



Anchored or Unravelling: Rethinking Persistent Absenteeism Through School Belonging

School of Psychological Sciences and Health

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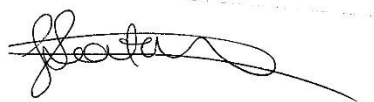
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Declaration

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Signed:

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'J. G. Taylor', written over a horizontal line.

Date: 20/10/2025

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Abstract

This thesis addresses an important and timely question: What role does school belonging play in influencing school attendance among persistently absent young people? It addresses a significant gap in the literature examining how school belonging mediates school attendance and amplifies the voices of young people, highlighting the policy and practical implications.

Study 1 is a scoping review of 73 studies that systematically maps the research on school attendance and belonging. It identifies key trends, methodological limitations, and a lack of youth voice and intervention-based research. The review highlights a field dominated by exploratory and cross-sectional studies, with limited causal analysis. From this, a preliminary conceptual model is developed to illustrate how belonging impacts attendance across various systems.

Study 2 builds on these findings by engaging persistently absent young people through two iterative exploratory and confirmatory semi-structured interviews. These sought to understand their experiences of school belonging and attendance, assess the relevance of the conceptual model, and co-design a candidate intervention. The young people's views aligned strongly with relational themes in the model but also identified areas needing refinement, such as the role of mental health, peer interactions, and gender. The candidate intervention was judged to be feasible and appropriate, although further research is required.

Together, these findings confirm that school belonging is a dynamic, context-dependent factor that plays a pivotal role in attendance. It can both anchor school attendance and unravel it. Belonging is influenced by relational, individual, and systemic factors and is experienced as both protective and fragile. This research highlights the pressing need for flexible, youth-informed, and relationally grounded interventions. It underscores the importance of ongoing research to pilot and evaluate the developed intervention, refining its application in educational settings.

Keywords: school belonging, school attendance, persistent absenteeism, youth voice, and co-designed intervention

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Overview

This thesis addresses an important and timely question: What role does school belonging play in influencing school attendance among persistently absent young people (YP)? This introductory chapter outlines the motivations for undertaking this research, the researcher's guiding positionality, the thesis structure, and the overarching research question. For this research, 'belonging' refers to a sense of school belonging, and 'attendance' refers to school attendance.

1.2 Why this Research?

Educational psychologists work alongside YP, families, schools, and wider services to address the complex factors underlying 'attendance' through consultation, assessment, intervention, training, and research (Health & Care Professions Council, 2024; Scottish Executive, 2002). This study emerged from the researcher's reflective practice and real-world challenges in fostering meaningful and sustainable change in her casework with non-attending secondary school pupils. It is grounded in the everyday realities faced by YP, families, and educators who grapple with the multifaceted barriers that affect 'attendance' and engagement with learning, particularly how a lack of 'belonging' undermines progress.

This study is situated within Local Authority X in North Scotland. It is predominantly rural, which can make 'attendance' more challenging due to long travel distances and reduced access to support services. The education provision caters to primary school students in 149 schools and secondary school students in 17 schools.

Research conducted by the local authority examined how 'attendance' and engagement are supported in secondary schools (Seaton & Murray, 2023). It indicated that school non-attendance is a significant and persistent challenge within the education system. The response rate was high, with 82% of schools responding. This highlights the importance of studying 'attendance' and the prevalence of the

challenge. Indeed, secondary school staff and educational psychologists indicated that engagement and 'attendance' are likely lower than nationally reported figures suggest, reflecting possible recording challenges. In addition, educational psychologists indicated that 34% of all case work with secondary schools was related to 'attendance'. The report identified several approaches to reduce barriers for YP struggling to access education. They offered personalised support, including strengthening relationships and building self-regulation, but gave limited attention to 'belonging.' Some evidence of impact was noted from these supports. However, for many YP, attending and engaging continued to be challenging. Barriers to 'attendance' included factors such as additional support needs, learner confidence, sensory needs, and parental involvement. The most prevalent barrier to 'attendance' was the social demands of school. Participants indicated that YP often lacked connections within relationships in school, appearing isolated and lacking 'belonging.' These approaches may fall short because they did not fully address the deeper relational and emotional factors that help YP feel included and connected. Difficulties persisted despite efforts to strengthen relationships, suggesting that the current strategies may not fully address YP's perceptions of 'belonging' in school. This motivates the exploration of how 'belonging' relates to 'attendance'.

1.3 Researcher's Positionality

This research's positionality is grounded in critical realism, which recognises the researcher's view as both part of and distinct from the reality being studied. This makes it suited to exploring the complex, reciprocal relationship between 'belonging' and 'attendance.' Bhaskar (2013) first proposed critical realism in the 1970s, positioning it as a philosophy that bridges the gap between positivism and interpretivism. Critical realism is based on a stratified ontology, where reality exists in multiple layers: the empirical (what is experienced), the actual (what happens), and the real (the hidden mechanisms causing events) (Stutchbury, 2022). This framework allows the researcher to interpret both quantitative and qualitative data while considering underlying mechanisms. These layers are crucial for explaining social phenomena through the interaction of agency (what individuals can do) and

structure (the social context in which they operate) (Lawani, 2021). Maxwell (2012) argued that critical realism is the integration of a realist ontology (there is a real world that exists independently of perceptions, theories, and constructions) with a constructivist epistemology (an understanding of this world is inevitably a construction built from a person's perspectives). This means critical realism acknowledges the existence of an external reality alongside the subjective experiences that shape an understanding of it.

Critical realism embraces judgmental rationality, allowing researchers to critically evaluate and compare different theories based on their explanatory power. This epistemological stance supports methodological pluralism and encourages the use of any method that best facilitates understanding the reality of what is being studied (Mukumbang, 2021). Critical realism is a useful and robust framework for integrating qualitative and quantitative methods. This supports exploring causes and mechanisms, strengthening theory development via multiple approaches. This study uses mixed methods, combining quantitative 'attendance' data with qualitative accounts of 'belonging' to explore underlying mechanisms.

1.4 Research Questions

The following studies aim to explore the relationship between 'attendance' and 'belonging' and the key factors that influence this relationship. Study 1 is a scoping review that examines the breadth and depth of current research on the relationship between 'attendance' and 'belonging', with a focus on secondary school YP. It presents a preliminary conceptual model illustrating 'belonging' as a key mediator for 'attendance' and considers insights to inform future interventions. Utilising an iterative design, study 2 examines YP perspectives, alignment with the conceptual model, and co-designs a candidate intervention to increase 'belonging' and 'attendance'. This research aims to address the following overarching questions:

Study 1:

- 1) What is the extent of the research on 'attendance' and 'belonging,' focusing on secondary education?

Study 2:

- 2) What do persistently absent YP think about 'belonging' and 'attendance'?
- 3) To what extent can themes derived from the antecedents of the conceptual model account for the YPs' views?
- 4) To co-create a candidate intervention with YP to increase 'belonging' and 'attendance.'

1.5 Structure of the Thesis

1.5.1 Chapter 2 - 'Attendance'

Chapter two explores the current state of 'attendance' in Scotland. It examines the decline of 'attendance', identifies who is at risk, explores factors affecting it, and reviews school practices to improve it. This provides the context for research and rationale for exploring 'Attendance'.

1.5.2 Chapter 3 - 'Belonging'

Chapter three explores 'belonging'. It defines 'belonging', its global decline, at-risk groups, influencing factors, and ways to improve it. This provides the rationale for exploring 'belonging'.

1.5.3 Chapter 4 - A Case for 'Attendance' and 'Belonging'

Chapter four presents a case for a relationship between 'attendance' and 'belonging.' It summarises different theories and models that link these concepts and presents a theoretical rationale for the importance of further research. It also provides an overview of empirical evidence of the bidirectional and recursive relationship between these concepts, showing that each can influence and reinforce the other. This chapter argues that 'belonging' is a mediator for 'attendance' and highlights the need for a systematic understanding of literature.

1.5.4 Chapter 5 - Study 1: Secondary School 'Attendance' and 'Belonging': A Scoping Review

Chapter five outlines a scoping review examining the extent of the research on 'attendance' and 'belonging,' focusing on secondary school students. This chapter has three sections: methods, results, and discussion.

The methods section outlines the protocol for the scoping review, including inclusion and exclusion criteria, sources, search strategies, and evidence extraction. It also presents a rationale for additional analysis supporting the conceptual model.

The results section reviews the findings from the included studies. It reviews study characteristics, terminology, methodology, and key findings. It also presents a preliminary conceptual model showing the 'belonging'- 'attendance' relationship.

The discussion section explains the significance of the results and their implications. It interprets the results, highlights 'belonging' as a key mediator for 'attendance', identifies gaps-especially the lack of youth voice and considers implications for future research. This section also considers the implications of research and outlines possible next steps.

1.5.5 Chapter 6 - Study 2: Does 'Belonging' Matter for 'Attendance'? Exploring Youth Perspectives and a Candidate Intervention

Chapter six uses an iterative design to explore YP's views on 'belonging' and 'attendance,' investigating alignment with the conceptual model and co-creating a candidate intervention. The first phase seeks to explore YP's views, and the second phase validates them through member checking. This chapter consists of three sections: methods, results, and discussion.

The methods section outlines the rationale for the research design and procedure, including recruitment, measurement, and data analysis. This section also outlines the use of a pilot reference group to assess feasibility and adjust protocols.

The results section is presented in two phases, exploratory and confirmatory. The exploratory phase summarises YP views on 'belonging', 'attendance', alignment

with the model, and intervention ideas. The confirmatory phase validates results and the candidate intervention, showing an updated model.

The discussion section outlines the results and explains why they are significant. It discusses YP views in relation to literature, provides evidence for 'belonging' as a key mediator for 'attendance', reports on intervention feasibility and acceptability, and considers implications and study limitations

1.5.6 Chapter 7 - Final Conclusions

Chapter seven brings together the findings from the two studies. It summarises key findings, practice implications, future research, and the importance of 'belonging' as a mediator. By combining a scoping review with lived experiences, this research underscores the need for youth-centred, relational, and responsive interventions. It demonstrates how 'belonging' impacts 'attendance' and highlights ways in which schools can strengthen 'belonging'. This chapter calls for a reorientation of school systems to place 'belonging' at the heart of education.

Chapter 2: 'Attendance' - Setting the Scene

2.1 Overview

This chapter highlights the evidence for the decline in 'attendance' in Scotland, its significance, and who is at risk of school absenteeism. It defines school absenteeism and when it becomes persistent. It will also consider the factors that impact persistent absenteeism and the approaches to addressing this issue.

2.2 The Importance of 'Attendance'

'Attendance' is important for attainment, well-being, and employment. Individuals with higher 'attendance' often achieve higher skill levels and greater success (Ansari et al., 2020; Dräger et al., 2024). Alexander et al., (2001) suggest that this is because attainment is proportional to YP's exposure to instructional time and classroom learning. Following this, it is understandable that 'attendance' is linked to various life outcomes, such as educational attainment, employment, and health.

Research indicates that 'attendance' impacts academic attainment, with several studies from across the United Kingdom (UK) and within its specific education jurisdictions demonstrating a link (Ansari et al., 2020; Dräger et al., 2024; Klein & Sosu, 2024b; Klein et al., 2022). Missing school has been found to negatively impact attainment, even if only for a few days, regardless of the reason. These associations seem to apply broadly across young people after controlling for socioeconomic status (Klein & Sosu, 2024b), and age (Ansari & Pianta, 2019). It is evidenced that for every one per cent increase in days absent, there is a three per cent impact on attainment (Klein et al., 2022).

Absence from school is also linked to health-related needs, such as risk-taking behaviour, anxiety, depression, self-harm, and suicide ideation (Allison et al., 2019; Ansari & Pianta, 2019; Epstein et al., 2020; John et al., 2022). Much research in this area focuses on one health condition and determines whether it is associated with school absences (Allison et al., 2019). There is evidence of the bidirectionality of health conditions and 'attendance', meaning that lower 'attendance' likely

increases health conditions and vice versa (Wood et al., 2012), and absences often indicate current or predicted future mental health difficulties (John et al., 2022). Indeed, John et al. (2022) posit that targeting interventions to reduce absenteeism may reduce the incidence of mental health disorders. Allison et al. (2019) outline several supports that impact health and 'attendance', such as infection prevention, school-based mental health services, school connectedness, and family and community engagement. Some approaches seek to reduce influenza and other illnesses leading to absences through infection prevention, whereas others seek to increase mental health and well-being for YP through targeted and individualised interventions.

A growing body of evidence links the consequences of missing school to long-term outcomes (Ansari et al., 2020; Dräger et al., 2024). Across the UK, school absence increases the risk of individuals being out of work, training, or education post-school (Klein & Sosu, 2024b). Dräger et al. (2024) examined the long-term effects of school absences on educational attainment and labour market outcomes. The study used data from the 1970s British Cohort Study, including participants from Scotland, Wales, and England. It employed a longitudinal design, with data collected at regular intervals from birth to 42 years of age. After accounting for missing data and attrition, the study analysed 13,776 participants. Teacher-reported absences at the age of ten were related to self-reported outcomes at 42 years old, after controlling for various risk factors, including socioeconomic status, economic status, and cognitive ability. They found a negative effect on attainment and the likelihood of employment. Individuals who missed five days of school at the age of 10 were 5.7% less likely to have qualifications and 4.2% more likely to be out of the workforce. Not only does 'attendance' matter, but there is also evidence of the impact of a short absence on individuals' attainment and engagement with the workforce.

Therefore, evidence shows the impact of 'attendance' on individual factors like attainment, health-related needs, and long-term outcomes. From an economic

perspective, a workforce that is out of education, employment, or training results in a loss of tax revenue and an increase in required public assistance. Higher absenteeism is significantly linked to economic hardship, employment, and public assistance (Ansari et al., 2020; Dräger et al., 2024). In addition, school absenteeism is a risk factor for a lack of civic engagement as an adult (Ansari et al., 2020). This suggests that it may indicate future community participation. From a health perspective, when individuals are healthy, their life expectancy and work productivity are higher (Van Rijn et al., 2014). YP with health needs may experience disadvantages in numerous ways. For instance, absenteeism may also be a consequence and a cause of their mental health needs. It can lead to a cycle of absenteeism (Wood et al., 2012), impacting their attainment and post-school destinations (Allison et al., 2019). It is noted that attainment, health, and economic factors are interrelated, and further research is needed to understand their relationships fully. However, evidence suggests that school absenteeism is a factor influencing these outcomes, making it a key area of consideration.

2.3 The Decline of ‘Attendance’

‘Attendance’ issues are a global concern affecting students from almost every country, with an estimated 244 million children and YP out of school worldwide (UNESCO, 2023). This equates to around 9% of primary school-aged children, 14% of lower secondary school-age YP, and 30% of upper secondary school-aged YP (UNESCO, 2023). Given the proportion of YP out of education, it is unsurprising that there has been a significant increase in research on ‘attendance’ over the last decade (Martínez-Torres et al., 2024). Maintaining ‘attendance’ rates within Scotland is a key priority for the government (Scottish Government, 2023a, 2023b). Despite this, ‘attendance’ in Scotland in 2022-2023 was the lowest since records began in 2003-2004, declining from 93% to 90.2% (Scottish Government, 2023b). Although school data indicates that the COVID-19 pandemic has magnified ‘attendance’ challenges, these figures were declining even before this (Giménez-Miralles et al., 2022). A difference is also noted between school settings, with primary ‘attendance’ declining from 95.1% to 92.1% and secondary ‘attendance’

declining from 90.1% to 87.6% between 2002 and 2024 (Scottish Government, 2024b) (Table 1). In 2024, over 31.4% of students in Scotland were persistently absent, missing 10% or more of the school year (Figure 1). This figure was reported higher for secondary school YP, with 40.6% meeting this criterion (Scottish Government, 2024b).

Table 1

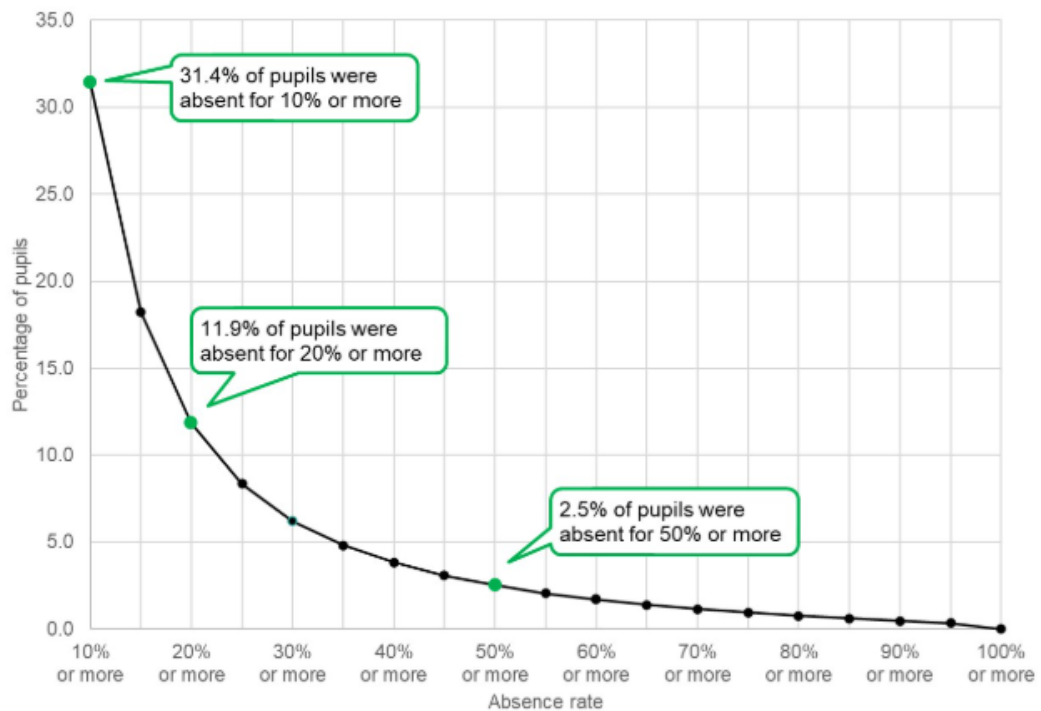
Scottish Secondary Attendance Figures by Year and Sector

Sector	2014- 2015	2016- 2017	2018- 2019	2020- 2021	2022- 2023	2023- 2024
Overall	93.7%	93.3%	93.0%	92.0%	90.2%	90.3%
Primary Schools	95.1%	94.9%	94.5%	94.0%	92.2%	92.5%
Secondary Schools	91.8%	91.2%	90.7%	89.1%	87.7%	87.6%
Special	90.7%	90.3%	90.1%	89.3%	87.1%	87.3%

Whilst it is noted that ‘attendance’ is a global concern, there have been relatively few studies comparing it across countries. This may be largely due to differing definitions of ‘attendance,’ alongside challenges associated with accurately measuring and recording it (Giménez-Miralles et al., 2022; Heyne et al., 2019). This leads to challenges in comparing data, both globally and nationally.

