Teachers' perceptions of sense of belonging and the possible impact on adolescent development

Debra E. York

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Teachers' Perceptions of Sense of Belonging and the Possible Impact on Adolescent Development

Debra E. York

A report submitted in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Award of Bachelor of Arts (Psychology) Honours, Faculty of Computing, Health and Science, Edith Cowan University.

Submitted (October, 2007)

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Teachers' Perceptions of Sense of Belonging and the Possible Impact on Adolescent Development

Debra E. York
Abstract

The nature of adolescence has been identified as a time of vast biopsychosocial changes that take place within a dynamic environment. The interplay between the individual developmental changes and the surrounding changing environments has been considered in relation to the development of depression during adolescence. Research has indicated that depression elevates during adolescence (Cicchetti & Toth, 1998). Both normative and non-normative changes pertinent to the adolescent have been identified as risk factors. Social support from family, peers and teachers has been found to facilitate positive influences to the adolescent’s psychological and emotional well being.

Particularly the role teachers’ play in relation to the identified protective factor sense of belonging within the school context has been highlighted. However, conflicting findings have indicated a need for further qualitative research into the characteristics of sense of school belonging to ensure its effective implementation within the school setting.

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Submitted: August 2007
Teachers' Perceptions of Sense of Belonging and the Possible Impact on Adolescent Development

The representation of adolescence as a developmental stage that is inherently tumultuous has its historical roots in the early writings of the American developmental psychologist G. Stanely Hall (cited in Arnett, 1999). This view of adolescence has been supported by other researchers such as Erikson (1968) who also considered adolescence to be a time of struggle experienced by the individual in order to develop an identity. In contrast modern researchers dispel the “storm and stress” model that has historically represented adolescence (Elliott & Feldman, 1990; Griffin, 2001; Steinberg, 1999). Arnett (1999) provided evidence to support a revised contemporary view of adolescence that suggests this particular time during the life span may be considered turbulent and unpredictable, although this is not the experience for all adolescents. From this perspective various issues are considered pertinent to the adolescent which may be problematic. These include new found conflict in the parent-adolescent relationship, an increase in risk behaviour and a tendency for mood disruptions which include more frequent depressed mood.

Depressed mood is a problem that exists in childhood but becomes more prevalent in adolescence (Cicchetti & Toth, 1998). Mental health issues which include depression have increased in adolescence despite the identified advances in the majority of health outcomes for adolescents living in Australia today (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare [AIHW], 2006). The risk factors which may contribute to adolescent depression are considered to be multifaceted that include many contexts in which the adolescent develops (Compas, Grant, & Ey, 1994; Zwi & Henry, 2005). From an ecological perspective, as the inherent normative changes take place within the
developing adolescent they are affected by both the immediate environment and the larger dynamic environments that surround the adolescent (Bronfenbrenner, 1979a).

Risk factors may be defined as factors that increase the likelihood of an adverse event or health outcome for the individual (World Health Organization [WHO], 2002). In contrast, protective factors may be considered conditions that alter the person’s response to the presenting risk factor (WHO, 2004). In an attempt to preclude the interplay of risk factors and the developmental tasks of adolescence and their potential for subsequent maladaptive outcomes, various protective factors have been identified.

Social support has been identified as a risk factor when absent from the adolescents life and a protective factor when present (Colarossi & Eccles, 2003; Cornwell, 2003; Harter, 1993; Helsen, Vollebergh, & Meeus, 2000; Yarcheski & Mahon, 1999). Sense of school belonging (SoSB) has also been identified in the literature as a protective factor against various mental health issues; which include anxiety, depression, suicidal ideation, drug use and intentional injury (Anderman, 2002; Mounts, 2004; Resnick, Harris, & Blum, 1993; Resnick et al., 1997; Sun & Hui, 2007; Ueno, 2005). The research has indicated that children and adolescents who experience a sense of belonging to family and school are less likely to exhibit behaviour problems or develop mental health issues (Resnick et al., 1997; Routt, 1996). It has also been identified that teachers play a significant role in relation to the adolescent’s experience within the school context and their subsequent well-being (Stumpers, Breen, Pooley, Cohen, & Pike, 2007). However, contrasting findings have found that for some adolescents SoSB may be problematic and consequentially procure negative outcomes for the individual. For SoSB to be a protective factor for all adolescents, an
understanding of the school characteristics that underlie this psychological construct need to be identified and fostered within the school environment effectively.

Scope of Review

This review will examine the adolescent from a biopsychosocial developmental perspective. It will discuss how the normative developmental changes that are inherent in adolescence, take place within the changing environmental contexts that surround the adolescent. Also the biological changes which include physical, cognitive and social cognitive changes will be discussed in-depth. The breadth of this discussion will elucidate how these changes not only impact on the adolescent's self-esteem and identity formation but also their psychological well-being. Specifically the adolescent's psychological well-being will be discussed in relation to depression and risk factors that are considered to precipitate the onset of depression will be explained. The identified risk factors will be representative of both normative developmental changes and non-normative changes. In contrast to identifying and discussing risk factors that have the propensity to contribute to the onset of depression during adolescence, protective factors will also be discussed. Both social support and SoSB will be identified as factors that have a mediating effect on both risk factors and the individual's self-esteem and subsequently decrease the likelihood of depression. SoSB will also be discussed in relation to the conflicting findings in the research in relation to its potential to positively affect the adolescent's well-being. In conclusion, from these identified inconsistencies in the literature, it will be suggested that future research needs to clearly ascertain the characteristics that represent SoSB. It will also be suggested that teaching staff that are considered to have a vested interest within the school context will be able to provide a greater understanding of the characteristics that foster a SoSB.
Defining Adolescence

Adolescence may be defined as a transitional developmental period during the life span between childhood and adulthood (Papalia, Olds, & Feldman, 2006) which includes both biological and social factors. The onset of puberty with its vast physical changes has been represented throughout the research as a prominent biological marker that signifies entry into adolescence (Elliott & Feldman, 1990; Smetana et al., 2006). In contrast Bronfenbrenner (1977) was one of the initial proponents who noted that various social factors may be considered more salient definitions of adolescence. Bronfenbrenner drew attention to the contextual variables that are inherent in this stage of the life span that require the adolescent to assume various roles and expectations.

Within a social context adolescence has also been defined by important transitions. For example, the transition into high school has been considered a key indicator of the individual’s entry into adolescence. In contrast the transition into full-time work may be considered an indicator of the transition into adulthood (Graber & Brook-Gunn, 1996). However, whether adolescence is defined by biological or social factors the main consensus seems to be that adolescence may be considered a time of immense biological, cognitive, social and emotional changes (Elliott & Feldman, 1990; Smetana et al., 2006). In most western cultures adolescence is considered to begin as early as ten years of age and proceed until the latter teenage years, even early twenties (Elliott & Feldman, 1990; Smetana et al.).

The literature suggests that within this decade adolescent development can be partitioned into three stages of development which are generally defined by aged markers and various aspects of development (Elliott & Feldman, 1990; Smetana et al., 2006). The first stage, termed early adolescence is considered to be the time between
ages of ten and thirteen years. During this stage physical maturation begins which is often rapid and profound (Bee & Boyd, 2004; Elliott & Feldman, 1990; Smetana et al., 2006). The second stage or middle adolescence is considered to be the time between the ages of fourteen and seventeen years. During this stage normative changes within the parent-adolescent relationship take place as the adolescent strives for greater independence and as a consequence peer relationships become more profound (Bee & Boyd, 2004; Elliott & Feldman, 1990; Smetana et al., 2006). The third stage or late adolescence occurs between the ages of eighteen years and the mid twenties (Smetana et al.) and may be referred to as emerging adulthood.

A Systems Approach to Adolescent Development

The changes the adolescent experiences across time during this stage of development are considered to take place within a dynamic environment (Moen, Elder, & Luscher, 2001). From a systems perspective the individual interacts with their environment not as a separate being but as an integral part of it (Bronfenbrenner, 1979b). According to Bronfenbrenner (1977) a systems approach views human development as an evolving, shared adaptation that continues throughout the lifespan between the individual and the changing environments that surround them. As the individual continues to develop he/she is affected by not only their immediate environment but also larger environments with which they do not have immediate contact. It is suggested that the relationship between the environmental factors that influence the individual’s development and the individual are reciprocal in nature (Bronfenbrenner, 1979b). According to Bronfenbrenner (1979b) these changing environments are connected systems that exist within each other and consistently interact. From this perspective the individual’s development is embedded within an
overarching interconnected ecological system that consists of multiple levels: the micro, meso, exo and macro systems.

The microsystem relates to the adolescent’s immediate surroundings and includes both settings and individuals; for example family members, the school and peers. The mesosystem consists of connections that transpire between various microsystems surrounding the developing adolescent; for example the relationship between home and school. The exosystem includes parts of the individual’s life which affect the individual but do not necessarily directly include the individual. This may include settings such as the adolescent’s parent’s workplace and the subsequent relationship between this setting and the adolescent’s home. Finally the macrosystem includes the dominant culture and institutions in which the micro, meso and exosystems are embedded. This system includes the government, ethnic and overriding social values. The recognition that adolescent development takes place within various interconnected systems provides a contextual perspective in contrast to adolescent development taking place in isolation (Bronfenbrenner, 1979b; Steinberg & Morris, 2001). From a systems perspective adolescent development is neither constrained by biological or psychological dispositions pertinent to the individual or exclusive to the surrounding environmental conditions. In contrast development is instead constructed interdependently as the individual is both a product and producer of their environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1979a, 1979b, 2005).

Biopsychosocial Development

Puberty. The onset of adolescence may be defined by the initial biological changes experienced by the individual (Bee & Boyd, 2004; Elliott & Feldman, 1990). These changes include changes to the reproductive system (primary changes) and
secondary physiological changes such as the growth of body hair in both males and females, (Bee & Boyd, 2004). Research has highlighted both positive and negative effects of pubertal timing on the adolescent’s psychosocial development (Celio, Karnik, & Steiner, 2006; Dick, Rose, & Viken, 2000; Ge, Conger, & Elder, 2001a; Laursen, Coy, & Collins, 1998; Wichstrom, 2001). Negative psychological effects may be due to discrepancies between the adolescent’s perceived expectations of development and their actual developmental experience (Bee & Boyd, 2004). It has also been suggested that the individual may not yet possess the necessary psychological and social maturity to support the physiological changes that are inherent in pubertal development (Celio et al., 2006).

Pubertal timing refers to whether the individual’s physical developmental changes are considered to be early, on time or late in comparison to their same sex and aged peers (Ge et al., 2001b; Graber & Brooks-Gunn, 1996). Early pubertal timing was found to correlate with alcohol use amongst both adolescent males and females, although the correlation was found to be stronger for males than females (Dick, Rose, & Viken, 2000; Wichstrom, 2001). However Dick et al. (2000) found a weak association between early pubertal timing and alcohol use after controlling for friends’ problem behaviour. Dick et al. suggests the use of alcohol may be determined more by the individual’s environmental influences in contrast to individual pubertal development.

