

CHRISTOPHER BOYLE AND KELLY-ANN ALLEN

12. THE PATH LEAST FOLLOWED

*Moving into the Future of School Belonging Research
and towards Clearer Interventions*

INTRODUCTION

As we have seen in this authoritative book, as well as that of the wider literature, school belonging is generally regarded as a student's sense of affiliation or connection to his or her school. Anyone who has personally navigated the sometimes-difficult terrain of secondary school is able to have some level of direct understanding as to the importance that belonging and identifying with a school holds for most people. Educators and practitioners often work with young people who feel that they do not belong to the school community that they attend. An absence of belonging can manifest itself in mental health concerns, school attrition and risk-taking behaviours. Opportunities for early intervention through fostering school belonging are born from a greater understanding and awareness of what school belonging is and how it is contextualised and fostered. School belonging is perennially important and marks a significant social issue of our time. The aim of this final chapter is to consider the key messages of the foregoing chapters, as well as relating them to the wider literature on school belonging.

This book, through 12 chapters, demonstrates that school belonging research is diverse. This collection of chapters presents a collection of mixed research designs, methodologies, and participants.

PATHS TO SCHOOL BELONGING

Students who may be marginalised or excluded may find it difficult to experience a strong sense of school belonging (Slaten et al., 2015). For example, students with special educational needs, low social and economic background. It is clear that students at the periphery of social acceptance may struggle to fully belong in a regular school setting. An important finding from Slaten et al.'s study (Chapter 2) is the lack of focus in school belonging literature on actual interventions in order to improve outcomes for students who require extra support in accessing school (e.g., social and emotional learning interventions). The fields of educational psychology and school belonging are complementary in nature and gaining a better understanding of the psychological aspects and consequences of students not achieving school belonging success is mutually beneficial.

Gowing and Jackson's main findings centre around the understanding that school connectedness is somewhat of a fluid concept that is affected by students' individual circumstances. In a similar way to the principles of inclusive education (Boyle, 2007; Boyle, Topping, & Jindal-Snape, 2013), a key aspect is about individualising the educational experience and adapting the school structure to take account of the student participants. As Gowing and Jackson (Chapter 3) state "the key challenge for schools is to become places of opportunity for every young person". It seems obvious, yet we know that with the increased focus on 'attainment or nothing' many young people can become disconnected from the school experience.

Gowing and Jackson (Chapter 3) discuss the importance of involving both teachers and students in school decision-making as this greatly improved the richness of the school environment (Simmons, Graham, & Thomas, 2015). Putting it simply, school connectedness cannot be regarded as existing properly if peer relationships are poor. It is clear that dialogue between all parties involved in a functioning school environment must be able to understand the goals and perspectives of each other.

The National School Climate Center (2015) discuss the main components of school climate through an emphasis on extracurricular activities. As has been emphasised earlier in this chapter and elsewhere in this book, the importance of *meaningfully* involving all parties in a school provides a much higher likelihood of success. Coker et al. (Chapter 4) states that this should "include systemically engaging all members of the school community, focusing on instruction that promotes prosocial development (e.g., collaboration, co-leadership), and meaningful relationships". The thesis that Coker and colleagues put forward for achieving this laudable goal is to make use of the curricular activities as a method of energising the life of students and staff in the school in order to facilitate a high degree of school belonging.

Again, the common theme in developing a positive progressive environment for school belonging is about building collaborations between all players in the school arena (Monahan, Oesterle, & Hawkins, 2010). Successful interventions in school need to be broader than just the school but should involve the wider community so that support can be readily provided by various groups (Boyle, 2007; Boyle et al., 2013). Moffa and colleagues (in Chapter 5) discuss the issue of the importance of ensuring quality interventions in order to enhance school belonging in schools. As with many areas of education various interventions are put forward to purportedly improve the social outcomes of students in schools and Moffa et al., whilst acknowledging the variance in programmes of this type, make the useful suggestions that further study into understanding whether being involved in school belonging interventions improves longer term mental health may be worth pursuing.

Attaining a positive school environment and taking cognisance of school belonging principles becomes more complex when support is required for students who are entering the system as refugees. Apart from the potential for severe psychological trauma (Gunasekera, Houghton, Glasgow, & Boyle, 2014), students who are refugees may have multi-faceted needs. In Chapter 6, Due, Riggs and Augoustinos highlight