Perceptions and experiences of belonging during the transition from primary to secondary school

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Abstract: A young person's sense of belonging at school can affect their level of motivation, academic achievement and wellbeing. During the transition from primary to secondary school, one's sense of belonging may be affected by the changes and challenges encountered.

This paper reports some of the findings from a larger qualitative longitudinal study that investigated the factors that contribute to educational resilience during the transition from primary to secondary school. Data gathered from interviews with sixteen Year 6 students from three Victorian primary schools over a period of eighteen months is presented and analysed.

A key theme identified from the larger study was belonging. This paper specifically reports on how belonging is perceived and experienced by students during the transition to secondary school. Understanding sense of belonging from young people's views, may help inform and effectively shape practices relevant to policy, pedagogy and teacher training. Implications for practice are discussed.

Introduction

In recent years, there has been increased interest in the link between students' views of belonging and their motivation and achievement in the context of schools (Nichols, 2008, 2006; Osterman, 2000). Important findings that arise from this body of research relate to the impact a sense of belonging to school may have on a young person's wellbeing and educational trajectory. For example, researchers consistently positively associate student belonging with resilience (Wang, Haertel & Walberg, 1998; Benard, 1995), happiness, positive self-esteem and life satisfaction (Bond, Butler, Thomas, Carlin, Glover, Bowes & Patton, 2007) and successful school outcomes such as academic achievement (Wang & Peck, 2013; Osterman, 2000) and motivation (Martin & Dowson, 2009; Goodenow, 1993). Furthermore, studies negatively associate lack of belonging with emotional distress and 'at risk' behaviours (Lester, Waters & Cross, 2013; Resnick, Bearman, Blum, Bauman, Harris, Jones & Udry, 1997; Baumeister & Leary, 1995).

While the importance of school belonging during early adolescence and the transition from primary to secondary school has been pronounced (Crosnoe, 2011, 2000; DeWit, Karioja, Rye & Shain, 2011; Goodenow, 1993; Simmons & Blyth, 1987), little is known about the experiences and significance of students' individual beliefs about belonging, and the role friendships may have in shaping experiences and perceptions of belonging particularly during the transition from primary to secondary school (Year 6-7).

Including young peoples' perspectives is essential in capturing the complexities of students' experiences and understandings in school (Kiefer, Alley & Ellerbrock, 2015; Ellerbrock, Kiefer & Alley, 2014). This is especially important during the transition into secondary school when young people are confronted by changing identities and contexts, and are challenged to adapt to new demands and more challenging environments (Hanewald, 2013). Additionally, studies have shown that students' sense of belonging often decreases after the transition from primary to secondary school (Gillen-O'Neel & Fuglini, 2013; Johnson, 2008). Several explanations have been offered for the drop in a sense of belonging and academic motivation once students move into secondary school. These relate to a poor fit between young people's developmental needs and middle school organisation and environments (Johnson, 2008), with schools responding inadequately to students' needs for belonging and support (Goodenow, 1993), and the gap between educational provision and students' lives (Johnson, 2008; Hattam & Prosser, 2008; Lingard, 2007; Carrington, 2006). Hence, sense of belonging and support may be especially important for academic motivation, engagement and performance of young people during the transition into secondary school.

Furthermore, the transition from primary to secondary school changes the social context of young people (Crosnoe, 2000). Friendships developed at primary school are at risk of dissolving, as young people move to different secondary schools, different classrooms and make new friends. Research has consistently demonstrated that the significant changes in the peer group and concerns about social acceptance and fitting in that dominate the school transition experience, can cause a loss of self-esteem, a decline in academic performance (Isakson & Jarvis, 1999) and rising levels of anxiety and depression (Lester, Waters, Cross & 2013; DeWit, Karioja, Rye & Shain, 2011; Smith, Akos, Lim & Wiley, 2008). However, most young people report greater adjustment and improvement within the year where they are able to connect with their peers and make new friends (Brown, 2004). Markedly, a sense of belonging, friendships and social support are attributed to the improvement. Understanding a sense of belonging and factors that contribute to a sense of belonging from students' views is thus valuable from both a theoretical and practical perspective.