In contrast Wichstrom (2001) postulated that his study controlled environmental influences by including particularly discordant dizygotic twin sisters as participants. Wichstrom found early maturing twin sisters were significantly more likely to use alcohol. However Wichstrom suggests these findings of within-family differences for pubertal timing and alcohol use should be considered with caution as separate peer
relationships between twin sisters and other contextual variables were not taken into
consideration.

Pubertal timing has not only been studied in relation to its subsequent effect on
substance use and abuse but also how it impacts on parent-adolescent relationships
(Celio et al., 2006; Laursen et al., 1998; Steinberg, 1988; Steinberg & Morris, 2001).
According to a review of the literature conducted by Celio et al. (2006) early maturing
females experienced more conflict with their parents. In contrast Steinberg (1988) found
that puberty per se rather than pubertal timing increased parent-adolescent conflict. Also
a study conducted by Laursen et al. (1998) found the age of the adolescent influenced
parent-child conflict in contrast to pubertal timing. Conflict frequency was found to be
greater in early adolescence in contrast to middle and late adolescence. It also appears
that conflict frequency decreases parent-child closeness and exacerbates parent-child
distance (Steinberg, 1988). It appears that for some adolescents the normative biological
changes inherent in puberty may be considered problematic (e.g., Celio et al., 2006;
Laursen et al., 1998). Negative outcomes such as depression have also been found in
association with pubertal development (Angold, Costello, & Worthman, 1998; Ge,
Conger, & Elder, 1996; Wichstrom, 1999). Although the majority of findings in which
puberty has been associated with internalized and externalized symptoms have also
found other contributing factors which influence these outcomes (Ge et al., 2001b;
Simmons, Burgeson, & Reef, 1988).

The impact of pubertal development needs to be considered carefully in relation
to other contributing factors that may be associated with the social and environmental
contexts in which the adolescent develops (Celio et al., 2006). Previous research has
supported negative outcomes for adolescents experiencing concurrent normative and
non-normative transitions (Simmons et al., 1988). Ge et al. (2001b) found that corresponding early maturation in males and stressful life events significantly increased internalized distress symptoms. Ge et al. (2001b) suggested that early maturation may be in itself a difficult period for the adolescent but with the confluence of stressful life events this may present added difficulties for the individual. During this time of development when the individual is still in the process of social and cognitive developmental changes, their ability to cope with a multiplicity of events both biological and environmental may be inadequate.

**Cognitive Development.** An understanding of the developmental cognitive changes which are inherent in adolescent development, still appear to be predominantly influenced by the theoretical underpinnings of Piaget (Papalia et al., 2006; Berk, 2006). According to Piaget (1972) cognitive development of the child is constructed in successive stages, although the exact timing of these stages may vary according to the individual’s intelligence and social environment (Piaget & Inhelder, 1973). At approximately eleven years of age the individual shifts from thinking in relation to the ‘here and now’ (‘concrete operation stage’) to thinking in relation to ‘what may be possible’ (‘formal operation stage’) (Piaget, 1972). Once the adolescent reaches the ‘formal operation’ stage they are able to think in an abstract manner and construct hypotheses for testing (Piaget, 1972). The adolescent now has a novel way to view the world and themselves (Papalia et al.). With this newly developed abstract thinking ability (Piaget, 1972) the adolescent is able to construct ideas about their possible future self and career (Papalia et al.).

These pronounced changes in the individual’s thinking are generally supported in the literature, but how these changes transpire has to some degree been rejected. The
idea that cognitive development proceeds in stages has been abandoned and in contrast current research suggests that all aspects of thinking are present at each age but expand and improve with age (Berk, 2006). The information-processing approach in understanding cognitive development suggests that the individual’s thinking processes change in relation to capacity and function (Berk; Flavell, Miller, & Miller, 1993). Support for this approach has been found in relation to the individual’s improvement in processing speed with age (Kail, 1997; Sieglar, 1976). It appears that adolescents are superior in their speed of processing, an aspect of cognitive development that Piaget’s theory does not address (Flavell et al., 1993; Kail, 1997).

Also Piaget (1972) reviewed his concept of stage development in regards to its dominant context free perspective. This review was based on numerous studies that identified a cultural perspective in regards to a lack of ‘formal operation’ development in adolescents (Rogoff & Chavajay, 1995). Piaget (1972) noted that the individual’s experience in relation to their ecological setting could significantly affect this part of their cognitive development and as a consequence preclude the individual from reaching the ‘formal operational’ stage.

Social Cognition. Reaching the ‘formal operational’ stage of cognitive development allows the adolescent to perceive themselves and others in an abstractive manner (Berk, 2006; Harter, 2006). As their social cognition develops they begin to subsequently define the self in relation to their own attitudes, attributes and values (Berk; Campbell, & Lavallee, 1993). The adolescent’s self descriptions may be both positive and negative and are often discrepant in nature (Berk; Harter, 2006). The acknowledgement of both positive and negative attributes and abilities constitutes the evaluative perspective of the self; hence the self-esteem (Campbell & Lavallee). The
evaluative nature of the individual’s cognitions in relation to the self have been
associated with the adolescent’s mood (Harter, 1993). According to Harter (1993) the
self-esteem of adolescents has not only been found to be related to positive mood but
also depression. Higgins’ (1987) self-discrepancy theory states that individuals who find
a discrepancy between their actual evaluated self and their preferred evaluated self also
have the propensity to suffer depression. As a consequence important consideration
needs to be made in relation to the adolescent’s developing self-esteem and its
propensity to be a salient risk factor for depression (Harter, 1993).

**Self-Esteem.** Discrepancies in the adolescent’s self-concept and subsequent self­
estime have been found to vary within different social contexts, including the school
Whitesell, 1998). Both relational contexts and competencies within various domains
have been found to influence adolescent self-esteem (Harter, 1993; Harter et al., 1998).
The global self-esteem of adolescents between the ages of fourteen and sixteen was
found to vary as a function of relational context. Perceived support from parents,
teachers and peers was found to increase the adolescent’s evaluation of self-worth
(Harter et al.).

In contrast according to Harter (1993) the negative impact on adolescents’ self­
estime derived from perceived low social support and inadequate competence in various
domains has the propensity to result in depression in the developing adolescent. Social
support and its effect on both self-esteem and depression was examined in a study
conducted by Colarossi and Eccles (2003). This study analysed both male and female
adolescents aged fifteen to eighteen, perceived social support from parents, teachers and
peers. Females perceived significantly more support from peers, in contrast males
perceived significantly more support from fathers. Although gender differences were found in whom they perceived to provide the most support, both males and females did not differ on the importance of support providers in relation to self-esteem and depression. Depression was significantly negatively affected by support from mothers, teachers and friends. In contrast, only friends and teachers significantly, positively affected self-esteem. Colarossi and Eccles suggest these findings indicate the adolescent’s need to identify at this stage of development with others outside the immediate family. Hence the significance of peers and teachers in the adolescent’s developing self-esteem must not be overlooked. Also the findings differentiated support between parents and as a consequence, father support did not effect either depression or self-esteem. Colarossi and Eccles suggested that this finding needs to be taken into consideration when reviewing other studies that do not find a significant effect for parental support when it is measured conjointly.

Identity Formation. The adolescent’s parents, peers and teachers are not only considered to be significant influences on the development of the adolescent’s self-esteem but they are also considered to be salient antecedents in the adolescent’s determination to achieve an identity (Colarossi & Eccles, 2003; Erikson, 1959; Galbo, 1989; Marcia, 1980; Pugh & Hart, 1999; Stone & Bradford Brown, 1999). According to Erickson (1968) this period of psychosocial development is characterized by the individual’s struggle to achieve an identity. Erickson suggests that the rapid physical changes that are inherent in adolescence and the expected sexual and occupational roles the adolescent must acknowledge, do not allow the individual to retain their existing identity and consequently a new identity must be forged.
There are various antecedents that are salient in the adolescent’s determination to
achieve an identity. Marcia (1980) has focused predominantly on parenting style; in
contrast Galbo (1989) suggests that the role models teachers portray in the classroom not
only influence identity formation but also the adolescent’s self-concept. Family
functioning (such as communication, cohesion and adaptability) has also been
considered a determinant of identity formation (Bakken & Romig, 1989; Grotevant &
Cooper, 1985).

In contrast to parental and teacher influences on identity formation, it has been
suggested that the peer group in the adolescent’s life is of extreme importance in
developing an identity whereby questions relating to the self are resolved (Erikson,
1959; Pugh & Hart, 1999; Stone & Bradford Brown, 1999). However, researchers such
as Adams and Marshall (1996) do not draw specific attention to the peer group in
regards to identity formation, but do emphasize the importance of socialization as a
function that influences human development; specifically identity development.

The relational function in identity formation inherent in socialization suggests
the individual forms both an individual identity as well as a collective identity (Adams
& Marshall, 1996). It is proposed that through a social context the individual develops
both a perception of his/her differences and his/her similarities in regards to others and
consequently develops an individual and social identity (Adams & Marshall; Jenkins,
1996). The differences identified provide the individual with a sense of self through the
process of differentiation (Adams & Marshall). Similarities noted provide the individual
with a sense of social identity. Adams and Marshall have suggested the process
responsible for social identity is integration, “which centres on the involvement,
connection and communion with others” (p. 431).
The family, peers, society, work environments and schools are identified contexts that provide connection and communion with others, and are considered important to identity formation (Adams & Palijan, 2004; Baumeister & Muraven, 1996; Grotevant, 1987; McLeod & Yates, 2006). A longitudinal qualitative study conducted by McLeod and Yates found that both male and female adolescents construct their identities through both differentiation and identified similarities in the school environment. The study included varied school settings such as: an elite private school, a regional middle-class school, a suburban middle-class school and a regional technical school in a poorer community. Six to eight students from each setting were interviewed progressively from grades seven through to twelve. The school ethos and discourse was found to facilitate the individual’s identity formation. For example the perspectives of students’ from the elite private school in relation to their future career aspirations included having high expectations and an assumption of their entitlement to go to university. In contrast the career aspirations of students from the poorer community adopted a "take it as it comes" approach. Although these findings are perceived to be representations of the school ethos, the authors suggest that family values may also contribute to the types of schools parents enroll their children in as well as their own personal aspirations for their children. It is also important to consider that in contrast to school effects, the interview process may have also facilitated the individual’s construction of their identities (Garbrecht, 2006). According to Adams and Palijan (2004) the construction of the adolescent’s identity needs to take place in both positive school and family environments so that these environments not only facilitate identity formation but also contribute to the adolescent’s well-being.
Depression

The adolescent’s well-being encompasses both physical and psychological health. Recent statistical data indicates that adolescents living in Australia today are healthier than previous generations in regards to various illnesses however mental health problems appear to be more prevalent (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare [AIHW], 2006). A comprehensive survey conducted in Western Australia in 1995 found that 18% of children had mental health problems with greater mental health morbidity amongst adolescents (Zubrick et al., 1995). A more recent Australia wide survey conducted in 1998 found evidence that was comparative to these findings (Sawyer et al., 2000). According to the latest report from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2007) anxiety and depression are considered to be the most prevalent cause of burden of disease for Australians aged between fifteen and twenty-four years. Anxiety and depression both account for 17% of the male burden and 32% of the female burden. Also, in relation to depression, subsequent episodes of depression are experienced in at least 50% of adolescents who have already experienced depressive disorder (National Health Medical Research Council [NHMRC], 1997).

