

How School Belonging Influences the Mental Health and Well-Being of Adolescents

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ABSTRACT

Adolescence is a critical developmental period due to increased vulnerability of mental health difficulties such as depression, anxiety, and loneliness. However, the role of schools in adolescents' social and emotional development is crucial, taking an important factor in understanding mental health outcomes. This brief overview examines how school influences adolescent mental health and well-being, explains the theory and attachment frameworks. A thematic synthesis of peer-reviewed studies indicates that higher levels of perceived school belonging are consistently associated with lower levels of depression, anxiety, loneliness, and behavioural difficulties, alongside greater emotional resilience and prosocial behavior. Although school belonging remained protective during remote learning, evidence suggests that digital contexts may be less effective in meeting adolescents' relational needs. Overall, the finding highlights school belonging as a key component of school-based mental health promotion and underscores the importance of fostering inclusive and supportive school environments to enhance adolescent well-being.

Keywords: *adolescents, mental health, protective factors, school belonging, well-being*

Buletin Riset Psikologi dan Kesehatan Mental (BRPKM), tahun, Vol. X(no), pp,

doi:

Editor:

Dikirimkan: Diterima: Diterbitkan:

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INTRODUCTION

Adolescence is widely recognized as a critical developmental stage marked by rapid biological, cognitive, and social changes, alongside increased vulnerability to mental health problems such as depression, anxiety, and social withdrawal (Steinberg, 2005; Patel et al., 2007). Epidemiological findings indicate that many mental disorders first emerge during adolescence, emphasizing the importance of identifying contextual factors that influence psychological well-being during this sensitive period (Kessler et al., 2005; Costello et al., 2011). Recent developments in developmental psychology increasingly highlight the role of social environments, particularly those in which adolescents spend substantial time, in shaping mental health trajectories.

Schools constitute one of the most influential social contexts in adolescents' lives. Beyond academic instruction, schools function as key environments for social interaction, identity development, and emotional regulation (Eccles and Roeser, 2011; Osterman, 2000). Because adolescents spend a significant portion of their daily lives in school, the quality of their social and emotional experiences within this environment plays a crucial role in their overall adjustment and well-being (Shochet et al., 2006; Bond et al., 2007; Arslan, 2018a; Arslan, 2021). Consequently, contemporary research has moved beyond academic achievement to examine psychosocial aspects of schooling that contribute to mental health.

A construct that has gained growing attention in this field is school belonging, defined as students' perceptions of being accepted, respected, included, and supported within the school community. A substantial body of empirical research demonstrates that higher levels of school belonging are associated with lower levels of depression, anxiety, loneliness, and behavioral difficulties, as well as higher levels of emotional well-being and prosocial behavior. These findings suggest that school belonging may serve as a protective factor that supports adolescents' mental health (Osterman, 2000).

However, despite consistent empirical associations, the existing literature reveals important conceptual and contextual gaps. First, many studies remain largely descriptive and do not sufficiently integrate psychological theories to explain the mechanisms linking school belonging to mental health outcomes. Theoretical perspectives such as need-to-belong theory and attachment theory offer strong explanatory potential. The need-to-belong theory proposes that humans possess a fundamental motivation to form meaningful social bonds, while attachment theory emphasizes the importance of secure relational experiences for emotional regulation and resilience. Yet, these theories are often applied separately, resulting in a fragmented understanding of how belonging and attachment processes jointly operate within school settings.

Second, research on school belonging is frequently limited to specific learning environments. Differences between traditional face-to-face schooling and remote or disrupted learning contexts, such as those experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic, are rarely examined within a unified framework (Golberstein et al., 2020; Perkins et al., 2021). This restricts a comprehensive understanding of how school belonging functions under varying educational conditions and how contextual changes may influence its protective role.

