‘Fitting in’ in high school: how adolescent belonging is influenced by locus of control beliefs

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Social interactions in the high school context are the source material for more enduring perceptions of fitting in for adolescents. Prior research demonstrates that perceptions of belonging relate to school engagement and academic outcomes. This study extends theories of adolescent belonging in school to highlight how individual differences in locus of control exist across adolescents’ with disparate levels of belonging. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 34 adolescents. The methods of interpretive science were used to explore adolescent sense-making around navigating fitting in with peers. This analysis identified that adolescents’ locus of control beliefs differed across levels of perceived belonging. Results provide evidence for both the need to account for individual differences in conceptualising adolescent belonging in school and the consideration of teaching practice and task structure when designing school-based interventions.

Keywords: belonging; locus of control; adolescents; high school; interviews

1. Introduction

Fitting in, or gaining peer acceptance, is a primary objective of youth in the high school context and, for many adolescents, may be more important than academic goals (Crosnoe, 2011; Eccles & Roeser, 2011). Not surprisingly then, perceptions of belonging have been determined to have important effects on adolescent development, influencing both social and academic outcomes (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Walton & Cohen, 2007). For example, the prevalence of teasing and bullying as perceived by adolescents is predictive of dropout rates among those students (Cornell, Gregory, Huang, & Fan, 2013).

Foundationally, perceptions of belonging represent the perceived nature of social interactions that adolescents experience in schools. Over time, these accumulated interactional experiences become the source material for more enduring perceptions of the school social climate, broadly, and peer acceptance, more specifically. Assertions that perceptions of belonging have an interactional basis are well established, but existing conceptual models offer less specificity about individual differences among the youth that influence such interactions.

In this study, we explore one such individual difference, perceptions of locus of control. To do so, we use the methods of interpretive science to compare the meaning highly socially connected adolescents make concerning peer acceptance to the meaning less socially connected adolescents make about fitting in with their peers. A central premise of our approach is that existing empirically based theories of social belonging are best characterised as adult-centric. Such theories have largely ignored the meaning that adolescents themselves make of social interactions as the source material for perceptions.

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of belonging. In the following sections, we review the relevant literature around the developmental contexts of schools and the importance of peer acceptance in schools, explore the emergent characteristic differences of perceptions of fitting in between youth identified as having high or low levels of social connectedness (SC) and hypothesise how these differences may shape a school experience.

1.1. Schools as contexts for adolescent development

Schools are a predominant learning environment for social conduct, social skill development and of important social understandings that begin in early childhood (Eccles & Roeser, 2011). For adolescents in particular, the peers they interact with in high schools are important information sources for youth coming to understand how they are likely perceived in society at large. Peers provide young people with abundant information about who they appear to be and hold power to assign other youth into social categories based on perceived social characteristics (Stone, Barber, & Eccles, 2008) – both of which greatly influence the normative work of identity formation (Crosnoe, 2011).

At the same time, research suggests that the transition into secondary school comes with less social support from teachers, peers and parents and may result in lower academic engagement (Wang & Eccles, 2012). The phenomenon of decreasing support may be especially true in overly sanctioned urban schools. In these environments, teachers and administrators are even more pressured to create classrooms focused solely on academic goals in order to increase student performance on high stakes testing (Anagnostopoulos & Rutledge, 2007). These high-stakes environments can engender diminished motivation for many youth (Meece, Anderman, & Anderman, 2005). Thus, many urban youth experience high schools within which the exclusive focus on standardised test performance fosters environments with little desire to structure meaningful opportunities for youth to engage in formal and informal social interactions with their peers while receiving ongoing emotional support from school-based adults within a positive climate.

Importantly, fostering adolescents’ sense of belonging in schools need not come at the expense of learning in schools. High-achieving school environments often emphasise high expectations and value on learning while simultaneously valuing each student within the school community (Lee & Smith, 2001). Teaching practices that support both academic achievement and intentionally use classroom management strategies to positively affect the social climate of a classroom lead to both achievement gains and increased pro-social behaviour among students (Gest & Rodkin, 2011).