Clinical depression is becoming more prevalent among adolescents in western countries with an increase in illicit drug use and alcohol abuse contributing to the increased figures (NHMRC, 1997). Drug use and alcohol abuse are also considered health behaviours that contribute to the burden of disease and injury amongst Australians aged between fifteen and twenty-four years (AIHW, 2006). Injury due to self-harm and suicide have also been found to be consequences of mental health problems (AIHW, 2007). In 2004 death rates from suicide for individuals between the age of twelve and twenty-four represented 19% of all their deaths in Australia. Although
male suicide rates have decreased by 50% between 1997 and 2004, female suicide rates have remained steady over the past twenty years. Male suicide rates in the 1980's were four to seven times as high as female rates. In 2004 the rate had dropped to three times as high for females (AIHW, 2007). Suicide is considered to be the second most common cause of death among Australian adolescents after motor vehicle accidents (Royal Children’s Hospital Melbourne [RCH], 2007).

**Risk Factors**

For the purpose of this review risk factors may be defined as issues that increase the likelihood of an adverse event (e.g., suicide) or health outcome (e.g., depression) for the individual (World Health Organization [WHO], 2002). The importance of focusing on risk factors in relation to depression is to identify factors that if addressed, may have the potential to decrease the prevalence of depression occurring in the adolescent population. It has been suggested that a change in risk factors in particular segments of the population can result in major positive health benefits (WHO). The risk factors which may contribute to adolescent depression include biological factors (genetic disposition) that interact with various environmental (poverty) and social contexts (victim of bullying) and subsequently affect the individual’s developmental outcomes (AIHW, 2003; Compas et al. 1994).

**Puberty as a Risk Factor.** The normative biological transitions that are inherent in adolescent development have been associated with depression in adolescence (Angold, Costello, & Worthman, 1998; Ge et al., 2001a, 2001b). Angold et al. (1988) conducted a three year longitudinal study involving children aged nine to sixteen. The study found that the development of secondary sex characteristics resulted in higher rates of depression in females compared to males, regardless of the female adolescent’s
age at the time of development. In contrast the probability of depression in male adolescents before the development of secondary sex characteristics was twice as likely when compared to adolescent males who had already reached puberty. An explanation for these findings may be supported by the findings of earlier research in relation to early physical maturation in male adolescents being associated with positive social relations, better self-esteem and popularity amongst their peers (Jones, 1965; Petersen, 1985). However Graber, Lewinsohn, Seeley and Brooks-Gunn (1997) found an increase in psychopathology amongst both early and late maturing male adolescents. Ge et al. (2001b) found early maturation in male adolescents was associated with psychological maladjustment only when the adolescent who matured early was obviously different from the peer group. Although this study by Ge et al. (2001b) found an effect for pubertal timing for males, the authors also analysed the compounding effect of stressful life events and their subsequent effect on depression.

It may be suggested that pubertal timing is more indicative of psychological maladjustment in adolescents because of the adolescent's physical maturation experience in relation to their surrounding social context. As a consequence physical developmental changes may be considered more problematic for the adolescent when differentiated from peers. Although the study previously discussed by Angold et al. (1998) found evidence to support a relationship between pubertal development and depression, the study did not provide any evidence to delineate other factors such as; inadequate social and cognitive development and or preexisting stressful events that may also be of consequence to the increased rates of depression.

*Stressful Life Events.* Stressful life events are considered to play a prominent role in depression in adolescence (Allgood-Merten, Lewinsohn, & Hops, 1990; Cuffe,
McKeown, Addy, & Garrison, 2005; Ge, Lorenz, Conger, Elder, & Simons, 1994; Ge, Natsuaki, & Conger, 2006; Larsen & Ham, 1993) and as a consequence may be considered a risk factor (WHO, 2002). Transition to secondary school was identified as the stressful life event associated with puberty and the adolescent’s subsequent internalized distress in a study conducted by Ge et al. (2001b). Ge et al. suggested that even though pubertal transition may be a difficult time for adolescent males it only becomes problematic when associated with other stressful life events. Larson and Ham (1993) found that adolescents experienced more stressful life events than preadolescents. They also found that the additive factor of non-normative stressful events and normative transitions appears to result in the adolescent’s subsequent increase in self reported negative affect. This study included male and female students from grades five to nine but it differentiated between preadolescents and adolescents by grade which may be a limitation. No measurement of pubertal status was taken.

Although stressful life events may be considered a risk factor for depression in both male and female adolescents, age and gender differences were found in a study conducted by Ge et al. (1994). An increase in depressive symptoms after the age of thirteen was found for females; in contrast males reported slightly higher depressive symptoms to females before age thirteen. The differences for depressive symptoms corresponded with reported stressful life events. Males reported experiencing more stressful life events before age twelve but for females an increase in stressful life events was reported after age thirteen with a continuous rise in depressive symptoms until age fifteen.

More depressive symptoms were also reported by female participants in a longitudinal study conducted by Waaktaar, Borge, Fundingsrud, Christie, and Torgersen
The study included 238 participants who completed questionnaires for initial depressive symptoms. A year later depressive symptoms were measured again and stressful life events were also assessed retrospectively. The results indicated a significant correlation between stressful life events and the development of depressive symptoms over a one year period. However, once initial depressive symptoms were controlled, stressful life events no longer had a significant effect. This study also had a relatively high attrition rate with only 163 participants who were predominately females completing the questionnaires in time two. The findings need to be considered carefully in that the characteristics of the participants may have confounded the initial results. The literature has indicated that depression appears to be more prevalent in the female adolescent population in contrast to the male adolescent population (Allgood-Merton, Lewinsohn, & Hops, 1990; Ge et al., 1994; Wichstrom, 1999). Waaktaar et al. (2004) suggested that maybe stressful life events do not increase depressive symptoms but depressive symptoms increase the probability of the adolescent experiencing subsequent stressful events. However, the view of the unidirectional modal of stressful life events raised by Waaktaar et al. may be doubtful as the nature of the stressful life events (illness of a close family member, death of a friend, death of a family pet) experienced by the adolescents in their study could not be provoked (Waaktaar et al., 2004).

Although longitudinal designs may be considered to have a greater capacity to examine the direction of causality (Compas et al., 1994), in this study both the participants and the definitions of stress is defined need to be considered carefully in relation to the findings.

Stress may be defined during this stage of the life span by the adolescents changing social roles and environments as well as their physical, psychological and
social cognitive development (Ge et al., 1994; Harter, 1993, 1999; Wichstrom, 1999). These various markers of stress appear to have different effects on female and male adolescents. Rather than the number and duration of stressful life events contributing to gender differences in depression, differences were found for susceptibility. Female adolescents appear to be more vulnerable to stressful events in comparison to males (Meadows, Scott Brown, & Elder, 2006). However, parental support was found to have a significant negative effect on depressive symptoms for both males and females although, parental support and its effect on depressive symptoms gradually diminished as the adolescent aged. Findings in the literature support the protective nature of parental support against the negative effects of stress in adolescence (Colarossi & Eccles, 2003; Cornwell, 2003; Yarcheski & Mahon, 1999).

Protective Factors

Social Support Systems as a Protective Factor. Social support has been defined as “support accessible to an individual through social ties to other individuals, groups, and the larger community” (Lin, Simeone, Ensel, & Kuo, 1979). The social support systems of the adolescent have been considered in relation to the people with whom the adolescent interacts; including parents, peers and teachers (Colarossi & Eccles, 2003). Also social support has been identified in the dominant social contexts that surround the adolescent, such as the school and its pervading educational practices and cultural influences (Segall, Dasen, Berry, & Poortinga, 1999). Social support has been considered to be a risk factor for psychological maladjustment when absent from the adolescent’s life (Cornwell, 2003; Harter, 1993) and a protective factor when present (Colarossi & Eccles, 2003; Helsen, Vollebergh, & Meeus, 2000; Yarcheski & Mahon, 1999). Generally the research considers social support to have a mediating effect
between stressful life events and depression. A common explanation is that social support shields the individual against the negative effects of stressful life events on subsequent mental health (Jackson, 1992; Lin & Ensel, 1984). Therefore, the assumption that stressful life events are related to negative mental health outcomes for the individual as previously discussed remains to be a dominant view (Allgood-Merten et al., 1990; Cuffe, McKeown, Addy, & Garrison, 2005; Ge et al., 1994). In contrast Lin et al. (1979) found social support had a significant negative effect on mental health symptoms which was much larger than the significantly positive effect that stressful life events had on mental health symptoms. In an endeavour to understand the etiology of depression in adolescents it is therefore important to understand the salient role that social support contributes when either present or absent from the adolescent’s life.

Levels of depression were found to exacerbate when social support decreased in a cohort of adolescents from grade seven to twelve (Cornwell, 2003). In this longitudinal study a decrease in social support from adolescents’ parents or peers was found to contribute with a greater magnitude to depression than increasing parental or peer support. The main findings analysed over one year found that decay in parental and peer support affected depression in contrast to either increasing or stable support. Although these findings suggest that both parental and peer social support are just as important, regression analyses actually found that parental support had the strongest effect on depression.

The differential effects of peer support in contrast to parental support have been identified in the research (Colarossi & Eccles, 2003; Helsen et al., 2000; Levitt, Guacci-Franco, & Levitt, 1993). Comparable results have been found across gender and ethnic groups for a shift in support from parents in middle childhood to peers in middle
adolescence (Levitt et al.). In contrast Helsen et al. found a gender difference in
differential effects for parental support and peer support. Adolescents aged between
twelve and twenty-four were interviewed and completed questionnaires in relation to
their perceived levels of social support and physical and mental health. For both male
and female adolescents parental support decreased whilst peer support increased across
ages twelve to seventeen, with an evening out effect after age seventeen. However, in
females between the ages of fifteen and seventeen, perceived peer support was greater
than perceived parental support. Although after age seventeen the findings were
comparative to the findings for male adolescents. Although the perception of support
differed, only parental support was found to result in less emotional problems for both
genders. Also, an interactive effect was found for age; parental support was found to be
more effective during early adolescence.

