

Identifying the personal and environmental factors that predict belongingness in secondary school in a sample of mainstreamed students: A Western Australian study

Sharmila Vaz^{1,2}, Anne Passmore^{1,2}, Errol Cocks^{1,2}

¹*Centre for Research into Disability and Society, Western Australia, Australia,* ²*School of Occupational Therapy and Social Work, Western Australia, Australia,* ³*Curtin Health Innovation Research Institute, Western Australia, Australia,* ⁴*Curtin University of Technology, Western Australia, Australia*

Introduction:

The construct of school belongingness takes on a special prominence in the lives of young adolescents, as they begin to explore aspects of personal identity separate from their family, and rely more on friendship and non-kin relationships for support and direction (Bernt, 1982; Epstein & Karweit, 1983). Belongingness in school is identified as a core construct, strongly positively correlated with indices of school performance and adjustment. Organizational policies and practices adopted by school systems have been identified to contribute to the decline in belongingness, following the transition to secondary school (Hargreaves, Earl, & Ryan, 1996). Gaps currently exist in the understanding of factors that may promote or limit school belongingness, especially for students with social or health related problems.

Objectives:

The study was set out to determine the pre-transition personal and environmental factors that affect students' sense of belongingness in secondary school, with emphasis on students with disability and chronic illness within mainstream education.

Methods:

A longitudinal study design was employed. 266 participants from 45-feeder primary schools and 81-secondary schools across metropolitan and regional Western Australia comprise the sample. Cross-informant data from stakeholders was retrieved using psychometrically robust measures.

Results:

Hierarchical linear regression revealed that pre-transition factors accounted for 29.7% of the variance in belongingness in secondary school. No differences in belongingness as a function of gender and health status were identified. Students from socially disadvantaged households were identified to be at risk. Use of non-productive coping strategies ($\beta = -0.128$, $p = 0.06$), and low levels of affiliation motivation ($b = -0.17$, $p = 0.016$) were also identified as significant risk factors. The ability to cooperate with one's peers emerged as significant protective factor ($b = 0.07$, $p = 0.032$). Additionally, those whose parents reported low level involvement with their primary school were more at risk ($b = -0.18$, $p = 0.006$).

Conclusion:

This research highlights the vulnerability of adolescents who are socially disadvantaged, and of those who lack appropriate coping skills. The protective role of cooperative social skills and parental involvement in schooling is also highlighted.

Contribution:

The study highlights the predictive power of pre-transition personal and environmental factors in promoting belongingness in secondary school.