Understanding Sense of Belonging

A sense of belonging refers to the relatedness individuals feel toward the other members of their community (Cemalcilar, 2010; Goodenow, 1993). School belonging describes the quality of the social relationships within a students' experience of school. The literature refers to "membership" (Goodenow, 1993), "connectedness" (Bond, Butler, Thomas, Carlin, Glover, Bowes & Patton, 2007) and "emotional engagement" (Wang & Eccles, 2012, 2013) to describe the core features of belonging. These expressions are subsumed in the term 'belonging' as it is used here in this paper.

Many educational researchers agree that the need for belonging is one of the most important needs of all for young people to function well in all types of learning environments (Crosnoe, 2000, 2011; Eccles & Roeser, 2011; Osterman, 2000; Goodenow, 1993). Maslow (1962) stated that the need for belonging has to be satisfied before other needs can be fulfilled. Satisfying the need to belong takes on greater importance during early adolescence. For these young people peers, close friends and non-parental adults become a greater influence – they start to go to them for guidance, support (Roeser, Eccles & Sameroff, 1998). According to Goodenow, (1993, p.81) their "sense of 'personal place' is still largely impressionable malleable and susceptible to influence in both positive and negative directions."

Common descriptions of school belonging in the literature is the need for young people to experience caring connections with others and the feeling of personal inclusion and acceptance (Schall, Wallace & Chhuon, 2016); that is, the degree to which a student feels like they belong at school and feels cared for by the school community (Rowe, Stewart & Patterson, 2007; Osterman, 2000). For example, Baumeister and Leary (1995) regard the need to belong as the need to experience consistent and caring interaction with others. This definition resonates with Goodenow's (1993) description of school belonging as the extent to which students feel personally accepted, included and supported in the school social environment. Belonging is "more than simple perceived liking or warmth, it also involves support and respect for personal autonomy and for the student as an individual" (Goodenow, 1993, p.25).

Students' perceptions of school belonging, however is more complex and multifaceted (Nichols, 2006, 2008). Nichols' (2006) study, examining students' conceptualisation of belonging at school, revealed students define belongingness in three dimensions of schooling: interpersonal relationships (teacher-student and student-student), learning /academic community, and school facilities or activities. Of interest to this paper, is Nichols' (2006; 2008) finding that students' beliefs about belonging, both positive and negative, were dependent on the quality of their relationships with teachers and peers; with the majority of students defining school belonging as being socially supported by their teachers and peers.

In the current study, sense of belonging is approached as a 'psychological sense of membership' (Goodenow, 1993; Ma, 2003) that is generated through the social interactions students experience with their friends, peers and teachers at school and encapsulates relatedness, the affinity or bond that encompasses a sense of connection with others (Osterman, 2000; Baumeister & Leary, 1995). This interpretation which, focusses on the interpersonal dimension of belonging (Nichols, 2008), is particularly useful in analysing the descriptions of belonging students provide in the current study.

Belonging and School Interpersonal Relationships

It is evident through a review of developmental and educational literature and research that young people, experience a sense of belonging in communities (Osterman, 2000) in which they feel their own importance and perceive that they can rely on others within that group. The school as a community can offer young people a context where they feel an emotional bond, and sense of security that comes from being a member, and feeling valued by and valuing the community (Feld & Carter, 1998).

In the relevant literature, research has demonstrated that young people's sense of belonging at school is closely linked to the nature of school-based interpersonal relationships, teacher - student, and students with peers (Ellerbrock, Kiefer & Alley, 2014; Waters, Cross & Shaw, 2010; Nichols, 2008). Teachers and peers may support adolescent academic motivation, classroom engagement and school belonging by providing a learning environment that is developmentally and academically responsive (Corso, Bundick, Quaglia & Haywood, 2013; Pendergast et al., 2005; Withers & Russell, 2001). Affirmative interpersonal relationships have been found to be a central element in shaping students' sense of belonging. Notably, positive peer relationships and close friendships are central to a young person's adjustment because it meets their developmental need for relatedness and acceptance (Brown, 2004) and may act as a protective factor.

The criticality of interpersonal relationships on young people's sense of belonging is highlighted in a recent study conducted in urban middle schools within the US.