1.2. Belonging in school

Evidence for the need to belong among adolescents has been consistently cited in research on applied adolescent development in schools (see, e.g. Crosnoe, 2011; Eccles & Roeser, 2011; Goodenow, 1993). The need to belong is examined in the literature in both developmental and context-specific ways. Baumeister and Leary (1995) regard the need to belong as the need to experience consistent and caring interaction with others. The need to belong can both promote behavioural change in an individual and be an outcome of the social environment resulting from the perceptions of the social climate derived from school experiences (Juvonen, 2006).

As such, sense of belonging is an influential self-perception in relation to adolescents’ school success. Some research found that sense of belonging in school was correlated with higher grades at the end of the year, as well as students’ expectations for success and value
of the work they did in school (Anderman, 2002). As a mediator between motivation and achievement for youth in school environments that can be specifically influenced by peer group membership in schools, belonging is essential to engagement and achievement behaviour (Fairecloth & Hamm, 2011). Finn’s (1989) influential model of the process of school dropout suggests that feelings of not fitting in at school are central to such processes and that strong social bonds work to assuage delinquent behaviours of youth in schools. The emphasis on social bonds as a means of mitigating delinquent behaviour and increasing feelings of connection to school is echoed in other research such that ‘environments characterized by caring and supportive relationships facilitate student engagement and other adaptive school behaviors’ (Juvonen, 2006, p. 656), whereas disconnected environments undermine these behaviours. Disconnected youth cannot leverage or activate the supportive potential of the school environment.

1.3. Locus of control

In a review of the literature, Gilmor (1978) established that from adolescence to adulthood, one’s internal locus of control correlated to more adaptive characteristics and performance that shape social and academic outcomes. A person’s locus of control can also be described as a perception of control,

the degree to which persons expect that a reinforcement or an outcome of their behavior is contingent on their own behavior or personal characteristics versus the degree to which persons expect that the reinforcement or outcome is a function of chance, luck, or fate, is under the control of powerful others, or is simply unpredictable. (Rotter, 1990, p. 489)

Academic achievement and locus of control are related in important ways. Perceived control affects behaviour and emotion; greater sense of control leads to more enthusiasm and beliefs about success in academic settings (Patrick, Skinner, & Connell, 1993). The influence of locus of control on academic achievement occurs because beliefs about personal agency that influence behavioural action, including the belief personal effort and competency, were available to achieve a goal (Ford, 1987). Adolescents who believe that they have little agency are less likely to engage in achievement behaviours. Thus, external locus of control can be a critical factor for students who are more likely to experience academic difficulty and/or leave school early (Finn & Rock, 1997).

This lack of a sense of agency may also transfer to social contexts and influence youth to believe that they have little control over the outcomes of their social interactions. When youth perceive a lack of peer acceptance and belonging, they may feel that they have little control in influencing their own social success, and this may especially be the case for many marginalised youth (Graham, Bellmore, Nishina, & Juvonen, 2009).

1.4. The present study

The purpose of this study is to explore how adolescents’ locus of control beliefs contributes to a young person’s perceptions of peer acceptance and belonging in high school. The analyses of adolescent narrative accounts generated during open-ended interviews (N = 34) afforded us the opportunity to develop empirically based understandings about individual differences that may be overlooked, or ignored, in less interpretively oriented designs. We were guided by two specific research questions in this study:

1. Do adolescents across disparate levels of belonging in high school interpret the task of navigating fitting in similarly? If not, what is the nature of the differences?
2. How do contextual factors influence adolescent perceptions of belonging and the task of navigating fitting in?