*Sense of Belonging as a Protective Factor.* Adolescents, who have supportive
parents, are part of supportive peer networks and feel they belong to supportive and
connected neighbourhoods, have more positive social and psychological outcomes
(Cornwell, 2003; Eccles, Early, Frasier, Belansky, & McCarthy, 1997; Mounts, 2004;
Youngblade et al., 2007). In addition to parental support, parental connection is a
protective factor. Adolescents who report feeling very close to their parents report lower
levels of negative affect (Eccles et al., 1997). The positive effects of feeling connected
go beyond the immediate family to also include the individual’s neighbourhood
(Youngblade et al., 2007). Adolescents who felt positively connected to their
neighbourhood were found to be more socially competent; they also exhibited less
externalizing behaviours.
According to Baumeister and Leary (1995) the most important contexts in which children and adolescents belong are their families, neighbourhoods and schools. They also suggest that the degree to which children and adolescents feel connected and supported within these contexts can influence their mental health. The school may be considered a more salient environment for the adolescent, as the need for more independence evolves, the role of significant others extends beyond the family to include peers and teachers (Bee & Boyd, 2004; Elliott & Feldman, 1990; Milardo, 1992; Smetana et al., 2006). The whole school environment and the classroom have been identified as important contexts whereby social support can be facilitated (Berk, 2000; Roberts, 1999; Perry, Kelder, & Komro, 1993). Teachers who create supportive classroom environments do so by establishing relationships with students that are both caring and understanding (Barry & King, 1998; Benard, 1995). It has been identified that teachers who maintain supportive relationships with their students not only encourage positive emotional outcomes but also increase academic achievement (Rimm-Kaufman, 2003). Also, positive outcomes for the adolescent’s emotional well-being have been considered to precipitate from a school environment that promotes an atmosphere of belonging through supportive and caring surroundings (Borich & Tombari, 1997; Schaps & Solomon, 1997). However, in contrast to these findings, the classroom has also been found to negatively influence the adolescent’s practical learning ability and belonging (Battistich, Solomon, Watson, & Schaps, 1997; Bergin, 1999; Eccles & Midgely, 1993; Wigfield & Eccles, 1994). An executive summary from the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development (1989) reported that the school environment can either facilitate or hinder the development of adolescents (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989). Therefore the importance of having caring
and supportive teachers (McNeeley, Nonnemaker, & Blum, 2002; Rutter, 1980) who contribute to a sense of belonging that has been linked to the personal well-being of adolescents within the school environment, may be considered of paramount importance (Gershoff & Lawrence Aber, 2006; Perry et al., 1993; McCullough, Huebner, & Laughlin, 2000).

The belongingness hypothesis proposed by Baumeister and Leary (1995) argues that a sense of belonging is a "need rather than a want, people who lack belongingness should exhibit pathological consequences beyond temporary distress" (p. 498). Maslow (1968) defined belonging as a basic human need that can only be fulfilled by other people and, as a consequence, emphasized the importance of the environment in the individual's life. The salient influence of other people in the individual's need for belongingness was also highlighted by Baumeister and Leary. They suggest a key feature of a need to belong is "frequent personal contact or interactions with others" (p.500). They also stated the importance of these interactions to be positive in nature and largely free of "conflict and negative affect" (p.500). Baumeister and Leary also highlighted how the need to belong is not dominated by one relationship. The individual can satisfy their need to belong with another human being even after a significant relationship has ceased.

Therefore as the normative changes within the parent-adolescent relationship takes place, a shift in the individual's need to belong may be from the family environment to the school environment. A SoSB has been defined as "students' sense of being accepted, valued, included and encouraged by others (teachers and peers)" (Goodenow, 1993a, p. 25). It is suggested that SoSB is more than identifying with ones' school, but rather feeling connected and an important part of the activities within the
school environment and classroom (Goodenow, 1993a; Osterman, 2000; Pittman & Richmond, 2007). Research has indicated that children and adolescents who experience a SoSB are less likely to exhibit behaviour problems, develop mental health issues and less likely to drop out of school (Finn, 1989; Resnick et al., 1997; Routt, 1996).

Various adolescent mental health issues have been found to be positively affected by the adolescent’s perceived SoSB; these include anxiety, depression, suicidal ideation, drug use and intentional injury (Anderman, 2002; Mounts, 2004; Resnick et al., 1993; Resnick et al., 1997; Sun & Hui, 2007; Ueno, 2005). A longitudinal study conducted by Resnick et al. (1993) found that a SoSB was a protective factor for both male and female adolescents against drug use, school absenteeism and risk of intentional injury. In relation to emotional stress and suicidal ideation or attempts it was found to be a protective factor after family connectedness. Further support for a SoSB as a protective factor against emotional distress and suicidal attempts was found for both early and late adolescents in a study conducted by Resnick et al., (1997).

However, further findings in relation to late adolescence also analysed the mediating effect of a SoSB amongst individuals of varying ethnic backgrounds in relation to some aspects of college transition in the first semester (Mounts, 2004). The study included both African American and white college students. A higher SoSB was related to lower levels of depression and loneliness for all students. Also African American students’ perception that the campus had a hostile racial climate, and its subsequent significant effect on depression, was mediated by the students perceived SoSB. However a SoSB was not found to mediate the significant relationship between a perceived hostile campus racial climate and depression for white adolescents. Mounts
suggests that these findings highlight the means by which a hostile racial climate impacts on African American students by weakening their sense of belonging.

Further support for SoSB and its effect on depression and also self-esteem and their subsequent mediating effect on suicidal ideation was examined in a study conducted by Sun and Hui (2007). In this cross-sectional study which included Chinese secondary students, SoSB, self-esteem, depression and suicidal ideation were measured. A SoSB was found to be predictive of suicidal ideation via the mediation of self-esteem and depression. SoSB was found to have a significant positive effect on the adolescents’ self-esteem in this study. Therefore when students perceived a low SoSB their self-esteem was also low. Ma (2003) proposed that the relationship between the individual’s self-esteem and their SoSB may be reciprocal. In this study, lower self-esteem predicted a decrease in SoSB. Ma speculated that when the individual’s self-esteem was low, this may result in the student’s lack of participatory behaviour in school activities and subsequently elicit feelings of alienation. According to Beck and Malley (1998a) students’ feelings of rejection and alienation may be strengthened by traditional school environments which fail to create a SoSB for their students.

However, in contrast to an absence of SoSB and its subsequent impact on alienation in adolescents, conflicting findings have been found. Anderman (2002) found that although a high SoSB was associated with low levels of depression, it was also associated with increased levels of social rejection and maladjusted behaviours. These negative findings were found when the overall level of belonging in the school was high. Anderman suggested that in some schools where there is a high SoSB, for the small group of children who do not feel that they belong, this may be consequentially negative. Therefore if SoSB is considered to be an important protective factor against
mental health issues such as depression it must be fostered in schools effectively. The school characteristics that are effective in creating a SoSB need to be identified accurately so that a perceived SoSB does not result in positive outcomes for some and deleterious effects for others.

**Sense of School Belonging Characteristics.** In order to foster a SoSB in the school environment an understanding of the school characteristics that underlie this construct need to be identified. The research has identified various characteristics which include; caring and supportive teachers (McNeeley, Nonnemaker, & Blum, 2002; Rutter, 1980), opportunities and skills for a meaningful and valued contribution to school life (Edwards, 1995; Routt, 1996; Rutter), sense of security and the availability of close, positive and mutually respectful relationships (Beck & Malley, 1998b; Carnegie Council, 1989; Edwards, 1995; Watson, Battistich, & Solomon, 1997) and parent and community participation (Baker, Terry, Bridger, & Winsor, 1997; Glover, Burns, Butler, & Patton, 1998). Generally SoSB has been measured by using the Goodenow (1993b) Psychological Sense of School Membership (PSSM) instrument or an adapted version of this instrument (e.g., Anderman, 2003; Booker, 2004; Pittman & Richmond, 2007; Sanchez, Colon, & Esparza, 2005). This widely used quantitative instrument consists of an 18-item scale which measures students’ perceived sense of belonging in the school environment. Other studies have measured students’ SoSB by devising their own questionnaire based on the theoretical underpinnings of the construct (e.g., Anderman, 2002; Ma, 2003; Sun & Hui, 2007).

A review of the literature suggested that the investigation of the construct SoSB appears to have been dominated by quantitative methods that determine SoSB from the student’s perspective. Although the research has highlighted the importance of the
teacher's role, classroom practices and organisational characteristics in contributing to
the students SoSB (Edwards, 1995; McNeely et al., 2002; Osterman, 2000; Rutter,
1983; Schmuck & Schmuck, 1992) very little research has examined the school context
from the perspective of teaching staff. A qualitative study conducted by Stumpers et al.
(2007) examined the adolescents’ experience within the school context and how the
school context impacts on their well being. One of the major themes identified was
“people within the school context”; teachers were identified as bearing a very important
part on adolescents’ lives. Stumpers et al. concluded that in order to fully understand the
school context and how it impacts on the experience of adolescents, other significant
members of the school community need to be included when examining this particular
area of the research. As previously identified, even when SoSB is perceived to exist
within particular schools, there still appears to be some students who do not experience
SoSB within the same environment. Therefore, a more thorough understanding of the
characteristics that are pertinent to SoSB is imperative so that future school level
interventions may be more effectively designed.

Conclusions and Future Directions

In review, the changes that are inherent in adolescent development may for some
adolescents become problematic (Arnett, 1999; Eccles et al., 1993). These changes may
be considered all encompassing in that they include all aspects of development,
biological, cognitive and social (Elliott & Feldman, 1990; Smetana et al., 2006). These
changes are not exclusive to the individual, but take place within dynamic environments
that include and surround the adolescent (Bronfenbrenner, 1979a; Moen et al., 2001).
From this perspective the aspects of both the individual and the environment have a
propensity to concur negatively and positively to the individual’s developmental outcomes.

Various risk and protective factors have been identified as contributors to the adolescent’s well-being. Both peers and teachers are considered important social support systems that have the propensity to contribute positively to adolescent development. Also the school has been identified as a social context in which the adolescents’ need to belong can be satisfied and subsequently act as a protective mechanism against depression and other mental health issues (Anderman, 2002; Mounts, 2004; Resnick et al., 1993; Resnick et al., 1997; Sun & Hui, 2007; Ueno, 2005). However, research has found conflicting evidence to support the beneficial outcomes for students in relation to experiencing a sense of belonging in the school context. The evidence raises the concern as to why SoSB may result in low levels of depression for some adolescents but increased levels of social rejection and maladjusted behaviours for others (Anderman, 2002).

Generally the current available literature has indicated that a large portion of the research has examined SoSB from the perspective of children and adolescents. It also appears to be dominated by quantitative research that has measured identified characteristics of the psychological construct “sense of belonging” (Goodenow, 1993a; Goodenow, 1993b; Williams & Downing, 1998). In order to address the conflicting findings in relation to the positive effects that SoSB has on the adolescents’ well-being, effective identification of the characteristics that foster SoSB is imperative. Therefore it is considered that further research that adopts a qualitative approach that examines the characteristics of SoSB from the perceptions of teachers will provide a greater understanding of the psychological construct SoSB. As a consequence this enhanced
understanding of SoSB will be deemed to provide important information for those individuals involved in designing and implementing health promoting intervention programs suitable for high school students.
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Teachers’ Perceptions of Sense of Belonging and the Possible Impact on Adolescent Development

Debra E. York
Abstract

Sense of school belonging has been identified in the literature as a protective factor for adolescents against various mental health issues and behavioural problems (Resnick, et al., 1997; Routt, 1996; Sun & Hui, 2007). Generally, sense of school belonging has been investigated from the student’s perspective using quantitative measures (Goodenow, 1993a; Goodenow, 1993b; Williams & Downing, 1998). However, teachers have been identified as important facilitators in developing in students a sense of school belonging (Broderick, 2001; Edwards, 1995). This current study aimed to understand the perceptions of sense of belonging by teaching staff. Semi-structured interviews with eight teachers and two principals from two senior high schools were conducted. A thematic content analysis identified five main themes; organisational structure, teachers, engagement, communication and school values and principles. Findings were dominated by characteristics specific to the organisational practices and policies of the school. Several avenues for future research were identified, including further exploration of the schools’ organisational practices and policies; both inception and implementation.