In a qualitative case study, Ellerbrock, Kiefer and Alley (2014) analysed the ways in which school-based interpersonal relationships helped to set the foundation for young adolescents' sense of belonging. Eighteen students (11–14 years old), 5 teachers, and 1 administrator within a large, diverse urban middle school (grades 6-8) were individually interviewed. Findings to emerge from this study revealed responsive teacher-student and student-student relationships were helpful in promoting young adolescents' sense of school belonging. Responsive student-student relationships included those where students felt known and accepted by their peers and received academic and emotional support from them. Responsive teacher-student relationships were described as those where teachers fostered caring connections and responded to student needs. Significantly, Ellerbrock, Kiefer and Alley (2014) suggest that fostering responsive, school-based interpersonal relationships with students that are both academic and social in nature were important in setting the foundation for young adolescents' belonging in middle school.

Belonging and Academic and Non-Academic Outcomes

The need to belong is examined in the literature in terms of young peoples' development and contexts (Baumeister & Leary, 1995) and is relevant to a range of academic and non-academic outcomes. For example, research on school belonging constantly reports belonging to be associated with positive emotions and outcomes for healthy growth, life satisfaction, general future orientation, and learning (Waters, Cross & Shaw, 2010; Resnick, 2008; Bond, et al., 2007; Osterman, 2000). Belonging can also be shaped by the social environment as a result of the young person's perception of the social climate at school and their experiences within it.

From a school perspective, a strong sense of belonging and the feeling of social connection better positions young people to be highly motivated, engaged in learning, and committed to school (Kiefer, Alley & Ellerbrock, 2015; Martin & Dowson, 2009). Furthermore, the sense of belonging that stems from a positive supportive classroom climate, trusting and supportive relationships with peers and teachers, leads to a stronger supply of inner resources and sense of identity which predict engagement and performance, as well as more positive attitudes towards school, class work and their teachers, and peers (Wentzel, Battle, Russell, & Looney, 2010; Osterman, 2000). Meeting the need to belong can enable young people to negotiate the affective and social context of the classroom and school.

Correspondingly, the literature on adolescent development, educational resilience and school belonging report that a low sense of belonging and not having friends is a primary cause of a wide range of negative psychological and behavioural outcomes for young people, such as exclusion, isolation, bullying, low self-esteem and increased school dropout (Lester, Waters, Cross, 2013; Bond, et al., 2007; Werner, 2000; Baumeister & Leary, 1995).

While students' connection to school is well documented in the literature, there is a greater need for research that investigates the relational dimension of belonging over time (Nichols, 2006, 2008), and in "understanding more fully the range of ways students define what it means to belong in an academic setting" (Nichols, 2008, p.167).

Considering the importance of the relational aspect of belonging, the goal of this paper is to deepen understanding of the ways in which young people define belonging and how friendships may contribute to their sense of belonging and experiences during the transition to secondary school. In order to grasp the meaning and perception of belonging experience from the students' perspectives, qualitative methods that capture student voice

and allow students to "tell it like it is" for them were used. The current study tracked a group of students across Year 6 and Year 7 to address the limitations of previous studies in school belonging. In examining *belonging* the interpersonal dimensions (Nichols, 2008), specifically the social and emotional connections with friends at school were the focus.

The Study

The aim of the larger qualitative study from which this paper is drawn (Longaretti, 2011) was to gain a deeper understanding of the ways in which young people conceptualise resilience and the elements that contributed to managing the transition from primary to secondary school. The study was set in the context of four Year 6 classrooms, across three Victorian primary schools (Catholic, State and Independent) and involved the eight secondary schools attended by the participating students in the second year of the study.

The larger empirical research employed a qualitative approach influenced by the methodological perspectives of narrative inquiry (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990) and grounded research (Corbin & Strauss, 2014; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). These perspectives are noted to be a preferred way to gather and analyse data to generate deep understandings and to illuminate the meanings students make of their experiences (Schon, 1983) as they transition into secondary school.

