

# Belonging: Improving outcomes for a diverse range of high school students.

## A qualitative systematic literature review



Sarah Darke and Kayleen Clark-Howard

### ABSTRACT

A diverse range of high school students dominate negative outcome data in Aotearoa-New Zealand, and a shift in how we support them is needed for outcomes to improve. Following PRISMA guidelines, a systematic review of published and grey literature was carried out to identify how research shows belongingness is an important element in improving outcomes for this population. Eight qualitative studies which explored the subjective experience of belonging for diverse students in high school education were identified and reviewed. The review highlights the paucity of research in Aotearoa-New Zealand, which privileges the voices of young people and focuses on their experiences of belonging, or not-belonging, in high school. The results identified four overarching themes: a sense of belonging is a protective factor, teachers are pivotal in creating a sense of belonging, safe spaces are needed to belong, and schools experienced as unsafe spaces. This study provides school staff with a window into the lived experiences of diverse students and links contemporary education policies with belongingness research. The findings of this review have important implications concerning the health and wellbeing of our young people in Aotearoa-New Zealand, and highlight belonging as a fundamental component in improving outcomes for diverse students.

### KEYWORDS

Belonging, diversity, high school, student voice

## Introduction

Focusing on student voice in education, this review explored how contemporary research shows that belongingness is important in improving outcomes for a diverse range of high school students. A sense of belonging is linked to a felt sense of security and safety, an antidote to feeling threatened (Allen et al., 2022; Phillips et al., 2020). There is an abundance of belongingness research. However, space existed for a systematic literature review of qualitative studies which explored outcomes for

marginalised and minority youth in relation to their sense of school belonging. Our overall hope, as Pākehā researchers, was to link findings from this review with a culturally relevant agenda specific to high school education in Aotearoa-New Zealand, upholding the values of Te Tiriti o Waitangi, while acknowledging our limitations as Pākehā researchers (Smith, 2021).

In recent years, there has been a positive shift in education toward prioritising student wellbeing in schools (Education Review Office, 2016; Ministry of Education-Te Tāhuhu o te Mātauranga [MoE], 2017, 2021a). Chris Hipkins, in his role as Minister of Education, stated that New Zealanders have expressed a desire for “an education system that recognises the connections between learners, wellbeing, equity, and achievement ... [which values] the identity, language and culture of every child and learner” (MoE, 2021b, p. 4). Furthermore, the Government affirms their education vision of providing barrier-free, world-class, inclusive public education for all learners. However positive these aspirations and wellbeing initiatives are, education and health data reflect inconsistent, inequitable, and negative outcomes across the cohort. Young people in Aotearoa-New Zealand are presently in a state of crisis (Menzies et al., 2020; Witton, 2022), with Children’s Commissioner Judge Eivers recently calling attention to the need for urgent work to address the increasing psychological distress of children across Aotearoa-New Zealand (1News, 2022).

Statistics show that anxiety and depression rates are climbing (Menzies et al., 2020), youth disengagement and truancy levels are an ongoing and increasing issue (Patterson, 2021), the frequency and intensity of violent incidents in schools and communities are growing (Hendry-Tennent, 2021a), and youth suicide rates continue to be woeful (Hendry-Tennent, 2021b). In addition, and attributed in part to pandemic-related lockdowns, the number of students who did not show up for their 2021 NCEA exams provides further evidence of disengagement (Clark-Dow, 2022). Citing a growing mental health pandemic, rising youth depression rates, and gender and ethnic inequities, Menzies et al. (2020) highlight the need for education to be urgently updated. While contemporary education policies acknowledge this, championing “inclusive, equitable and connected learning” (MoE, 2021b, p. 13), the traditional and arguably outdated Eurocentric model of education continues to dominate in state schools. Yet, the landscape upon which this education model was created vastly differs from the one presently experienced by 21st-century children and youth (Baumeister & Robson, 2021; Hipkins et al., 2020).

The Covid-19 pandemic, climate change issues, fast-paced technology growth, social media, bullying, marginalisation, disenfranchisement, and discrimination are being experienced on a pervasive level. Young people are bombarded with seemingly inescapable wellbeing threats, the likes of which have never been seen before (Menzies et al., 2020). These wellbeing threats are akin to our young people feeling unsafe, which, research empirically tells us, is the antithesis of being ready to learn (Phillips et al., 2020). With Aotearoa-New Zealand’s traditional state school systems scaffolded around neoliberal performative models of care (Dadvand & Cuervo, 2019), it is logical to discern the importance of students feeling safe and secure as a prerequisite to them being able to perform (MoE, 2017). Despite these challenges, young people do have experiences of success in the state school system as evidenced by positive socioemotional outcomes, academic attainment, and pathways into employment or tertiary education. However, there remain far too many who do not,

and of those who do not, the traumatised, vulnerable, minority and indigenous populations are grossly overrepresented (Deane et al., 2019; Sanders & Munford, 2016).