To address these gaps, this study synthesizes empirical findings through an integrated theoretical framework that combines need-to-belong and attachment perspectives. By conceptualizing schools as environments that can fulfill adolescents' basic needs for social connection and relational security, this study aims to provide a more coherent explanation of the psychological mechanisms underlying the association between school belonging and mental health (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Furthermore, by

considering both traditional and remote learning contexts, the study contributes to a more context-sensitive understanding of adolescent well-being in contemporary educational settings. In order to explain the review, there is a question: how does school belonging influence adolescent mental health and well-being across different educational contexts?

However, the purpose of this study is to develop an integrated theoretical and empirical understanding of the relationship between school belonging and adolescent mental health by synthesizing existing research and examining how this relationship operates across different educational contexts (Allen et al., 2008; Osterman, 2000). It is also hypothesized that higher levels of school belonging are associated with better adolescent mental health and well-being. This relationship is expected to be mediated by the fulfillment of adolescents' belongingness needs and attachment-related feelings of security, and to vary depending on the nature of the educational context (for example, traditional versus remote learning environments).

METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a brief literature review design to synthesize existing empirical and theoretical research examining the relationship between school belonging and adolescent mental health. A literature review approach was selected to allow for a comprehensive integration of findings across multiple studies, theoretical perspectives, and educational contexts, rather than the collection of new empirical data. This design is appropriate for identifying patterns, consistencies, and gaps within the existing body of research.

Participant

The studies reviewed have used a range of well-established psychological measures to evaluate school belonging and mental health outcomes among adolescents. School belonging measures included the School Belongingness Scale, which assesses students' perceptions of the school as accepting, inclusive, and supportive. The established scales were used to measure mental health outcomes in children. Depression Inventory, the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire, the Generalized Anxiety Disorder scale, and the UCLA Loneliness Scale. The relationship of validated instruments employed in the studies increases the reliability and comparability of the findings used in this review.

Data Analysis and Synthesis

A thematic synthesis approach was used to analyze the selected literature. References were categorized into the following themes: associations between school belonging and mental health outcomes; mechanisms of social inclusion and exclusion; associations based on attachment to clarify how school belonging works; and differences between traditional and disrupted learning environments, including remote education due to COVID-19. This thematic organisation supported critical comparison of studies and enabled the identification of general patterns and theoretical implications in the literature.

Data Collection Strategy

Academic databases, such as Google Scholar and PsycINFO, were used to identify relevant literature. The articles were chosen based on their relevance to school belonging, adolescent mental health outcomes, and explanatory theoretical models, e.g., need-to-belong theory and attachment theory. The following were the inclusion criteria in the literature review: studies that addressed adolescent populations, research on school belonging or school connectedness, and studies that measured mental health outcomes, including depression, anxiety, loneliness, well-being, or behavioral problems. Preferences were made based on research published in established journals in psychology and education, ensuring academic quality and reliability.

Methodological Limitations

This research is limited to a few methodological weaknesses as a mini literature review. The analysis was based mainly on cross-sectional studies, which limit the assessment of causal relationships between school belonging and mental health outcomes. Furthermore, several of the studies reviewed used self-report measures, which can contribute to response bias. Lastly, the review was restricted to English-language publications, which may have omitted other research published in other languages. These limitations should be taken into consideration when interpreting the review's findings.

RESULTS

Across the literature briefly reviewed, the consistency of school belonging emerges a significant protective factor for adolescent mental health. This suggests that school belonging contributes uniquely to mental health outcomes, beyond individual or familial characteristics. A key mechanism through which school belonging influences mental health is social inclusion. Adolescents who experience inclusion within the school community demonstrate lower levels of loneliness and emotional distress, whereas social exclusion is strongly associated with poorer mental health outcomes (Arslan, 2018c; Riva & Eck, 2016). Importantly, social exclusion within schools has been shown to predict emotional difficulties independently of peer relationship quality, highlighting that belonging to the broader school community extends beyond having individual friendships (Shochet et al., 2006; Bond et al., 2007; Arslan, 2021).

Research further indicates that chronic experiences of exclusion can undermine adolescents' emotional safety and sense of self-worth, increasing vulnerability to internalizing problems such as depression and anxiety (Zimmer-Gembeck et al., 2007; Arslan, 2021). These findings suggest that school belonging operates not merely through peer attachment but also through broader perceptions of fairness, respect, and inclusion embedded in school culture and practices.