Participants and Aims

A total of seventy-one students across four Year 6 classes were invited to participate in the study. In all, sixteen Year 6 students volunteered to be interviewed and agreed to be tracked over eighteen-month period, during Year 6 and 7. Of the sixteen student participants eleven were female and five were males. These students were of mixed academic ability and cultural backgrounds, aged between eleven and twelve years.

The aim of the study was to explore students' perceptions of resilience during the transition from primary to secondary school. The central research question was

What factors and mechanisms contribute to the educational resilience of young people during the transition from primary to secondary school?

One of the key themes identified in the initial larger investigation was belonging. The aim of this paper is to try to understand the complexities of belonging during the transition to secondary school and highlight young people's perspectives about belonging during a significant educational transition, by making their views more visible. In particular this paper interrogates how belonging is perceived and experienced by students during the transition to secondary school.

Methods

The study employed a qualitative approach, utilising multi-method interviews. This paper reports on the interview data, with the theme of young people's sense of belonging as a focus.

The Interviews

The sixteen students were individually interviewed at their school three times over the eighteen-month data collection period (end of Year 6; first and final school terms of Year 7). The duration of the interviews was approximately 25 minutes each and they were multi-method in nature (Longaretti 2011).

The multi-method interview technique incorporated a semi structured interview schedule using multiple techniques comprising card sorting tasks (Longaretti, 2011), open ended questions, and self-nominated scenarios (Longaretti, 1999). The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim and reviewed several times to ensure completeness of the data. Guided by theory (Baumeister & Leary, 1995) the interview schedule explored students' perceptions of resilience during the transition to secondary school, school-based friendships, educational aspirations and experiences in and outside of the classroom. To enhance young people's ability to provide specific details about their experiences in schools, card sorting tasks labelled with the concepts related to resilience – belonging, acceptance, relationships, and social support, were used during the interviews. The data generated from the interviews have been analysed in this paper.

Data Analysis

Data were manually analysed inductively (Miles & Huberman, 1994) across cases to reduce data to assist in drawing conclusions. The data were read several times to get a sense of it as a whole. The transcripts were read and reread, with the researcher highlighting important elements which served as coding categories related to each interview question. These were repeatedly compared and contrasted within and across the participants' transcripts, so that refined coding categories were generated. The final cycle of coding consisted of an emergent coding method, used to explore adolescent perceptions of resilience during the transition to secondary school. During this coding process, data were examined within the interview transcripts, which highlighted individual students' experiences and perceptions of belonging during Year 6 and 7 at school. The repeated sortings, codings, and comparisons characterising the grounded approach, occurred until saturation was reached (Corbin & Strauss, 2014; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Labels were assigned to the categories that emerged from this process. The significance of belonging was a dominant theme. The findings in relation to the theme of belonging are presented in this paper.

Findings

This paper interrogates how belonging is perceived and experienced by students during the transition to secondary school. Three major themes associated to belonging were identified from the analysis of the school transition experience*: (i) students' perceptions of belonging at school, (ii) important factors for belonging at school in Year 6-7 and (iii) signs and consequences of belonging and not belonging at school*.

Perceptions of Belonging at School

Students' descriptions of belonging in Year 6 and 7 relate to the following categories: *i) belonging as being and doing; ii) belonging as felt or lived; and iii) belonging as relating and accepting.*

i)   *Belonging as 'being and doing'*

In Year 6, students predominantly spoke of belonging as 'being' - being a part of the school, the classroom and friendship groups. For example, *"being sports captain", "being a leader', "being a friend", "being a buddy"* and *"being part of the class and school."* The majority of students (11 of 16) also described belonging as *doing*, having responsibilities such as jobs and roles in the school, which came with being in Year 6. These included, *"doing jobs for teachers", "helping other classes out", "doing newsletters"* and being known at the school. Lucinda explained, *"...people know who you are... you just belong"*.

Once in secondary school, however students' accounts of belonging focused on their friendships, with explanations describing a feeling resulting from peer acceptance and belonging to a friendship group, rather than to the classroom or school. In Year 7, all 16 students described belonging as i) felt or lived, and ii) relating and acceptance.

ii)   *Belonging –'felt' or 'lived'*

Across Year 6 and 7 students' narratives commonly describe the empowering nature of belonging as support felt or lived. In Year 6, students reported to know or feel they belonged to the classroom, the school and to their friendship groups. For example, *"...you just feel you belong to the class, ...like everyone gets along"* (Natalie), *"the teacher helps you and makes you feel part of the group"* (Lucinda)*, "You just know you're part of the school"* (Kim), and *"at lunchtimes you all play"* (Chen).