Figure 1

Scottish Schools Absence Rate by Percentage of Pupils for 2024 (Scottish Government, 2024)



Research comparing 'attendance' often draws from international data sets that adopted self-reported measures and define absenteeism as truancy. Therefore, this definition likely provides a narrow view of school absenteeism. However, some research does seek comparison, Keppens and Spruyt (2018) explored truancy across educational jurisdictions by examining cross-sectional data from 24 European countries. A higher level of truancy was found within comprehensive and individualised education systems than in separate education systems. All individuals are educated together in the former, regardless of ability; in the latter, individuals are separated by cognitive ability. It is posited that low-performing students may feel less comfortable in classes dominated by high-performing students, leading to higher rates of truancy. In contrast, groups are more similar when separated by ability. Keppens and Spruyt (2018) strongly caution against this viewpoint, as there is also evidence of the negative consequences of tracking. However, further exploration of whether this difference can be replicated and the reasons behind it

may be an interesting avenue for investigation. Fredriksson et al. (2024) adopted a longitudinal approach. They sought to address this issue by utilising Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) data from four countries - Germany, Japan, Sweden, and the UK - across three time points. The UK reported the highest percentage of truancy. They consider differences in the welfare state, education systems, and values that may influence 'attendance' as possible influences. However, it was not possible to make any further assertions about whether these were linked. Further research into whether there are specific differences within education jurisdictions leading to higher absenteeism is required.

It is important to note that the Scottish statistics draw from school-tracked data (Scottish Government, 2023b), whereas other research relies upon self-reported data. The reliability of self-reported measures is questionable as students may not provide accurate and reliable information about their 'attendance' (Kearney & Childs, 2023; Keppens et al., 2019). Keppens et al. (2019) found that school-registered unauthorised absences were twice as large as self-reported school absences. One plausible reason for this is that YPs who find attending school difficult may not have been present to complete the administered survey. Therefore, self-reported absences may not fully capture the depth of school absenteeism. For school-tracked data, absences may be categorised by total or partial-day absences, lateness, and missing classes (Keppens et al., 2019). Absences are also categorised as excused and unexcused (Giménez-Miralles et al., 2022). However, there are many difficulties with categorising and recording absences; the factors leading to school absences can be complex (Kearney & Childs, 2023). For instance, how should schools categorise a YP with absences related to school anxiety? If a parent/carers informs the school of absenteeism, this may be categorised as an excused absence. However, this may mask an underlying need when others seek to interpret 'attendance' data. Kreitz-Sandberg and Fredriksson (2023) further evidence this. They found large differences in how absences are coded, with both authorised and unauthorised absences being used for holiday absences in England, leading to skewness in data interpretation (Kreitz-Sandberg & Fredriksson, 2023). Therefore,

separating absences in this way may lead to inaccurate reporting and an oversimplification (Birioukov, 2016). Thus, refining the data collection system is necessary to enable higher sensitivity when gathering 'attendance' data, such as further differentiation into categories underlying absence and improved data collection (Giménez-Miralles et al., 2022).

2.4 Who Is at Risk of School Absenteeism?

A global pattern is evident: as YP advance through school, their 'attendance' decreases (Kearney et al., 2022; UNESCO, 2023). Absenteeism is more prevalent in secondary school-aged YP (Scottish Government, 2023a, 2024b) and disproportionately affects vulnerable YP (Giménez-Miralles et al., 2022; Kearney et al., 2022). Indeed, they have been found to increase after YP transition into secondary school education (ImpactEd, 2024; John et al., 2022) and appear more pronounced in school year two within the data (Scottish Government, 2023b). While age variation exists for absenteeism, no clear difference is observed for gender (Scottish Government, 2024b). This is likely an underrepresentation of YP missing their learning, as secondary schools are not expected to track class absence data (Scottish Government, 2023b). Class absences in secondary schools are often higher due to YP changing several subjects and classrooms throughout the day (Whitney & Liu, 2017). Indeed, YP who exhibit this pattern of absence are often overlooked within the 'attendance' data (Gentle-Genitty et al., 2017). This is also established within the Local Authority X (Seaton & Murray, 2023). Therefore, there is a need to consider changes in recording data, as highlighted previously.

Certain YPs may also have additional risk factors for school absenteeism. Research indicates that individuals with lower socioeconomic status are more likely to experience higher absenteeism rates (Sosu et al., 2021). Findings indicated that different dimensions of socioeconomic status have varying degrees of impact on absenteeism, with parental education and social housing the strongest risk factors for YP. The most recent Scottish Government figures (2024) illustrate that pupils living in the 20% most deprived areas have an 'attendance' rate of 86.9%, compared

to 93.6% in the least deprived areas, with the gap further magnified in secondary schools. In addition, YP with additional support needs are more often absent. YP with additional support needs had lower overall 'attendance' rates than those with no identified need (87.4% compared with 92%), and the gap was further magnified in secondary schools (Scottish Government, 2024b). This is likely due to a combination of interacting factors, such as individual characteristics or systemic challenges (Gubbels et al., 2019). Research from England has found a gender difference in 'attendance' among individuals with an additional support need (ImpactEd, 2024). This research demonstrates that the most significant differences in 'attendance' are intersectional, meaning that living in deprivation with an additional support need compounds the likelihood of secondary school absenteeism (ImpactEd, 2024).

2.5 Definition of School Absenteeism

Many terms have been used to describe school absences, leading to ambiguity within the conceptualisation (Havik & Ingul, 2021; Heyne et al., 2019; Kearney & González, 2022). See Heyne et al. (2019) for a review of terminologies. Hamadi et al. (2024) conducted a scoping review exploring professional views on 'attendance'. They reported on 42 studies from 14 different educational jurisdictions and found that 19 different terms were used to define absenteeism. This suggests that there is a lack of consensus when defining it. Historically, school absence was defined as a within-child difficulty often categorised as school refusal, truancy, or school withdrawal (Berg, 1997; Broadwin, 1932; Gentle-Genitty et al., 2017). These terminologies relate to distinct definitions underpinned by a YP's presentation. For instance:

- School refusal concerns YP who want to attend school but experience emotional distress at the prospect of attending. Parents are aware of absenteeism and have attempted to support their YP into school (Berg, 1997).

- Truancy concerns YP who skip school, attend school but miss classes, or hide absences from others; this is intentional. Parents are often unaware of non-attendance (Gentle-Genitty et al., 2017).
- School withdrawal relates to parents' awareness of YP's absence. These absences are parent-condoned or parent-initiated (Broadwin, 1932).

There is debate about the need to differentiate between school absences. Some researchers argue that distinct definitions are needed, as interventions can be more targeted when differentiated in this way (Havik & Ingul, 2021; Heyne et al., 2019). This can be a helpful way to categorise, as it provides clear parameters for identification. However, a significant challenge is that YP can present overlapping presentations and may not neatly fit into the identification parameters (Heyne et al., 2019; Kearney & González, 2022; Kearney & Silverman, 1999). Other researchers make the case that absenteeism cannot be explained by one factor alone (Heyne et al., 2019). Another argument is that categorisation by school refusal or truancy leads to differences in adult responses to an individual's needs, with a decrease in legitimacy and an increase in blame for some types of absence compared to others (Elliott & Place, 2019). This may be particularly true for truancy, with behaviours associated with choice rather than an unmet need. It is likely also inaccurate to term YP who attend school but miss classes as truants, as the definition asserts intentionality (Gentle-Genitty et al., 2017). YP prefer their behaviour to be described as a lack of coping rather than using language associated with choice (Corcoran & Kelly, 2023). Within the Scottish context, school absences are categorised as excused and unexcused (Giménez-Miralles et al., 2022). This categorises absences into legitimate (excused) and illegitimate (unexcused). A challenge with the definitions shared so far is that most define school absences through an individualised lens - framing difficulties with 'attendance' within a child deficit viewpoint, placing the problem with the individual, and deflecting attention from the impact of the school and home environment.

A further argument is to define school absenteeism by function. Kearney and Silverman (1999) non-attendance model, for example, comprises four underpinning

functions. Two functions relate to school-based factors: YP avoid school-based experiences as they provoke adverse effects, and they seek to avoid social situations. Two further functions relate to home-based factors: YP prefer remaining at home as it is a rewarding experience and meets an attention need. This model has benefits as it links the need to an intervention. In addition, it recognises that functions underpinning absenteeism do not exist in isolation.

Other researchers argue for a broader definition of persistent school absenteeism with a dimensional view of school absences (Kearney & González, 2022; Kearney et al., 2019; Knage, 2023; Pellegrini, 2007). School absences can be defined on a continuum of severity. Considering these needs from a socio-cultural viewpoint, Knage (2023) argues that one definition is too rigid, suggesting that central to defining 'attendance' - and therefore, appropriate intervention - is understanding how individuals intertwine with and through each system in their world. Yet 'attendance' is broader than physical presence within a building (Kearney & González, 2022); it may include a remote presence online (Havik & Ingul, 2021). A distinction can be made between some YP attending school but not classes and engaging very little with their learning, and others who are unable to attend school full-time but are engaging in remote learning (Garcia-Gracia & Valls, 2023; Seaton & Murray, 2023). Therefore, there is a move away from 'attendance' measured by presence within a school building towards presence and engagement as a learner (Garcia-Gracia & Valls, 2023).

For this research, a dimensional and functional viewpoint will be adopted. A dimensional viewpoint categorises 'attendance' along a spectrum and considers the severity of absenteeism in terms of frequency, duration, and context. Therefore, the broader term 'persistent absenteeism' will be used. This terminology and broader definition were chosen because they do not aim to assign value to the underlying reasons for school absence. This researcher's position is that the issue itself is not the behaviour of absenteeism, but the function and the unmet need it serves (Pellegrini, 2007). Adopting a functional viewpoint provides insights into why an

individual is absent. This allows 'attendance' patterns to be linked to underlying needs, enabling a clear understanding of challenges and supporting targeted intervention (Kearney & González, 2022).

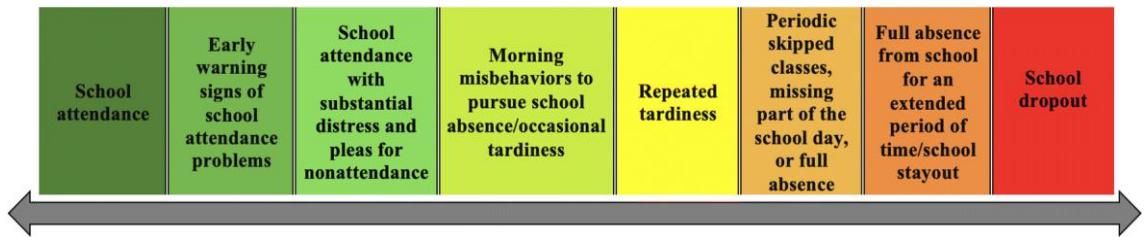
2.6 When Does School Absence Become Persistent School Absenteeism?

In Scotland, persistent absence is defined as 'attendance' below 90%, a threshold that quickly adds up to major lost learning time and equates to missing one day of school every fortnight (Scottish Government, 2024b). If this absence rate persists throughout a YP's school career (being absent 10% over 11 years) it would amount to approximately a year or more of missed schooling by the time they leave school at 16 years of age. Individuals who miss more than 10% of school are persistently absent. Recent statistics illustrate that the proportion of secondary school YP who are persistently absent has risen from 27% in 2013-2014 to 40.6% in 2023-2024 (Scottish Government, 2024b). Research also suggests that even unavoidable absences are associated with reductions in academic achievement (Klein & Sosu, 2024a).

Rather than a single cut-off, some researchers describe school absence on a continuum from non-problematic to severe. Kearney et al. (2023) and Kearney & Graczyk (2020) argue for a continuum of extended school non-attendance (Figure 2), sorting 'attendance' into categories of problematic and non-problematic (Heyne et al., 2019; Kearney & Childs, 2023). They categorised the severity of school absence by the frequency of physical school absences or time missed from classes on a continuum; as such, it is argued that prevention and intervention rely on a range of tiered supports depending on where an individual is on the continuum (Kearney & Graczyk, 2020; Skedgell & Kearney, 2018).

Figure 2

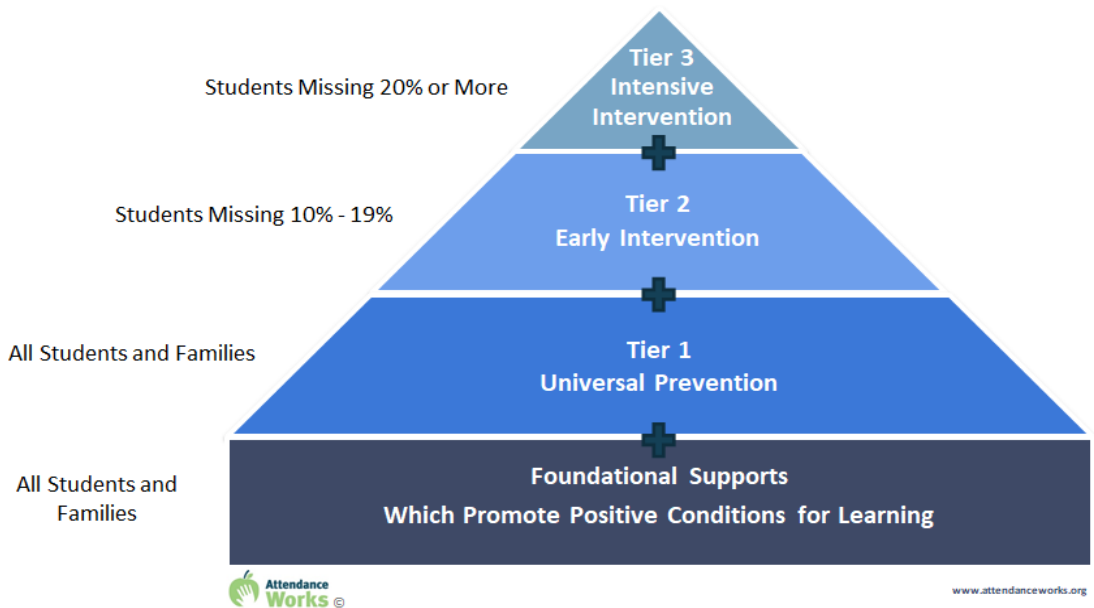
Continuum of Extended School Non-attendance (Kearney & Graczyk, 2020, p. 320)



A tiered model helps to show when and how to intervene, combining universal and targeted supports. Kearney and Graczyk’s (2014; 2020) model provides parameters around when it is best to intervene. As shown in Figure 3 (Attendance Works, 2025), the model has three tiers and is underpinned by whole-school foundational approaches.

Figure 3

Tiered Support System for ‘Attendance’ and Absenteeism (Attendance Works, 2025).



For this research, persistent absenteeism refers to YP with ongoing difficulties, mainly those in Tiers 2 and 3. This model focuses on decreasing school absences and strengthening approaches to promote ‘attendance’ for all learners. A tiered approach focuses on foundational supports, universal prevention, intervention, and intensive intervention. For this research, persistent school

absenteeism refers to YP at risk of disengagement and experiencing persistent 'attendance' difficulties.

2.7 Factors that Impact 'Attendance'

'Attendance' is shaped by many interacting systems, from close relationships to wider social influences. Many researchers acknowledge how different ecological systems interact with 'attendance', considering proximal factors (those within an individual's immediate environment, such as peer relationships) and distal factors (those that indirectly impact the individual, such as societal attitudes towards education) (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007). However, further research is needed to understand the complexity of how these factors interact and impact 'attendance' (Kearney et al., 2022; Leduc et al., 2022). There is an acknowledgement of the bidirectionality of risk factors for persistent absenteeism, although the extent of interacting factors is unclear. Factors can be differentiated into predisposing, precipitating, and perpetuating difficulties (Thambirajah et al., 2008).

Reviews highlight individual, family, school, and peer factors as key risks for absenteeism. Gubbels et al.'s (2019) meta-analysis sought to quantify the risk factors underpinning school absenteeism and dropout. This research included 75 studies. The scope of this review focused on proximal factors. It focused exclusively on studies of 'problematic school absenteeism,' such as truancy, and did not include research examining risk factors for general absenteeism or excused absences like illness. They found that multiple individual, family, school, and peer-related factors significantly contributed to absenteeism and dropout. These can be related to predisposing factors (such as an individual's mental health or family circumstances) and precipitating factors (such as negative school perceptions or poor relationships).

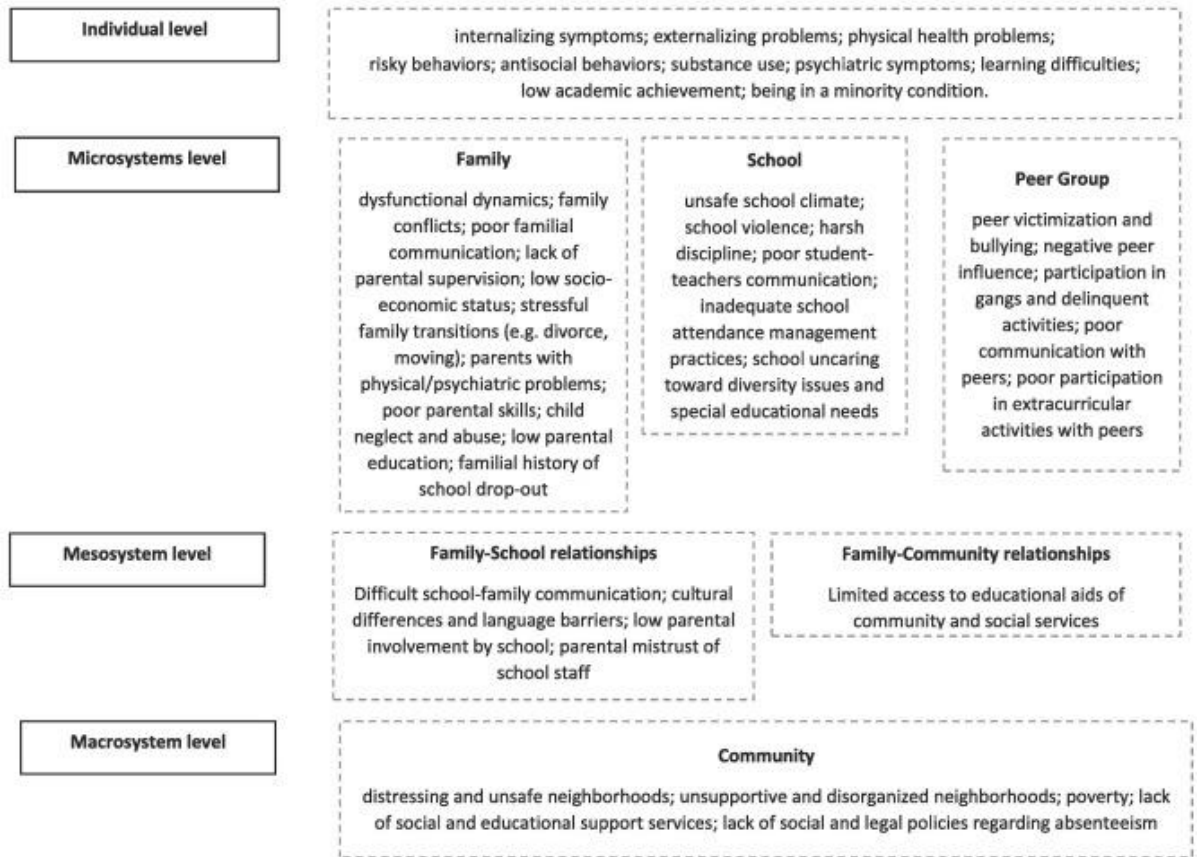
- For school absenteeism, individual factors included perceptions of self and school (negative school attitude and low academic self-concept), social and risk-taking behaviours (smoking, alcohol, and anti-social behaviour), and physical and mental health concerns (poor physical health, anxiety, and depression).