To answer these research questions, we created analytic contrast cases of socially connected ($n = 21$) and socially disconnected youth ($n = 13$) to identify characteristic differences in the sense-making of adolescents who do and do not feel they fit in with their peers. In seeking to identify any potential differences, we contextualised the importance of such differences within an interactional model of adolescent school-based social bonds. Such a conceptualisation recognises the potential of contextual factors, such as the role that teachers play in enhancing or undermining the feelings of belonging among their adolescent students and the nature of the tasks provided to youth, to influence adolescent meaning-making.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Adolescent participants were recruited through public high schools and youth development programmes in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, St Paul, Minnesota and Minneapolis, Minnesota (see Table 1 for adolescent participant profiles). The high schools in Pittsburgh serve primarily African American students from working class, urban communities. The Saint Paul site was a Boys and Girls Club located in an urban community in which many participants from a nearby high school in the same community were active members. Finally, interviewees were also recruited from an afterschool programme in Minneapolis that was connected to students’ high school and sponsored by the school district. The members of our research team played differing and multiple roles throughout the research process. For instance, two of the three authors have secondary teaching experience and had previously conducted research studies in collaboration with these sites. Based on recommendations from teachers, programme coordinators and the youth themselves, our selection of participants took into account gender, achievement level and racial and ethnic diversity. A total of 34 students participated in semi-structured interviews. See Table 2 for demographic information.

2.2. Procedure

Individual semi-structured participant interviews lasted between 25 and 45 min and were recorded and then transcribed verbatim for analysis. Guided by theory (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Crosnoe, 2011; Juvonen, 2006) and our own experiences with urban youth, the interview protocol explored students’ perceptions of belonging in high school, school-based social bonds, educational aspirations and experiences in the classroom, as well as non-instructional spaces within the school. To enhance adolescents’ ability to provide specific details about their experiences in schools, elicitation devices (such as laminated index cards labelled with the concepts related to belonging – acceptance, respect and support) were used during the interviews.

2.3. Data analyses

We coded interview transcripts to identify levels of SC of our participants by using items adapted from the Social Connectedness Scale-Revised, a measure used to gauge SC of the independent self to others (Lee, Draper, & Lee, 2001). As Lee et al. (2001) noted that ‘social connectedness is considered an attribute of the self that reflects cognitions of enduring

International Journal of Adolescence and Youth 465
The measure was chosen because it reflects individual perceptions of relation to others deemed necessary for the development of a sense of belonging. The interview transcripts were carefully examined, and examples that reflected items from the SC scale were identified. For instance, the excerpt, 'I don’t feel like I belong. It’s just like hey we’re here we so happen to be at the same place,’ was connected to the item ‘I feel like an outsider.’ Excerpts like these provided us with relatively concrete examples of how participants felt about their relations to peers in school. Afterwards, we established analytic contrast cases of adolescents ranked high or low on SC (see Table 2). These comparative cases provided us a means to test for hypothesised links between belonging and perception of control over peer acceptance.

Using the ATLAS.ti software package, we completed a two-cycle coding process (Saldaña, 2009). The first cycle coding consisted of a structural coding method, examining large sections of interview text which identified peer relations, social belonging and school
belonging discussion. This coding facilitated the creation of a reduced data-set focused exclusively on peer relationships, peer acceptance and peer interactions. The second cycle coding consisted of an emergent coding method, used to explore adolescent perceptions of the role their peers play in their school setting. During this coding process, we examined data within the interview transcripts, which highlighted the individual’s experiences and perceptions of their peers in the school environment. Some codes included constructs such as feeling known, school identity and creating social belonging. These codes were examined for convergence and divergence and, where necessary, were combined or split to ensure consistency. Finally, analytic memos (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995; Graue & Walsh, 1998), discussing initial thoughts about codes and their relation, helped inform our discussions and interpretations at various steps of analysis.

3. Results

Our analyses identified the ways that participants’ perceptions of control related to fitting in among their peers and how these experiences differed across levels of SC. Youths categorised as low in SC expressed feeling little personal control in their abilities to fit in among their peers. In describing examples of how one creates a sense of fitting in with their peers, low SC youth typically described ‘fitting in’ in external ways. Although they saw themselves as individuals with personal interests, their ability to fit in depended on how others would accept them and other things beyond their control. At the other end of the spectrum, youth evaluated as higher in SC described fitting in in ways that emphasised individual control and choice in social interaction. Variability did occur within the high SC group as well as within the low SC group, as one would expect along a SC continuum. However, the differences between the categories were quite stark across our analysis. Examples of these findings are presented below.