In Year 7, however the focus on friendships dominated students accounts. All 16 students indicated that a sense of belonging through trust between friends enabled them to mobilise their confidence to act, to seek help or advice and to utilise their friendship as a support base at school. Of the 16 students, all 11 girls described 'knowing' or 'feeling' they could confide in and support one another in relation to personal matters at school. A sense of knowing and feeling led students to reading where they were placed in relation to others (i.e. trusted, being accepted, belonging to a group or not). The five boys in the study did not refer to emotions, rather they described 'knowing' by visible or physical signs such as *'they play sport with you'* and, *'they let you in [the group]'*. Girls on the other hand spoke frequently of the emotional support they gained from their friendships. For instance, *'feeling supported'* and *'being listened to and understood'*.

For Aldo, belonging within the context of friendships was viewed as a fixed state. For example, in Year 7 Aldo explained, *"You either belong or you don't belong",* suggesting there is no place in between. This is in contrast to Natalie and Analisa, who held more fluid views of belonging during the transition from primary to secondary school. They explained:

> *If something happens to you because of bullying your feelings about belonging change because you feel like nobody like you.* (Analisa)
> *Your feelings of belonging can change. Sometimes at school you feel you belong because you are getting along with your friends and you're happy... And when there's a fight it feels like you don't belong. But you do.* (Natalie)

iii)   *Belonging as relating and accepting*

In year 7, the majority of students (14 of 16) believed that relating or connecting with their peers helped build friendships, while all 16 students identified acceptance from peers as crucial to their sense of belonging. Significantly, students emphasised they wanted their friends to know and accept them. Students frequently spoke of being accepted in terms of *'being liked for me'*, and *'being seen as an individual'*. Furthermore, a sense of belonging seemed to relieve students of the enduring pressure to fit in for peer acceptance. For instance, by the end of Year 7 students reported to be able to *"be myself with friends", "letting others be themselves"* and signaled the importance of *"knowing who you are"*. For one student, Natalie, belonging across Years 6 and 7 meant friends understanding her (*"knowing me"*) and being accepted for her individuality (*"being myself"*).

Important Factors for Belonging at School in Year 6-7

Students responses revealed that over the course of Year 6 and 7 the key factor significant to students' perceived sense of belonging during the school transition experience was their school friendships. Friendships were viewed by students as a context or a space, in which to establish trust and a sense of belonging. In Year 6 and 7 all 16 students described friendships to mean companionship, security, support, and wellbeing. In Nadia's words, friendships were *"...somewhere to be, with people you can trust or count on, ... somewhere to feel like you belong."* In terms of their learning and school work, friendships also encouraged engagement and motivation. This was particularly evident in Year 7 where students reported to *"like being with friends in class"* (Chen) *"...want to do well"* (Millie), and *"enjoy going to school because of my friends"* (Denise).

Consequently, in Year 7, all the participants perceived school to lose meaning and significance if they did not belong or have friends at school. Natalie explained, *"You wouldn't want to come to school any more. You wouldn't want to come, without friends."* They associated not having friends with negative self-talk and feelings of alienation (*I don't belong*), lack of support (*I won't have anyone to talk to or help me)* and disengagement from school (*I don't want to come anymore*). For the majority of the students (13 of 16) not having friends at school with whom you felt '*you belonged'* meant '*being lonely'* and '*doing it tough'*.

Signs and Consequences of Belonging and not Belonging at School

In this study, every student identified signs that for them indicated a sense of belonging during the course of their transition from primary to secondary school. In Years 6 and 7 the students described knowing they belonged when they related well with their peers and felt secure in their friendships. For instance, "*having friends to play with*", and *"... to hang out and be with."* For these students, trust, support and care, and acceptance were significant factors.