Deane et al. (2019) note that while most of the young people in Aotearoa-New Zealand experience positive outcomes in school there continue to be inequities across groups. Among our young population, Māori, Pasifika, Asian, refugee, migrant, rainbow students (LGBTQIA+), those with a disability, and those living in Canterbury or in rural areas, are overrepresented in negative outcomes statistics. The Ministry of Education-Te Tāhuhu o te Mātauranga 2021-26 statement of intent highlights “achieving equitable and excellent outcomes” (MoE, 2021c, p. 14) as one of its goals, citing a sense of belonging, feeling safe, and high aspirations as the measures of progress. However, while a strong sense of belonging at school is positively correlated with higher levels of achievement, research shows that the percentage of 15-year-olds in Aotearoa-New Zealand who feel they belong at school is declining.

Determining ways to redress inconsistent, inequitable, and negative outcomes is as complex as the multi-faceted contributing factors listed above (Menzies et al., 2020). Indeed, education, health, and social development policymakers continually chase these dynamic determinants to inform meaningful and effective change. As mentioned above, it is widely acknowledged that student wellbeing, whether abundant or absent, has a direct influence on learning. Counsellors and pastoral care teams in schools are well-positioned to provide targeted support and interventions. However, school communities, from board members to non-teaching staff, also have an obligation and role to play in ensuring all young people feel safe and supported so they may reach their full potential (Education Council New Zealand, 2017; MoE, 2017).

Studies that privilege the voices of a diverse range of students allow for meaning-making to be constructed by the young people themselves. It is important to note that as a bicultural nation, Aotearoa-New Zealand’s educational policies and practices are guided by a commitment to honouring the principles of Te Tiriti o Waitangi (MoE, 2021b). Yet, as Highfield and Webber (2021) reflect, despite 50 years of educational reforms, very little has changed in relation to outcomes for Māori.

### ***Māori and state education in Aotearoa-New Zealand***

Research demonstrates that the structure of many state schools in Aotearoa-New Zealand, premised on outdated imperialistic and colonial thinking (Valencia, 2020), is not benefiting a diverse range of young people (Highfield & Webber, 2021). Furthermore, evidence highlights the ongoing negative impact of neo-colonial education systems for Māori (Berryman & Eley, 2019). Within our state school system, Māori rangatahi (young people) continue to be overrepresented in negative outcome statistics, a trend mirrored in indigenous populations worldwide (Macfarlane et al., 2007). In viewing education as a social rather than an individualistic process, the importance of connection, community, and belonging is clear (Osterman, 2000). Māori knowledge systems provide crucial teachings about prioritising and centralising belongingness. Māori orient who they are in relation to their connections with place, people (past and present), and events (Deane et al., 2019; Fleming, 2018).

## **Belongingness**

The construct of belonging is well-researched, with studies unequivocally identifying it as a fundamental human need, ahead of self-esteem and self-actualisation (Allen, 2021; Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Goodenow, 1993). Given the plethora of belongingness research, difficulties arise across studies concerning its definition, conceptualisation, and measurement (Allen et al., 2021). Allen et al. (2021) refer to belonging as a core psychological need (a trait) and/or a situation-specific sense of belonging (a state). In relation to mental health, their findings indicate that “trait belongingness [seems] more crucial for mental health and wellbeing [than] state belongingness” (p. 90).

A substantial body of research is dedicated exclusively to students’ sense of belonging in school (Berryman & Eley, 2019). As education affects all communities, whānau (family), and people in Aotearoa-New Zealand (MoE, 2021c), acknowledging belongingness as a core need as well as linking it to mental health and well-being outcomes for students in school, is arguably an important step.

Spotlighting the value of belongingness in relation to improved outcomes for a diverse range of young people has immediate relevance for the wellbeing of youth in Aotearoa-New Zealand. For this review, outcomes for a diverse range of students refer to those disproportionately represented in poor outcome data, encompassing Māori and Pasifika students, students from low socio-economic backgrounds, diverse and minority groups, and those with specific learning, physical and/or mental health needs (Highfield & Webber, 2021; Menzies et al., 2020; Sanders & Munford, 2016). Additionally, the notion of improved outcomes signifies experiencing success in school and being provided with opportunities to reach their full potential through education (MoE, 2017, 2021b).

For the purposes of this study and in alignment with most of the literature read for this review, Goodenow and Grady’s (1993) definition of belonging was assumed, “that is the extent to which [students] feel personally accepted, respected, included and supported by others – especially teachers and other adults in the school environment” (pp. 60-61).

## **Aim of proposed research**

This qualitative systematic literature review asked, ‘How does research show that belongingness is an important element in improved outcomes for a diverse range of high school students?’. Menzies et al. (2020) recognise youth as holding specialist knowledge in relation to their needs and preferences, stating “it is critical to explore determinants of mental health and sustainable mental wellbeing from their perspective” (p. 5). This review aimed to provide a collated snapshot of students’ lived realities, giving voice to those who often remain silent in the margins (Dadvand, 2017). A broader aim of this study was to highlight how schools, as communities, can strengthen students’ sense of belonging, thereby bolstering the wellbeing of young people and enhancing the outcomes of their most vulnerable members.