3.1. Youth with low levels of SC

Overall, youth who identified with low levels of SC ($n = 13, 38.2\%$) were more likely to represent their perceptions of control in fitting in with their peers as external to themselves. These students explained that peers were in control of determining the criteria for which youth could fit in with certain social groups and that, in order to fit in, conformity was
necessary. For instance, Elijah (17-year-old, 11th grade), a youth we characterised as having a low sense of belonging emphasised in his interview that, in order to fit in, it was necessary to figure out what others like, and align one’s interests accordingly. He explained:

I would have to say that trying to fit into a certain group that they would like to be around. But my way of fitting in is just to be yourself you know like I can’t see my trying to fit in with a group that’s different from me like I – at lunch I sit by myself cause I don’t try to fit in, you know, but yeah if like say if I was to be the person that would try to fit in. I would go over there to a group and see what they talking about and just start talking and asking other kids about what they like, not what I like, you know.

In addition to asserting that fitting in involved finding out about others’ interests, rather than emphasising one’s own, Elijah alluded to the necessity to supplant himself into a cultural norm in order to find belonging among his peers. The theme of incongruence between what is known about oneself privately and what is needed to be accepted publicly was observed frequently among adolescents with low levels of SC. Another youth, for example, Rico (16-year-old, 11th grade) described how he saw others trying to fit in at his school: ‘Just try to fit in. Like try to be like the other people in there, and do the same things that they do…because you don’t want to get picked on because you’re different, so they just do that….’ Thus, for Rico, fitting in meant doing what others are doing. More specifically, he elaborated that being different will encourage being ‘picked on’, so instead it is better to act like your peers, even if your interests are not aligned with theirs. Importantly, Rico seemed to believe that being yourself was not an option and that conforming to the expectations of others was necessary to engage with peers and avoid ridicule. In this way, he expressed a sense of having very little control in social interactions and his success socially was largely dependent on the judgement by others. Essentially, Rico saw others as the decision-makers in his social participation. A perceived external locus of control, the belief that powerful others have control over desired outcomes, significantly influenced some participants’ experience of belonging in high school. This often showed up as a resigned acceptance of a continued mismatch between one’s self-concept and the perception of others.

The view that peers exerted greater control over the way in which a youth would be perceived was consistent throughout the narrative accounts of low socially connected youth with some exceptions. One of these exceptions was Trent (16-year-old, 10th grade) who also shared how he saw youth trying to find fitting in with their peers. Below, Trent described what it means when someone says they fit in at their school:

I guess you would just feel comfortable with the people around you and but like that can mean different things. I mean you could still not be a popular kid, but… the people that you hang around might not be as popular as you. You may feel comfortable around [them] so you can just fit into that point.

Trent interestingly explained that his peer group could be less popular than he was but expressed comfort with the interpretation of him they are likely to possess. Trent’s sense-making, however, contrasted with other low SC youth because he perceived that he did have control in choosing to be around those whom accept his perception of self. At the same time, he did indicate that he is not actually in control of fitting in with his peers, suggesting that those with whom he fits in with are not really the peers he would choose if he could. Trent’s interpretations of his social interactions offers support to theories suggesting that adolescents experience placement into social roles by their peers that have little to do with the way they see themselves (see, e.g. Crosnoe, 2011; Frank et al., 2008; Stone et al., 2008). For youth with low levels of SC, the control associated with ways of fitting in is outside of themselves. These youth presented a perception of their social worlds in that being different is unacceptable. In their narrative accounts of belonging in
school, they consistently proposed that it is necessary to sacrifice one’s sense of self to conform to a desired social peer group.