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Teachers’ Perceptions of Sense of Belonging and the Possible Impact on Adolescent Development

Introduction

As the biopsychosocial changes inherent in adolescence emerge, the school environment is a central context in which these changes can be recognised and described. Considering adolescents spend almost fifty percent of their waking hours within this context (Edwards, 1995; Royal Child’s Hospital Melbourne [RCHM], 2004), schools are considered important environments in which interventions for adolescents may be implemented (McNeely, Nonnemaker, & Blum, 2002). It is suggested that high schools in which positive adolescent biopsychosocial development is facilitated, both successful academic achievement and positive psychosocial outcomes are exhibited (Beck & Malley, 1998a; Borich & Tombari, 1997; Edwards, 1995; Ma, 2003). As Rutter, Maughan, Mortimore, and Ouston (1979) found, academic and behavioural outcomes are determined by the school’s characteristics rather than the composite of students. Within the school context, teachers have been specifically identified as prime facilitators of adolescent academic achievement and positive psychosocial development (Colarossi & Eccles, 2003; Galbo, 1989; Massey, 1998; Rimm-Kaufman, 2003).

Even though teachers have been found to influence positive psychosocial outcomes for adolescents, recent statistical data indicates that adolescent mental health issues are considered to be the most prevalent cause of burden of disease. The major mental health issues affecting adolescents are depression and anxiety, both account for 17% of the male burden and 32% of the female burden (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare [AIHW], 2006, 2007; National Health Medical Research Council [NHMRC], 1997). Depression is a problem that exists in childhood but becomes more
prevalent in adolescence (Cicchetti & Toth, 1998). Depression in adolescence has also been considered a risk factor for further psychosocial disorders in adulthood (Aalto-Setala, Marttunen, Tuulio-Henriksson, Poikolainen, & Lonnqvist, 2002; Fergusson & Woodwood, 2002; Lewinsohn, Rohde, Klein, & Seeley, 1999; Reinherz, Giaconia, Carmola Hauf, Wasserman, & Silverman, 1999).

In an attempt to understand the etiology of depression in adolescents, both risk factors and protective factors need to be considered carefully (Department of Health and Aging [DHA], 1998). Risk factors may be defined as factors that increase the likelihood of an adverse event or health outcome for the individual (World Health Organisation [WHO], 2002). In contrast, protective factors are defined as factors that alter the person’s response to a presenting risk factor (WHO, 2004) Risk factors may include biological factors (genetic disposition) that interact with various environmental (poverty) and social contexts (victim of bullying) (AIHW, 2003; Compas, Grant, & Ey, 1994). Protective factors are also found at a biological level and include both environmental and social factors such as social support and social connectedness (DHA, 1998).

A Systems Approach to Adolescent Development

The interaction of both risk and protective factors and their subsequent impact on adolescent depression may be considered within a theoretical framework that adopts an ecological approach (Sanson, Nicholson, & Ungerer, 2002). From an ecological approach the individual interacts with his/her environment not as a separate being but as an integral part of it (Bronfenbrenner, 1979b). According to Bronfenbrenner (1977) a systems approach views human development as an evolving shared adaptation that continues throughout the lifespan between the individual and the changing environments that surround them. As the individual continues to develop he/she is not only affected
by his/her immediate environment, but also other areas with which he/she does not have immediate contact. It is suggested that the relationship between the environmental factors that influence the individual's development and the individual are reciprocal in nature (Bronfenbrenner, 1979b). From a systems perspective, adolescent development is neither constrained by biological or psychological dispositions pertinent to the individual or exclusive to the surrounding environmental conditions. In contrast, development is instead constructed interdependently as the individual is both a product and producer of their environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1979a, 1979b, 2005).

According to Bronfenbrenner (1979b) the changing environments that surround the adolescent are connected systems that exist within each other and consistently interact. From this perspective, the individual's development is embedded within an overarching interconnected ecological system that consists of multiple levels: the micro, meso, exo and macro systems. The microsystem relates to the adolescent’s immediate surroundings and includes both settings (such as the home and school) and individuals (Bronfenbrenner, 1979b). Within these settings individuals exist who have varying relationships with the adolescent such as; parents, peers and teachers (Bronfenbrenner, 1979b; Garbarino, 1985). The microsystems that surround the adolescent have been identified as a potential basis for negative developmental outcomes for the individual. This may be due to inadequate mutual or psychologically damaging interactions (Garbarino).

However it is not only the interactions that take place within the microsystems that are deemed to be important contributors to the development of the adolescent but also the interaction between these various systems (Garbarino, 1985). The mesosystem consists of connections that transpire between the various microsystems, for example the
relationship between home and school (Bronfenbrenner, 1979b). According to Garbarino (1985) the most salient mesosystem in the adolescent’s life is the school and the home. Strong supportive contacts between the adolescent’s home and school appear to be paramount in facilitating optimum developmental outcomes for the individual and therefore can be thought of as protective factors. For example, effective communication and support between parents and teachers (Garbarino).

**Protective Factors**

*Social Support Systems as a Protective Factor.* The supportive contacts between home and school are not the only protective factors identified in the adolescent’s life. Other supportive systems include, supportive parents, supportive teachers and strong peer support networks which have all been shown to enhance positive social and psychological outcomes for the adolescents (Colarossi & Eccles, 2003; Cornwell, 2003; Eccles, Early, Frasier, Belansky, & McCarthy, 1997; Mounts, 2004; Rimm-Kaufman, 2003; Youngblade et al., 2007). Further to this it is the degree to which children and adolescents feel connected within the contexts of families, neighborhoods and schools (Baumeister & Leary, 1995).

The whole school environment and the classroom have been identified as important contexts whereby social support and a sense of connectedness can be facilitated (Berk, 2000; Glover, Burns, Butler, & Patton, 1998; Roberts, 1999; Perry, Kelder, & Komro, 1993). An executive summary from the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development (1989) reported that the school environment can either facilitate or hinder the development of adolescents. It is argued that the organisational structure of traditional high schools is not a good match for the emotional needs of the adolescent as the constant shift in classrooms, teachers and peers is considered not
facilitative to building relationships and establishing social support networks (Carnegie Council, 1989). A stable environment that allows students to have more frequent contact with specific teachers is considered more conducive to creating supportive relationships between teachers and students (Carnegie Council). It has been identified that teachers who maintain supportive relationships with their students encourage positive emotional outcomes which in turn enhances academic achievement (Rimm-Kaufman, 2003). Positive outcomes for the adolescent’s emotional well-being have also been considered to precipitate from a school environment in which an atmosphere of belonging is promoted through supportive and caring surroundings, and teachers that demonstrate respect and equal treatment of all students (Borich & Tombari, 1997; McNeely et al., 2002; Rutter, 1980; Williams & Downing, 1998).

**Sense of Belonging as a Protective Factor.** Therefore teachers have been identified as important facilitators in establishing a sense of belonging both within the school environment and the classroom. A sense of school belonging (SoSB) has been defined as “students’ sense of being accepted, valued, included and encouraged by others (teachers and peers). It also involves a respect for personal autonomy and for the student as an individual” (Goodenow, 1993a, p.25). It is suggested to be more than identifying with ones school but rather feeling connected and an important part of the activities within the school environment and classroom (Goodenow, 1993a; Osterman, 2000; Pittman & Richmond, 2007).

Osterman’s (2000) extensive review of belonging within the school environment emphasised the important role that teachers play in ensuring students feel wanted and cared for within this context. In a qualitative study conducted by Broderick (2001) year eight students’ identified teaching processes, style and the way in which teachers
managed their classrooms to be important contributors to their perception of SoSB. However, not all teachers appear to be effective in facilitating a sense of belonging (Broderick). Students also identified specific teacher characteristics that were not conducive to a SoSB, such as a lack of mutual respect (Beck & Malley, 1998b; Broderick; Edwards, 1995). This finding appears to be supported by Osterman’s literature review in which not all students perceive teachers to be supportive. Sun, Hui, and Watkins (2006) found even though teacher support predicted increased self-esteem and decreased depression for adolescents aged between twelve and fifteen, these findings were not consistent across gender and age groups.

In light of these conflicting findings, various adolescent mental health issues have been found to be positively affected by adolescents’ perceived SoSB. These include anxiety, depression, suicidal ideation, drug use and intentional injury (Anderman, 2002; Mounts, 2004; Resnick, Harris, & Blum, 1993; Resnick et al., 1997; Sun & Hui, 2007; Ueno, 2005). A longitudinal study conducted by Resnick et al. (1993) found that a SoSB was a protective factor for adolescents against drug use, school absenteeism and risk of intentional injury. In relation to emotional stress and suicidal ideation or attempted suicide, SoSB was found to a protective factor after family connectedness (Resnick et al., 1997). According to Beck and Malley (1998a) students feelings of rejection and alienation may be strengthened by traditional school environments which fail to create a SoSB for their students.

Sense of School Belonging Characteristics. In order to foster a SoSB in the school environment, an understanding of the school characteristics that underlie this construct need to be identified. The research has identified various characteristics which include: caring and supportive teachers (McNeely et al., 2002; Rutter, 1980),
opportunities and skills for a meaningful and valued contribution to school life (Edwards, 1995; Routt, 1996; Rutter, 1983), sense of security and the availability of close, positive and mutually respectful relationships (Beck & Malley, 1998b; Carnegie Council, 1989; Edwards, 1995; Watson, Battistich, & Solomon, 1997) and parent and community participation (Baker, Terry, Bridger, & Winsor, 1997; Glover et al, 1998).

Edwards suggests that teachers are only able to foster a SoSB when they actually experience a sense of belonging themselves. Also in contrast to the characteristics that foster a SoSB, the literature has identified characteristics that are negatively related to students' SoSB. For example, traditional schools that incorporate authoritarian teaching styles and the use of extrinsic rewards (Battistich, Solomon, Watson, & Schaps, 1997).

Generally SoSB has been measured by using the Goodenow (1993b) Psychological Sense of School Membership (PSSM) instrument or an adapted version of this instrument (e.g., Anderman, 2003; Booker, 2004; Pittman & Richmond, 2007; Sanchez, Colon, & Esparza, 2005). This widely used quantitative instrument consists of an 18-item scale which measures students' perceived sense of belonging in the school environment. Other studies have measured students SoSB by devising their own questionnaire based on the theoretical underpinnings of the construct (e.g., Anderman, 2002; Ma, 2003; Sun & Hui, 2007).