## Methods

### **Methodology**

Systematic literature reviews adhere to structured, explicit and rigorous processes that identify, describe, appraise and synthesise all available research, resulting in a robust evidence-based response to the research question (Dickson et al., 2017). A gap existed in the present literature for a systematic literature review of qualitative studies which centralise the subjective experiences of belongingness as described by a diverse range of students in Aotearoa-New Zealand and Australia. In exploring qualitative studies that privilege diverse students' experiences in inclusive schools, this research falls within a constructivist paradigm, where both researchers and participants are inherently involved in the co-construction of knowledge (Norman, 2019). From a philosophical standpoint, it is understood that while individual realities are unique, each reality is valid. The aim of improving outcomes and informing practice politicises this research, moving it toward Onwuegbuzie and Frels's (2016) critical dialectical pluralism, wherein the goal is to "give voice and to empower" (p. 54).

The methods adopted for this review include a systematic search strategy, followed by a critical appraisal of the studies and data extraction process. The adopted data analysis and synthesis process is a thematic analysis with global themes and subthemes arising from common groupings of codes.

When conducting this research, it was acknowledged that all researchers' observations are framed by the researcher's unique worldviews and experiences, in this case through a Pākehā/European lens (Mika & Stewart, 2017). Recognising that this can lead to potential bias, the researchers followed a robust, systematic process which aimed to mitigate any potential bias. While regular university, peer and cultural supervision ensured that the review was valid and trustworthy, it is acknowledged that one cannot remain wholly unbiased in human endeavours (Florczak, 2022; Onwuegbuzie & Frels, 2016).

### **Search strategy**

The Population, Interest, Context (PICO) framework for designing and planning the search strategy was used to focus the research (Butler et al., 2016). The following keywords were selected: teen\* OR youth OR adolescen\* AND student\* AND Zealand OR NZ OR Aotearoa OR Australia OR Australasia AND belongingness OR belong\* OR connect\* AND "high school" OR "secondary school" (B. Johnson, personal communication, April 7th, 2022). The electronic databases searched provided access to both education and counselling-based literature: EBSCOhost Discovery Service (which searches multiple databases including ERIC, Education Source, and PsycINFO), Scopus, NZresearch.org, A+ Education, Google Scholar, and Web of Science. Reference lists and citations for relevant studies were manually searched. Contact was made with experts in the field to gain reassurance and expert advice, as suggested by Dundar and Fleeman (2017). In addition to the keywords and selected databases, further limitations were determined by identifying specific inclusion and exclusion criteria (Table 1). The final search was conducted on 15th May 2022, following receipt of the low-risk ethics approval from Massey University.

Table 1. Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
Includes high school age youth	Early childhood, primary school or tertiary education
Secondary school aged 12–18y*	Students <12y and >18y
Qualitative research or qualitative part of MMR	Quantitative research
High school/secondary school	Published paper is older than ten years
Published in last 10 years 2012–2022	Before 2012
Student voice highlighted but not limited to	Any research which does not fall within the ethical principles of the Massey University Code of Ethical Conduct for Research, Teaching and Evaluations Involving Human Participants (Massey University, 2017).
NZ, Australia, Australasia	Outside NZ, Australia, Australasia
English Language	
*If multiple studies within one article, it may be included even if not all participants are >12y	

### **Included studies**

A total of 689 records were identified in the final search after removing all duplicates. Titles and abstracts of all 689 articles were then screened against the inclusion and exclusion criteria. From this, 40 full-text articles were selected and read in full to assess eligibility. Of these, 12 were excluded as the focus of the study was too broad, 11 did not meet inclusion criteria as they were quantitative studies, seven were excluded as they were not relevant to the research question, and two did not meet the population inclusion criteria (Figure 1). Eight studies were selected for inclusion. Five of these were peer-reviewed journal articles, two were chapters in doctoral dissertations, and one was an individual piece of research funded by the Dr Vince Ham eFellow scholarship in Aotearoa-New Zealand (Longley, 2021).