Other signs of belonging identified by students included fitting in and feeling *"good", "happy"* and *"having strength".* When asked to describe what belonging looked or felt like, Millie described belonging as *"...feeling good about yourself with others".* When asked to clarify 'fitting in', students commonly denoted *'blending in'.* According to Allie, *"You blend in with others so you don't stand out."* According to Ayden, not standing out meant *"not be too smart"*, whilst for Kim it meant, *"being able to do what others do."*

Additionally, students' accounts reflected an awareness of the outcomes and consequences of belonging and not belonging. These are important in understanding the meaning young people assigned to feeling connected.

Positive Outcomes of Belonging

The participants explained that belonging or feeling connected to their friends resulted in positive effects for students socially, emotionally and academically. The students believed that feeling a sense of belonging led to a greater sense of trust and companionship and enabled them to confidently form other relationships and feel comfortable and content at school, as well as manage interpersonal and school related problems. For example:

> *…if you belong at a school you feel comfortable and feel safe and don't feel embarrassed…you feel comfortable talking to your friends about a problem and feel like they accept you, and that you belong.* (Analisa)

The majority of students (14 of 16) agreed that during the course of Year 7 they strove for peer acceptance in order to belong. Denise explained:

> *In the beginning, you do the same as others [to fit in]. You want to be accepted and liked by your friends or the group especially at the beginning of the year when no one really knows you. Oh, your old friends do but you want to make new friends here.*

By the end of Year 7, Denise acknowledged that her need for belonging and acceptance had changed. She explicated:

> *Belonging gives you the confidence to do things at school. You know you belong, that your friends accept you for who you are and you don't need to hide things or change your ways…like I am loud, and my friends know that I am…I don't have to change. In the beginning I did, but then they got to know me as loud.*

Fourteen students strongly agreed that a sense of belonging through their friendships also affected their attitude and behavior in the classroom and towards their learning in their first year at secondary school, as the following examples illustrate:

> *You learn better when you are with others... especially friends because they talk to you and help you if you need help.* (Allie)
> *When you belong you're able to ask teachers any questions without being nervous   about what you want to ask.* (Ayden)
> *You want to join in and do activities.* (Sam)

For these students a sense of belonging and having friends inspired them try harder at their school work and feel motivated to learn and have 'fun'.

The Consequences of Not Belonging

In Year 6, students showed some resolve about not belonging. While they reported not belonging to be undesirable and something that *"makes you feel alone…",* all Year 6 students aspired to make new friends in secondary school. In Year 7 students' perceptions were influenced by their acute awareness of the potential undesirable consequences of not belonging (see Table 1).

Consequences: Not belonging in Year 7	
Social emotional	Academic
Negative Feelings	**Behaviour**
Discomfort	Distracted in class
Unhappiness	Loss of confidence
Loneliness	Discomfort
Negative thoughts	Silence
Paranoid	Disengage
Worry	- feign boredom
Low view of self	- give up
Won't get better	- not participate
Attempts to fit in	
Buy things for others	
Pretend	
Change self	

Table 1: Year 7 Students' Perceptions of the Consequences of Not Belonging at School

The students viewed 'not belonging' as detrimental to their schooling, personal wellbeing and sense of self. They commonly described not belonging as having negative social, emotional and academic effects; describing these in terms related to adverse feelings, thoughts and behaviors. For example:

> *You'd feel lonely – alone. Then you wouldn't have anyone to go to for help or to play with. You'd just be left alone.* (Allie)
> *It makes you feel left out and that's why it's important to ask if other kids need help.* (Natalie)
> *You feel like you are the wrong one and don't fit in.* (Lucinda)
> *You think it won't get better.* (Chen)
> *You worry a lot about what others think and say.* (Marshall)
> For Allie, a sense of urgency and yearning to satisfy her need for belonging was conveyed. For example, "*You don't want to not belong because that's bad. Then you are out…with no-one, nothing!*"

In terms of behaviors students described a variety of strategies they used in attempt to fit in socially. Strategies ranged from buying things for others in order to be liked, persisting, feigning to have similar interests and hobbies, and acting out of character. For example, Millie explained, *"…at the beginning of Year 7, I pretended to like sport like everyone else. I don't really but all the girls here do, so I thought I'd just go along with it."* On the contrary, in Year 7 Natalie emphatically stated she would not change to fit in as it was imperative for her friends and teachers to *"…know and accept me for who I am"*.