A review of the literature suggested that the investigation of the construct "SoSB" appears to have been dominated by quantitative methods that determine SoSB from the student's perspective. Although the research has highlighted the importance of the teacher's role, classroom practices and organisational characteristics in contributing to the students SoSB (Edwards, 1995; McNeely et al., 2002; Osterman, 2000; Rutter, 1983; Schmuck & Schmuck, 1992) very little research has examined the school context
from the perspective of teachers. A qualitative study conducted by Stumpers, Breen, Pooley, Cohen, and Pike (2007) examined the adolescent’s experience within the school context and how the school context impacts on their well-being. One of the major themes identified was “people within the school context”. Teachers were identified as bearing a very important part in the adolescent’s life. Stumpers et al. (2007) concluded that in order to fully understand the school context and how it impacts on the experience of adolescents, other significant members of the school community need to be included when examining this particular area of the research. As previously identified, even when SoSB is perceived to exist within particular schools, there still appears to be some students who do not experience SoSB within the same environment. Therefore, a more thorough understanding of the characteristics that are pertinent to SoSB is imperative so that future school level interventions may be more effectively designed.

This study aims to investigate how the psychological construct “sense of belonging” is created in the school environment. The perceived characteristics of the construct will be elicited from the perspectives of the principal and teachers within two schools. It is anticipated that this research will highlight the salient characteristics of a sense of belonging and how they may be generated and maintained within the school environment. The research questions for this study are:

1. What is the understanding of sense of belonging by principals and teachers?
2. How is sense of belonging developed within the school environment?
Method

Research Design

The research is a qualitative study that followed a phenomenological approach whereby the participant’s lived experience in relation to the research question was analysed (Creswell, 2007). A phenomenological approach aims to understand what the participant’s lived experience means to them (Liampittong & Ezzy, 2005). The value in using a phenomenological approach is that it enables the researcher to understand the shared experiences of the participants. From this perspective the essence of the phenomenon, “sense of belonging” may be identified and used in future research (Creswell, 2007). Participants’ experiences were obtained from semi-structured interviews (Liampittong & Ezzy).

Participants

Eight high school teachers and two principals participated in the study. Eight participants were males and two were females. Four teachers and one principal were from a government senior high school in a southern suburb in the Perth Metropolitan Region. The other participants; four teachers and one principal were from an independent senior high school in the northern suburbs of the Perth Metropolitan Region. The method of selection followed a volunteer sampling technique (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005).

Materials

A semi-structured interview schedule with open-ended questions was used to identify the teachers’ experiences in relation to their perceived sense of belonging in the school environment. All interviews were individual and audio taped (Creswell, 2007; Smith, 1996). The interview protocol consisted of approximately three to four questions
with prompts where needed (see Appendix A). Questions included teachers understanding of the psychological construct “sense of belonging” and how they perceive it is developed within their school. The questions were derived from the literature, definition of a sense of belonging (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Goodenow, 1993b) and characteristics of SoSB as previously identified (Baker et al., 1997; Beck & Malley, 1998b; Carnegie Council, 1989; Edwards, 1995; Glover et al., 1998; McNeely et al., 2002; Routt, 1996; Rutter, 1980; Watson et al., 1997).

Procedure

A random selection of high schools, both government and independent were selected from a list of schools. Principals of the schools were sent an information letter (see Appendix B) outlining the nature of the study and inviting their school to participate in the research. Principals were telephoned to ascertain their interest in the research and to clarify any issues. The first government and independent school to respond positively was selected for the study. Once permission had been obtained from the principals of the high schools, the teaching staff were sent an information letter (see Appendix C) outlining the nature of the research and inviting them to contact the researcher if they were interested in participating in the study.

Interviews were arranged at a mutually agreed time and place. Interviews were conducted at the schools involved and lasted approximately 20 - 30 minutes. Initially all participants were informed of the voluntary nature of the interview and that they may withdraw from the study at anytime. A consent form was given to each participant to read and complete (see Appendix D). All participants were advised that the interviews were to be tape recorded. At the conclusion of each interview, participants were given
the opportunity to ask questions. Brief notes were made after the interviews in a journal by the researcher.

**Data Analysis**

Each interview was transcribed verbatim from the tape recording to ensure authentic records for analysis. Thematic content analysis was used to analyse the data in order to identify central patterns and themes (Patton, 2002). The reduction of large amounts of data can be reduced to smaller units (or themes) through qualitative analysis. This is done to aide interpretation of the gathered data (Miles & Huberman, 1994). All the transcripts were read through a number of times to ensure insightful information was gathered (Smith, 1996). Whilst reading and re-reading the transcripts, reflections were noted by the researcher and salient words, phrases, sentences and passages were underlined in each transcript (Creswell, 2007). Recurrent words, phrases and sentences were then grouped together according to what appeared to be their distinctive themes. Codes were then used to give meaning to the descriptive information that had previously been grouped together. Themes were then derived from a group of codes. Themes representing the meaning underlying a group of codes were identified (Berg, 2001; Creswell, 2007; Patton, 2002). To prevent researcher bias, identified codes and themes were verified by a co-analyser (Miles & Huberman, 1994). A journal was kept that contained notes, ideas and reactions to the data collection and analysis process to ensure that any biases identified by the researcher were noted.

**Findings and Interpretations**

In addressing the first research aim; “what is the understanding of sense of belonging by principals and teachers”, all ten participants illustrated their understanding of this psychological construct. Participants were consistent in how they defined a sense
of belonging. For example, ‘connectivity’, ‘feeling as if you are part of a group’ and ‘people appreciate what I do and I can contribute’. As the literature suggests, SoSB is not just identifying with the school but rather feeling connected and an important part of the activities within the school environment and classroom (Goodenow, 1993a; Osterman, 2000; Pittman & Richmond, 2007). Also participants referred to key words used by Goodenow when defining a SoSB such as; “accepted and valued”. For example, ‘how much the school values me’ and ‘being accepted in the peer group’. After illustrating their understanding of a SoSB, when the researcher asked if they believed a SoSB existed in their school, all participants indicated its existence affirmatively.

In addressing the second research aim; “how is a SoSB developed within the school environment”, five major themes were identified by participants. These were organisational structure, teachers, engagement, communication, and school values and principles. Table one illustrates the major themes and sub-themes identified from the analysis of the participants’ responses. Quotes from the participants are included throughout this section to ensure that the experience of the teachers and principals is conveyed.


Table 1

*Themes and Sub-themes of the Perceptions of Sense of Belonging by Teaching Staff*

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<th>Themes</th>
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*Organisational Structure*

The importance of the organisational structure of the school has been identified in the literature as a means to facilitate relationships between teachers and students (Osterman, 2000). Providing a stable environment that allows students to have more
frequent contact with specific teachers is considered conducive to creating supportive relationships and consequently increases students SoSB (Goodenow, 1993b). Schools that provide ‘small communities’ within the school environment are considered to provide a stable environment where students and teachers have a greater opportunity in which they get to know each other (Carnegie Council, 1989). From the participants’ responses in this study, two major organisational structures were identified as important to fostering SoSB. These were the pastoral care and the house system.

*Pastoral Care.* Both schools emphasized the importance of existing organisational structures within their school. Both structures provided ‘small communities’ (Carnegie Council, 1989) within the school that encouraged frequent contact with the same teachers and students. For example, ‘*student services...a place where kids know they can get support...in personal issues but also career opportunities*.’

Also another participant illustrates how their pastoral care system operates:

> ...so a year eight student comes into the school...and they’re with their pastoral care leader (PCL)...PCL’s group of twenty-four. But PCL is a classroom teacher who teaches that group a subject. But also teaches them the PD curriculum [personal development]...and those classes stay together for the vast majority of all their subjects.

Both schools also provide an opportunity for ‘peer leadership’ which is also recognised as part of their pastoral care system. Older students in the school act in mentoring and leadership roles which give younger students an opportunity for frequent contact and support from another student. For example, ‘*we have peer leaders for the kids when they come into the school to try and get them into the school*
environment...get them comfortable making friends'. Another participant also illustrates what peer leaders do:

*in year eight in some of these PCL groups, there are some boys who struggle academically. So the PCL set it up that some of the boys who have a mind set, who have that capacity to work with others; they work in partnership with them. So it's peer mentoring, it's peer support.*

Goodenow (1993b) suggests that adolescents SoSB may be enhanced by interventions targeted at an organisational level. These include formatting programs to increase peer mentoring.

*House System.* According to Osterman (2000) houses provide students with extended time to be with familiar students and teachers across grades. It also facilitates interaction amongst students and teachers and increases a sense of community. To be effective it is suggested that students should stay within the same house for their entire school life, so that students can unite (Carnegie Council, 1989). However, only participants from the independent school made reference to a house system that existed within their school. In this school students belong to a house group from year eight until the end of year twelve. As illustrated by a participant:

*year eight when you come in at high school...the first thing they do is they get put into a house ...one way they get identified with a group within the school.*

And further:

*their being put into a house group for sport, for all their academic and pastoral care, so they've got a real sense of belonging to something within the school.*
Even though a difference in organisational structure was found between the two schools, this may be of little consequence to its effect on fostering a SoSB. As Rutter (1983) suggests, the importance of pastoral care is not delineated by the way in which the system is structured but rather, that it provides an opportunity for students to be able to access support from an approachable adult.

**Teachers**

The second theme identified by participants related to teachers. Teachers have been identified as an integral part of developing a SoSB (Broderick, 2001; Edwards, 1995). Teacher support and the relationship that students have with their teachers are considered to strongly determine how students feel about their school and their academic program (Osterman, 2000). Classroom practices, characteristics of the teacher and the teaching staffs' own sense of belonging have been highlighted in the literature as characteristics that contribute to fostering a SoSB (Broderick, 2001; Edwards, 1995; McNeely et al., 2002).

*Teachers Sense of Belonging.* It is considered important for teaching staff to have a sense of belonging themselves. According to Edwards (1995) teachers would not be able to foster a SoSB if they do not experience it themselves. Teachers expressed having a sense of belonging amongst staff members. For example, teachers talked about how they perceived the principal and deputy principal felt about the teachers, ‘*you do get that sense, you know of appreciation*’ and ‘*the encouragement to think outside the square and do things differently*’. Also Edwards discusses the importance of teachers having social events to get to know each other to facilitate their sense of belonging. A participant highlights this point, ‘*I think also the staff have a sense of belonging...like the bar we have on a Friday*’.
Sense of Belonging by Teaching Staff

Classroom Practices. Goodenow (1993a) defined a SoSB as “students’ sense of being accepted, valued, included and encouraged by others” (p.25). This study identified classroom practices that teachers employed to help students feel accepted, valued, included and encouraged. Examples included, ‘I try to include them as a whole group...I think I just refer to them as a...as an entity of their own’. Also, ‘listen to the kids and what they have to say’ and ‘there’s no put downs’. One teacher provided an example of how he tries to encourage all students in his class:

...and there was a girl who is really, really weak in the class...I got her to give that answer, the easiest question and I actually asked her to answer the question so that she’d have some success um verbally...but I gave her an opportunity to actually be a success in front of her peers.

Also many teachers provided examples of how they try to form close and mutually respectful relationships with their students (Carnegie Council, 1989; Watson et al., 1997). For example, ‘I ask them about their lives and they learn a little about my life as well’ and ‘...the best way to make them feel comfortable is to, is to me, is to show who you are’. Also as one teacher stated in relationship to developing respect:

we expect the teachers to be respectful to kids and then we expect the kids to be respectful back.