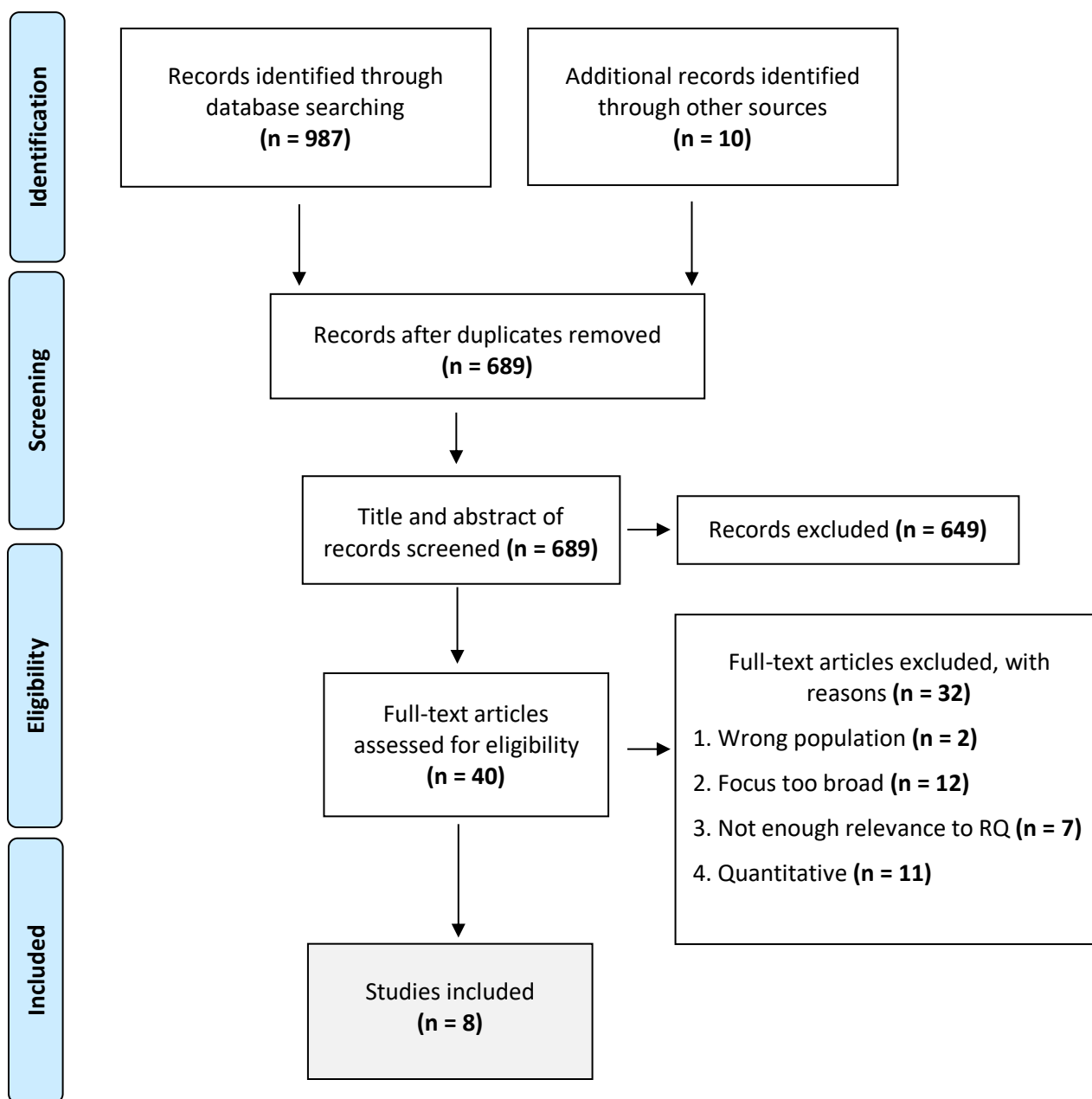


Figure 1. PRISMA flow diagram of study selection process

### Critical appraisal

The CASP qualitative checklist (Critical Appraisal Skills Programme, 2018) was used to critically review the selected articles. The CASP contains 10 questions which assess the quality of the articles by asking questions regarding whether the aim of the research was clearly articulated or if the research methodology and design was appropriate. The questions are grouped into four broader sections which assess the study’s aims, methodology, findings and the value of the research. Each item was

marked as either *yes* (item adequately addressed), *can't tell* (insufficient information provided) or *no* (item not adequately addressed), accompanied by a written summary justifying the selected choice.

The selected studies are qualitative, except for Sanders and Munford's (2016) mixed-methods longitudinal study. As it is the qualitative findings of Sanders and Munford's study which are included within this systematic review, the CASP was deemed appropriate for assessing the methodological strengths and limitations of the chosen studies. Seven of the eight studies were deemed very valuable in relation to the research question, and one was regarded as somewhat valuable due to its broader focus on youth citizenship. All eight studies clearly stated their aims, rationale for qualitative research methodology and the study findings. Only four of the eight studies adequately addressed recruitment strategy, researcher/participant relationship and rigour of data analysis. However, given that there were strengths across all of the articles, all eight were deemed acceptable for inclusion.

### **Data extraction and synthesis procedure**

Information pertaining to participant characteristics, research methodologies, and findings were extracted across the selected studies and tabulated (Table 2). Each article provided rich accounts of student experiences, with the voices of young people clearly presented across all eight papers. The combination of both peer-reviewed and grey literature meant some flexibility was required in relation to which sections of the studies were coded. As a general rule, findings and conclusions were coded, and if not possible, relevant sections were selected and coded. In addition, notes were taken highlighting any new codes or areas of interest and verbatim quotes were extracted and tabulated to provide richness to the findings.

### **Study and participant characteristics**

Table 2. Study and participant characteristics

<b>First author and date</b>	<b>Data collection date</b>	<b>Student participant characteristics</b>	<b>Methodology</b>	<b>Data collection and analytical approach</b>
Alesech (2021)	Not stated	n=6 (male n=3, female n=3) secondary school students (mean age 12.15 years) identified as having special educational needs and previous RTLB support. Ethnicity: NZ European/Pākehā = 6. (Aotearoa-New Zealand)	Qualitative descriptive case studies	Observation and interviews. Review of school reports and school mission statements. Analysed using thematic analysis.
Berryman (2019)	2001, 2005-2009, 2015	Māori students (in Years 9 and 10, or at the end of Year 13) attending state secondary schools in Aotearoa-New Zealand. Sample size, mean age, and gender are not stated. (Aotearoa-New Zealand)	Qualitative kaupapa Māori research design	Interviews and group discussions. Analysed using the qualitative, kaupapa Māori 'collaborative storytelling' approach.