- Family factors included socioeconomic status, low parental control, parent education, and school involvement.
- School factors related to negative school climate, poor pupil-teacher relationships, and low quality of education.

At the individual level, perceptions, behaviours, and health are the strongest predictors. Notably, an individual's perceptions of the school had the most significant overall effect size, followed by antisocial behaviours, low academic self-concept, poor teacher relationships, and low parent involvement. Many risk factors were similar for school dropouts, except peer relationships, where social status within groups had a significant adverse effect. Adding to this, subsequent research highlights the significant impact of peer relationships on absenteeism (Gubbels et al., 2019). Bianchi et al. (2022) created a conceptual model illustrating how Gubbels et al.'s (2019) risk factors aligned with Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological model (Figure 4).

Figure 4

Conceptual Model of Primary Risk Factors of School Absenteeism (Bianchi et al., 2022, p. 2)



Similarly, Ulaş and Seçer (2024) explored risk and protective factors for absenteeism. Their review, including 40 articles, specifically explored school refusal, defined as a child's reluctance to attend school. Aligning with Gubbels et al. (2019), risk factors contributing to school refusal included peer bullying, health-related difficulties, anxiety, adverse living conditions, and mismatches between family and school expectations. Additionally, certain YP are more vulnerable, such as individuals with special support needs who attend regular schools and individuals facing social inequalities. Protective factors include positive self-perception, such as high self-respect, learning goals, academic resilience, and social strengths like pro-social behaviours, supportive friendships, and strong social skills. Relational factors also play a crucial role, including perceived teacher support, positive student-teacher and teacher-family relationships, and healthy family dynamics.

Another review of 15 studies explored factors associated with YP who anxiously refuse school, and those who do not (Leduc et al., 2022). This review included studies from Europe, North America, South America, and Asia; however, country-specific differences were not examined. This may be due to variations across different countries, which could influence the findings, such as education systems, policies, and support for individuals with additional needs. Therefore, caution is required when applying this in a Scottish context, as contextual factors such as the curriculum, specific policies, and support systems may shape school absenteeism differently. However, this research provides insights into factors differentiating anxious school refusers from those without. The centrality of anxiety, anxiety-related symptoms, and diverse learning needs were the main points of contrast between youth with school refusal and those without. YPs who refused school were more likely to experience social anxiety, performance anxiety, and generalised anxiety. In addition, their parents and carers were also more likely to experience psychopathology. Evidence shows that YP are worried about academic, familial, and interpersonal factors. They are more likely to have diverse learning needs and to perceive a lack of support from teachers.

Across studies, pupils' views of school have the largest impact, followed by behaviour, self-concept, teacher relationships, and parent involvement. Overall, absenteeism reflects overlapping individual, relational, and contextual factors, with relationships and self-perceptions especially important. The research shows several interrelated factors relating to individuals, schools, and communities may underpin school absenteeism. It also evidences the centrality of relationships, including those between schools, YP, families, and communities. Additionally, how YP perceive themselves as learners and their relationships within the school are also important.

2.8 'Attendance' Interventions

Given the significant impact of persistent absenteeism and the complexity of its underlying factors, it is unsurprising that research has sought ways to increase 'attendance'. The Education Endowment Foundation (2022) conducted a rapid

review of interventions that support 'attendance'. They reviewed 72 studies across the United States, the UK, Canada, and Australia. The majority of studies took place in the United States; therefore, an educational jurisdiction bias is likely present. Nevertheless, they found several approaches that supported 'attendance', including mentoring, parental engagement, responsive and targeted approaches, teaching social and emotional skills, behavioural interventions, meal provision, incentives and disincentives, and extra-curricular activities. Of interest was the considerable variation of strategies used to support 'attendance'. Often, multiple support approaches are needed to impact change. Overall, they found that the quality of evidence for interventions that impact 'attendance' was low. This suggests a need for further research exploring 'attendance' supports, as well as when and how to intervene. This review focused on primary and secondary school-based research.

Freeman et al.'s (2018) review focuses on secondary schools and indicated the need for interventions to be situated within a school-wide approach. Common components align with findings from the Education Endowment Foundation (2022). However, Freeman et al. (2018) found that many 'attendance' interventions do not select participants based on their 'attendance' or consider individual differences within delivery. This may impact intervention effectiveness. They suggest the need for a framework to support the systematic implementation of interventions aimed at improving 'attendance'. Many researchers argue for a multi-tiered support system to support schools in considering interventions for YP (Fernandes et al., 2024; Kearney & Graczyk, 2014; Kearney & Graczyk, 2020). One such model is Kearney and Graczyk's (2014; 2020) 'Response to Intervention' model. This model emphasises prevention, early identification, and targeted interventions for 'attendance' issues through three tiers (Figure 3):

- 1) This tier one focuses on universal and primary prevention approaches. It includes initiatives that support school ethos and culture, such as positive behavioural approaches.

- 2) This tier two focuses on early and selective intervention. It includes approaches tailored to individuals, such as mentoring programmes.
- 3) This tier three focuses on intensive intervention, which includes the involvement of specialist agencies, such as psychologists.

2.8.1 Systemic and Relational Approaches

It is essential to place school absenteeism within an ecological context. Boaler and Bond (2023) considered systemic school-based approaches supporting 'attendance'. They found four key characteristics that underpinned interventions: proactive school systems and methods to support 'attendance', building relationships, targeted interventions, and collaboration with families. Proactive school systems related to school staff training and tracking systems to support early identification. Building relationships related to high-quality interactions and mentoring. Targeted interventions included specific programmes such as 'check and connect'. This tier-two school-based mentoring intervention was designed to improve 'attendance' through relationship-building and problem-solving, and can impact 'attendance' (Guryan et al., 2021). Collaborative working with families involved effective communication, home visits, maintaining a key school contact, and regular meetings.

This is supported by other research exploring interventions for truancy, where two overarching categories emerged: interventions informed by rational choice theory and interventions informed by a school bonding perspective (Keppens & Spruyt, 2020). The former relates to using school disciplinary responses and prosecution for absenteeism, and the latter views school absenteeism as an outcome of a lack of school connectedness with interventions seeking to increase this. They found that interventions exclusively based on rewarding and punishing pupils are ineffective and can be counterproductive. In addition, interventions focusing solely on increasing school bonding are unlikely to demonstrate high effects unless they are situated in changes in the broader system. For example, all school personnel must invest in relationships and collaboration with the broader

community. Keppens and Spruyt (2020) conclude that, despite extensive literature on truancy, empirical research on the factors that ensure the successful implementation of interventions is lacking.

2.8.2 Early Identification and Intervention

Many researchers consider early intervention a practical approach to addressing persistent school absenteeism (Boaler & Bond, 2023; Chu et al., 2019; Leduc et al., 2022), and a 'wait to fail' approach must be avoided (Kearney & Graczyk, 2014, p. 4). A reactive approach is cautioned against, due to its costly nature and challenges in creating change for individuals once stuck in a cycle of non-attendance (Chu et al., 2019). Indeed, Elliot & Place (2019) found that interventions for school refusal were more effective for young children, irrespective of approach. They theorise that this may be due to increased challenges in returning to school once absenteeism has been established. In addition, they posit that older YP often experience challenges related to high-stakes testing.

It is noted that there is some evidence for the impact of tier two interventions in increasing 'attendance' (Boaler & Bond, 2023; Guryan et al., 2021; Maynard et al., 2018). A challenge is the categorisation of early intervention, as there is no clear evidence for the demarcation between tiers, and thus interventions (Kearney & Childs, 2023). Therefore, some individuals experiencing absenteeism between 10% and 19% would benefit from more intensive support.

Early warning signs may support the identification of YP at risk of absenteeism (Boaler & Bond, 2023; Chu et al., 2019; Leduc et al., 2022). For example, these YP may still attend school, be late, raise 'attendance' concerns, or be absent from classes more often. The advantages of early identification allow for targeted intervention through identifying patterns (Chu et al., 2019; Kearney & Childs, 2023). Research is growing on early warning systems as a way of identifying YP at risk of persistent absenteeism (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2019; Canbolat, 2024). There is some empirical evidence for early identification and its impact on absences, with research indicating a short-term impact on reducing the number of students

exhibiting identified early warning indicators (persistent absenteeism, suspension, and course failure) (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2019). A benefit of early intervention is that it is often cost-effective, as it aims to prevent 'attendance' challenges from deteriorating. However, further research is needed to understand the nuances of these systems, with systems reliant on specific predictors (Chu et al., 2019; Kearney & Childs, 2023). In addition, the effectiveness of these systems is impacted by accuracy and implementation (Davis et al., 2019). Canbolat (2024) examined data from one school district and found that in early identification and intervention, absences were impacted by socioeconomic status, with disadvantaged individuals experiencing no effect and advantaged individuals experiencing a significant effect. It may be for these individuals that current thresholds for 'attendance' fail to account for the accumulative effect of wider factors on 'attendance', such as family perceptions of school or poor transportation (Kearney et al., 2023). This suggests a need to consider more sensitive measures for socially and economically disadvantaged YP. In addition, Canbolat (2024) found that early identification and intervention were more effective for persistently absent individuals, defined as missing more than 10% of school, compared to moderately absent individuals, defined as missing between 4% and 9% of schooling. These findings could have implications for when and how to intervene and need to be considered when implementing whole-school approaches.

2.8.3 Integrated Approaches

Despite universal support, early identification, and intervention, some YP will require more intensive support (Kearney & Graczyk, 2020). Several systematic review studies have explored approaches and interventions aimed at improving 'attendance'. Interventions often adopt a cognitive or behavioural perspective. The most common intervention approach was cognitive behavioural techniques, with research demonstrating effectiveness for most, but not all, school absentees (Fernandes et al., 2024; Leduc et al., 2022; Tonge & Silverman, 2019). This approach used cognitive restructuring to challenge YP's currently held beliefs. However, caution should be noted as research often demonstrates variability in

implementation and study replication (Maynard et al., 2018). Other reviews have highlighted the impact of pharmacologic support (Londono Tobon et al., 2018). However, the power of the included studies was questioned. From a behavioural perspective, interventions draw from social learning theory and behaviourist approaches, including gradual exposure to environmental stressors when moving to the school environment, gradual muscle relaxation, support for teacher-student relationships, social skills intervention, and learning feedback (Leduc et al., 2022; Tonge & Silverman, 2019; Ulaş & Seğer, 2024).

In addition to considering the integration of health-based supports, such as cognitive behaviour approaches and school-based supports, multi-agency and family partnership is also essential (Kearney & Childs, 2023; Ulaş & Seğer, 2024). Fernandes et al. (2024) examined the role of the school in interventions for school refusal. They found that while school involvement varied on a continuum, most research demonstrated a disconnect between school involvement and intervention. This is a surprising finding, as school factors play a crucial role in supporting the prevention of school absenteeism (Gubbels et al., 2019; Keppens & Spruyt, 2020; Ulaş & Seğer, 2024). Indeed, intervention will be less effective if YP cannot apply their skills in context. Fernandes et al. (2024) posit the need for better-connected sociological systems to provide a comprehensive intervention for school absenteeism.

2.8.4 Key Considerations

There is a disconnect between targeted interventions from professionals who support mental health and integration within the school context (Fernandes et al., 2024). There is variability in how interventions are delivered (Maynard et al., 2018). Identification and early intervention are essential for the success of an intervention (Boaler & Bond, 2023; Chu et al., 2019; Kearney & Graczyk, 2014; Kearney & Graczyk, 2020; Leduc et al., 2022). Interventions must address individual needs (Boaler & Bond, 2023). Family partnership working is vital, and there is a lack of research exploring this (Kearney et al., 2023; Ulaş & Seğer, 2024). Interventions benefit from grounding in a school connectedness perspective but are only effective

if an ecological perspective is considered (Boaler & Bond, 2023; Keppens & Spruyt, 2020; Leduc et al., 2022; Ulaş & Seğer, 2024). Developing and strengthening positive relationships is arguably central to success when considering interventions to increase 'attendance'.

2.9 Summary

In Scotland, 'attendance' is declining, and absenteeism is on the rise. Absences are higher for secondary-aged students. This is likely an underrepresentation due to the reporting structures in Scottish schools. 'Attendance' matters and is related to various short-term and long-term outcomes for individuals, including attainment, employment, and health. Persistent absenteeism is established as a complex phenomenon underpinned by predisposing, precipitating, and perpetuating factors across multiple systems. Relationships and the level of perceived support are essential for 'attendance' and can serve as protective and risk factors. YP who are absent from school benefit from various approaches to support their 'attendance'.

Chapter 3: ‘Belonging’

3.1 Overview

The previous chapter highlighted the rise of school absenteeism in Scotland, its significance, and who is at risk of experiencing it, including when it becomes persistent and the factors underlying it. This chapter outlines the global decline in ‘belonging’. It explores explicitly ‘belonging’, why it matters, and who is at risk of not ‘belonging’. It defines ‘belonging’ and examines the factors that influence it. It also highlights the factors that impact ‘belonging’, how to intervene, and considerations for intervention.

3.2 The Roots of ‘Belonging’

Three decades ago, Baumeister and Leary (1995) published their seminal paper asserting that belonging and being part of a group is essential for survival and that people “have a pervasive drive to form and maintain at least a minimum quantity of lasting, positive, and significant interpersonal relationships” (p.497). Subsequently, numerous other theorists align with the view that belonging is not only necessary for survival but is a fundamental need. It can be argued that belonging is the glue that links individuals to communities (Chin, 2019). Since this publication, research focusing on belonging has notably increased, indicating its significance (García-Moya et al., 2019). This topic spans numerous disciplines, including health, education, politics, and management (Chin, 2019; Lähdesmäki et al., 2016). There is growing recognition of the importance of ‘belonging’ within education (Allen, Gray, et al., 2022). Before exploring this in detail, it is essential to define what ‘belonging’ means.

3.3 Definition of ‘Belonging’

Whilst there is agreement that ‘belonging’ is essential, there is less consensus within the terminology and definition. A variety of terms have been used to describe ‘belonging’, such as emotional engagement, connectedness, relatedness, bonding, attachment, membership, and identification with the school (Alink et al., 2023;

García-Moya et al., 2019; Slaten et al., 2016). Many researchers consider these terms highly related. Alink et al. (2023) asked 70 experts to rate the suitability of synonyms for 'belonging' on a 7-point scale. The highest-rated synonym was connectedness, with an average rating of 5.93. This synonym had the lowest standard deviation ($SD = 1.34$), indicating the least variance among the experts in rating the suitability of this term. It was noted that no term was deemed unsuitable, with all synonyms having a mean rating above 4, above the middle of the scale. This strengthens findings that, despite variation, most measures of 'belonging' yield similar correlations with other educational variables, providing weight to the parallels within the terminology (Voelkl, 2012). This suggests researchers may be using different terminology to measure the same concept. This has implications for research. That is, it may be important to include identified synonyms to ensure relevant research is not missed due to the use of different terminology.

A variety of definitions of 'belonging' exist. Mahar et al. (2013) conducted a narrative scoping review that included 40 articles from the literature on existing definitions of 'belonging'. It is unclear whether the primary research originated from a specific country; therefore, it is difficult to determine if differences were found across different countries. However, they outline five intersecting themes that create 'belonging': subjectivity, groundedness, reciprocity, dynamism, and self-determination. These five themes are summarised in Table 2, which presents the key dimensions of 'belonging' and their defining characteristics.

Table 2
Conceptual Dimensions of ‘Belonging’

Dimension	Description
Subjectivity of Belonging	It is subjective and unique to the individual experiencing it. It is underpinned by effects such as feelings of value, respect, and acceptance. It is broader than merely fitting in or being liked.
Contextual Grounding	It is grounded within the context of an individual’s world. There is always something or someone to which an individual ‘belongs’. Depending on the context, individuals interact with various social worlds and may experience different levels of ‘belonging’—to people, institutions, and networks.
Reciprocity	It is reciprocal; individuals exchange feelings and beliefs with others and groups, stemming from shared experiences that create a perception of acceptance. It is the intersectionality between the self and the social world that defines ‘belonging’. In schools, this is reflected in engagement with peers and teachers and participation in school activities.
Dynamism	It requires dynamism. Both physical and social environments influence belonging (Kuttner, 2023). It extends beyond immediate social interactions to encompass broader societal influences, including cultural, religious, and political factors. Individuals may also belong to physical or symbolic spaces where they feel rooted. School policies, such as inclusive teaching strategies that reflect diverse cultural perspectives, can strengthen ‘belonging’ (Scottish Government, 2019).
Autonomy and Power	Individuals have autonomy and power in ‘belonging’. They can choose whether and how to interact and engage in relationships. Belonging is not something that simply happens to an individual—it is a bidirectional process that exists with and because of the individual.

These themes must be considered within any research exploring ‘belonging’ and have implications for methodology and analysis. For instance, subjectivity emphasises the need for qualitative methods to capture individual experiences of ‘belonging’ (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017) while groundedness calls for context-specific approaches to explore the influences of environments and relationships. This lends itself to a thematic analysis-based approach (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). Reciprocity can be explored by adopting an iterative approach where the

researcher and participant meet on more than one occasion. At the same time, dynamism highlights the importance of mixed methods or repeated measures design. This allows for opportunities to check for understanding, make adjustments based on participants' insights, and capture any changes over time (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). Finally, self-determination highlights the importance of student voice within any research conducted.

Several definitions were considered for this research. A caveat is that many definitions of 'belonging' lack an explicit acknowledgement of cultural differences, which shape how 'belonging' is perceived and experienced (Cortina et al., 2017; Kuttner, 2023). Many definitions are situated from a Western perspective and may not accurately capture a nuanced view of 'belonging'. Thus, wider consideration is required for a culturally inclusive definition of 'belonging'. This is out of the scope of this research. This research is conducted within the UK and, therefore, focuses on definitions of 'belonging' that align with the values and frameworks commonly understood within Western educational systems.

