

BELONGING MATTERS

STRATEGIES AND SOLUTIONS TO
BUILDING SCHOOL BELONGING FOR
ADOLESCENCE

Associate Professor Kelly-Ann Allen,
School of Educational Psychology and Counselling
Faculty of Education, Monash University
kelly-ann.allen@monash.edu



Today's Intentions

Understand
“What is Belonging?”

Understand why
belonging matters for
students and staff

Identify practices to
increase belonging

WHAT IS BELONGING?



Belonging is a Fundamental Human Need

“Human beings are pervasively & fundamentally motivated by a need to belong.

Asserted a quarter-century ago”

(Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Baumeister & Robson, 2021)





DIFFERENT TYPES OF BELONGING

- **INCLUSIVE** belonging involves welcoming all people to a group.
- **EXCLUSIVE** belonging requires an individual to have particular attributes in order to join. (Roffey, 2019)



What does belonging mean?

Belonging is a subjective feeling that one is **an integral part** of their surrounding systems, including: family, friends, school, work environments, communities, cultural groups, and **physical places.**

(Hagerty et al., 1992)



Cultural Perspectives

BELONGING CAN BE CONTEXTUAL



Kelly-Ann Allen, PhD FAPS

@drkellyallen

I'm thinking about the word [#belonging](#) in different languages. If you speak a language other than English, what's the word for "belonging" and what does it mean? Does it align with the English definition or represent something else?

INCLUSIVITY SUPPORT COMMUNITY SPANISH SERBIAN/CROATIAN IRISH
BELONGING OWNERSHIP JAPANESE SWAHILI
CONNECTION CULTURE COMFORT HAITIAN CREOLE
ATTACHMENT ENGAGEMENT BANGLA HEBREW NORWEGIAN
TOGETHER PARTICIPATION SECURITY GERMAN ITALIAN TURKISH
RELATIONSHIPS ENVIRONMENT MALAY HINDI SLOVAK BENGALI

Current university students said:

A safe, inclusive, environment where I am comfortable being myself

University alumni said:

A respectful, supportive, community where I am connected and proud to belong (Brunet et al., 2021)

University educators said:

Being comfortable and confident in your environment; being included and involved and being heard; being considered across all decisions, being welcomed exactly as you are and feeling connected to others; and feeling a positive emotional connection that makes you want to be involved”

(Allen et al., 2021)





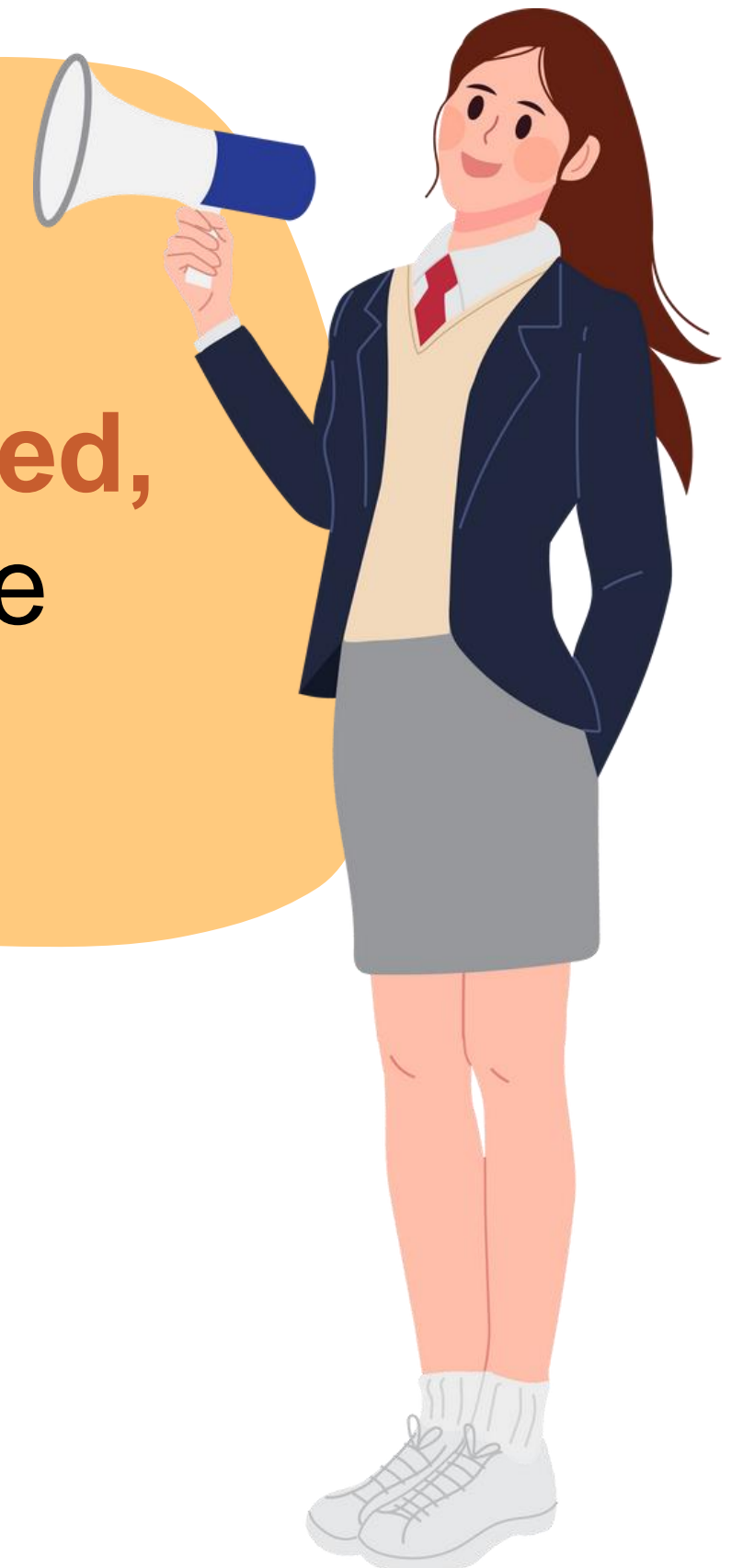
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SCHOOL BELONGING