Crooks (2021)	Not stated	n=5 (male n=4, female n=1) secondary school students (mean age 17.2 years) diagnosed with ASD, AS, HFA, or PDD-NOS (Autism). In mainstream education. Ethnicity: European = 4, South African = 1. (Aotearoa-New Zealand)	Qualitative multi-perspective phenomenological design	Participant-led, semi-structured interviews. Analysed using the Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) process.
Dadvand (2017)	2014 - 2015	n=12 (male n=7, female n=5) secondary school students (mean age 13.5 years). Attending mainstream school 4 days a week and alternative education classroom on site one day a week. Ethnicity not stated. (Australia)	Qualitative ethnographic study	Observations, focus group discussion and semi-structured interviews. Analysed using the constant comparative method.
Dadvand (2020)	2014 - 2015	n=1 (male) school student (age 12 years) diagnosed with ASD. Attending mainstream (sic) school 4 days a week and alternative education classroom on site one day a week. Ethnicity not stated. (Australia)	Qualitative ethnographic study	Observations, focus group discussion and semi-structured interviews. Analysed using the constant comparative method.
Ellery (2019)	Not stated	n=4 school students (in Years 7 to 11) identified as having received some level of RTL support. Mean age, gender and ethnicity not stated. (Aotearoa-New Zealand)	Qualitative grounded analysis methodology, appreciative inquiry approach	Photovoice and focus group discussions. Analysed using grounded analysis.
Longley (2021)	Not stated	n=15 (aged 15 to 18 years). Students with diverse cultural backgrounds including Indian, Chinese, Thai and African. All attending a state-funded senior high school, Years 11 to 13. Gender not stated. (Aotearoa-New Zealand)	Qualitative action research methodology. Kaupapa Māori research principles	Focus group discussions and interviews. Analysed using an unspecified qualitative process to generate themes.
Sanders (2016)	2016	n=107 (male n=63, female n=44) marginalised youth (mean age 17.49 years). Ethnicity: Māori = 55, Pacific Island = 17, NZ European/Pākeha = 34, other = 1. (Aotearoa-New Zealand)	Mixed-methods longitudinal study	Semi-structured interviews. Analysed using two stage process – horizontal thematic coding across all of the data and vertical individualised coding per participant.

### ***Ethical considerations***

Low-risk ethics approval (Ethics Notification Number: 4000025810) was received from Massey University on 4th May 2022. As a secondary piece of research, the review was deemed low risk. Informed consent was not required for this review; however, given that selected studies present findings from participants under the age of 16, quotes are presented with the identifier Student and First author's name to provide additional protection of anonymity to participants. The report aimed to reproduce the words and sentiments of the participants as authentically as possible.

## **Results**

### ***Synthesis of the data***

A systematic search of the literature resulted in the selection of eight studies for review. Following a rigorous thematic synthesis, four main themes were identified (Table 3). These were: a sense of belonging is a protective factor, teachers are pivotal in the creation of a sense of belonging, safe spaces are needed to belong, and schools experienced as unsafe spaces. In addition, 11 further sub-themes were grouped within these four and identified as resilience building, enhanced social and emotional outcomes, acceptance and inclusion, personalised approach, normalise differences, quality of teacher relationship, physical spaces, social and relational spaces, lateral violence, disengagement, and psychological and emotional distress.

The strongest theme to emerge from the thematic synthesis was the critical role teachers play in the creation of a sense of belonging for diverse students. Two dominant sub-themes within this were evidenced across all eight studies. The first of these, normalise differences, was clearly articulated through all the studies. Young people felt a sense of belonging when they were accepted for who they were, when their culture, strengths, and differences were celebrated, and they could be included without having to change who they were. "[I]nclusion' was experienced when teachers and conditions addressed the needs of each student creatively, flexibly, and relationally and took the onus off the student to 'adapt'" (Crooks, 2021, p. 328). Conversely, where teacher expectations, practices and values communicated a need for participants to change aspects of who they were to fit a set of unattainable normative structures (e.g. change their cultural identity, ability, socioeconomic status), students experienced a weak sense of belonging and correspondingly below par outcomes.

The second dominant sub-theme highlighted that the quality of the teacher-student relationship is key. Even though the studies represent a diverse range of participants, the similarities regarding this were very strong. Warm, welcoming, positive and authentic were acknowledged as teacher qualities which enhanced students' sense of belonging, whilst respectful and reciprocal relationships were essential for a strong sense of belonging. Furthermore, these relationships perpetuated positive student behaviours, which enhanced class climate, reflected favourably on student and teacher experiences and improved student motivation and outcomes. Apparent across these eight studies was that in high school education, the quality of the teacher-student relationship was deficient for many of the student participants, and for some, it was extremely damaging.