Several definitions of 'belonging' were explored alongside Mahar et al. (2013) themes for 'belonging' (Appendix A). This approach ensures that the definition of 'belonging' aligns with the complexity of the construct and provides a theoretical basis to guide research methodology (as previously highlighted). Other research proposes three consistently observed components: the importance of interactions and experiences in school, the importance of quality student-teacher relationships, and the impact of students' perceptions and attitudes toward school (Allen & Kern, 2017). One of the most cited definitions of 'belonging' is from Goodenow (1993):

“a student’s sense of being accepted, valued, included, and encouraged by others (teachers and peers) in the academic classroom setting, and of feeling oneself to be an important part of the life and activity of the class. More than simple perceived liking or warmth, it also involves support and respect for personal autonomy and the student as an individual.” (p.80).

This definition of 'belonging' aligns most closely with Mahar et al.'s (2013) framework and Allen and Kern's (2017) components of 'belonging'. It reflects subjectivity by emphasising an individual's sense of experience in school, establishing a sense of 'belonging' within the school context, describing reciprocity through peer support, acknowledging dynamism by highlighting the importance of activity in the class, and considering self-determination through personal autonomy. Similarly, it aligns with Allen and Kern (2017) factors by highlighting the importance of positive interactions and experiences in school, the quality of student-teacher relationships, and the role of students' perceptions and attitudes toward their school environment. Accordingly, this definition captures the complexity of 'belonging' through its underpinning factors and has been adopted for this research.

3.4 The Importance of 'Belonging'

Research has evidenced the impact of 'belonging' on YP. YP with higher 'belonging' have better outcomes than those who report lower 'belonging', relating to their academic attainment, levels of motivation, and 'attendance' (Allen, Kern, et al., 2021; Korpershoek et al., 2020; Rose et al., 2024).

Korpershoek et al. (2020) conducted a meta-analysis of 82 studies, demonstrating an association between a student's 'belonging' and several outcomes. It impacted attainment, motivation, perceived learning environment, and behavioural engagement, including effort, educational aspirations, and self-perceptions. One key finding revealed that students who viewed their classroom as focused on mastery goals and positively perceived the overall classroom environment also reported a stronger 'belonging' to their school. A positive correlation between 'belonging', self-concept, and self-efficacy was evidenced, highlighting the importance of 'belonging' in supporting students' social-emotional well-being within the school setting. A negative correlation was found between 'attendance' and 'belonging', suggesting that students with a higher 'belonging' tend to have lower dropout rates and higher 'attendance' rates. This research focuses on cross-sectional studies, drawing from the general student population.

Therefore, it may not be fully representative of the impact of 'belonging' on marginalised youth.

In addition, 'belonging' plays a crucial role in YP's mental health and well-being, with associations found with low mood and suicide (Allen et al., 2024; Marraccini & Brier, 2017; Steiner et al., 2019), anxiety (Allen et al., 2024; Cohman, 2023), substance misuse (Rose et al., 2024), life satisfaction (Arslan et al., 2020; Çıkrıkçı & Erzen, 2020) and self-esteem (Ali Ammar, 2021). Research has demonstrated that individuals with higher 'belonging' had 44-68% lower odds of health risk behaviours (Steiner et al., 2019). Cohman (2023) conducted a systematic literature review focusing on the impact of 'belonging' on longitudinal mental health outcomes. The review found that 'belonging' predicted lower mental health difficulties longitudinally, ranging from 6 months to 27 years.

Other longitudinal research demonstrates that 'belonging' at the age of 15 significantly predicts whether an individual is not in education, employment, or training (NEET) at ages 16 and 20. To examine this relationship, Parker et al. (2022) drew on two longitudinal data sets and controlled for individual and school-level variables, including gender, academic achievement, and socioeconomic status. It is considered that low 'belonging' may predict NEET status due to similarities in systemic factors that link exclusion at school and exclusion in the wider world post-school. It is posited that many factors that impact 'belonging' are also linked to NEET status, for example, emotional distress, physical violence, and risk-taking behaviour. They found that 'belonging' was particularly important for individuals who did not complete secondary school, where a higher 'belonging' mitigated the likelihood of being in NEET by five per cent compared to individuals with a lower 'belonging.' Therefore, considering strategies influencing 'belonging' may improve NEET status (Chapter 4, section 4.3, p.59). Parker et al. (2022) posit that interventions that increase 'belonging' may have longer-reaching impacts in the broader society. To do this, interventions that target care, respect, and broad

inclusion and build student-teacher relationships will likely be beneficial. However, this research does not specify interventions that effectively address this.

3.5 Is There a Decline in ‘Belonging’?

Despite its recognised importance, ‘belonging’ has been steadily declining (OECD, 2019; OECD, 2022; Hogberg et al., 2021). Högberg et al. (2021) explored ‘belonging’ data from Sweden over 18 years. A dramatic decline in ‘belonging’ was found between 2003 and 2015, which was more significant for students from disadvantaged social backgrounds and low-achieving students. This suggests that ‘belonging’ is declining within schools and disproportionately affects certain YP. This decline appears to be reflected across many school communities, where ‘belonging’ has steadily declined across almost all participating countries in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) (OECD, 2022). In the UK, secondary school YPs’ ‘belonging’ has decreased since 2012 (OECD, 2022). In 2022, 36% of YP reported low ‘belonging’ in school. Indeed, a lack of ‘belonging’ is often described as perceptions of otherness, isolation, and marginalisation (Allen & Kern, 2017). Research from the UK (Riley et al., 2020), including primary and secondary schools, found that 25% of participants had low ‘belonging’. This suggests that one in four YP may be at risk for lower academic achievement, lower social-emotional well-being, and a higher likelihood of mental health and post-school outcomes.

There is limited research on the explanatory factors contributing to the decline in students’ ‘belonging’. Högberg et al. (2021) explored this decline across 18 years. They found that neither the school disciplinary climate nor teacher support explained the decrease in ‘belonging’. However, it is noted that mathematics anxiety was found to impact it, possibly highlighting that performance-based anxiety may be a significant risk factor. Högberg and Lindgren (2023) further explored this by examining the effects of the inclusion policies and performance testing. They found that earlier grading, increased national testing, a standards-based curriculum, and the inclusion of students with additional support needs in mainstream classrooms coincided with a notable decline in ‘belonging’. Therefore, while the inclusion

agenda seeks to promote equity and integrate students with diverse needs into the mainstream classroom, it may overlook the specific needs of this population, as they are more vulnerable to performance testing. Although drawing firm conclusions across different educational jurisdictions is challenging, there are some parallels within Scotland's policy landscape, which emphasise inclusion and aim to close the poverty-related attainment gap. However, further research is required to understand whether these factors also impact 'belonging' within Scottish schools.

3.6 Who Is at Risk of Not 'Belonging'?

Whilst there is evidence for the importance of 'belonging' for children and YP throughout their school experience, establishing 'belonging' at school can present additional challenges for students from diverse, underrepresented backgrounds with an identified disability or additional support needs. In addition, YP with low 'attendance' demonstrate lower 'belonging' compared to high-attending peers (ImpactEd, 2024). YPs with additional support needs report lower 'belonging' than their peers (Frehill & Dunsmuir, 2015; Hebron, 2018; Marsh, 2023; Pampati et al., 2020). For instance, Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller students exhibit lower 'belonging' than their non-traveller peers. A relationship was observed between Gypsy, Roma, and Travellers' 'belonging' and their school absenteeism. Brassington (2022) highlights that this may be due to several reasons. These students frequently face prejudice and discrimination within school and in the wider population, which can create feelings of disconnection. These experiences may include racism and bullying, which undermine perceptions of school safety. Cultural differences may also impact 'belonging' and 'attendance', such as different gender norms. Additionally, many families opt for homeschooling because of concerns about prejudicial treatment, negative past experiences, lack of representation in the education system, or differing gender norms.

Another consideration is the frequent mobility of some families, which accounts for a quarter of the population. This mobility poses additional challenges by disrupting educational continuity and hindering the formation of stable

relationships with teachers and peers. When considering transition more widely, a 'belonging' does not automatically transfer to another context (Virtanen et al., 2022), which poses an important consideration for YP who experience frequent school moves or may be transitioning from primary to secondary school.

Adolescence is a crucial period for identity development, where individuals explore their personal and social identities (Erikson, 1968). These identities are intertwined and may conflict with each other as individuals seek to develop their individuality whilst connecting with other group identities (Branje et al., 2021; Verhoeven et al., 2021). A coherent sense of self develops in relationships, and how individuals perceive them (Branje et al., 2021), providing a safe base to explore who they are and who they want to become. When individuals feel unsafe exploring their identity or struggle to fit within their social identity, they may seek an alternative identity, for instance, by rejecting societal expectations. 'Belonging' to a peer group, with relationships based on acceptance and mutual respect, is positively related to adolescent identity development (Bannon et al., 2015; Ragelienė, 2016). Therefore, adolescence can be considered a particularly vulnerable period for experiencing a lack of 'belonging'.

3.7 Factors that Impact 'Belonging'

As the research field has grown, attention has turned to how 'belonging' can be fostered in YP. There is a consensus within the literature that multiple levels within an individual context can impact their sense of 'belonging' through a complex interplay between individual, interpersonal, institutional, and cultural factors (Allen, Gray, et al., 2022; Allen et al., 2018; Chiu et al., 2016; El Zaatari & Maalouf, 2022).

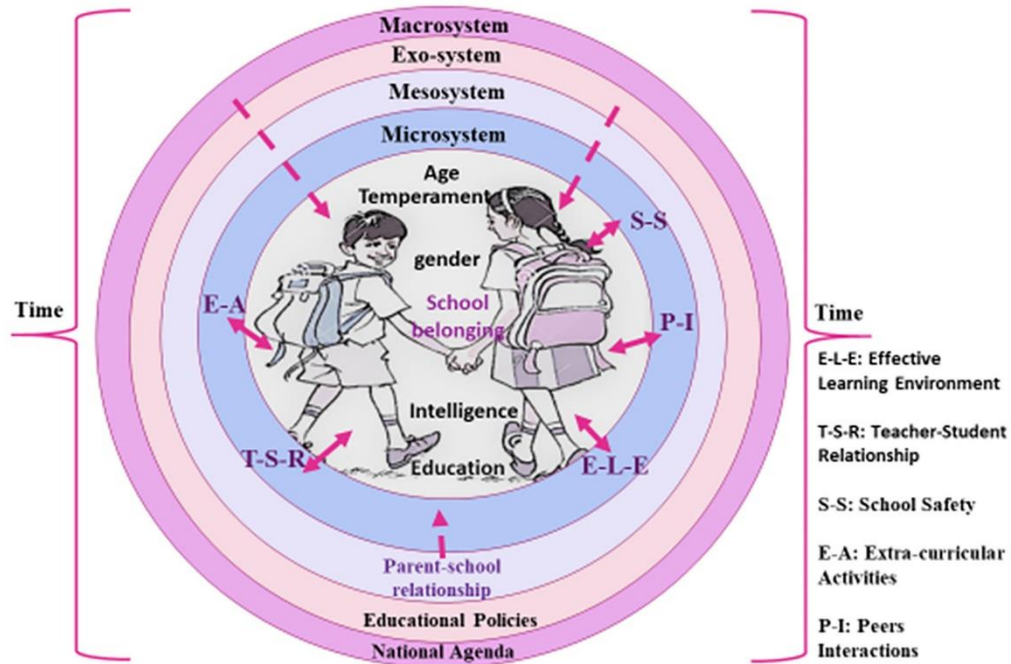
Underpinned by Bronfenbrenner's ecological model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007), Allen et al. (2018)'s meta-analysis identified ten themes from 51 studies that impact 'belonging', including academic motivation, emotional stability, personal characteristics (gratitude, interpersonal skills, decision-making), parent support, peer support, teacher support, gender, race and ethnicity, extracurricular activities and environmental/school safety. Individual-level factors included

emotional stability, positive personal characteristics, and microlevel factors including parent, teacher, and peer support, were significantly related to 'belonging'. Of these themes, teacher support and positive personal characteristics were the strongest predictors of 'belonging'. Their findings indicated that teacher support had a more significant effect than peer support in a school setting.

El Zaatari and Maalouf (2022) further utilise Bronfenbrenner's ecological model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007) by categorising four layers of the system: process, person, context, and time Figure 5. They place the factors influencing 'belonging' within this framework. Process refers to interactions within an individual's microsystem, such as relationships with peers, teachers, and parents. Person relates to individual traits, such as optimism and self-esteem. Context includes broader systems, such as school settings, policies, or national agendas. Time relates to chronological age and significant life events.

Figure 5

The Bio-Ecological System Model and Sense of 'Belonging' (El Zaatari & Maalouf, 2022, p. 3).



In this model, weight is given to the influence of contextual systems that indirectly influence a student's 'belonging'. They propose six key factors influencing 'belonging': an effective learning environment, teacher-student relationships, school safety, extracurricular activities, peer interactions, and parental involvement.

Štremfel et al. (2024) conducted a systematic review of 86 studies on the predictors of 'belonging', using Bronfenbrenner's model, with the majority of the research originating from the United States of America (America). Most of the research focused on individual factors influencing 'belonging' (70 studies), with less addressing micro and meso levels (Table 3). Notably, the strongest individual predictors were related to student participation, with skipping school, absenteeism, and lack of preparedness for class strongly associated with lower 'belonging'. At a micro level, the strongest predictor was teacher support and likability. At a meso level, the strongest predictors were classroom climate and disciplinary practices. All these predictors indicated a moderate or large effect size, according to Cohen

(2013). There was limited research at the other levels. It is unclear within the literature how these levels interact and impact one another. For instance, how do teacher relationships impact externalising difficulties? This gap underscores the need for future studies to explore how factors at various levels interact to shape 'belonging'. It was also found that predictors may have different effects on different students. For example, social media usage was a positive predictor in secondary school but a negative predictor in middle school, while parent involvement was significant for boys but not for girls. These findings call for a more nuanced and intersectional approach to understanding 'belonging', emphasising the importance of tailored, context-sensitive interventions.

Table 3

Identified Significant Positive and Negative Predictors of Students' 'Belonging' (Štremfel et al., 2024, p. 2908).

Level	Findings	
	Significant Positive Predictors	Significant Negative Predictors
Individual	Age, gender, academic achievement, educational track, socioeconomic status (SES), parents' education, students living arrangements with parents, ethnicity and race, immigrant and minority status, physical appearance and sexual orientation, students' (academic) behaviour in school (including teacher and parent reports of student behaviour), substance use, social media use, emotional feelings and functioning, students' self-perception, students' perceptions of the environment around them, well-being, students' expectations, social goals, coping strategies, and problem-solving skills.	Age, gender, academic achievement, educational track, students living arrangements with parents, ethnicity and race, immigrant and minority status, physical appearance and sexual orientation, students' (academic) behaviour in school (including teacher and parent reports of student behaviour), problem behaviour, substance use, social media use, emotional feelings and functioning, students' perceptions of the environment around them, internalising difficulties, externalising difficulties, sensation seeking, social goals, coping strategies, and problem-solving skills.
Micro	Parent and family relationships, parent involvement, peer relationships, and relationships with teachers.	Parent and family relationships, parent involvement, problematic peers, discrimination, and being a victim of bullying.
Meso	School size, SES at school level, school composition, teaching practices, classroom goals, classroom climate, school support practices, autonomy-supporting practices, school disciplinary practices, other school policies and practices, and extracurricular activities.	School size, SES at school level, school composition, school violence, teaching practices, classroom goals, school disciplinary practices, other school policies and practices, and extracurricular activities.
Exo	Student's participation in youth-based community organisations, percentage of non-US citizens in the neighbourhood.	Educational instability due to residential changes, the percentage of renters in the neighbourhood, schools in urban areas, and students paying their rent.
Macro	Higher gross domestic product, religiosity, and OECD country.	Hierarchical cultures.
Chrono	High school belonging at previous time points.	Low school belonging in middle school.

3.7.1 Staff and Student Perspectives

These findings are supported by qualitative research from a staff viewpoint (Greenwood & Kelly, 2019) and YP's view (Craggs & Kelly, 2018). Greenwood and Kelly (2019) conducted a systematic review exploring school staff's views on increasing YP's sense of 'belonging'. It sought to identify methods perceived as supportive in helping students develop 'belonging' within their secondary school environment, both at the individual staff and whole-school systemic levels. Key

themes included the importance of teacher practice, such as teacher connection, personal support, and academic support, as well as school context factors like school culture, school community, and inclusive classroom practices. Examples of effective classroom practices related to relational aspects and learning approaches. For instance, taking an active interest in students, talking to them, and getting to know them, alongside using media, active learning strategies, and positive reinforcement. The review also highlights how leadership and parental involvement contribute to students' 'belonging'. Additionally, it underscores the need for a whole-school approach that emphasises emotional safety, respect, and community-building activities. They highlight the limited number of qualitative studies that gather staff views on supporting 'belonging'. Therefore, further depth and breadth in this area are required.

Craggs and Kelly (2018)'s qualitative meta-synthesis explored YP's views on fostering 'belonging'. The research indicated that 'belonging' was "feeling safe to be yourself in and through relationships with others in the school setting" (p.1). Findings demonstrate that positive relationships with teachers and peers are intrinsic to fostering 'belonging', alongside feeling respected, supported, and understood. Other factors, such as inclusion, recognition of individuality, and emotional safety, were also found to shape students' 'belonging' significantly. Experiences of exclusion, isolation, and negative relationships with teachers or peers negatively impact this 'belonging'. Craggs and Kelly (2018) highlight the lack of student voice in the literature. In addition, it is posited that listening to students' views on their 'belonging' may, in turn, enhance their perceptions of it, highlighting the importance of reciprocity within 'belonging'.

Both studies note a lack of research exploring staff and student views on 'belonging'. They underscore the importance of relationships in fostering it and how school culture can foster or hinder it. Similarly, they emphasise the need for intentionality in creating and supporting 'belonging'. There are some differences within the research. Greenwood & Kelly's (2019) focus on staff perceptions

emphasises systemic factors supporting 'belonging'. This is likely due to research exploring how teachers and school staff perceive and describe their roles, as well as wider school system factors, in fostering it. In contrast, Craggs & Kelly (2018) examine adolescents' experiences of 'belonging' and highlight the feelings associated with it, as well as how it is influenced. The themes highlight the emotional and relational aspects experienced by the participants, focusing on the person and process (El Zaatari & Maalouf, 2022). Together, these studies provide insights into different systems within school settings that foster 'belonging'.