When asked how not belonging affected them in the classroom, students identified a range of behaviours including distraction, lacking self-confidence and disengagement. For instance,

> *You can't concentrate.*
> *You don't feel good about yourself…like… not confident in what you say or do.*
> *You don't want to try.*
> *You stop listening …. you worry more.*

Discussion

Students' experiences in and understandings of school was complex. Belonging is intricately linked with young people's motivation and achievement at school (Martin & Dowson, 2009). The literature reports that a sense of belonging to school may impact on a young person's wellbeing and educational trajectory (Waters, Cross & Shaw, 2010; Baumeister & Leary, 1995). It is also known that for young people, social acceptance and friendships dominate the school transition experience. This section draws on the interview data analysis to consider how belonging is perceived and experienced by students during the transition to secondary school. Three key deductions related to belonging emerged from this study: (1) Belonging at school was considered a significant element to students' conception of resilience, (2) school friendships contributed to students' sense of belonging at school, and (3) students identified and assigned meaning to signs and consequences of belonging and not belonging.

First, belonging at school was considered a significant element to students' conception of resilience – 'being and doing well' at school. In this study, students defined belonging to be a feeling resulting from belonging to a friendship group, peer acceptance, as opposed to a sense of belonging to the classroom or school. Belonging at school was defined by young people in terms of relational, behavioural and emotional aspects, namely belonging as *being and doing, felt or lived, relating and acceptance.*

Similarly to Nichols' (2006) findings, young people in this study defined belonging at school in terms of different dimensions of schooling (interpersonal relationships, learning/academic community and school activities). However overwhelmingly the data reveals that students' responses concentrated strongly on their school interpersonal relationships, particularly their school friendships. Being socially supported by their friends and teachers was most important throughout the transition. Students viewed belonging as a vehicle that facilitated social and academic benefits.

Interestingly students' descriptions of belonging differed in primary and secondary school. Notably, in Year 6 students' portrayals of belonging varied and ranged from school and classroom activities (Nichols 2006), having responsibilities and having friends with a strong focus on leadership roles. In Year 6, a sense of belonging was associated with the classroom, school and friendships. Conversely, in secondary school, the descriptions of belonging centred more on friendships and the psychological need to fit in. This finding is consistent with developmental and other transition literature that describes adolescents' need to experience caring connections with others and the feeling of personal inclusion and acceptance (Rowe, Stewart, Patterson, 2007; Feld & Carter, 1998; Baumeister & Leary, 1995). The students' expression of belonging as feelings that come from acceptance, inclusion and relating also concur with the findings from Ellerbrock, Kiefer and Alley (2014), who identified that students want their relationships to have value. Goodenow (1993, p.25) describes this sense of belonging as "…*more than simple perceived liking or warmth, it also involves support and respect for personal autonomy and for the student as an individual."*

Significantly, the findings offer a deeper perspective of the meaning and value students assigned to belonging. Students' accounts of belonging broaden the definitions offered in the literature as they draw on the personal and lived experienced - what this feels and means to them in the daily setting inside and outside of the classroom. They describe the enabling and social nature of belonging as support felt or lived, through trust between friends. When students experience acceptance and a sense of belonging they are more likely to be supportive of others (Nichols, 2006, 2008; Crosnoe, 2000; Osterman, 2000).

Second, the data reveals that positive school friendships contributed to students' sense of belonging at school. Students voiced that when they felt known, were accepted and valued

by their peers and teachers, and upon receiving academic and emotional support, it helped to promote their sense of belonging at school in Years 6 and 7. This endorses educational and resilience literature that repeatedly highlights the critical and central role relationships have on young person's wellbeing, their sense of belonging and school success (Ellerbrock, Kiefer & Alley, 2014; Eccles & Roeser, 2011). It calls attention to the social context of the classroom and the pedagogy within it.