Table 3. Presence of themes across articles

Theme Subtheme	Alesech & Nayar (2021)	Berryman & Eley (2019)	Crooks (2021)	Dadvand (2017)	Dadvand (2020)	Ellery (2019)	Longley (2021)	Sanders & Munford (2016)
<b>A strong sense of belonging is a protective factor</b>	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓
Resilience building	✓	✓	✓					✓
Enhanced social and emotional outcomes	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
<b>Teachers are pivotal in the creation of a strong sense of belonging</b>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Acceptance and inclusion	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	
Personalised approach	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Normalise differences	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Quality of the teacher-student relationships	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
<b>Safe spaces are needed to belong</b>	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
Physical spaces	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
Social and relational spaces	✓	✓	✓		✓			
<b>Schools experienced as unsafe spaces</b>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
Lateral violence	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
Disengagement		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
Psychological and emotional distress		✓		✓	✓		✓	✓

Note. ✓ Theme evidenced in the study

## Discussion

Adopting a hybrid deductive-inductive approach to data analysis highlighted a couple of areas of interest that, while not consistent across studies are deemed worthy of mention. The first relates to the limited number of times academic achievement was attributed to the participants having a sense of belonging at school. The seminal work of Goodenow (1993) attests to the relationship between adolescents' sense of school belonging and school achievement. However, what has emerged from this review is that for diverse students a sense of belonging at school has greater impact on other aspects of their lives than academic outcomes.

The second area worth highlighting is the role of peers regarding diverse students' sense of belonging at school. Given that adolescence is a developmental period marked by a desire to conform with peers (Goodenow & Grady, 1993; Lines, 2011) it is noteworthy that peers were not a dominant theme across the studies. A couple of the studies reported participants wanting to be viewed the same as peers while also being acknowledged as unique individuals (Alesech & Nayar, 2021). However, it appears that for diverse students the school culture and teacher relationships are the key to their sense of belonging at school. Therefore, for outcomes to improve, diverse students' socioemotional need to belong appears to require an overt and personalised effort from the most dominant members of the school community, namely teachers and school leadership.

### ***A sense of belonging is a protective factor***

I think how lucky we are to enjoy success as Māori, and for that success not only to be for ourselves but for the collective, for our whānau, for our village. (Student, Berryman)

A sense of belonging was observed as having the power to build confidence, enabling participants to feel safe and creating opportunities for experiences of success (Alesech & Nayar, 2021; Berryman & Eley, 2019; Crooks, 2021; Sanders & Munford, 2016). For Māori students especially, this positive sense of belonging equates to success for the collective. These strong positive factors enhanced participants' social and emotional wellbeing and were acknowledged as powerful resilience-building factors in their lives. "[S]chool became a powerful resilience resource ... that fostered a sense of belonging despite feelings of difference" (Sanders & Munford, 2016, p. 165).

We have a strong sense of what it is to be Māori within our school. (Student, Berryman)

### ***Teachers are pivotal in the creation of a sense of belonging***

There's lots of things. Like they just go to you and say good job that was really good and like inside you that feels really, like cool. (Student, Alesech)

A sense of belonging was generated when teacher practices personalised students' school experiences. While differentiating curriculum content provides a way of meeting students' different academic needs these studies show that it was simple acts such as smiling, checking in, using students' names, displaying curiosity about students' interests/culture, or sharing something about themselves, that radically transformed participants' experiences of belonging.

The teacher I liked best wasn't Māori but he could have been. He knew all about our stuff. Like, he knew how to say my name. He never did dumb things like sitting on the tables. (Student, Berryman)

When referring to teacher practices, the sub-theme 'personalised approach' has been deliberately labelled instead of child/student-centred. The term student-centred is challenged by Berryman and Eley (2019), who state that the student who does not have a sense of belonging at school and who is not flourishing in the school environment will not benefit from student-centred learning. Furthermore, the notion of the term child-centred troubles one to question the homogeneity of the

word 'child'. Overtly preferencing the term 'personalised' draws attention to the pitfalls in creating catch-all concepts, such-as child-centred, in the name of meeting the diverse needs of individuals.

I think they [teachers] need ... like to understand that each student is different, and each student has needs that are different from others. (Student, Dadvand)

These studies show that diverse students are working hard to fit a normative narrative "when difference is visible, or created, then 'invisibly' the entire edifice of normativity is silently strengthened" (Crooks, 2021, p. 325). Where difference has been embraced, celebrated, and normalised, students reported a strong connection to school and have had experiences of feeling included. This has affirmed school as a place participants could experience success with the corresponding positive effect of improving outcomes.

[I]nstead of saying: 'Sit down!', they'll say: 'E noho!'. And they're using those small Māori sentences and scenarios to be able to make the classroom a friendlier environment for Māori students. (Student, Berryman)

Approaches which normalise difference through equitable practices enable diverse students to feel part of the school community. Conversely, treating students equally means that there has to be some standard against which everyone is measured, thus perpetuating normative standards.