There is a commonality across the cited studies suggesting factors essential for fostering a student's sense of 'belonging', including experiencing positive relationships with teachers and peers, family involvement, perception of safety in school, access to opportunities and activities outside of the classroom, an appreciation of individuality, and an inclusive school culture and ethos (Allen et al., 2018; Craggs & Kelly, 2018; El Zaatari & Maalouf, 2022; Greenwood & Kelly, 2019). However, the lack of student voice within 'belonging' research is surprising for several reasons. As previously highlighted, 'belonging' is a subjective, context-dependent, reciprocal, dynamic, and self-determined concept (Mahar et al., 2013). Therefore, without incorporating students' voices, research risks neglecting individuals' experiences of 'belonging' within their context. In addition, understanding reciprocity and the dynamic nature of 'belonging' can only be accurately captured by those experiencing it. Finally, self-determination reinforces the need to support students in sharing their perspectives and actively participating in creating interventions and policies that affect their 'belonging'. Therefore, without student voices, it is challenging to know how 'belonging' is experienced, what factors influence it, and how to affect it. Thus, further research is required.

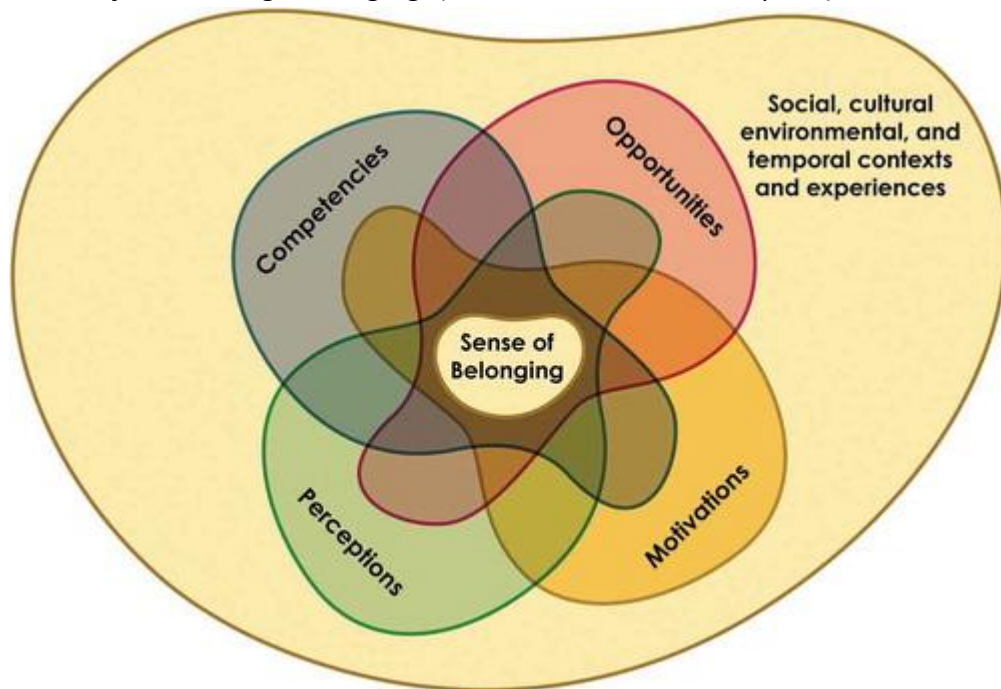
3.8 How to Increase 'Belonging'

Allen et al. (2021) proposes an integrative framework to inform future research and interventions for 'belonging' (Figure 6). They suggest that it is a dynamic feeling and experience that emerges from four interrelated factors: competencies for

'belonging' (skills and abilities), opportunities to belong (enablers and removal of barriers), motivations to belong (inner drive), and perceptions of 'belonging' (cognitions and positive or negative experiences when connecting).

Figure 6

Framework for Fostering 'Belonging' (Allen, Kern, et al., 2021, p. 92).



Considering the above-mentioned factors, teacher, peer, and parent support are essential for 'belonging'. Often, schools will seek to increase the perceived level of support by providing opportunities to build and strengthen relationships in school. It is proposed that interventions need to account for a collective understanding of the importance of 'belonging' alongside ways to increase it in these four factors. These factors align with Mahar et al. (2013) themes of subjectivity, reciprocity, groundedness, dynamism, and self-determination. For example, perceptions of 'belonging' directly link to subjectivity. Although they note that further research is required to ascertain the weighting of factors when targeting interventions. This indicates a need for research to provide supporting evidence linking this model to effective interventions, as such support is currently lacking. Chapman et al. (2013) systematically reviewed 14 articles examining school-based programmes to increase 'belonging' and reduce risk-taking. Almost all the studies

were situated within a primary context. Most programmes adopted a whole-school approach, encompassing classroom, school-level, and broader environmental supports (such as parent and family involvement). Strategies used in these interventions included widespread school system changes and teacher training to alter the classroom-level environment through classroom management and interactivity. It was noted that the analysis did not allow for the investigation of the effectiveness of individual components. Some studies included in this review measured the extent to which a programme was implemented as intended and examined this alongside its effectiveness (Battistich et al., 2004; Fagan et al., 2008). For instance, one study found that students in high-implementation groups showed greater changes than students in low-implementation groups (Fagan et al., 2008). This means it is important to consider not only the components of an intervention but also how it is implemented and the degree of fidelity with which it is executed. It was noted that the feasibility and ease of embedding a programme are also important. A balance is required between designing comprehensive and effective programmes whilst ensuring practicality regarding adoption and sustainability. It is suggested that future research should embed implementation within a curriculum-based programme. This approach could enhance both the feasibility and effectiveness of interventions by aligning them more closely with existing educational practices and resources.

Allen, Jamshidi, et al. (2022) conducted a systematic review that included 22 studies evaluating the impact of interventions on secondary school students in a school setting. The review included research based on the measure of 'belonging' used, rather than on terminology. The interventions reviewed were highly diverse, with various methods and components included to effect change. They ranged from universal approaches (such as implementing restorative practices and reducing cyberbullying) to evidence-based approaches (such as peer mentoring and instilling a growth mindset). Implementation timeframes ranged from three months to one year, with varying intensities. Some interventions were delivered weekly, bi-weekly, tri-weekly, or fortnightly. Interventions also aimed to affect a range of variables, for

instance, strengthening student-teacher and student-student relationships, impacting YP's self-perception, and providing social skills training. This means that caution is needed when drawing firm conclusions about which elements within and across the research lead to the impact. Indeed, 'belonging' was almost always measured as a byproduct of another intervention rather than the focus of the intervention itself - for instance, an intervention aimed at reducing depression or bullying. Therefore, the effect of an intervention aimed at impacting 'belonging' is not yet fully known. Within the review, a limited number of studies included participants with additional support needs, such as those with a learning disability or at risk of dropout. The lack of representation of vulnerable YP within the literature searched for this review is surprising, given the evidence that these YP tend to experience lower levels of 'belonging' and 'attendance' at school. This may be due to several reasons, such as exclusion from research because of mitigations and the effort required to implement necessary adaptations to ensure no risk of harm or further exacerbation of vulnerabilities (Aldridge, 2014). Recruitment can also be a barrier, as some vulnerable YP, especially those who struggle or feel unable to express their experiences and needs, are often left out of studies (Aldridge, 2014). This is because they may be seen as difficult to engage or work with during the research process. (Aldridge, 2014; Anyon et al., 2018)

Unsurprisingly, there is a dearth of literature exploring YP's views on interventions to increase 'belonging', as limited research elicits YP's views on 'belonging' (Craggs & Kelly, 2018; Keyes, 2019; Shaw, 2019). Allen et al. (2023) attempt to address this literature gap by exploring students' views on school practices that increase it'. Participants identified five supports that increase 'belonging': opportunities to foster peer relationships, quality of teacher-student relationships, flexible and inclusive learning environments, mental health supports, and extracurricular and community involvement. Emotional and academic support from teachers was significant for participants' 'belonging'. Allen et al. (2023) identified several strategies to support 'belonging', including:

- The creation of policies and procedures to ensure a safe, nurturing, and inclusive environment.
- Ensuring student voice and choice are embedded within the system.
- Supporting teacher connectedness and wellbeing.
- Providing professional learning opportunities for teachers.
- Availability of specialist psychological support services.

Participants described the influence of their microsystem, which was perhaps expected, as this is the system they interact with most frequently. Participants were secondary school students between 12 and 20 years old. Taken together, research demonstrates the importance and salience of 'belonging'. However, interventions aimed at increasing 'belonging' are limited. The available research outlines varying delivery methods, intensity, and implementation fidelity, which limits the identification of key strategies. Despite this, there is evidence that 'belonging' is malleable and can be impacted by intervention support. 'Belonging' is often captured as a secondary outcome of research and is often exploratory rather than confirmatory. Exploratory research identifies and uncovers relationships where little is known (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). Confirmatory research seeks to test specific hypotheses, often identified by exploratory research, using robust, reliable, and replicable methods (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). Therefore, the measure of 'belonging' as a secondary research outcome makes it difficult to establish causal relationships. Thus, further research aiming to impact 'belonging' as a primary outcome, through confirmability research, may yield more robust evidence of its impact on targeted outcomes and provide a deeper understanding of the underlying mechanisms supporting this.

3.9 Summary

'Belonging' is essential for a variety of life outcomes. Despite this, research demonstrates that 'belonging' is decreasing. YP from diverse, underrepresented backgrounds, those with additional support needs, and those in secondary school are particularly vulnerable to low 'belonging.' Many factors influence 'belonging,' including individual factors such as emotional stability and personal characteristics,

school factors like opportunities for support and policies, and community factors like parental involvement. Interventions that increase 'belonging' support YP's competencies, motivations, perceptions, and opportunities to belong. However, research exploring YP's views on 'belonging' is lacking and further limited for vulnerable YP.

Chapter 4: A Case for 'Attendance' and 'Belonging'

4.1 Overview

Chapters 2 and 3 outline the research on 'attendance' and 'belonging', defining 'attendance' and 'belonging'. They also identify the decline in 'attendance' and 'belonging' over the past decade, highlighting the impacting factors and intervention considerations. This chapter outlines the underlying theories of 'belonging' and 'attendance' and provides an overview of key literature.

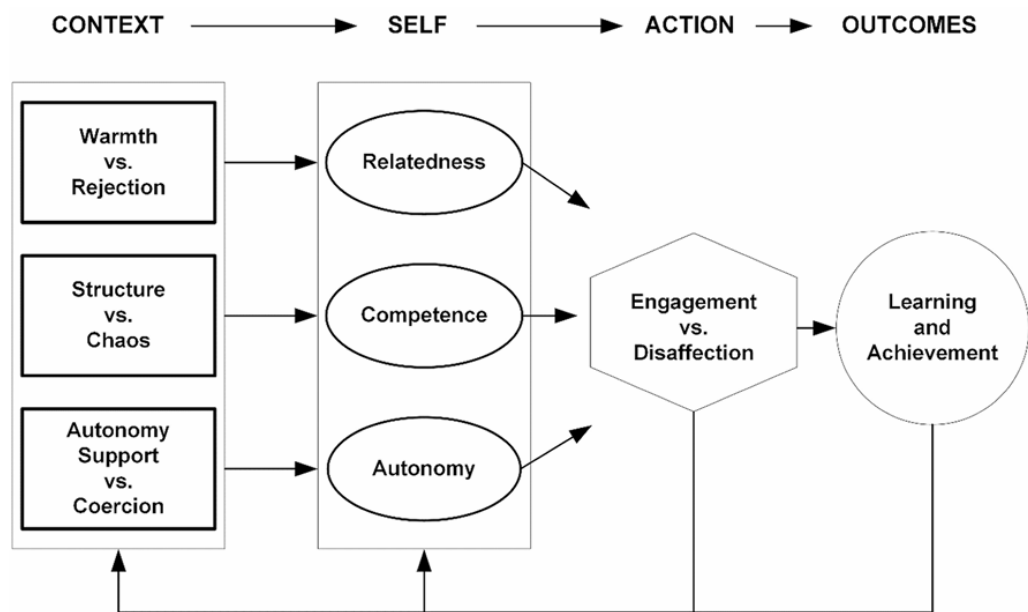
4.2 Theoretical Framework

Several frameworks can be used to explain how 'belonging' and 'attendance' are connected. Motivation frameworks and engagement frameworks were explored for this study.

Maslow's (1943) 'Theory of Motivation' describes the drivers of human behaviour through a hierarchy of needs. According to Maslow (1943), physiological, safety, belonging, and esteem needs are deficiency needs, while cognitive, aesthetic, self-actualisation, and transcendence are growth needs. Deficiency needs arise from the absence of something essential, whereas growth needs arise from the desire for personal development. A challenge with this theory is that it is sequential, with each lower need requiring satisfaction before progressing to a higher need. However, later, it was acknowledged that individuals often experience multiple needs simultaneously (Maslow, 1970). In the context of 'attendance', students may lack motivation to meet higher-level needs if their basic needs are unmet.

Figure 7

The Self System Model of Motivational Development, based on Skinner et al., (2008)
(Martins et al., 2022, p. 796)



A second model that incorporates ‘belonging’ and ‘attendance’ is the ‘Self-System Model of Motivational Development’ (SSMD) (Connell, 1991; Nouwen & Clycq, 2021; Skinner et al., 2008). It is underpinned by the ‘Self-Determination Theory’ (Ryan & Deci, 2000). This theory posits that when an individual’s basic psychological needs of relatedness, competence, and autonomy are met, they have higher engagement and academic achievement (Ryan & Deci, 2000, 2017). Autonomy relates to experiencing choice, relatedness relates to feeling connected to others and being part of a community, and competence relates to feeling capable and knowing how to create change. These needs are met through interactions with others in their social context. When these needs are unmet, an individual may seek to meet them in other areas of their life, thus resulting in lower ‘attendance’ (Pikkarainen et al., 2021; Vansteenkiste et al., 2023). The SSMD (Figure 7) provides an overview of how motivational theories connect to engagement (Martins et al., 2022). This model integrates the impact of context (such as peer and teacher relationships), basic psychological needs (including relatedness), engagement or

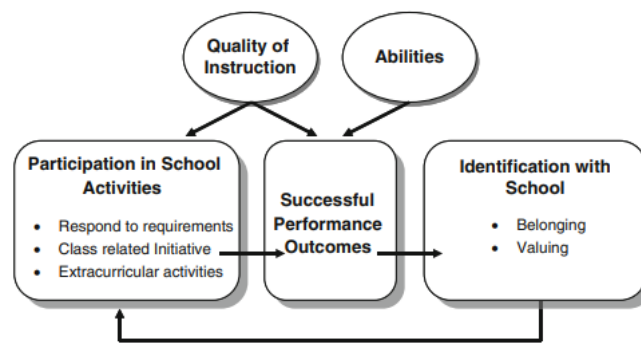
disaffection (action), and outcomes (achievement or absenteeism). It establishes interpersonal relationships as facilitators rather than a dimension of engagement. Within this model, engagement and disaffection are recognised as distinct. For example, behavioural engagement is underpinned by effort, intensity, attention, and involvement, and behavioural disaffection is underpinned by passivity, withdrawal, and distraction (Skinner et al., 2008). A strength of the SSMD is that it accounts for the complexity of contextual components that impact the internalised processes which affect behaviour (Nouwen & Clycq, 2021). However, the model remains linear, and motivational processes are much more complex than an input-output model would suggest (Linnenbrink-Garcia & Walton, 2023).

A third model, Finn's (1989) Participation-Identification Model (Figure 8), was a seminal theory of student engagement and sought to understand student dropout. Identification refers to a student's affective engagement and is underpinned by the student's 'belonging' and school valuing (Finn, 1989; Voelkl, 2012). 'Belonging' is the feeling of being part of the school, whereas valuing is a student's feelings of success towards their goals (Voelkl, 2012). Participation refers to behavioural involvement in school and includes attending school regularly, engaging in academic tasks, participating in extracurricular activities, and actively contributing to school decision-making (Finn & Rock, 1997; Finn & Zimmer, 2012). This model highlights the importance of successful learning as an outcome of participation and quality instruction, leading to increased identification. Identification then increases participation and are mutually reinforcing. The theory suggests that dropping out and school completion are ongoing, cumulative processes. This means time is also a consideration. Specifically, participation leads to school success and identification with the school (completion), reinforcing participation, while non-participation results in poor academic performance and emotional withdrawal (dropout). Thus, these outcomes represent long-term patterns of either engagement or disengagement (Finn & Zimmer, 2012). Whilst this model is influential, it may not account for individuals who attend and engage with their learning but feel disconnected emotionally. In addition, some researchers

believe this model does not account for the complexities underpinning engagement and consider that participation does not always lead to identification, especially if students feel disconnected from the curriculum (Appleton et al., 2008; Schnitzler et al., 2021).

Figure 8

Participation Identification Model (Finn, 1989, p. 130)



A fourth model, that of Hirshi's 'Social Bonding Theory' (2017) weighs this social component. This theory posits that school delinquency results from an individual's weakening bond with society. In other words, connection to others and relationships created are essential for 'attendance'. Four components underpin social bonds: attachment, commitment, involvement, and belief.

- Attachment refers to affection and close relationships with others.
- Commitment describes the investment made through collaborative activities.
- Involvement refers to engagement with learning activities.
- Belief refers to belief in the value of school and a perception that school rules are fair and just.

Research has empirically supported these assumptions (Costello & Laub, 2020). However, this model is based on individual factors and may not fully account for broader contextual factors that impact 'attendance' and 'belonging'. A further model (Fredricks et al., 2004) provides further depth of engagement literature by proposing a tripartite framework for engagement. There is widespread recognition that student engagement is a multi-dimensional construct that is complex and

dependent on individual, micro, meso, and macro systems (Allen & Boyle, 2022; Appleton et al., 2008; Fredricks et al., 2004). It is proposed that engagement consists of affective, behavioural, and cognitive components (Appleton et al., 2008; Fredricks et al., 2004).

- Behavioural engagement involves participation in school activities, including extracurricular participation. It can also include behaviours such as compliance, disruption, effort, school absences, and class withdrawal.
- Cognitive engagement involves students' psychological investment in learning and is associated with meta-cognition strategies, such as planning, organising, and reviewing their work.
- Affective engagement refers to feelings and attitudes towards school, including 'belonging'.

Although these dimensions are distinct, there is a recognition of overlap and interdependency (Schnitzler et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2019). A challenge with this model is that it does not account for the influence of context, precisely the social context. Researchers argue that the quality of involvement in social interactions within and outside the classroom is another salient component of engagement (Wang et al., 2019; Wang & Fredricks, 2014). Applying this to Finn's (1989) Participation-Identification Model, behavioural and cognitive engagement relate to participation, whereas affective engagement is akin to identification. Indeed, Allen and Boyle (2022) provide an overview of the conceptual similarities and differences between 'belonging' and specific engagement dimensions.