“School belonging is the extent to which students feel personally **accepted, respected, included, and supported** by others in the school social environment.”

(Goodneow & Gradey, 1993)



What do teens say?

“A sense of **security and safety** (physical and psychological), **positive relationships** (teachers, peers, and friends), **feelings of inclusivity and acceptance**, and **autonomy with guidance** (empowered and in control of their learning while being academically and personally supported and encouraged at the same time)”

(Mulholland et al., 2023; Osborne et al, 2023 – both forthcoming)



Belonging – it's not
always easy



EVERYONE HAS A BELONGING STORY



WE GET TO CONTRIBUTE TO OTHER PEOPLE'S **BELONGING** STORY



BELONGING IN ADOLESCENCE



ADOLESCENCE

Adolescence is characterized by
Identity formation (social and personal)
Psychosocial adjustment
Transition into adulthood



Belonging– ADOLESCENCE

A sense of belonging appears important:

- Adolescents have heightened sensitivity to exclusion
- Adolescents appear to be more negatively affected by ostracism than are younger children
- Can impact the student teacher relationship (perceived fairness)



Mental Health

Reduced depression, anxiety, suicide ideation (*Allen et al., 2018, Parr et al., 2020; Shochet et al, 2011*)
Associated with decreased levels of depression, anxiety, and stress symptoms at all three timepoints in adulthood (age 19-20, 23-24, 27-28 years). *Allen et al (under review)*

Physical Health

Diminished doctors visits and less chronic health conditions later in life
(*Caspi et al, 2006, Russek & Schwartz*)

Wellbeing



Strongly related to five dimensions of positive development- social competence, life satisfaction, trust and tolerance of others and civic engagement *O'Conner et al., 2010*

School experience

Academic motivation (*Allen et al., 2018*)
Enjoyment of school (*Allen et al., forthcoming*)
Predictor of NEET (*Parker et al. (under review)*)

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School networks and relationships with adults, have been found to **reduce** suicide ideation and attempts

Wyman, P. A., Pickering, T. A., Pisani, A. R., Rulison, K., Schmeelk-Cone, K., Hartley, C., Gould, M., Caine, E. D., LoMurray, M., Brown, C.H., & Valente, T. W. (2019). Peer-adult network structure and suicide attempts in 38 high schools: implications for network-informed suicide prevention. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 60(10), 1065-1075. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcpp.13102>



The Program for International Student Assessment (PISA)

- Surveys 540,000 students,
- Representing about 29-million, 15-year-olds
- 72 participating countries and economies.