Something that helps students get along is having a good teacher, like a teacher you respect and get along with. You like and respect them, and they like and respect you. (Student, Berryman)

One of the strongest themes across the studies was the nature of the relationship between teachers and students. It was not enough for teachers to be physically present to provide learning materials and instruction. The studies show that the most powerful element fostering a sense of belonging among diverse students was the relationship quality. "'[R]elaxed and positive' teachers brought joy, other teachers were experienced as being emotionally 'out of control'; they were described as 'emotional', raising their voice, making demands, or articulating threat, and anger" (Crooks, 2021, p. 311).

Be nice, that's always welcoming. (Student, Ellery)

### ***Safe spaces are needed to belong***

*Where would you like to sit?*

Middle.

*Why do you choose the middle?*

Because at the front the teachers talk too loud and at the back I can't hear properly. (Interviewer/Student, Alesech)

While geographical locations differed, what was consistent across the studies was the need for spaces in school where participants felt comfortable and at home. “Photovoice data showed a range of learning spaces around the school where students experienced ... comfort and a sense of belonging” (Ellery, 2019, p. 56). Students reported feeling a sense of security and safety in spaces they felt an affinity to, providing a buffer to other, less positive, experiences they encountered during the day. Physical spaces in school which reflect diverse students’ cultures, either through the practices within those spaces (kapa haka, singing, music) or through art displays and artefacts, strengthen the narrative that school is a place they can belong (Berryman & Eley, 2019; Longley, 2021).

I like coming in here to ... come in here and sit in silence or listen to music when I do my work. (Student, Ellery)

Facilitating opportunities for students to hold space alongside peers was an important ingredient for diverse students’ sense of belonging. It “begins with teachers creating a welcoming environment and creating a sense of belonging in the classroom” (Ellery, 2019). Creating opportunities for diverse students to be welcomed and supported in group work and classroom activities was transformational. When students experienced being part of something, their sense of belonging was strengthened which improved social, emotional, and academic outcomes.

At the end of the day you’ve got to have someone there, someone outside of your family; when there is all that shit going on in your family. School should be the one place where you can go to and just be yourself, doesn’t change who you are, but it’s a place you can go. (Student, Sanders)

### ***Schools experienced as unsafe spaces***

I feel like New Zealand has a lot of casual racism. Yes they do, especially towards Asians. (Student, Longley)

One of the strongest threads coming through this review speaks to the palpability of participants’ negative experiences at school. Experiences which eroded students’ sense of belonging were recorded across seven of the eight studies. School was not a safe place for them. “Students who spent more time in mainstream classes felt less safe and were singled out more often, especially when they had their idiosyncratic traits illuminated” (Crooks, 2021, p. 325). Across the studies, students consistently reported narratives of overt and covert acts of aggression.

Some teachers are racist. They say bad things about us. (Student, Berryman)

Rather than a resilience-building haven with the potential to be transformative, those popularly labelled at-risk were ironically most at-risk while at school. “Bullying was experienced as an ongoing problem for most autistic students” (Crooks, 2021, p. 316).

Schools were real hard to be honest. I was always bullied. I used to have girls rip my clothes, pull my hair. Coz we were poor, I never had my own shoes; I went to school in

the same clothes that I had worn for the past couple of days ... I was different, everyone laughed at me. (Student, Sanders)

Experiences of school practices which eroded participants' sense of belonging were frequent. Several studies reference monocultural structures, favouring dominant practices, as detrimental to diverse populations. "At its worst, [NCEA] was experienced as contributing to the perforation of the student 'body' into those who 'got it' and the dysfunctional ('retarded') 'other'" (Crooks, 2021, p. 326). Some students reported not fitting in, not being wanted by school and feeling rejected.

Teachers will often make reference to Pākehā popular culture "you will all have heard this song, your grandparents will have played it..." this immediately disconnects you from the class if you have not grown up in this culture or country. (Student, Longley)

Other students actively decided to disengage when they recognised they were not accepted for who they were, in essence when they felt they did not, or could not, belong. "[Student] ... found skipping school effective in dealing with what she described as "a negative school environment" (Dadvand, 2017, p. 90).

Teachers had favourites, I wasn't one of them, coz I'm not on the bright side so I was teased or ignored. So I got meself [sic] pinned as the class clown. Even when I tried to do the work, teachers would just not even bother with me so I was like, 'Fuck it, whatever'. (Student, Sanders)

Ultimately schools, when experienced as unsafe places, lead to psychological and emotional distress. Students across the studies make references to being voiceless, lonely, isolated, and feeling unsafe. Experiences at school which directly contribute to the erosion of a young person's sense of belonging, safety and wellbeing sit in direct contrast to the ethical principles of teaching and education (Education Council New Zealand, 2017). "[C]hildren who daily experience school as frightening, hostile, foreign, or unwelcoming are likely at some point to either remove themselves or precipitate circumstances where the school excludes them" (Sanders & Munford, 2016, p. 164).