The participants’ perceptions illustrate the dissonance found between internal perceptions of self and what they see as external perceptions about them. For example, in his work with high school youth, Crosnoe (2011) found that the very worst thing youth could experience in their school was to not feel accepted for who they were, and argued that these youth were more likely to experience identity discrepancies that can result in maladaptive coping strategies. For example, Rico illuminated this identity discrepancy as he described changing the way you are in order to not get picked on for being different, and Elijah stated that his strategy included socially isolating himself if he found difficulty in fitting in with a desired social group of peers. Both examples are likely counterproductive coping strategies. Nevertheless, participants with low SC regarded control over their social fit as being external from themselves, with little that they can do outside of conforming to others, to have any effect in their belonging. These youths’ perceptions echo the elements of locus of control (Rotter, 1966), and posit that feeling that others have greater control in their outcomes than they do can contribute to a perpetual feeling of inability to achieve. However, as levels of SC increased, so did perceptions of personal control in fitting in among one’s peers. For example, Trent, who exhibited greater perception of SC, shared control as an individual whom is able to present the self with whom he identifies, but still perceived that others are in control of his acceptance and social belonging. Trent, for example, still experienced social exclusion, but seemingly felt as if he had greater control in his own ability to fit in among his peers. The difference in perception of control contrasts with Elijah and Rico, as Trent exhibited less indication of identity discrepancy and of counterproductive coping mechanisms associated with his experience of not fitting in.

### 3.2. Youth with high levels of SC

Overall, youth with higher levels of SC (n = 21, 61.8%) demonstrated perceptions of greater control in social interaction with their peers. In general, these adolescents perceived sharing perceptions of control with other youth and themselves, but exhibited a significantly higher sense of personal control than youth identified as low in SC. Some high SC participants described both an internal and external sense of control for fitting in with their peers. More often, these youth perceived that they possessed a mutual, and in some cases, greater sense of control of fitting in. Brandon (14-year-old, 9th grade) shared his thoughts on the importance of students fitting in at school by recounting how he felt when he was a new student:

> Yeah, kind of. I don’t know, like, what I think about that is it’s like you want to fit in. You feel like you’re a new person in school and you just feel left out. That’s how I felt when I switched school, ’cause I didn’t feel like I was fitting in and I was part of the school yet. Then eventually, like a couple months passed by, and then I got the hang of it. I didn’t get lost at school, and then I felt more fitting in.

 Appropriately, locus of control should be viewed on a continuum where an individual may have varying levels of sense of control in relation to context (Rotter, 1990). Brandon’s excerpt exhibited this variability. Brandon mostly expressed shared control over others’ perceptions of him as an individual, and his own control to pursue fitting in with peers.

In another example, Jennifer (16-year-old, 11th grade) echoed shared perception of control. Specifically, she articulated how she sees herself fitting in with her peers. ‘Well my friends do that out of respect. Just like I got to respect. That’s me treating them the way I want to be treated or it’s not gonna be worth. It’s not. We’re not friends.’ Jennifer
identified mutual respect as key to friendships and that without mutual respect they would not have had a friendship. This reciprocity in respect contributes to a feeling of control located across both Jennifer and her peers. A significant difference between low SC and high SC youth was in the higher sense of control that high SC youth felt over their social worlds. This perception of control seemed to influence their ability to cope appropriately with the task of fitting in among, and finding social belonging with their peers. Increase in perception of internal control moving with increasing levels of SC extends into the narrative accounts of those participants who presented with the highest level of SC. For example, Jeff (18-year-old, 12th grade) described that a major part of fitting in is the ability to connect with one’s peers easily:

When you fit in at your school…in my perspective, that means you’re well rounded like; 'cause everybody’s different. And I think when you kind of fit in, you kind of like blend – you can work with different people…you can go into a classroom and not know anybody but like you could sit down and like be willing to work with each other…

Jeff described that fitting in to him is being able to work with others who are different from you, the ability to work with anyone. Jeff believed that he has the control over his own ability to fit in amongst his peers. He described personal action in which he initiates fitting in and finding social belonging. Much as Ford (1987) described that personal agency initiates action towards achievement, this youth described feeling as if he wanted to change his circumstance and had the personal power to do so, thus promoting him to take action. Essentially, Jeff exhibited the feeling of personal control in fitting in with his peers. He recognised that everybody is different, but that those differences have no effect in his personal ability to find belonging. The influence that such perceptions of control have on experiences of belonging supports conceptualisations of the importance and influence a youth’s school-based peers have on the social position in which an adolescent is cast and how perceptions of control to personally direct this positioning may fundamentally influence experiences of belonging.