One in three students don't belong



DIGGING INTO DATA



SCHOOL BELONGING
A META-ANALYSIS

What are the themes that relate to school belonging in secondary school settings?



SCHOOL BELONGING META-ANALYSIS

Factors	N	R	ES strength
Parent Support	29,778	.29	Medium
Peer Support	8,790	.31	Medium
Teacher Support	11,929	.46	Large
Academic Motivation	26,220	.30	Medium
Emotional Stability	2,1778	-.35	Medium
Personal Characteristics	7,210	.44	Large
School Climate	3,181	.32	Medium
Gender	17,061	.18	Small
Race & Ethnicity	3,960	.11	Small
Extracurricular Act.	6,432	.08	Small

Ninety eight cases
categorised into
seven themes

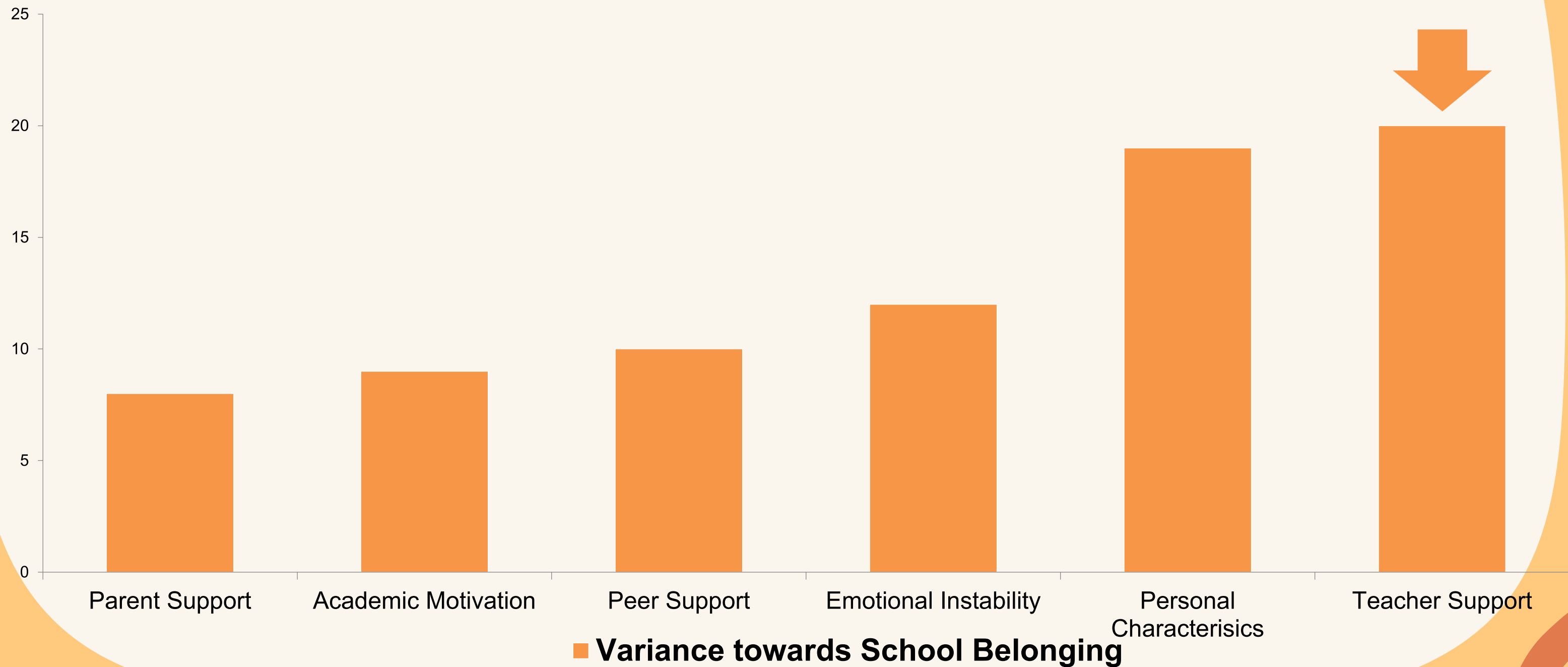
Total N: 123,390

Allen et al., 2018



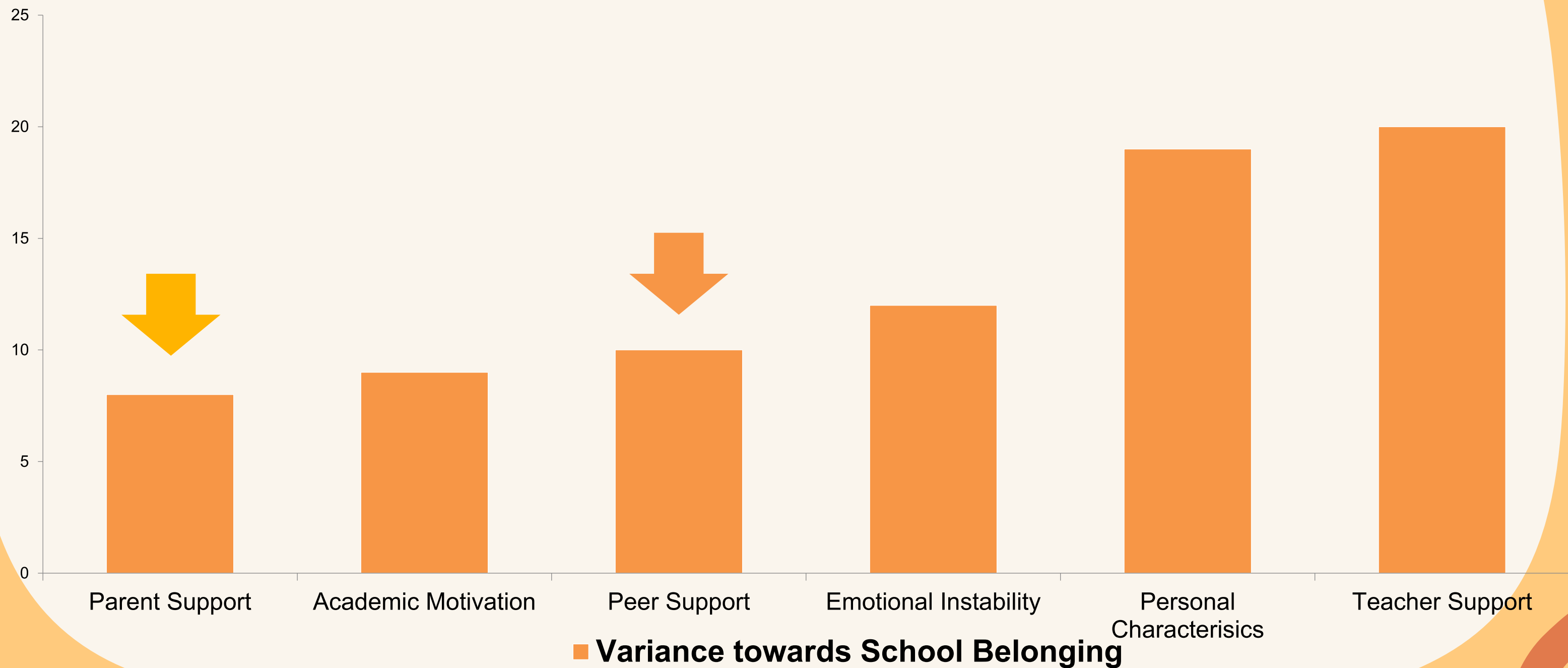
School Belonging Meta Analysis

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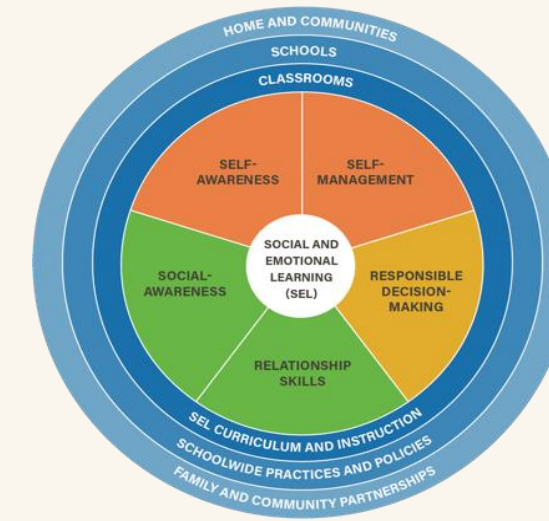