The classroom social environment should not be underestimated. Not only does it relate to students' motivation and engagement (Goodenow, 1993; Martin & Dowson, 2009), but it provides the resources for young people to negotiate so that they can engage, perform and be well at school (Crosnoe, 2011). The data in this study suggests there is a need to listen to students and attend to the social interactions and climate of the classroom in order to maximize opportunities for young people to connect with their peers and teachers, and engage and participate in learning.

Thirdly, students in this study identified and assigned meaning to signs and consequences of belonging and not belonging. The descriptors offered are illustrative of their experiences and perceptions of them. Young people's accounts of feeling connected gives a sense of the import it has for them overall, but specifically for *being and doing well* at school. Such outcomes concur with the literature on belonging (Osterman, 2000; Martin & Dowson, 2009; Bond, et al., 2007), that report a wide range of positive psychological and behavioural changes associated with a sense of belonging.

The students' assessments of the risks of not having friends and not belonging at school are strikingly similar to the negative outcomes widely documented in the literature, such as low self-esteem, low confidence, and poor emotional adjustment, that are positively connected with not having friends at school (Lester, Waters & Cross, 2013; Crosnoe, 2011; DeWit, Karioja, Rye & Shain, 2011; Resnick, et al., 1997) and in studies of belongingness that show that a lack of belonging is a primary cause of a wide range of psychological and behavioural problems (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Young people's narratives clearly showed that the underlying fear or related anxieties of not belonging and being somewhere in-between is disconcerting and not a space or place to be envied.

Significantly, in terms of their wellbeing, students were aware that without being connected to the peer group, one may be left without a crucial source of support during a particularly challenging period of their development and schooling (Hargreaves & Earl, 1990). All things considered, the young people in this study had sound reason to worry about and focus their attention on creating positive connections at school amongst their peers. These findings lend strength to Wang and Peck's (2013) suggestion that young people are most engaged when they feel connected, competent and a sense of autonomy. As educators we need to question and pay greater attention to the efforts young people go to 'fit in', to feel as though they belong.

Implications for Teacher Education

An awareness of students' perceptions of belonging during the transition from primary to secondary school may be valuable for both teachers and pre-service teachers. The findings of this study help elucidate the factors young people perceive important and influential to their transition and experiences at school. Notably, they highlight areas of teachers' work that can be targeted to support young people in the early years of secondary school. The findings of this study suggest that primary to secondary school transition programs and early secondary school curriculum be designed with due consideration to the significance of relationships for young people and satisfying the need to belong. Relational,

social pedagogy and the classroom climate can be made central to every day practices to encourage the development of friendships and to foster engagement in learning at school. Professional learning opportunities for teachers in these areas can further support teachers in their work and in assisting their students.

The influence of school friendships on a young person's sense of belonging merits further exploration in consideration of educational practice in the middle years of schooling. Identifying ways in which schools foster supportive and rewarding relationships between students, might offer additional evidence that supports the need to encourage practices that promote the development of belonging inside and outside the classroom in secondary school. Future research could identify such teaching practices that effectively create social cultures within classrooms that are unified and encourage young people to genuinely engage and feel supported in their learning and relationships, and positively promote belonging. This could add to the research efforts focused on better understanding belonging at school for young people, and school reform efforts that aim at producing positive outcomes for young people beyond schooling.

Conclusion

This paper examined the ways in which young people perceived and defined belonging during the transition from primary to secondary school. It offers a qualitative view of the experiences of young people during transition. By investigating through narratives, the meaning making of young people, a group whose voices are usually overlooked in educational research, was highlighted. Listening to what young people have to say about belonging is critical. They have unique viewpoints and values, particularly about what is important to their learning and wellbeing. Adults cannot always anticipate knowing the totality of the views of young people, or what is best for them in regards to enhancing engagement, performance and wellbeing in schools.

The findings and literature presented in this paper accentuate the significance of belonging for young people and the central role friendships have on their perception of belonging and sense of being and doing well in school. These relationships are embedded in the school context and influenced by the people, policies and practices within schools. Therefore, conscious efforts to foster student connections and friendships that provide for belonging, should receive further attention in research and practice to assist social, emotional and academic development of all young people during the transition to secondary school. This is within the capacities of all schools to achieve.

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