However, during adolescence, attachment relationships extend beyond caregivers to include peers, teachers, and institutional contexts such as schools. Empirical evidence suggests that school belonging can buffer the negative effects of insecure parental attachment, particularly for adolescents exposed to socioeconomic disadvantage or family instability. In this sense, schools may function as secondary attachment environments, providing emotional consistency and relational security when familial support is limited. This highlights the potential of school-based interventions to mitigate mental health risks among vulnerable adolescent populations.

DISCUSSION

During periods of remote learning, this study indicates that school belonging remained inversely associated with symptoms of depression and anxiety, even when traditional forms of face-to-face interaction were limited (Perkins et al., 2021; Page et al., 2021). These findings suggest that school belonging retains its protective function even in digitally mediated learning environments. The literature provides the indication that digital forms of school belonging may not be effectively compensating for the loss of in-person social interaction. While online initiatives focusing on emotional support and stress management improved engagement for some students, a substantial proportion of adolescents continued to report heightened anxiety and social disconnection (Golberstein et al., 2020; Perkins et al., 2021). This explanation highlights the limitations of remote learning environments in fostering comprehensive social connectedness and underscores the importance of maintaining relational continuity between students and schools during periods of disruption.

According to reviewed studies, it is also explained that school belonging influences adolescent mental health through multiple, interrelated pathways, including social inclusion, emotional safety, attachment processes, and institutional support. School belonging appears to be a multidimensional construct embedded in school culture, rather than acting as a single protective mechanism. Nevertheless the strength and consistency of the findings, several limitations should be noted. Much of the existing research relies on cross-sectional designs, limiting causal interpretations of the relationship between school belonging and mental health outcomes. Additionally, reliance on self-report measures may introduce response bias. Longitudinal and mixed-methods research is needed to clarify causal pathways and to explore how school belonging develops and changes across adolescence.

CONCLUSION

This brief literature review spelled out the effects of school belonging on adolescent mental health and well-being, drawing on two explanatory theories: the need-to-belong theory and attachment theory. Throughout the literature reviewed, school belonging has been found to be a strong protective element linked with reduced levels of depression, anxiety, loneliness, and behavioral problems, as well as increased levels of emotional resilience and prosocial behavior. School belonging appears to be beneficial for adolescent mental health, as it satisfies basic social and emotional needs for acceptance, inclusion, and validation by the school community. Adolescents living with such needs are more emotionally adjusted and less susceptible to psychological distress. On the other hand, the unfulfilled belonging needs, especially when it comes to social exclusion, are linked with the increased risks of poor mental health.

Mental health risks might be buffered by supportive teacher-student relationships and inclusive school climates, which partially compensate for insecure attachment experiences. On the other hand, significantly, the safeguarding effect of school belonging is maintained both in the conventional and disrupted learning environments. As the COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated, despite the fact that digital schooling reduces opportunities for socialization, perceived school connectedness remains a significant factor in adolescents' emotional well-being. Nevertheless, these results also highlight the constraints of remote learning conditions in fully satisfying adolescents' belonging and attachment needs. It is concluded that this review identifies school belonging as a multidimensional construct embedded in social, emotional, and institutional processes.

WRITER APPRECIATION

Alhamdulillah, all praise and gratitude be to Allah SWT for His mercy and guidance, which have enabled the writer to complete this undergraduate thesis entitled "How School Belonging Influences the Mental Health and Well-Being of Adolescents" as a partial fulfilment of the requirements for obtaining a bachelor's degree in psychology at the Faculty of Psychology, Universitas Airlangga. The completion of this thesis would not have been possible without the support, guidance, and encouragement of many individuals and institutions.

DECLARATION OF POTENTIAL CONFLICT OF INTEREST

Aqeyl Omarmakki Tazakka does not work for, consult for, own shares in, or receive funding from any company or organization that might profit from the publication of this manuscript.

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