Characteristics. Various teacher characteristics such as caring, fun and nice have been identified by students as contributing to creating school environments that are positive (Stumpers et al., 2007). Also in the study conducted by Stumpers et al. the characteristics of teachers that students viewed as positive provided them with feelings of being important valued members of the school. A fundamental characteristic of students’ SoSB is their perception of being valued members of the school (Goodenow,
Teachers in both schools stressed the importance of the teachers’ characteristics in relation to establishing teacher-student relationships that are conducive to developing a SoSB. For example, ‘a bit of humour, being honest...and it’s just not I’m the teacher on my pedestal’. Also as one participant stated when discussing the teachers in a particular department:

...if you looked at the group in there, there’s a large percentage of them... are just really good, fun people...and that’s what I keep saying, it’s that that filters down to the kids...you know kids like being around people like that...with enthusiasm.

Teachers also stressed the importance of letting students know that they care. For example, ‘there is a genuine concern...and a feeling of genuine care, we’re here for the kids’ and ‘I give them a feeling that I care about them’. Also as another participant illustrates:

[teachers] ...that they feel that they know that student there who’s having certain issues and that they can take that into account and care about it...keep an eye on them.

Caring and supportive teachers have been considered to promote an atmosphere within the school environment that enhances students’ sense of belonging (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; McNeely et al., 2002; Rutter, 1980).

Engagement

Finn’s (1989) participation-identification model proposes the student’s identification with the school and their subsequent sense of positive school belonging is elicited through opportunities for active and meaningful participation. A SoSB is suggested to be more than identifying with ones’ school but rather feeling connected and
an important part of the activities within the school environment and classroom (Goodenow, 1993a; Osterman, 2000; Pittman & Richmond, 2007). Participants’ responses to how a sense of belonging is developed in the school environment reflected an overall theme of engagement. Four sub-themes provided an understanding of how students become engaged in the school environment: shared experiences, extracurricular activities, assemblies and meetings, and extrinsic rewards.

Shared Experiences. Baumeister and Leary (1995) suggested that a key feature of a need to belong is ‘interactions with others’ (p.500). Both schools indicated that shared experiences outside of the classroom are important elements in developing a SoSB. Social events, assemblies and activities separate from extracurricular activities were deemed as separate opportunities for students to interact and share experiences. For example, ‘we had a river cruise at the end of last term and we had about 200 kids out of 370’. Also another participant reflected;

...those shared experiences that happen outside the context of the classroom
...so that shared experience of being out in the bush on the outdoor ed camp
[outdoor education] together...through those shared experiences, that’s when
those connections happen.

According to Finn(1989) shared experiences such as social activities provide students with the opportunity to spend extra time within the school environment and may also be considered a prime foundation of attachment to school. This may be especially important for students who have limited success in the academic arena.

Extracurricular Activities. Responses from students aged eleven and twelve to ‘what they thought made a good school and what they like most about their school’ (Stumpers et al., 2007, p.262) indicated the opportunities in which they had to
participate meaningfully in activities with peers and teachers. Extracurricular activities may be representative of meaningful participation. Extracurricular participation has been identified in the literature as a way in which students become connected to their school (Booker, 2004; Mahoney, 2000). Mahoney found that students who participated in at least one extracurricular activity were less likely to drop out of school and less likely to exhibit future maladaptive behaviours. Both schools emphasized the importance of students’ participation in extracurricular activities in developing a SoSB. For example, ‘there is literally something for everyone to be involved in, in this school’ also ‘it’s not just sport, we’ve got the...the drama productions and musicals and all sorts of things’. Also another participant reflected how the school’s extracurricular program tries to ensure all students get an opportunity to become engaged:

...and where somebody who might wander around and not be engaged in, in the sports part of the co-curricular program, if they know they can go to circus skills on a Wednesday afternoon, that’s fantastic.

Assemblies and Meetings. Participants not only expressed the importance of social events and extracurricular activities that appear to facilitate opportunities for students to engage but also assemblies which bring students together. According to Booker (2004) schools that provide opportunities for extended interaction amongst students other than classroom activities facilitate a sense of belonging. A participant illustrates how assemblies are an important part of how the school enhances a SoSB:

...and every year group has their own day...we have them every week so we build that, you know, we are one big, we’re a small team that’s part of a big team at the school.
Extrinsic Rewards. Schools that adopt a relational approach in which a sense of belonging is fostered place little emphasis on the positive influence of extrinsic rewards (Baker et al., 1997; Battistich et al., 1997). In contrast extrinsic rewards have been found to influence students’ sense of belonging when given frequently and for more common everyday achievements. Traditionally extrinsic rewards have been given for achievement in dominant areas such as sport and academic performance (Glover et al., 1998). However, only participants from the government school reflected on the importance of extrinsic rewards which they believed contributed to the development of a SoSB. For example, ‘...recognising kids achievements in all sorts’ and ‘we promote not just sport, any community type service’. Also another participant reflects:

making some of the kids who don’t normally get awards for sport, for sports stuff or academic stuff, we try and include everyone...it’s not all about being good at school work or just good at sport.

In contrast to the negative relationship between extrinsic rewards and the development of a SoSB (Baker et al., 1997; Battistich et al., 1997) the findings in this study support the positive contribution of extrinsic rewards postulated by Glover et al. (1998). Participants reflected the importance of extrinsic rewards given across a broad spectrum of achievements frequently in contrast to traditional extrinsic reward programs.

Communication

According to Baumeister and Leary (1995) the family, neighborhood and school constitute the most important contexts in which children and adolescents belong. Fostering relationships between these three contexts and subsequently enhancing parent and community participation within the school setting has been recognized as way in which to ameliorate negative student outcomes through developing a SoSB (Baker et al.,
1997; Carnegie Council, 1989; Glover et al., 1998). The facilitation of effective communication and the involvement of extended communities that includes parents were highlighted by the participants as important characteristics evident in fostering a SoSB. Two sub-themes relating to parental involvement and community connection were identified.

**Parental Involvement.** From a systems perspective adolescent development is affected by the connections that transpire between the various microsystems, for example, the relationship between home and school (Bronfenbrenner, 1979b). According to Garbarino (1985) the most salient mesosystem in the adolescent’s life is the interaction between the school and home. Strong supportive contacts between these two systems appear to be paramount in facilitating optimum developmental outcomes for the adolescent. For example communication and support between parents and teachers. Participants reflected upon the importance of not only involving parents in the school but how effective communication can sustain and facilitate this involvement. For example, one participant’s experience of parental involvement and how their involvement has the potential to influence the student’s perception of school:

...getting a little bit more involvement from parents and support from parents in various activities...because if students see their parents getting involved in whatever way like the, ah well they're going to say, oh gee they like the school ...there must be something to like...for those that might not be as engaged as others.

Keeping parents informed has been identified as a way to connect parents in schools (Carnegie Council, 1989). This notion is supported by a participant who indicated that
parental communication is essential if a sense of belonging was to be created not only amongst students but also amongst parents:

\[\textit{as a head of house communication with parents is really important... so, and I think with all of us, and I think that's a part of wanting everybody to sort of belong...I think that's very much an intention and it's a you know, it's right across the school.}\]

**Community Connection.** Community connection can be facilitated by reciprocal interaction. Initially by bringing the extended community into the school environment (Baker et al., 1997; Glover et al., 1997) and secondly by providing students with opportunities to be involved in volunteer community service programs outside of the school environment (Carnegie Council, 1989). For example, 'the school really encourages an outdoor focus, but it doesn't look in, so community service'. Also another participant gives an example of the type of activity involved in community service programs in which students participate.

\[\textit{I take a group of year ten boys to an old people's home on Wednesday afternoon...completely voluntary, it's not compulsory...so there's that sense of community, that sense of belonging, that sense of contributing to something outside themselves.}\]

The literature has also identified programs that have been implemented in schools that encourage student participation in community service (Carnegie Council, 1989). The results of these programs support students increased self-esteem, empathy, social competence, liking for school, improved behaviour and positive attitudes (Carnegie Council, 1989; Schaps & Solomon, 1997).
School Values and Principles

The values and principles of the school appear to be inherent in the underlying school philosophy (Rutter, 1983). This philosophy, according to Rutter, appears to take priority over the subtle differences that may exist between teachers and their classroom practices. Participants identified three sub-themes that may be considered representative of the values and principles that are part of both the participating schools in which a SoSB is fostered. The three themes are empowerment, equality and cooperation.

Empowerment. Encouraging shared responsibilities provides students with a sense of ownership and as a consequence they feel empowered (Beck & Malley, 1998b). Students need to feel that they have some control over the decisions that are made in relation to their educational experience such as rules and curriculum planning (Beck & Malley). Goodenow’s (1993a) definition of belonging included reverence for student autonomy. Benard (1995) defined autonomy as 'having a sense of one’s own identity and an ability to act independently and to exert some control over one’s environment' (p.5). Schools that provide opportunities for student participation in making decisions are said to enhance a sense of autonomy (Roeser, Eccles, & Sameroff, 2000). These decisions include various aspects of school life; curriculum planning and classroom rules, norms and activities (Benard, 1995; Battistich et al., 1997; Rutter, 1980). Both schools indicated that students were given more autonomy as they progressed through the grades. For example, ‘students in years ten, eleven and twelve are given more autonomy and responsibility’ also ‘so it’s like you give them some autonomy in their learning’. Also one participant reflected how autonomy was facilitated through the decisions that students were involved in making:

so a lot of the decisions that we see, or a lot of the things we see are the results
of the students being involved in the discussions...some school rules, their uniforms...even the discipline we brought kids in on the discipline that we're going to do.

In addition, participants felt that through participation students were not only able to gain a sense of their own identity (Benard, 1995) but also an opportunity to identify with their school. Finn's (1989) participation-identification model suggests that through participation students are able to identify with their school and consequently perceive belongingness. For example, 'I think the students are given ample opportunity to have a sense of identity and that identity gives them a belonging'.

Equality. Teachers who create a sense of fairness were considered conducive to a positive school experience for students in a study conducted by Stumpers et al. (2007). Amongst teachers, characteristics such as respect and appreciation, equal treatment of students were identified as a way in which a sense of school membership was fostered (Williams & Downing, 1998). In this study uniforms were considered by participants as one way in which equality is maintained. Also providing students with equal chances of academic success through offering a variety of courses was identified as a way to create equality. For example, 'matching their ambitions to their abilities' also 'they can find a course that they can be successful at'. In addition a participant stated that they believed their school 'provided something for every kid'.

Cooperation. Teachers, who promote competition amongst their students and encourage students to work on their own, weaken a sense of community (Schaps & Solomon, 1997). In contrast teachers who promote group learning processes encourage a sense of community and subsequently increase a sense of belonging (Baker et al., 1997). Therefore a sense of belonging can be promoted via cooperation and teamwork
as students work actively together to achieve a common goal (Beck & Malley, 1998a; Edwards, 1995; Routt, 1996). Participants considered cooperation and teamwork a contributing factor to fostering a SoSB. For example, ‘don’t let the team down... we say that all the time here’ also ‘work with each other, so work as a team’. Another participant gave an example how the idea of being a team is reinforced:

...you can have one kid who forgets his homework, for example, you guys, you should’ve reminded him...you guys are a team; you’re in the same group.