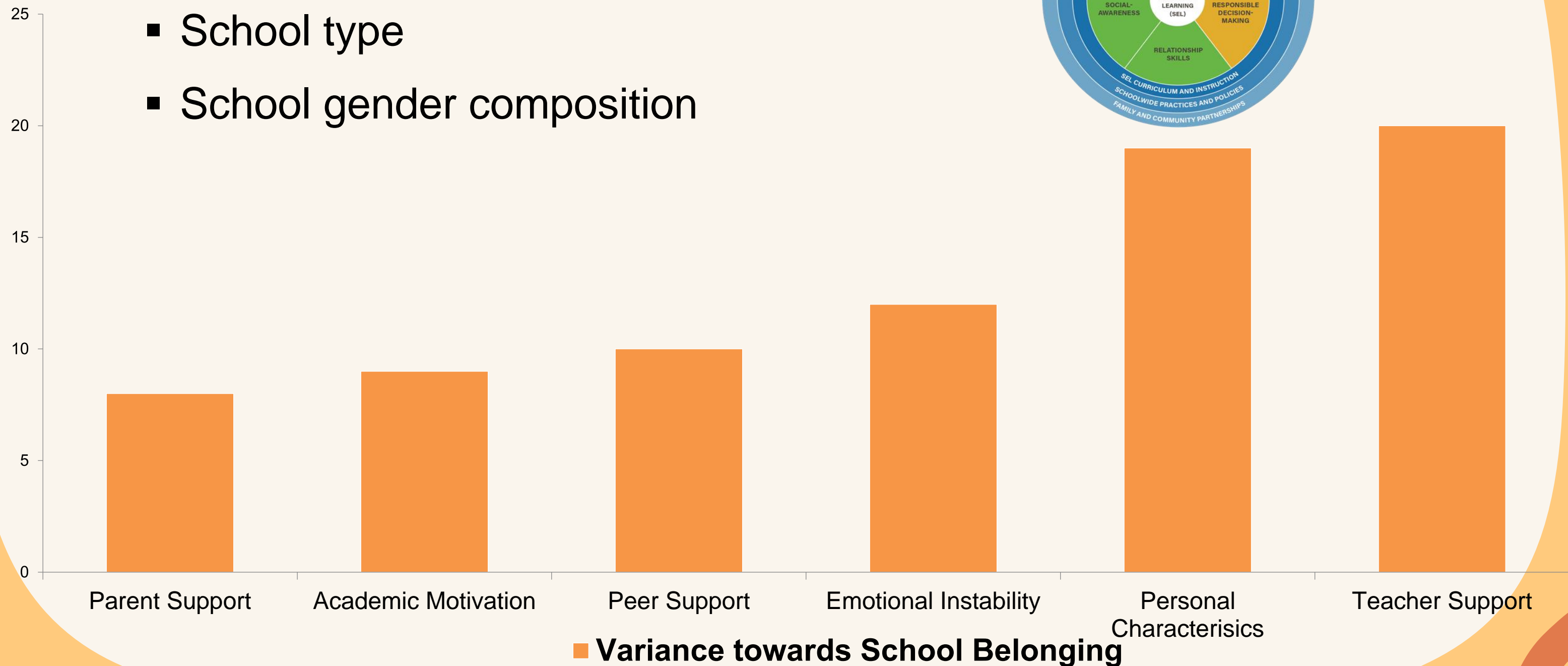


School Belonging Meta Analysis

School belonging was

not associated with...

- School type
- School gender composition



Ninety-eight cases categorised into seven themes
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Allen et al., 2018

STRATEGIES AND PRACTICES



What do the students say?

We asked them!

- Practices identified by secondary school students as being associated with improved school belonging after COVID-19 (n= 367)

Emotional Support

“They notice when I'm struggling and ask if I'm okay”

Support for Learning (Academic Support)

“Every student learns differently. Encourage students to discover the type of learner they are”

Building Social Connections

“Promote more discussion in class across friend groups to prevent exclusion”

Fairness

“Treat all students with the same level of respect”, “not pick favourites, treat everyone equally”.

SCHOOL LEVEL PRACTICES

Students also suggested school-level ideas:

1. **Positive School Culture:** by nurturing respectful and supportive relationships and encouraging collaboration among students, educators, and staff
2. **Supportive Educator Practices:** by empowering educators to be effective and responsive to student needed and providing resources and training for best practices
3. **Welcoming Environment:** so students felt included and safe- this meant encouraging student voice and choice



SCHOOL LEVEL PRACTICES

Students also suggested school-level ideas:

4. Access to Counselling Support

5. School-wide Activities: these activities were about Offering opportunities for social connection and engagement and Encouraging participation in clubs, sports, and events. And linked to the adult support needed for social connection.