In school, it's so dramatic. There is [sic] always things happening, [you] have to worry about things. It's a stressful place. (Student, Dadvand)

### **Limitations**

It is important to acknowledge the limitations of this review. This study set out to give voice to a diverse range of high school students yet was unable to include a study representative of the experiences of rainbow students who are over-represented in the negative outcome statistics, including higher rates of anxiety, depression, self-harm and suicide (Fenaughty et al., 2019). Fenaughty et al. (2019), drawing on quantitative data from the Youth '12 survey, hypothesise that a strong sense of school belonging would be a significant protective factor for rainbow students. In addition, the small number of available qualitative studies from which findings were drawn limits the generalisability of findings.

The use of student voice is highlighted as both a limitation and a strength. Student voice is viewed as a strength because listening to and privileging the experiences of diverse students creates a shift in the power dynamic and acknowledges “students’ rights as active participants ... in school” (Cook-Sather, 2006, p. 366), however, it has limitations. By reproducing excerpts of student narratives, student voice becomes researcher’s voice. Every effort has been made to present the verbatim excerpts as authentically as possible, acknowledging that the students themselves were unable to review and validate this (Robertson, 2017). As student voice offers one perspective only, it too limits generalisability and can be seen as a limitation.

## Conclusion and implications

### *Implications for practice*

Relating this study to the role of counsellors in high school, there is an opportunity for counsellors to draw on these findings in their role in promoting social justice and diversity (New Zealand Association of Counsellors-Te Roopu Kaiwhiriwhiri o Aotearoa, 2002). This further extends to supporting and educating teacher colleagues so they may practice in relational ways, creating partnerships between educators and learners (Robertson, 2017). For high school teachers, the findings highlight the crucial role they play in adding value to the lives of diverse students and highlight the deleterious impact on diverse students when this relationship breaks down.

### *Recommendations for future research*

There is a gap in the literature exploring the subjective experiences of LGBTIQ+ students in relation to their feelings of belonging at high school in Aotearoa-New Zealand. A case could also be argued for a larger primary study across a range of high schools which aims to capture the voice of a diverse range of students within a single study. Additionally, investigating belongingness as a core need, which links to mental health and wellbeing outcomes for students in school, and its position in Aotearoa-New Zealand’s school curriculum documents could be examined.

### *Conclusion*

The themes and subthemes identified in this review show that a sense of belonging can be viewed as a driver of improved outcomes for diverse students. When students feel they belong, they feel safe and secure, and the positive effects are numerous. Conversely, when students do not feel they belong, they feel unsafe, with corresponding negative effects, which are many. Currently, the diverse populations represented in these studies are over-represented by increasing negative trends. Policymakers are shifting a sense of belonging toward the surface of education documentation; however, for outcomes to improve for diverse students, belongingness needs to be centralised and understood as a key element across every aspect of high school education.

The high school experience has the capacity to be the most wonderful resilience-building resource for diverse students. This review shows that our traumatised, vulnerable, minority and indigenous students require overt acts of kindness and acceptance to develop a strong sense of belonging at school. Staff in schools are positioned to bolster this resilience-building resource simply by



welcoming, acknowledging and valuing each student and celebrating their differences. These studies show us that fostering a strong sense of belonging starts with the most basic acts. It is as simple as acknowledging the person in front of us as a unique individual, welcoming them into the space and showing warmth and care with a smile.

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## AUTHOR PROFILES



### **Sarah Darke**

Sarah is the Head of Guidance at New Plymouth Boys High School. Before her role as a counsellor, Sarah worked as a teacher in primary and secondary schools in the UK and Aotearoa-New Zealand. Following this she worked as an itinerant teacher of ORS-funded students, a teacher in Alternative Education settings and as a Special Education Adviser at The Ministry of Education. Before moving to New Zealand, Sarah completed a Bachelor of Education, Art and Design (Hons) at Plymouth University, UK. She has a Graduate Diploma in Psychology and a Post Graduate Diploma in Education. Sarah's Master of Counselling Studies explored the importance of belongingness in improving outcomes for diverse students in the margins of inclusive education. Sarah is passionate about supporting young people so they can experience success in a safe, supported, inclusive, and equitable education system.

Email: [sarah.darke@npbhs.school.nz](mailto:sarah.darke@npbhs.school.nz)



### **Kayleen Clark-Howard**

Kayleen is a Lecturer at Massey University, Institute of Education, based on the Albany campus in Auckland. Prior to joining Massey University, she worked as a teacher, Special Education Needs Coordinator (SENCO) and Learning Support Coordinator (LSC) in various secondary schools in Aotearoa-New Zealand. Her Master of Education (Inclusive Education) explored New Zealand secondary school teachers' understanding of inclusion and how this understanding influences their practice. She is currently working on her PhD which aims to reimagine human development within an inclusive paradigm. Passionate about inclusion and inclusive education, where a human rights approach informs her understanding, she aims to promote inclusive education philosophies, aligning her research with the United Nations 2030 Sustainable Development Goals, specifically Goal 4, which aims towards global, inclusive, equitable, quality education and lifelong learning for all.

Email: [k.clark-howard@massey.ac.nz](mailto:k.clark-howard@massey.ac.nz)