Consequently at both schools an underlying philosophy of working together was verbalized and constantly reinforced by teaching staff.

Summary

In summary, five themes were identified that were central to the participants’ perceptions of how a sense of belonging is developed within their schools; organisational structure, teachers, engagement, communication and school values and principles. The first theme, “organisational structure” included two sub-themes, “pastoral care” and “house system”. Both were illustrative of how students were grouped together within the school setting. Another major theme, “teachers” included three sub-themes: sense of belonging, which referred to teachers own sense of belonging; classroom practices, which were characterized by teachers’ interactions and relatedness to students; and characteristics, which referred to teacher personalities. The third theme “engagement” consisted of four sub-themes; shared experiences, extracurricular activities, assemblies and meetings, and extrinsic rewards. The three sub-themes; shared experiences, extra curricular activities, and assemblies and meetings referred to organised activities the school provided for students to participate in outside the classroom setting. Extrinsic rewards related to opportunities in which positive
student participation was acknowledged and encouraged. Communication was the fourth theme identified. It included two sub-themes: parental involvement, which focused on facilitating parental involvement through effective communication; and community connection, which referred to students' external community involvement. Finally the fifth theme “school values and principles” included three sub-themes: empowerment, which was characterized by opportunities that facilitated student autonomy and identity; equality, which referred to treating students equally; and cooperation, which focused on goal achievement through working together.

Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to understand the perceptions of teachers and principals understanding of a sense of belonging and how it is developed within the school environment. The findings indicate that teachers and principals have a clear understanding of what a sense of belonging means. Also participants identified various characteristics that foster a SoSB. These findings offer support for the existing literature which include, aspects specifically related to teachers such as their personal characteristics and their own sense of belonging (Edwards, 1995; Goodenow, 1993a; McNeely et al., 2002; Rutter, 1980). Also organisational practices that facilitate “frequent personal contact or interactions with others” (Baumeister & Leary, 1995, p.500) through structural grouping of students and teachers, that was evident across grades. Also parent and community participation was encouraged and maintained through effective communication and community programs the school adopted (Baker et al., 1997; Glover et al., 1998). In addition participants reflected on the strategies the school employed to encourage active and meaningful participation in activities within the school environment (Finn, 1989; Goodenow, 1993a; Osterman, 2000; Pittman &
Richmond, 2007). This was done through extra curricular programs, organised social events and opportunities for student engagement through assemblies and meetings.

However, the identified characteristics differentiated in relation to those that may be considered part of the whole school environment and precipitate from an organisational context and those that were specific to teachers. Even though the literature has suggested that teachers play an integral part in fostering a SoSB (Broderick, 2001; Goodenow, 1993a; McNeely et al., 2002; Rutter, 1980) and participants indicated that individual teacher characteristics and their classroom practices were considered to be important in facilitating a SoSB, elements specific to teachers did not appear to dominant the findings. In contrast, school-wide organisational practices were central to participants' experience of how a SoSB is developed. Organisational practices included pastoral care and house systems, co-curricular activities and events, parental involvement and community participation. These findings offer support for the idea that the schools organisational practices offer greater opportunities for students to interact and spend a larger amount of time with other students, teachers and significant adults (Carnegie Council, 1989; Glover et al., 1998; Osterman, 2000).

In addition to the organisational practices of the school and also separate from the idiosyncrasies of teachers, participants reflected on the overall school values and principles that also contribute to fostering a SoSB. It is suggested that the values and principles of the school take priority over the subtle differences that may exist between teachers and their classroom practices (Rutter, 1983). Participants described how these values were conveyed to students through verbal communication and through school policy and practice. However, even though participants reflected on the important
contribution of the schools values and principles to developing a SoSB, participants did not indicate how these values become a part of the underlying school philosophy.

**Implications and Recommendations**

This study has implications for the current body of knowledge of how a SoSB is developed within the school environment. Firstly it provides evidence to suggest that teachers can provide insightful information into the characteristics of how a SoSB is developed. Secondly, it contributes to current research that identifies teachers as an important source in either facilitating or impeding the development of a SoSB (Battistich, et al., 1997; Beck & Malley, 1998b; Borich & Tombari, 1997; Broderick, 2001; Edwards, 1995; McNeely et al., 2002; Osterman, 2000; Rutter, 1980). However, in contrast to these findings this study has also highlighted the salient influence of characteristics that are specific to school-wide organisational practices and policies.

Research appears to be limited in relation to understanding the organisational practices and policies of schools and how they foster a SoSB (Osterman, 2000). As a consequence future SoSB research could further explore the school’s organisational practices and policies; both inception and implementation. Implementation may be considered important as the current study found a difference in organisational practices between schools. School contexts may differ between the public and private sectors as participants from the government school identified extrinsic rewards as part of their approach to developing a SoSB. Generally the literature suggests that extrinsic rewards do not facilitate a SoSB (Baker et al., 1997; Battistich et al., 1997). However, limited research suggests (Glover et al., 1998) that extrinsic rewards are not counter effective to developing a SoSB per se but rather their effectiveness is dependent on the manner in which they are implemented. Therefore, developing a deeper understanding of the
subtle differences in how organisational practices are implemented across school environments could have implications in the education system for identifying aspects of the school context that facilitate the development of a SoSB.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

The volunteer sampling technique may have limited the findings of this study through potential self-selection bias (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005). Whilst a phenomenological approach does not seek representativeness or endeavour to generalise the findings to the larger population, it does try to understand and describe the experience of the participants in relation to the phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). The two schools that volunteered to be a part of the study may have done so because of their prior understanding and knowledge of the psychological construct SoSB. Other schools that do not have a clear understanding of the construct SoSB may have chosen not to participate. From this perspective it may be suggested that this study does not provide a composite description of the phenomenon SoSB for all high school teachers and principles.

Also to further increase the understanding of the characteristics that foster a SoSB and to ensure a rigorous approach to data collection it is recommended that future research involve the collection of data from multiple sources (Creswell, 2007). This may be done by combining qualitative and quantitative methodologies that include interviewing teachers and parents and administering Goodenow’s (1993b) PSSM questionnaire to students. Finally, the findings from this study have highlighted the benefit of conducting qualitative research to provide a greater understanding of the characteristics that foster a SoSB. From this perspective developing a SoSB
questionnaire for teachers in which a larger population can be reached may be considered both feasible and important in furthering the understanding of SoSB.
References


E. O. Nightingale (Eds.), *Promoting the health of adolescents: New directions for the twenty-first century* (pp. 73-96). New York: Oxford University Press.


Appendix A

Interview Schedule

1. What do you understand by the phrase 'sense of belonging'?

2. Do you think that there is a 'sense of belonging' present in your school?

   (if the participant states that they believe there is a sense of belonging in the school environment, go to question 3. If they do not believe there is a sense of belong in the school environment, go to question 4).

3. How do you think a sense of belonging is fostered in the school environment?
   Prompt: what are some of the activities the school utilizes to foster a sense of belonging (e.g., extra curricular activities)?

4. Why do you believe there is not a sense of belonging at the school?

5. If there is not a sense of belonging at the school how do you think a sense of belonging could be generated within the school environment?
   Prompt: what are some of the activities the school could utilize to foster a sense of belonging (e.g., extra curricular activities)?

Thank you for your participation. In what way would you like to receive feedback in regards to the findings of the study? I am happy to make the full report available to you or I will provide you with a summary of the findings.
Appendix B

Information Letter to Principals

Dear Principal,

My name is Debra York and I am a student at Edith Cowan University pursuing a Bachelor of Arts Psychology Honours degree. As part of my course I am required to conduct a research project this year. The Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Computing, Health and Science has approved this study. The research will enhance our understanding of a sense of belonging from the school’s perspective. A sense of belonging has been identified as an important protective factor during development for the adolescent. It has been found that when adolescents feel they belong to their school and family they are less likely to have behaviour problems or develop mental health issues.

The aim of my study is to explore the perspectives of principals and teachers in relation to their understanding of a ‘sense of belonging’ in the school environment. My study will involve interviewing yourself and teachers currently teaching at the school. Participation in this study will involve an audio taped interview lasting approximately 20 – 30 minutes. During the interview, I will ask questions related to the aim of my study. No names or identifying information will be required for this study and all your responses will be kept confidential. The audio taped interview will be transcribed for the purpose of data analysis. No individual participant will be identified in the reporting of this study.

I will contact you in the next few days to ascertain your interest in the research and to clarify any issues you may have in regards to the study. If you are interested in the school participating in the study, I would appreciate it if participant letters and consent forms which I will provide could be distributed to all teachers within the school. Teachers interested in participating can then contact me to make arrangements for the interviews. If you have any queries please don’t hesitate to contact me (Debra York) on [number] or my supervisor Associate Professor Lynne Cohen on 6304 5575 or Dr Julie Ann Pooley on 6304 5591. If you want to speak to someone independent of this research, please contact the university research officer Kim Gifkins on 6304 2170.

Thank you for taking the time to read this letter and I look forward to speaking with you further.

Debra York
Appendix C

Information Letter to Teachers

Dear Participant,

My name is Debra York, and I am a student at Edith Cowan University, pursing a Bachelor of Arts Psychology Honours degree. I am currently conducting a study with the co-operation of your principal. The Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Computing, Health and Science has approved this study.

The aim of my study is to explore the experiences teachers in relation to their understanding of a sense of belonging in the school environment. My study will involve a sample of teachers who are currently teaching at your school. This research will enhance our understanding of a sense of belonging in the school environment.

Participation in this study will involve an audio taped interview lasting approximately 20 – 30 minutes. During the interview I will ask questions related to the aim of my study. Your name will not be required for this study and your responses will be kept confidential. The audio taped interview will be transcribed for the purpose of data analysis. No individual participant will be identified in the reporting of this study.

Should you be willing to participate in this study, please contact me (Debra York) on [redacted] or email me at [redacted]. In order to participate in the study you are requested to complete the attached consent form. Your participation in this study is voluntary and you will be free to withdraw from the study at any time without any adverse consequences.

If you have any queries regarding this research project, please feel free to contact me, Debra York on [redacted] or my supervisors, Associate Professor Lynne Cohen (6304 5575) or Dr Julie Anne Pooley (6304 5591). If you wish to talk to someone who is independent of this study, please contact the University Research Officer, Kim Grifkins on (6304 2170).

Thank you for taking the time to read this letter and I look forward to hearing from you.

Debra York
Appendix D

Consent Form

I ____________________________ have read the enclosed information letter and consent to participate in the research project entitled The Perceptions of Sense of Belonging by Teaching Staff.

I understand that:

1. The aim of the study is to explore the experiences of teachers in relation to their understanding of a sense of belonging in the school environment;

2. That any data collected in the study will be kept confidential and will only be discussed with the supervisors involved in the study;

3. Anonymity will be maintained;

4. My participation in this study is voluntary and I may choose to withdraw from the study at any time without any adverse consequences;

5. The interview will be audio taped and transcripts from the interview will be made for the purpose of data analysis.

Signed ____________________________

Dated ____________________________
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