BRIEF INTERVENTIONS



Brief interventions

The Fast Friends Intervention (Arthur Aron)

Background: We know that taking time to get to know each other helps to prevent **fundamental attribution error**.

What's involved?

- Pairs and small groups
- 36 deep questions split into three sets
- Not typical *small talk*
- Decades of research



BRIEF INTERVENTIONS
FAST FRIENDS



Findings

Friendship can develop in 45 minutes, increased interpersonal closeness, bonding, classroom belonging.

Helps students strike and understand similarities, dispels stereotypes and differences

FAST FRIENDS: SET 1

1. Given the choice of anyone in the world, whom would you want as a dinner guest?
2. Would you like to be famous? In what way?
3. Before making a telephone call, do you ever rehearse what you are going to say? Why?
4. What would constitute a “perfect” day for you?
5. When did you last sing to yourself? To someone else?
6. If you were able to live to the age of 90 and retain either the mind or body of a 30-year-old for the last 60 years of your life, which would you want?
7. Do you have a secret hunch about how you will die?
8. Name three things you and your partner appear to have in common.
9. For what in your life do you feel most grateful?
10. If you could change anything about the way you were raised, what would it be?
11. Take four minutes and tell your partner your life story in as much detail as possible.
12. If you could wake up tomorrow having gained any one quality or ability, what would it be?

Purpose is fun. Uncomfortable questions can be skipped. Just have fun. No right or wrong.

FIND SIMILARITIES

Gehlbach et al. (2016)

When people perceive themselves as similar to others, greater liking and closer relationships typically result

Findings

Improved relationships

Higher course grades.

This brief intervention appeared to close the achievement gap at this school by over 60%.

Students in the treatment condition received feedback on five similarities that they shared with their teachers; each teacher received parallel feedback regarding similarities.



THE POWER OF BEING SEEN 3:08

SCHOOL BELONGING

DRAWING FROM EXPERIENCED OTHERS

Walton and Colleagues

The social-belonging intervention



GREG WALTON

1. The concern /challenge causing student to question their belonging
2. How this challenge made the student think and feel ("I" statements).
3. How the student resolved the concern and came to feel they belonged at the school with time.

“Students understand that **WORRIES** about belonging are **NORMAL** [especially] in an academic transition, are not permanent, and can improve with time.”

(Walton et al., 2017, p. 5)



SCHOOL BELONGING

DRAWING FROM EXPERIENCED OTHERS

Walton and Colleagues

Findings:

Lasting and sustained improvements in making friends, achievement, physical health and belonging have been found.



MAKING YOUR OWN BELONGING STORY

What's your social belonging story?

Example:

First time at...

Uni?

new job?

1. The concern /challenge causing you to question your belonging
2. How this challenge made the you think and feel ("I" statements).
3. How you resolved the concern and came to feel you belonged.



BRIEF INTERVENTIONS

STARTING WITH, “HELLO”.

Positive Greetings at the Door: Evaluation of a Low-Cost, High-Yield Proactive Classroom Management Strategy

Clayton R. Cook, PhD, Aria Fiat, BA, Madeline Larson, BA, more...

[Show all authors](#) ▾

First Published February 19, 2018 | Research Article



<https://doi.org/10.1177/1098300717753831>

[Article information](#) ▾

Altmetric

9



Abstract

Externalizing behavior is a significant concern among teachers. Teachers could benefit from incorporating proactive strategies to prevent problem behaviors and promote academic engagement as students transition into the classroom learning environment. The purpose of this study was to conduct an experimental investigation of the Positive Greetings at the Door (PGD) strategy to improve middle school students' classroom behavior. Teachers were nominated by their principals for participation and then randomly assigned to the PGD or attention control condition. Observational data on academic engaged time and disruptive behavior were collected pre- and post-implementation. Results revealed that the PGD strategy produced significant improvements in academic engaged time and reductions in disruptive behavior. Moreover, results from a social validity questionnaire indicated that teachers found the PGD strategy to be feasible, reasonable, and acceptable. The limitations of this study and implications of these findings for teacher pre- and in-service trainings are