3.3. The influence of locus of control on school experiences

Participant interviews characterise the differences seen between internal and external locus of control and how they play out in the classroom and school settings in these excerpts from a youth with higher SC and a youth with lower SC. For example, Jayla (18-year-old, 12th grade) was asked whether she had experienced respect, support and acceptance from other kids in her school.

Yes…there was kids – usually I wouldn’t talk to, and then they started speaking to me, I started speaking to them. They needed advice or support or needed help on class work I helped them, and that made us – that made me accept them for who they are and we made strong bonding friendships.

Jayla felt personal control in creating social belonging among herself and classmates with whom she did not normally talk, how those interactions were defined by supporting each other academically and how those connections helped her create SC with her peers. Furthermore, this social connection occurred in the context of completing a shared task, thus allowing Jayla to build relationships in the classroom setting and to foster academically beneficial relationships. An internal locus of control benefited Jayla in both social belonging and achievement through motivating her to engage with her peers in the classroom.

Conversely, another participant, Trent, suggested that he felt little control over fitting in. He shared that he experienced great distress from participation in a remedial
programme that was meant to bolster his achievement. He described why his participation in this programme made him feel as if he did not belong:

The Promise Route... I mean because the reason why I was in there was completely different from all the reasons they were in there. Like the other kids were in there, I mean it was just weird. It was just a weird place, especially being like the only White kid in there... I listen to rock music and I'm nerdy and stuff like that.

Here, the contrast highlights how Trent's perception of control in fitting in and creating social belonging affected his orientation towards classroom environment. Whereas Jayla and her peers were able to work together for mutual benefit, Trent essentially isolated himself, choosing not to seek out academic support in a programme designed to offer extra support to students at-risk for academic failure.

It appears that locus of control may work as an identifying factor for youth who are at greater likelihood to experience problems associated with a sense of not fitting in. Adolescent accounts of their experiences of belonging in high school also provided evidence that locus of control can affect both their perceptions of ability to achieve in school and in social contexts. As such, the experience of external perception of control appears to produce bi-directional effects for social belonging and academic achievement. Examples of these types of activities, described by adolescents during their interviews, include one shared by Malik, below, who was identified as high in SC. Malik shared a school experience in which he felt like he belonged:

[On a school sponsored hiking trip] I think because like you need them so... say for instance I was having trouble getting down the hill and he’s been on the trip before and he knows what he’s doing so he comes and helps me out, and like from that right there it’s just like basically you made a new friend.

In a similar vein, Brandon, identified as low in SC, described an experience of school belonging:

I guess when I was in a big group activity with all the kids here. We actually had to work together... everybody was trying to decorate the class doors. We was all working together trying to make our door the prettiest the best door our there so that was a time where I felt that I kinda belong at this school. We’re having fun everyone’s getting along.

Malik and Brandon highlight that the nature of the activities within which they engage in school influence the kind of social interactions they are afforded. Interestingly, these kinds of socially low-risk but high-interest activities deviated from the narrative descriptions of other social interactions that occurred outside of the context of specific structured activities. Adolescents placed value on adult-created and facilitated school activities that engendered high levels of interest and engagement from participants and created positive, inclusive, productive interactions. Across these types of activities, adolescents were required to work as teams to accomplish specific tasks. This appeared to produce interactional spaces that were less dependent or influenced by individual differences in perceptions of control. Thus, it may be the case that such activities neutralise individual differences and promote more equitable opportunities for joint participation in the co-construction of belonging experiences for all adolescents.

4. Discussion

In this study, we examined adolescent perceptions of belonging as related to students' locus of control vis-à-vis fitting in with peers. As discussed, locus of control refers to the extent that individuals feel influence over their outcomes (Rotter, 1966). Our results indicate that youth with high sense of belonging tended to exhibit higher levels of internal
locus of control in described peer interactions, whereas youth with low sense of belonging exhibited increasing levels of external control, believing that peers and peer groups tend to control if and how they fit in at school.