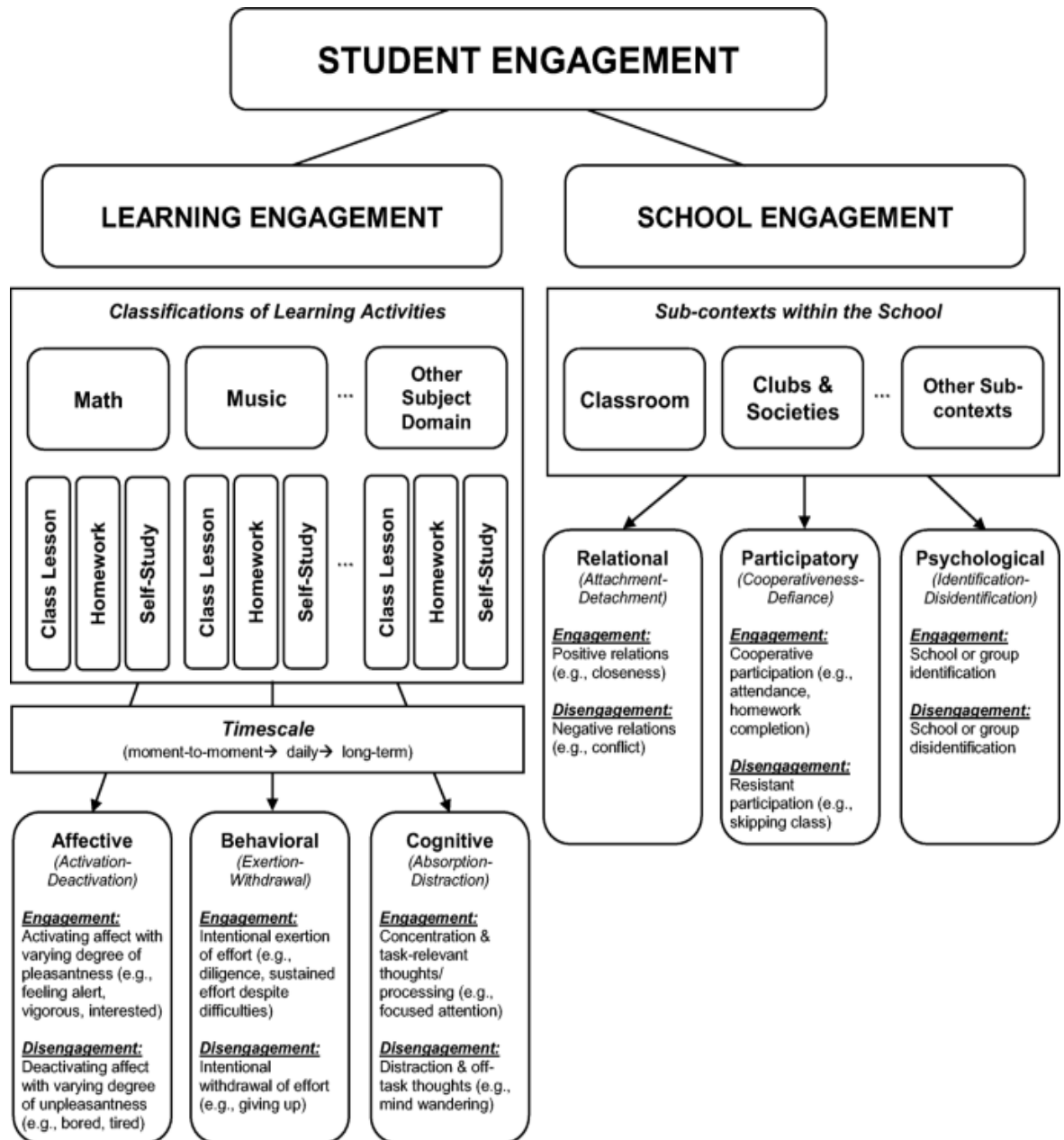
Wong and Liem (2022) propose that the conceptualisation of student engagement is hazy and unclear. They outline concerns relating to student engagement's conceptualisation, theorisation, and operation. Firstly, they argue that student engagement has become a catch-all term that can explain any variable linked to student success. Secondly, some researchers assume student engagement has a singular meaning rather than describing multiple constructs or believe that labels refer to specific constructs when they describe similar phenomena.

Ambiguity can also arise through confusion when applying motivation and engagement theories. Motivation theories, such as those proposed by Maslow (1970; 1943) and Ryan and Deci (2000, 2017), suggest that motivation stems from inherent drives to satisfy psychological needs. In contrast, engagement theories, like Finn (1989) and Hirschi (2017), explain how affective engagement develops from initial behaviours and external reinforcement that eventually becomes internalised. This difference in focus can result in a lack of conceptual clarity.

To address this, Wong and Liem (2022) proposes the 'Dual Component Framework of Student Engagement' (Figure 9), which considers two distinct perspectives on student engagement: learning engagement and student engagement. Learning engagement refers to students' active involvement in learning activities and is related to achievement (underpinned by motivational theories). In contrast, student engagement refers to their interpersonal involvement within the school community and is related to well-being. Wong and Liem (2022) argue that these concepts are both semantically and conceptually different. The former relates to the student's direct experience of a learning activity, and the latter relates to a student's connection with the school environment. It is noted that an individual may be academically engaged and socially disengaged, vice versa, or both. Student engagement is most closely related to 'belonging' and school absenteeism or 'attendance'. Student engagement is *"students' state of connection with the school community"* (p.125). It is characterised by relational attachment to people within the school, cooperative participation in school-organised activities, and a psychological identification as a school member.

Figure 9

Dual Component Framework for Student Engagement (Wong & Liem, 2022, p. 55)



In their literature review, Bowles and Skull (2019) suggested that YP must attend school in some form and build connectedness. Whilst it is acknowledged that engagement is not necessarily linear, they argue that the first stage of ‘belonging’ is being present as a learner, followed by being with and among the school experience. Once these two factors are established, YP can engage with their learning and reach flow. Relating this to Wong and Liem (2022), this model

emphasises the importance of student engagement as a precursor to learning engagement.

Each of the models was considered within the scope of this research. All models highlight the importance of 'belonging' (affective engagement, relatedness, social bonds) as an important process for 'attendance' (behavioural engagement, participation), with most illustrating recursion. In addition, 'attendance' was often argued to be observable and overt, and 'belonging' was more internal and covert. This has implications for research design, for instance, through a mixed methods research approach where students' voices are captured through qualitative methods for a rich understanding of their experiences of 'belonging', and quantitative measures to capture more overt behaviours.

Table 4 outlines each of the models in relation to complexity, interaction, whether they explain the relationship between 'belonging' and 'attendance', and whether they recognise the influence of context and individual differences. Complexity relates to whether the model presents a linear or more dynamic view. Interaction relates to whether recursion or directionality is theorised. The relationship between 'belonging' and 'attendance' relates to whether this is demonstrated or assumed. Finally, accounting for external and internal influences involves considering whether other influencing factors are included in the model.

Some theories present linearity and a hierarchical structure (Bowles & Scull, 2019; Maslow, 1970; Maslow, 1943), which may overlook the complexity of the relationship between 'belonging' and 'attendance'. There is some merit to this, as many researchers argue that an individual must belong to something, and YP need to be present in some form to build connections (Bowles & Scull, 2019; Wong & Liem, 2022). However, other researchers argue that many YP have preconceived ideas about school, which impact their perceptions of 'belonging' before attending (Allen & Boyle, 2022). Another consideration is that a linear model does not account for the interaction between and the interplay between various levels of both concepts. A linear model with no recursion suggests a directional rather than

bidirectional relationship. Hirshi's (2017) theory aimed to explore the impact of social bonds on behaviour; it posits that an individual engages in deviant behaviour due to weakened bonds and attributes this to a lack of conformity. It does not directly provide a pathway for how 'belonging' impacts 'attendance'; instead, 'attendance' or absenteeism is viewed as a function of the strength of social bonds and is framed as a byproduct of conformity or non-conformity.

Fredricks et al. (2004) present engagement as a meta-construct, including emotional, cognitive, and behavioural dimensions. For example, affective engagement accounts for 'belonging' and learning affect together (Allen & Boyle, 2022). Wong & Liem's (2022) model attempts to provide theoretical clarity between the lenses of engagement and motivation and offers a rationale for engagement when grounded in context. It identifies three key components contributing to student engagement: psychological, relational, and participatory. It is not yet clear how these components interact. In addition, psychological and relational engagement appear to be similar, if not significantly overlapping, concepts. That is, psychological engagement relates to a student's overall connection towards a group or institution, such as a sense of purpose or motivation, and relational engagement refers to personal connections. However, it is argued that both connections to a group or institute and connections to individuals are core components of 'belonging' (Mahar et al., 2013). Therefore, the broad scope of these models (Fredricks et al., 2004; Wong & Liem, 2022) may make it difficult to focus specifically on the relationship between 'belonging' and 'attendance'.

Other models are presented as input and output models (Connell, 1991; Finn, 1989). While these models may not capture all the complexity, they describe bidirectionality of the relationship between 'belonging' and 'attendance'. In its simplest form, this research examines this relationship. Therefore, this theoretical orientation was deemed appropriate. Whilst Finn's (1989) model provides an overview of the relationship between participation and identification, it does not elaborate on the contextual factors that influence it. It also does not account for

individuals who participate but do not feel high levels of school identification (Schnitzler et al., 2021). Therefore, the SSMD (Connell, 1991), as illustrated by Martins et al. (2022) was deemed an appropriate theoretical orientation for this research. This model outlines the intra-individual and interindividual processes that impact school engagement and disaffection ('attendance'). It is particularly suited to exploring the factors that influence 'belonging' and 'attendance' because it integrates both intrinsic and external influences and accounts for the broader social and institutional environment.

Table 4*Comparison of ‘Belonging’ and ‘Attendance’ Theories and Model Components*

Theory	Model (Dynamic)	Interaction (Recursive)	Links ‘Belonging’ and ‘Attendance’	Considers Contextual Influence	Accounts for Individual Differences
Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs (1943; 1970)	No	No	No	No	No
Bowles & Skull (2019)	No	No	No	Partially Present	No
Hirschi’s Social Bond Theory (1969; 2017)	No	No	No	Yes	No
Fredrickson et al., Tripartite Engagement Model (2004)	Yes	Yes	Partially Present	Partially Present	Yes
Finn’s Participation- Identification Model (1989)	Partially Present	Yes	Partially Present	Partially Present	No
Self-System Model of Development (Connell, 1991)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Wong & Liem’s (2022) model.	Yes	Not Specified	Not Specified	Yes	Yes

4.3 ‘Attendance’ and ‘Belonging’ Literature

The literature has evidenced the importance of ‘attendance’ and ‘belonging’ and presented a theoretical framework outlining how they may influence one another.

It is acknowledged that there are differences between the ‘attendance’ and

‘belonging’ research. ‘Attendance’ research often focuses on the impact of external risk factors, such as poverty or family dynamics (Gubbels et al., 2019; Sosu et al., 2021), and measures ‘attendance’ through quantitative data. Meanwhile, ‘belonging’ research outlines the impact of internal factors such as perceptions of relationships (Allen, 2015; Allen, Kern, et al., 2021; Allen et al., 2018). However, they also share some similarities. Both have declined over the past two decades; relationships are central to supporting them, and many interventions that seek to increase ‘attendance’ and ‘belonging’ focus on relationship building, developing a sense of connectedness and safety, and personalising interventions (Allen, Jamshidi, et al., 2022; Boaler & Bond, 2023; Keppens & Spruyt, 2020). These interventions frequently aim to increase ‘belonging’, drawing heavily on the social connections built at school, to support ‘attendance’.

When students feel connected to their peers, teachers, and the wider school community, they are less likely to engage in behaviours that lead to persistent absenteeism (Ewing et al., 2023; Keppens & Spruyt, 2015; Keppens & Spruyt, 2019; Van Eck et al., 2021). These relationships provide a buffer to school avoidance. Students who feel part of a supportive social network are more likely to prioritise attending school to maintain these relationships. Regular ‘attendance’ increases opportunities for students to engage in situations that increase ‘belonging’, such as classroom activities, social events, and extracurricular activities (Keppens & Spruyt, 2015; Keppens & Spruyt, 2019; Ramsdal & Wynn, 2022). In contrast, more authoritarian schools and those with higher school exclusions contribute to a student's sense of alienation, leading to disengagement (Keppens & Spruyt, 2019). Research emphasises that school environments that promote ‘belonging’ create a positive feedback loop (Gowing, 2019; Rangel-Clawson, 2017). Students who feel valued and supported are more likely to attend regularly, which increases their opportunities for social engagement and academic success, further strengthening their ‘belonging’. The relationship is more pronounced for vulnerable YP, such as those with a disability or from a marginalised background (Ewing et al., 2023; Frehill & Dunsmuir, 2015; Pampati et al., 2020). Interestingly, Mooney et al. (2023) found

that the relationship between 'belonging' and absenteeism was important for YP from all socioeconomic statuses.

Of interest is that this relationship is not static, and it is context-specific. This is evidenced by research exploring the views of YP who attended a traditional secondary school followed by an alternative provision, where the difference between provisions was 'belonging' (Barrett, 2022; Fortner, 2022). Participation in primary school impacts early secondary school identification, but the inverse is not true (Virtanen et al., 2022). Therefore, students must reestablish and adapt to different contexts, as effective school participation depends on this reidentification process rather than relying on previous identification. The safe base created within primary education does not, therefore, automatically transfer to a secondary context, which may help explain why 'attendance' and 'belonging' decline in secondary school.

Empirical research also evidences a bidirectional relationship between 'belonging' and 'attendance.' Cross-sectional studies have illustrated a correlation between 'attendance' and 'belonging' for primary and secondary school students (Churchill et al., 2021; Orpinas & Raczynski, 2016; Virtanen et al., 2021; Wang & Fredricks, 2014). Longitudinal data demonstrates this connection (Garcia-Gracia & Valls, 2023; Jackson et al., 2020; Mooney et al., 2023). Students who have a strong 'belonging' in school are more likely to attend regularly and are less likely to drop out. Korpershoek et al.'s (2020) meta-analysis demonstrated a negative association between belonging and absenteeism/dropout, indicating that students with higher belonging tend to have lower absence and dropout rates, which aligns with the view that belonging supports regular attendance.

Several review articles have demonstrated a connection between 'belonging' and 'attendance'. Review articles aim to provide comprehensive overviews of the existing research on these two concepts, allowing for analysis of specific trends or highlighting research gaps. Two articles present theories regarding the relationship between the concepts: one focuses on the actions of the individual (Bowles & Scull, 2019), while the other considers the effect of the organisational climate (Arslan et

al., 2020). Four articles analysed 'attendance' research and presented a rationale for 'belonging' as an explanatory factor. Two utilised student voice research (Corcoran & Kelly, 2023; Ramsdal & Wynn, 2022), one thematically analysed the impact of truancy interventions (Keppens & Spruyt, 2020), and another explored its impact with a focus on neurodiversity in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic (Hamilton, 2024). Two articles explored 'belonging', 'attendance', and bullying; one illustrated 'belonging' as a predictor of bullying and 'attendance' as a consequence of bullying, suggesting an indirect relationship (Moyano & Sánchez-Fuentes, 2020), and the other explored the relationship between bullying and substance misuse, where 'belonging' was conceptualised as a mediator between these concepts, and 'attendance' as a moderator (Hong et al., 2014). Finally, one article presented a meta-analysis of quantitative literature exploring the impact of several factors on 'belonging', including 'attendance' (Korpershoek et al., 2020). Six articles considered conceptual analysis and theoretical development. These articles are exploratory, organising and interpreting research by applying a theoretical lens rather than adding new empirical data. Three studies explore the relationship between the concepts and other factors, providing evidence of a relationship, but not necessarily establishing causality or measuring its directionality.

As will be discussed in Chapter 5, despite the link between 'belonging' and 'attendance', there is a dearth of research within the UK. Research from England, UK, found that 'belonging' was a key driver of 'attendance' across all school contexts (ImpactEd, 2024). This research included data from 126 schools. They tracked 'attendance' data from YP aged 11 to 14. A difference was observed in 'belonging' between high and low-attending YP. YP with secondary school absences exhibited even lower connections to school. Supporting the view that consequence or exclusionary approaches do not increase 'attendance' (Keppens & Spruyt, 2020), persistent non-attenders were aware of attendance-related sanctions. However, these consequences did not improve 'attendance'. Factors such as understanding the importance and relevance of school and supporting strong relationships were important for 'attendance'. This research highlights the need to embed YP voice

into supporting 'attendance' and 'belonging' interventions. This is supported by Hamilton (2024), whose research is framed within England's school context. They propose that increasing 'belonging' in school among pupils, especially those in marginalised groups, is a key mediator to reducing emotionally based school avoidance. Emphasised is the lack of the YP's voice within the research.

The views of YP who have experienced extended school non-attendance align with the vital importance of relationships in school (Corcoran & Kelly, 2023; Ramsdal & Wynn, 2022). Ramsdal and Wynn (2022) synthesised the literature on YP's secondary school dropout and re-enrolment. YP describe feelings of abandonment, lack of relatedness and social support, leading to a reduced ability to self-regulate and lower resilience. They compensated for a history of failure and prolonged exposure to stress. This aligns with the view that persistent school absenteeism does not just happen; it is a response to an accumulation of challenges over time (Finn, 1989; Finn & Zimmer, 2012; Gubbels et al., 2019). A pre-requisite for re-enrolment was developing a trusting relationship with a key adult. Within these relationships, YP described identifying their goals, growing motivation, and developing confidence as learners. This occurs through the social support relationships provide, allowing individuals to receive affirmation, understanding and empathy through the support of being noticed and cared for. Ramsdal & Wynn (2022) believe that disengaged YP are searching for a climate of belongingness.

The views of YP from the UK also support these findings. Corcoran and Kelly (2023) reviewed the views of YP who experienced persistent school absenteeism. This review included ten qualitative papers. Participants identified seven main themes relating to their persistent absenteeism:

- Difficult relationships with peer groups.
- Inconsistent relationships with and support from adults.
- Negative experiences of school transition.
- Negative experiences of learning in school.
- Emotional well-being and mental health needs.
- Others' negative perceptions of the individual's needs.

- Personal beliefs about ‘attendance.’

These themes are categorised into precipitating and perpetuating factors, although they caution against viewing factors as discrete areas due to their interrelatedness. YP indicated that difficulties in peer and adult relationships, transition, and learning led to mental health difficulties, which perpetuated challenges. It is noteworthy that YP described a desire to achieve. However, they were passive in their school absenteeism. They had no agency or control over their ‘attendance.’ This is supported by research that has linked low self-efficacy to school absenteeism (Bianchi et al., 2022). Initial difficulties with relationships, transition, and learning led to subsequent issues with emotional well-being and self-perceptions. These onset and maintenance factors can be viewed through individuals’ experience of feeling safe, connected, and supported by others, alongside their perceptions of how others view them and their agency.

