk. Please print out the hard copy from the disk you are sending. Submit three printed copies of the final version with the disk to the journal’s editorial office. Save all files on a standard 3.5 inch high-density disk. We prefer to receive disks in Microsoft Word in a PC format, but can translate
from most other common word processing programs as well as Macs. Please specify which program you have used. Do not save your files as "text only" or "read only".

**References**

References should follow American Psychological Association style. All publications cited in the text should be listed following the text; similarly, all references listed must be mentioned in the text. Within the text references should be denoted by the author's name and year of publication in parentheses, e.g. (Lambert, 1993) or (Mansell & McGill, 1995) or, if there are more than two authors, (Gallico *et al.*, 1986). Where several references are quoted consecutively within the text the order should be alphabetical, e.g. (Elford & Sherr, 1989; Folkman, 1992). Similarly, where several references are quoted within a single year, the order should be alphabetical (Mansell & McGill, 1995; Woods, 1995). If more than one paper from the same author(s) and year is listed, the date should be followed by (a), (b) etc., e.g. (Blazer, 1995a). References should be listed at the end of the paper in alphabetical order, typed in double spacing. Responsibility for the references and their verification against the original documents lies with the author(s).

References should be listed on a separate sheet(s) in the following standard form, capitalisation and punctuation:


**Units of Measurement**

All measurements must be cited in SI units.

**Illustration**

All illustrations (including photographs, graphs and diagrams) should be referred to as Figures and their position indicated in the text (e.g. Fig. 3). Each should be submitted on a separate sheet of paper, numbered on the back with Figure number (Arabic numerals) and the title of the paper. The captions of all figures should be submitted on a separate sheet, should include keys to symbols, and should make interpretation possible without reference to the text. Figures should ideally be professionally drawn and should be capable of reduction.

**Tables**

Tables should be submitted on separate sheets, numbered in Arabic numerals, and their position indicated in the text (e.g. Table 1). Each table should have a short, self-explanatory title. Vertical rules should not be used to separate columns. Units should appear in parentheses in the column heading but not in the body of the table. Any explanatory notes should be given as a footnote at the bottom of the table.
Proofs
Proofs will be sent by fax or air mail to the author nominated for correspondence. Proofs are supplied for checking and making essential typographical corrections, not for general revision or alteration. Proofs must be returned (by air mail or fax) within 72 hours of receipt.

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Fifty offprints of each paper are supplied free, to the nominated author for correspondence for further distribution, together with a complete copy of the relevant issue of the journal. Additional offprints may be purchased and should be ordered when proofs are returned. Offprints are sent approximately two weeks after publication.

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