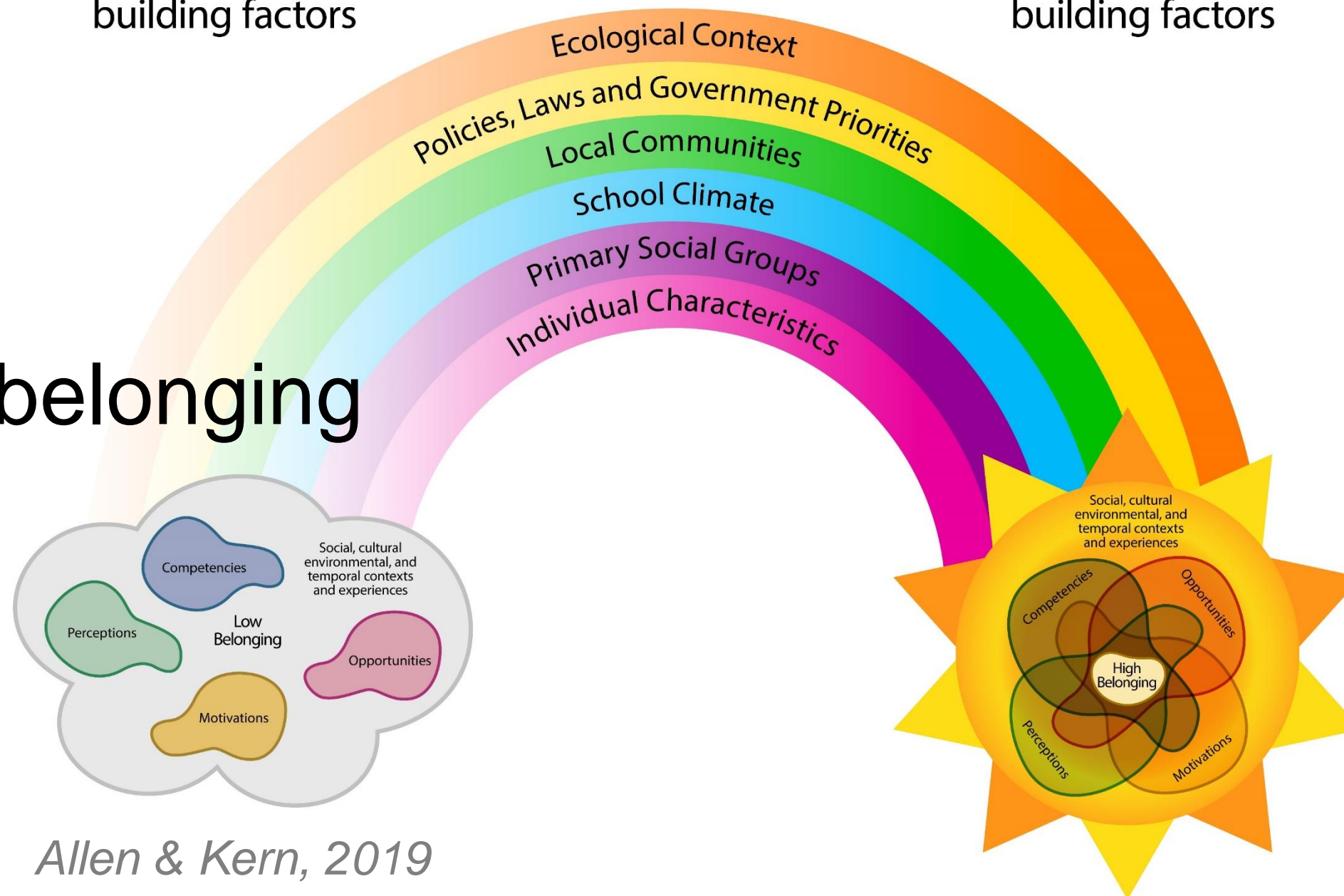


Systematic solutions

Absence of belonging
building factors

Presence of belonging
building factors

Low belonging



Allen & Kern, 2019

High belonging

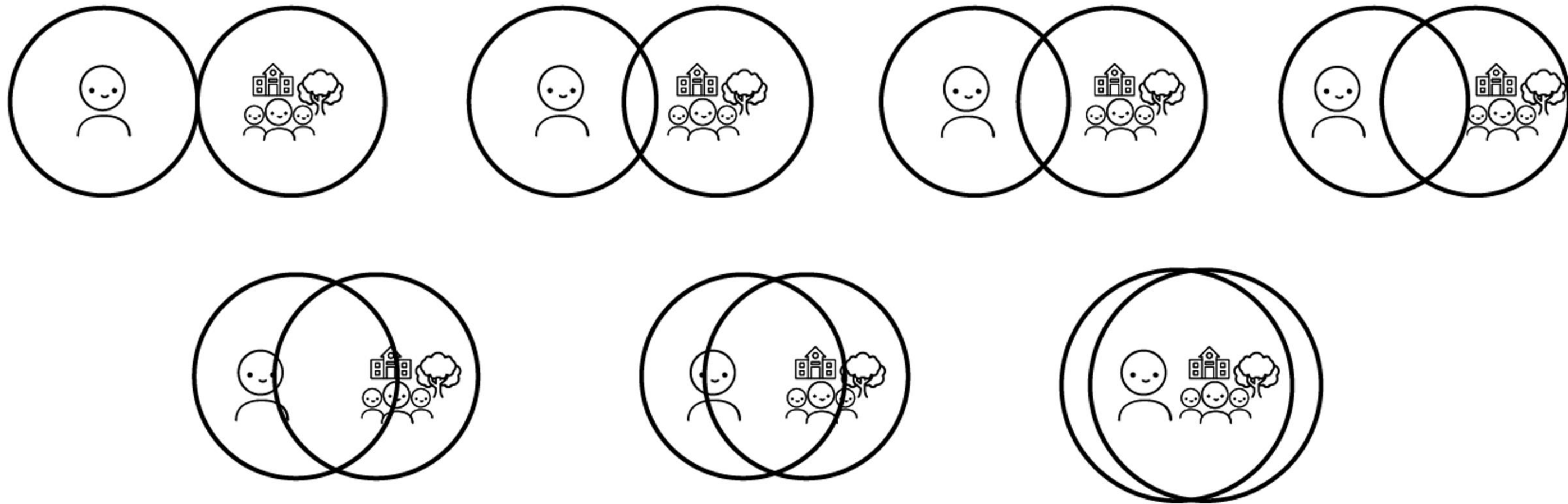


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EDUCATOR BELONGING



Which one of these circle-pairs best shows your sense of belonging to your school? Do you feel like you belong a little (the first picture)? Do you feel like you belong a lot? (the last picture)? Do you feel like your sense of belonging is somewhere in between?



*Allen, K-A. (2021). General Belonging Visual Measure. Figshare.
<https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.16639564.v1>*

Belonging in ADULTHOOD

Challenges for belonging in adulthood

- Making and maintaining social contacts
- Balancing family commitments and workplace demands

Importance of belonging

- Predicts mental health and wellbeing
- Belonging as a health factor, on par with diet and exercise
- Loneliness and social isolation: Health risks equal to smoking, obesity, heavy drinking, and high blood pressure



Teacher belonging to their profession

Teacher belonging (Longmuir et al., 2023)

- 80% of educators feel a sense of belonging to the profession
- Early childhood educators less likely to feel like they belong (66.5%)

Key contributors of belonging for teachers

1. Relationships with colleagues
2. Relationships with students
3. Supportive schools and systems

Barriers to belonging for teachers

1. Lack of respect for teaching profession
2. Workload and unrealistic expectations
3. Insufficient support from leadership

Addressing Barriers

1. Promote respect for teachers
2. Manage workload expectations





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SOME CONSIDERATIONS



#FACT

**Belonging
takes time.**







“

I feel like a tree that has lost my roots, and that a storm has knocked me down and this is where I need to stay.

Ms Kmetj on her experience leaving Ukraine to relocate to Melbourne.





Our multiple groups can make belonging can be tricky



"I get really offended in class when ... I hate this so much, when in class when your teacher's telling a story and says, 'African' or 'black'. ... Straight away it's like they look at you."

The Age, November 4, 2018: *'There are times we belong here, and times we don't': Being young and South Sudanese in Victoria.* Tammy Mills



Considerations

Need to belong

High need to belong
Low sense of belonging

High need to belong
High sense of belonging

Low need to belong
Low sense of belonging

Low need to belong
High sense of belonging

Sense of belonging

PARENTING BELONGING





Kelly-Ann Allen



Kathryn Riley



Lea Waters



Dianne Vella-Brodrick



DeLeon L. Gray



Gökmen Arslan



**Thank you
for listening!**