It is posited that persistent school absenteeism “arise (s) from a reduced ‘belonging’, often relating to cumulative, intersecting difficulties within the physical and social school environment and pupils’ well-being and beliefs about attendance” (Corcoran & Kelly, 2023, p. 33). ‘Belonging’, therefore, is intrinsic to relationships and encompasses many of the difficulties these YP experience in school, such as feeling connected, listened to, and supported, which support ‘attendance’ (Corcoran & Kelly, 2023; Ramsdal & Wynn, 2022). A student’s ‘belonging’ draws heavily on the social connections they build at school. This adds weight to considering persistent school absenteeism through a ‘belonging’ lens.

4.4 Summary

Research highlights that ‘attendance’ and ‘belonging’ are linked. Given this connection, a scoping review of the literature linking ‘attendance’ and ‘belonging’ is essential. Existing literature has demonstrated the importance of both concepts in shaping YP’s academic attainment, mental health, and later life outcomes. YP in secondary education are most at risk of low ‘attendance’ and ‘belonging’. Interventions targeting ‘belonging’ or ‘attendance’ emphasise the importance of relationships, fostering connectedness, and creating a sense of safety and security

in schools. These relationships buffer against absenteeism by creating a positive feedback loop, and students who feel valued, included, and respected are more likely to attend school. However, the research in this field remains fragmented, and to date, no scoping review has been conducted to explore the intersection between these two essential concepts systematically. Therefore, before considering further research, there must first be a clear understanding of the existing literature. This will aid an understanding of the overview of research in this field, help identify gaps, and support the next steps for consideration.

Chapter 5: Study 1 - Secondary School 'Attendance' and 'Belonging': A Scoping Review

5.1 Overview

Chapter 4 examines a range of theoretical frameworks that connect 'attendance' and 'belonging', and from these identifies the Self-System Model of Motivational Development as the most appropriate foundation for this study (Connell, 1991; Nouwen & Clycq, 2021). It provides an overview of empirical evidence of the bidirectional relationship between 'belonging' and 'attendance' (Churchill et al., 2021; Garcia-Gracia & Valls, 2023; Jackson et al., 2020; Korpershoek et al., 2020; Mooney et al., 2023; Orpinas & Raczynski, 2016; Pirtle II, 2023; Virtanen et al., 2022; Wang & Fredricks, 2014). It is posited that many factors associated with 'attendance' can be viewed through the lens of 'belonging' (ImpactEd, 2024; Keppens & Spruyt, 2019; Ramsdal & Wynn, 2022).

Research has consistently shown that 'attendance' and 'belonging' are interrelated, yet the extent of this relationship remains to be determined. A scoping review on the topic is necessary to explore this further, given the growing recognition of its importance. A preliminary search of the Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews and JBI Evidence Synthesis confirmed that no systematic or scoping review has been conducted on this issue. Scoping reviews are beneficial for mapping available evidence, examining how research in each field is conducted, and identifying gaps in knowledge (Munn et al., 2018). Thus, it is an appropriate starting point to understand the existing literature on these two concepts. This review focuses on research within secondary education, where YP in secondary school are most at risk of low 'attendance' and 'belonging'.

5.2 Review Questions

This scoping review aims to answer the following question: What is the extent of the research on ‘attendance’ and ‘belonging’, focusing on secondary education? More specifically:

1. How many studies focus on ‘attendance’ and ‘belonging’ to school? What are their characteristics?
2. Which methodological approaches characterise the research conducted?
3. How many studies include the YP’s voice, and what are their characteristics?
4. How many studies are intervention-based, and what are their characteristics?
5. What are the key findings of the research included?

5.3 Methods

This scoping review aligns with PRISMA scoping review guidelines (Tricco et al., 2016), ensuring a rigorous and transparent methodology. It was conducted following the JBI methodology for scoping reviews (Peters et al., 2020). Before undertaking the scoping review, a protocol was developed and pre-registered with the Open Science Framework (Seaton, 2024).

5.3.1 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Specific inclusion criteria were designed, aligning with the overarching research questions, population, context, and concept framework (Peters et al., 2020). The identified criteria serve as a strategy for finding all relevant studies within the research literature. Table 5 outlines inclusion and exclusion criteria. Scoping reviews are not intended to analyse all research exhaustively; instead, they seek to map the evidence. Therefore, consideration is required to balance practical feasibility with the breadth and depth of the research sampled (Tricco et al., 2016). Therefore, a 10-year timeframe was adopted to ensure the inclusion of relevant, up-to-date research and the feasibility of conducting the review (Palese et al., 2022).

Table 5
Study 1 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Criteria	Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria	Rationale
Year of Publication	Studies published between 2014 and 2024	Studies published before 2014	To ensure relevant research was included in the search.
Language	Studies must be published in English	Studies published in another language	To ensure the accessibility of content by the reviewer.
Type of Publication	Peer-reviewed studies, dissertations	None	To ensure relevant research was included in the search.
Participants	Current or former students with school attendance challenges and those who work alongside them, including school staff, parents, social workers, and educational psychologists	Primary-aged Students Further or Higher Education Students	To ensure studies include all research focusing on adolescents encountering challenges with school attendance.
Context	A secondary education context	Primary school context Further or Higher education context Community context	To ensure studies relate to secondary education.
Concept	Studies must measure school belonging or identified terminology, or terminology identified within qualitative research, as a primary or secondary analysis.	Studies that do not measure school belonging or identified terminology or terminology not identified within qualitative research as primary or secondary themes.	To ensure studies relate to a school's sense of belonging and attendance.
	Studies must measure attendance or identified terminology or include the views of participants at risk of non-attendance and/or who are non-attending	Studies that do not measure attendance or identified terminology or do not include the views of participants at risk of non-attendance and/or who are non-attending	

5.3.2 Types of Sources

This scoping review considered empirical research, including journal articles and doctoral theses. Master's theses were also included if they were identified from databases and met relevance criteria. The review included relevant experimental and quasi-experimental study designs. Cross-sectional studies were also studied for inclusion. This research considered qualitative studies, including, but not limited to, designs such as phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography, and action research. Review articles were excluded from the review.

5.3.3 Search Strategy

The search strategy aimed to locate both published and unpublished studies. An initial search of the Web of Science was used to identify articles on the topic. The text words in the titles and abstracts of relevant articles, and the keywords were used to develop a complete search strategy (Table 6). Key search terms were formulated with input from the University of Strathclyde librarian and the researcher's supervisor. The search syntax was verified against two peer-reviewed published literature reviews, ensuring that key references from these studies were included in the initial search (Corcoran & Kelly, 2023; Craggs & Kelly, 2018). As reviews were not eligible for inclusion, they were not treated as evidence sources; instead, any primary studies identified through this process were screened independently against the inclusion and exclusion criteria. Once key search terms were formulated, a scoping review protocol was pre-registered with the Open Science Framework (osf.io/chp8v). The literature search took place in June 2024.

Databases searched included APA PsychArticles, APA PsychInfo, British Education Index, ERIC, Web of Science, and OpenDissertations. A search of ETHOS was anticipated to identify other unpublished studies. However, at the time of writing, this database was unavailable. The reference list of all included sources of evidence was screened for additional studies. In addition, all studies citing the included source of evidence were also screened. Only studies published in English were included. Studies were limited to publications between June 2014 and

June 2024. This ensured that the most up-to-date research was included in the review.

Table 6

Key Search Terms Relating to Population, Concept, and Context

	Search Terms
Population	Adolescents or former students with persistent non-attendance and those who work alongside them, including school staff, parents, social workers, and educational psychologists.
Concept	“School refus*” OR “School phobia” OR “School avoid*” OR “School reluct*” OR “Truancy” OR “School withdrawal” or “condoned absence” or “Persistent non-attend*” or “absenteeism” or “persistent absenteeism” or “school absent*” or “school non-attend*” or “school attend*” or “extended school non-attend*” or “school attendance problem” or “chronic non-attend*” or “dropout*” or “at risk of dropping out”. “Sense of belonging” or “school belong*” or “school identification” or “school bond*” or “school connect*” or “school relatedness” or “school member*” or “emotional engagement*” or belonging* or connectedness or relatedness or bonding.
Context	Not a university, college, elementary, or primary school

5.3.4 Study/Source of Evidence Selection

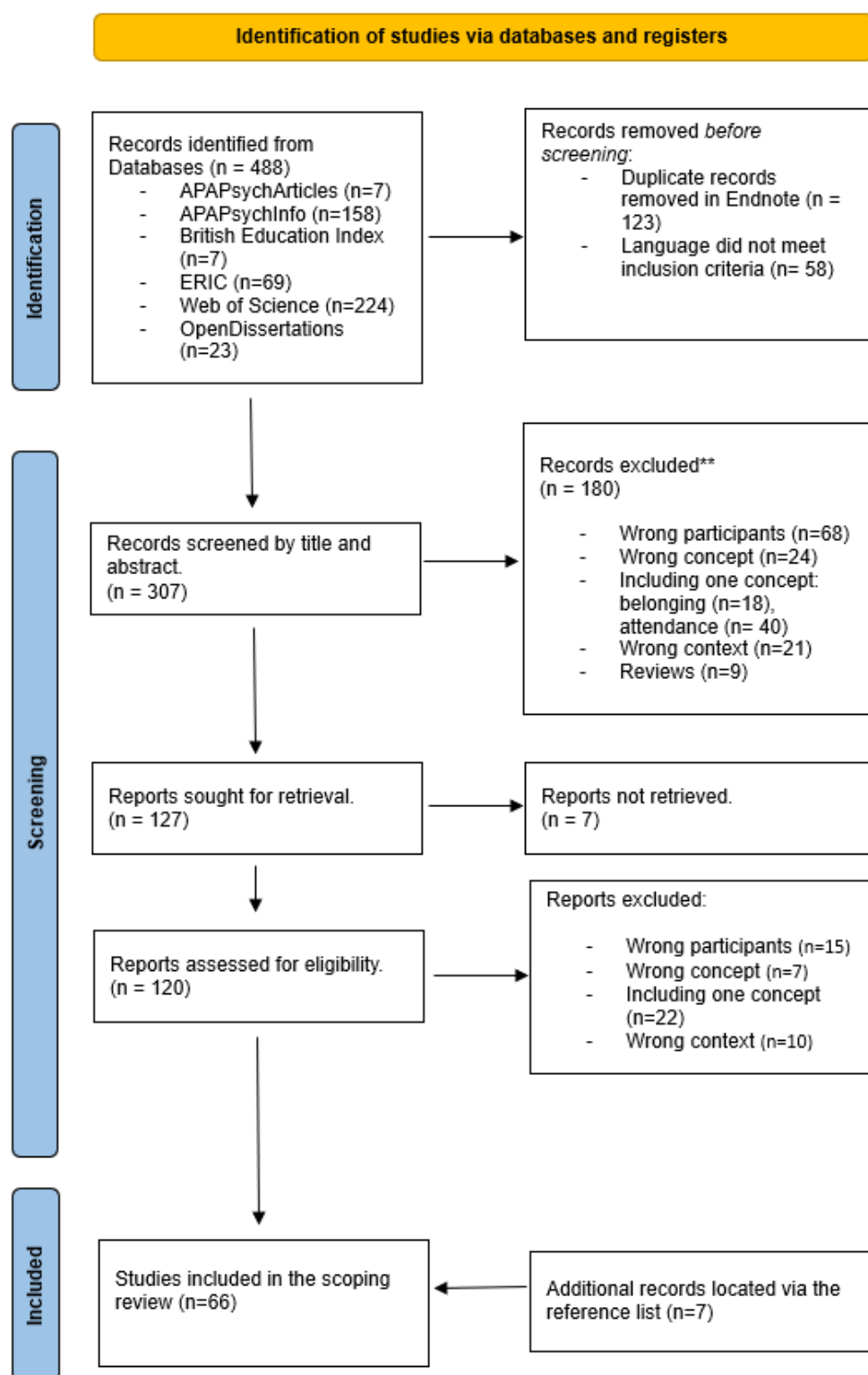
Following the search, all identified citations were collated and uploaded into EndNote21 (Clarivate Analytics, 2025), and duplicates were removed. Relevant articles were identified through two stages of screening.

- 1) Titles and abstracts were assessed against the inclusion and exclusion criteria for the review. The researcher screened all titles and abstracts. A random selection of over 10% (total- 15%) of titles and abstracts was screened by an independent reviewer (Boyle et al., 2016; Peters et al., 2020).
- 2) All potentially relevant sources were retrieved in full. Authors of inaccessible sources were contacted. The full text of selected citations was assessed in detail against the inclusion criteria. A random selection of over 10% (total -18%) of identified articles was examined by an

independent reviewer against the inclusion criteria for the review (Boyle et al., 2016; Peters et al., 2020).

Reasons for excluding sources of evidence were recorded and reported. The overall percentage agreement rate between the two independent reviewers was 93.4%. Any disagreements arising between the reviewers at each stage of the selection process were resolved through discussion. Once screening was completed, seed references were used to identify further relevant sources using citation tracking (Hirt et al., 2024). This analysis took place in August 2024. Both indirect and direct methods were employed to identify further relevant sources. The citations of seed references and the sources that cite them were checked for relevance. The results of the search and the study inclusion process are presented in a PRISMA flow diagram (Figure 10).

Figure 10
Scoping Review PRISMA (Tricco et al., 2018).



5.3.5 Data Extraction and Analysis

Data was extracted from papers included in the scoping review using an extraction tool developed by the author (Appendix B). This protocol was based on the JBI template (Peters et al., 2020) and tailored to the scoping review questions. It was initially piloted with two researchers reviewing three papers, with adjustments made as necessary. The data extracted included details about the participants, concept, context, study methods, and key findings relevant to the review questions.

Data extracted related to study characteristics, including publication year, country, and study purpose; methodological characteristics, including research method, study design, and data collection approach; sample characteristics, including type of participants and specified inclusion criteria; and study context, including type of school and conceptualisation of sense of 'belonging' and 'attendance'.

Intervention data were extracted using Hoffmann et al. (2014) 'Template for Intervention Description and Replication' (TIDieR) checklist and guide. This included the intervention, core elements, delivery, participants, duration, intensity, and fidelity. The purpose of this checklist is to describe interventions in sufficient detail to allow their replication.

Data extracted for key findings within quantitative data included whether a relationship was present between 'attendance' and 'belonging', whether this relationship was significant, and its directionality. Data extracted for key findings within qualitative data included the themes and sub-themes identified by the authors. The data is presented entirely in Appendix C.

Following an initial exploratory orientation, additional data analysis was performed on qualitative data. Underpinned by critical realism, data analysis drew from techniques from a grounded theory methodology, alongside consideration of theoretical views (Hoddy, 2019; Mukumbang, 2021). Consideration was also given to the inclusion of quantitative data. However, this research aimed to understand

participants' perceptions of the interconnections between 'attendance' and 'belonging' (Miles et al., 2020; Ravitch & Riggan, 2016). It sought to identify and explore the emerging themes and patterns from the data. The qualitative data were further analysed to explore how participants' views toward 'attendance' and 'belonging' intersect, inform, and influence each other (Miles et al., 2020; Ravitch & Riggan, 2016). A conceptual map was created to illustrate this.

5.3.5.1 Trustworthiness. Trustworthiness was considered before creating a conceptual map. Trustworthiness in qualitative research is key to its quality appraisal, serving as a framework to assess rigour and validity (Ahmed, 2024; Nazar et al., 2022; Stahl & King, 2020). Consideration was given to the trustworthiness of the relevant qualitative studies included in the scoping review, followed by the trustworthiness of the data interpretation. It encompasses credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability to ensure the research findings are authentic and trustworthy (Lincoln & Guba, 1986).

- Credibility establishes whether the findings accurately reflect the participants' original data and perspectives.
- Transferability refers to the extent to which qualitative research findings can be applied to different contexts or populations. The researcher's detailed description supports transferability and helps potential users assess it.
- Dependability refers to the consistency of findings over time. It involves ensuring that participants can review and agree that the findings, interpretations, and recommendations are well-supported by the data collected from them.
- Confirmability refers to how verifiable the study is. It ensures that the data and interpretations are based on the evidence rather than the researcher's biases.

- Reflexivity refers to the acknowledgement of the researchers' biases, preferences, and preconceptions and awareness of how these may influence participants' responses.

Table 7

Outlining Key Criteria for Trustworthiness and Underpinning Approaches

Key Criteria	Underpinning approaches	Examples
Credibility	Prolonged Engagement	Engaging with participants over time.
	Triangulation/Cross-validation	Integrating multiple data sources, methods, researchers' analysis, or across contexts.
	Persistent Observation	Recognising bias and practising self-reflection.
Transferability	Thick description	Providing detailed descriptions to support others in determining the applicability to another context.
Dependability	Audit Trail	Documentation of approaches, data collection, and procedures to support replicability.
Confirmability	Member checking	Validation of interpretations from participants.
	Peer Debriefing	Support from another researcher to authenticate findings.
Reflexivity	Reflexive Journalling	A reflective account of thoughts and biases throughout the research process.

Ahmed (2024) provides an overview of different approaches to determining whether qualitative research is trustworthy. Table 7 outlines key criteria for trustworthiness, underpinning approaches, and examples. Many researchers have considered different ways to appraise qualitative research; one approach is to use frameworks or checklists (Dixon-Woods et al., 2007; Majid & Vanstone, 2018).

Majid and Vanstone (2018) provided an overview of existing quality appraisal tools and a tool to support researchers in selecting the most appropriate tool for their research purpose. After consideration, the 'Critical Appraisal Skills Programme' (CASP) tool was chosen to evaluate the qualitative studies (Critical Appraisal Skills Programme, 2024). This checklist includes ten questions: two screening questions and eight appraisal questions, relating to research design, recruitment strategy, data collection, reflexivity, ethical issues, reporting, and the value of findings. This tool is easy to understand and administer and is one of the most used appraisal tools (Long et al., 2020; Majid & Vanstone, 2018). It was used to identify potential sources of bias or areas of concern regarding the quality of the studies, rather than assigning scores to each one. Numerical scores alone may not provide a comprehensive picture of the study's quality or highlight areas that require further attention (Siddaway et al., 2019). Details of this analysis can be seen in Appendix E and Appendix F.

Several techniques were used to ensure the credibility and validity of the research. The conceptual model was underpinned by all studies that met the inclusion criteria, supporting cross-validation/triangulation and transferability. Two reviewers completed the coding, supporting cross-validation/triangulation and confirmability. The researcher kept a diary throughout the research process, documenting key decisions and reflections, supporting dependability and reflexivity. The researcher made available the raw data and examples of the coding process to support dependability. When creating the conceptual model, the researcher was mindful of their potential biases and mitigated these. For example, confirmation bias is mitigated by employing multiple coders.