Just as a student’s external locus of control can lead to academic struggles (Finn & Rock, 1997), our data suggest a similar association between locus of control and sense of belonging. When youth felt they had little personal control to influence their own belonging across their social worlds, they felt powerless to the perceptions that their peers placed upon them. In other words, participants in our study with an external locus of control felt as if the outcomes of their efforts were little in their own control, and were influenced more by factors in their environment. Our interviews with students categorised as low in social connection suggest that these youth exhibit specific challenges in relation to normative identity work due to discrepancies between their own and others’ perceptions of their personal view of self. A central implication of our results is the potential for locus of control to operate as a characteristic variable able to identify youth more likely to experience problematic effects of not fitting in among their peers, such as maladaptive coping strategies or discrepant identity challenges.

4.1. Theoretical implications

Broadly speaking, our results support and advance theories related to the role self-presentation strategies can play in the development of problematic identity discrepancies and social marginalisation for youth (see, e.g. Baumeister & DeWall, 2005; Crosnoe, 2011). More specifically, our results suggest a need for empirically validated models of how teachers, as facilitators of social processes in their classrooms, influence peer relationships. As an example, the concept of network-related teaching (Gest & Rodkin, 2011) is one such relevant component of a conceptual model that attends to how adolescent–teacher interactions facilitated through a teacher’s instructional practice shape the peer ecology of the classroom.

Current theories of adolescent social belonging, even those focused on school-based experiences, mostly ignore the concrete particulars of interactions in the classroom (largely facilitated through a teacher’s instructional practice) that either enhance or undermine adolescents’ belonging. Moreover, existing conceptual models of belonging often fail to account for individual differences among adolescents as relevant sources of variation. This study found locus of control to be one such source of meaningful variation, but there are likely others.

4.2. Future directions

In school, the lack of perceived belonging often leads to disengagement from schoolwork and overall disconnection from school (Crosnoe, 2011). Likewise adolescents are most engaged in environments, in which they feel competent, autonomous and related to others (Wang & Peck, 2013). A productive line of inquiry would aim to identity effective intervention strategies for fostering adolescent engagement in high school. Such strategies would necessarily account for individual differences among students as well as acknowledge and leverage the social worlds of youth. In this study, youth across SC levels consistently reported that highly engaging activities that involved low social risk with their peers contributed to situational feeling of belonging in their schools. Adolescents’ desire to make authentic and productive contributions to their environment along with their need for meaningful social interaction should inform future intervention work.
Future research could also identify teaching practices that productively manage the social culture of classrooms to positively influence peer relationships that promote belonging across diverse youth. For example, classroom management techniques may be more or less effective at engaging adolescents in socially supportive ways in order to create an environment for feelings of fitting in to emerge. How teachers create more cohesive classrooms with greater mutual support and perceived responsibility among students are central research questions.

Such research would help advance empirically based theories, which specify the relations of belonging, activity structure and participation level, and engagement and academic achievement while accounting for important sources of individual difference. These research efforts focused on continued understanding of the elements that engender social and school belonging in youth would inform school reform efforts aimed at producing positive outcomes for adolescents far beyond the school years. Moreover, mixed methods studies focusing on the relationship between previously developed concepts and emerging understanding of youth meaning around belonging and fitting in in schools may provide the depth and breadth necessary to fully understand their implications in youth development.

4.3. Conclusion

In this study, we examined the ways that adolescent students made sense of fitting in with their high school peers. We adopted a locus of control framework to understand youth perceptions of their own authority over their social worlds. By investigating, through narratives, youth we identified as high in SC and youth who were low in SC, we highlighted the meaning-making of adolescent youth, a group whose voices are typically unheard in educational research. As Crosnoe (2011) argued, there exists a significant difference between the theoretical and adult view of high schools as centred upon academics with what high school really is about for youth – navigating peer acceptance and achieving belonging. Thus, the work of school-based adults must also be grounded in the context of adolescents’ peer relationships. Research and interventions aimed at supporting the positive development of youth must be contextualised within the reality of the lives of the adolescents who are to benefit from them.

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