5.3.5.2 Additional Data Analysis and Procedure. Thematic analysis was chosen as the most appropriate method of data analysis. Underpinned by Braun and Clarke (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Clarke & Braun, 2017), Naeem et al.'s (2023) six-step thematic analysis conceptual model approach was adopted: 1) transcription and familiarisation with data, 2) selection of keywords, 3) coding, 4) theme development, 5) conceptualisation through interpretation of keywords, codes and themes, 6) development of a conceptual model.

Nineteen studies were included, as they were qualitative. Additionally, the qualitative data from the five mixed methods studies were also included. These were initially categorised by aim and participant group. Most studies explored participants' views towards attending school, while a smaller number focused on participants' opinions on 'belonging'. Although an overlap between the identified themes was hypothesised, it was not assumed. An inductive approach was initially adopted, allowing themes to emerge from the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun et al., 2019; Naeem et al., 2023).

The two reviewers coded the data. Familiarisation, coding, and early theme generation were conducted independently, after which the researchers met to discuss their interpretations. To strengthen reflexivity and ensure that the analysis was not shaped disproportionately by one construct over the other, the two reviewers began coding from opposite starting points. One coder began by analysing the 'belonging' studies, while the other began with the 'attendance' studies. This process was not intended to establish inter-coder reliability, but rather to support reflexive dialogue and enrich interpretive insight (Braun et al., 2019).

Miles et al. (2020) approach informed the development of the conceptual model. It was chosen because it supports moving from coded data to higher-order interpretation by organising and interpreting themes, identifying patterns, displaying data, and exploring potential explanatory pathways through iterative examination.

The studies were analysed in two stages. Firstly, studies focusing on 'attendance' were examined independently. Keywords, codes, and preliminary

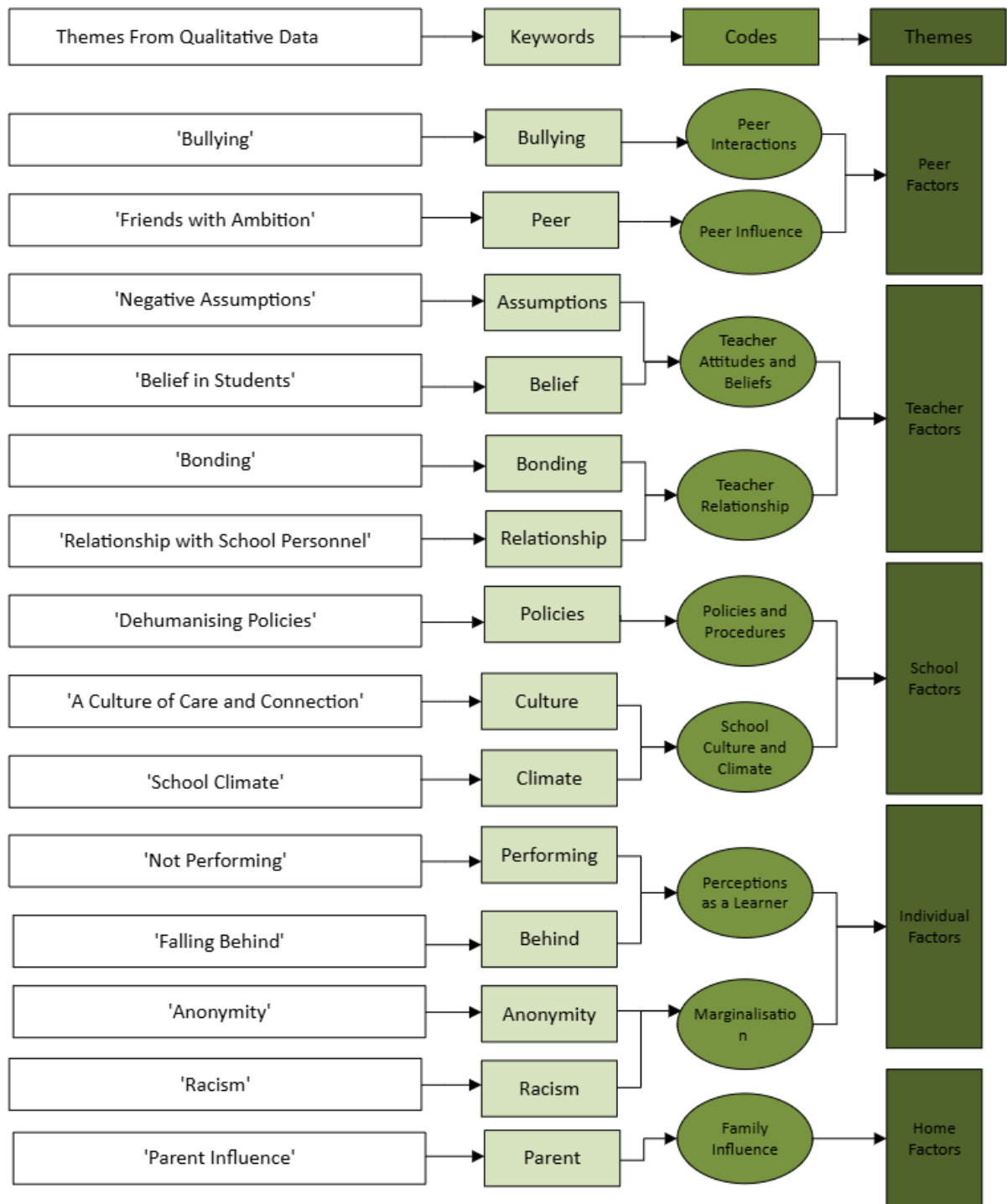
themes were generated specifically in relation to the factors shaping attendance. Separately, the studies exploring 'belonging' were subjected to the same process, resulting in a distinct set of themes related to this factor. This analysis was stratified by participant group. Figure 11 outlines examples of the data from the studies categorised by keywords, codes, and themes.

Following the development of codes, similarities and differences were explored through comparative analysis, and overarching themes were created. This stage involved identifying areas of alignment and divergence between the 'attendance' and 'belonging' themes (Table 9 and 10). This process supported the identification of core patterns across the qualitative findings.

Secondly, a visual map was used to illustrate the relationship between codes and themes. These visual displays allowed the researcher to compare themes side-by-side, identifying patterns, gaps, and contradictions. This process was iterative, allowing for conclusion-drawing, moving between the data, visual displays, and interpretation, ensuring the final model was grounded in evidence while also explaining how the antecedents, 'belonging' and 'attendance', interact. This process enabled the identification of patterns, intersections, and explanatory pathways, which shaped the final structure of the model. Several iterations of this map were created, with the preliminary conceptual model illustrated in Figure 18.

Figure 11

Examples of Data from Scoping Review to Codes and Themes



5.4 Results

5.4.1 Search Results

The literature search identified 66 independent datasets that met the inclusion criteria. A further seven were identified through forward and backwards citation tracking. A total of 73 studies were included. Appendix C and Appendix D detail the extracted data for the studies and summary of data.

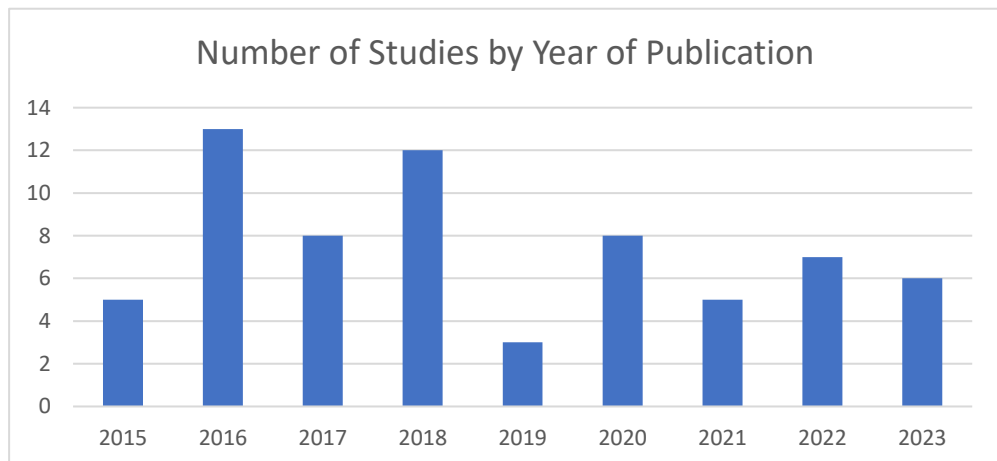
5.4.2 Study Characteristics

5.4.2.1 Type of Evidence Source. Most of the included studies were peer-reviewed publications. This includes 57 journal articles (78.1%) and one book chapter (1.4%). The remaining 15 studies were dissertations (20.5%), with 14 doctoral-level and one master's level.

5.4.2.2 Year of Publication. Figure 12 provides an overview of the number of studies per full year published focusing on 'attendance' and 'belonging' between June 2014 and 2024. Two studies were published from June to December 2014, and four were published from January to June 2024.

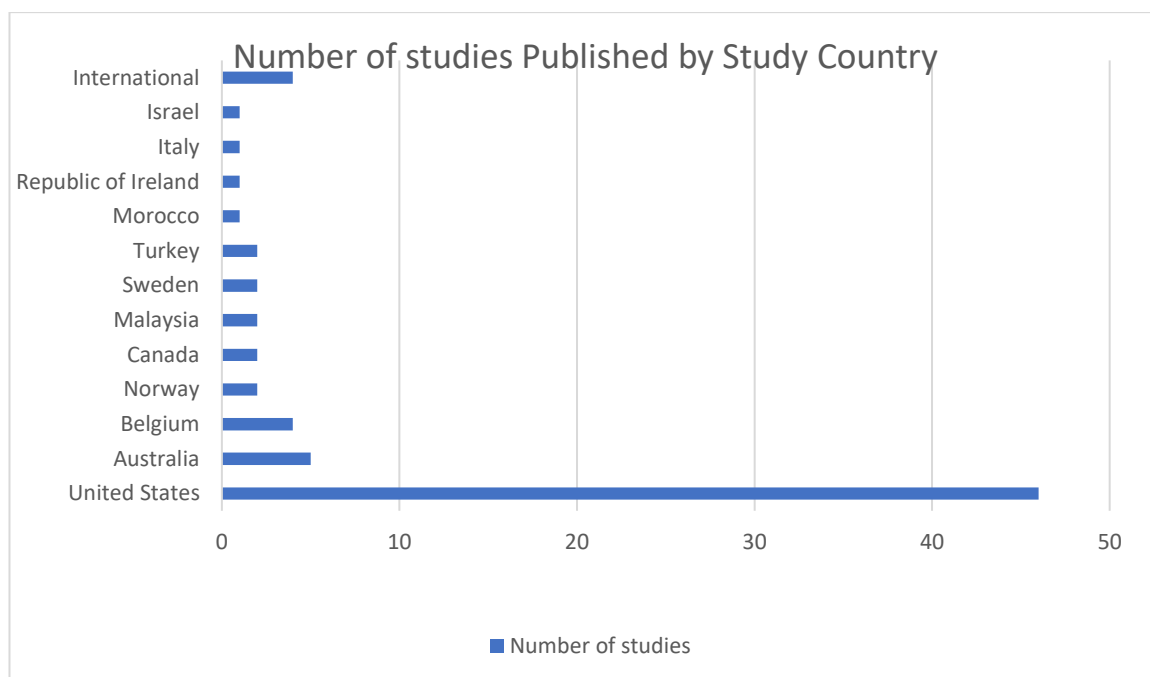
Figure 12

Number of Studies Included by Year of Publication



5.4.2.3 Study Country. Figure 13 illustrates the number of studies published by the study country. The included studies were conducted in America (k= 46), Australia (k=5), Belgium (k=4), Norway (k=2), Canada (k=2), Malaysia (k=2), Sweden (k=2), Turkey (k=2), Morocco (k=1), Republic of Ireland (k=1), Italy, (k=1)and Israel (k=1). Four studies were drawn from international data.

Figure 13
Number of Studies Related to the Study Country

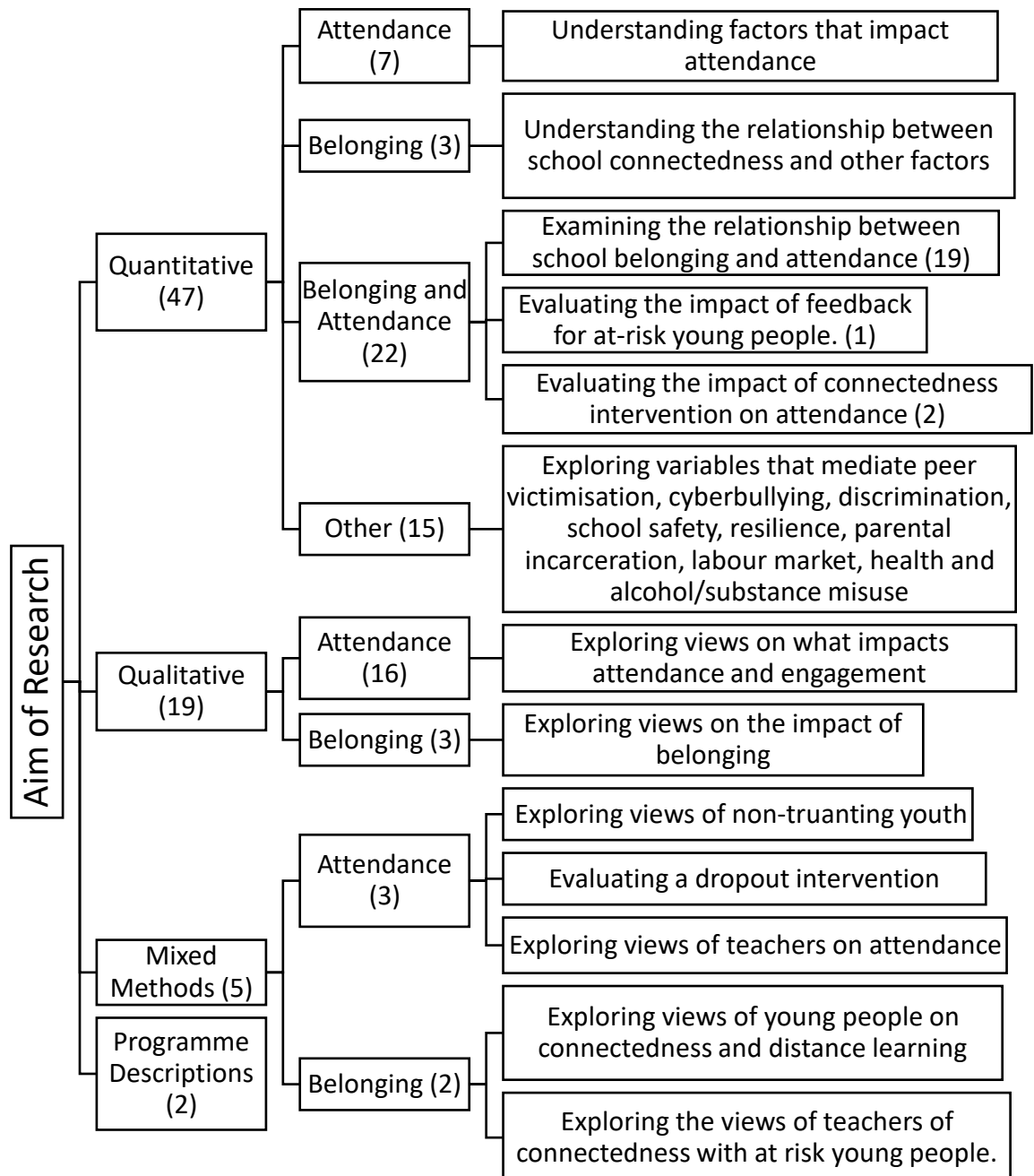


5.4.2.4 Aim of Research.

Figure 14 illustrates the aim of research categorised by frequency and methodology. Eight studies explored ‘belonging,’ its relationship to other factors, and stakeholder views (3 quantitative, 3 qualitative, and 2 mixed-methods studies). Twenty-six studies focused on ‘attendance’ and its relationship to other factors (16 qualitative, 7 quantitative, 3 mixed methods). Twenty-two studies sought to explore the quantitative relationship between ‘belonging’ and ‘attendance.’ Fifteen studies explored factors related to a variety of constructs, including peer victimisation, cyberbullying, discrimination, school safety, resilience, parental incarceration, labour market, health, and alcohol/substance misuse. Two studies were programme descriptions.

Figure 14

Aim of Research Categorised by Number of Relevant Studies and Study Design



5.4.3 Concept Characteristics

5.4.3.1 School Absenteeism Terminology and Definitions. A wide variety of terms were used to describe 'attendance.' These included per prevalence: 'dropout' (22 studies), 'truancy' (17 studies), 'school attendance' (9 studies), school absenteeism' (9 studies), 'at-risk of non-attendance' (8 studies), 'behavioural disengagement' (7 studies), 'school completion' or 'persistence to graduation' (6 studies), 'chronic absenteeism' (4 studies), 'school participation' (2 studies), 'class skipping' (2 studies), 'tardiness' (1 study), 'safety absenteeism' (1 study) and 'school refusal' (1 study). Fifteen studies used two terms for 'attendance,' with one study using three terms.

Almost all studies used self-reported measures for 'attendance,' with twelve accessing school-held data. Thirteen studies adopted more than one measure.

Many studies defined 'attendance' by the percentage of missed days over the school year (9 studies) and others by the frequency of missed days within a specific period (4 studies). This was similar to truancy, except that it was operationalised as the frequency of unexcused absences or missing days without an adequate excuse (10 studies). Studies operationalised dropout as not completing secondary school or receiving a diploma (16 studies); secondary school completion was operationalised as completing secondary school and receiving a diploma (5 studies). Behavioural engagement related to school participation through 'attendance' and task involvement (5 studies). Six studies operationalised at-risk YP as meeting specific criteria (such as increased behaviour incidences, low-grade point average, skipping school, or low 'attendance'). One study specified school absenteeism due to feeling unsafe, and one study used Kearney and Graczyk's (2020) continuum to define 'attendance'. Twenty-four studies did not define 'attendance' or related terminology.

5.4.3.2 'Belonging' Terminology and Definitions. The studies used a wide variety of terms to describe 'belonging'. These included per prevalence: 'school belonging' (29 studies), 'school connectedness' (26 studies), 'school bonding' (7 studies), 'school attachment' (5 studies), 'affective/emotional engagement' (5 studies), 'school climate' (3 studies), 'alienation' (2 studies), 'relatedness' (2 studies) and 'school membership' (1 study). Six studies used two terms for 'belonging', with one using three.

Table 8

Most Cited Definitions for 'Belonging' illustrates the most prevalent definitions used for 'belonging'. Studies predominantly cited Goodenow & Grady's (1993) definition of 'belonging' (8 studies), followed by Blum et al. (2004) (7 studies), Hirschi (2017) (3 studies), Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2009) (2 studies) & Wehlage (1989)(2 studies). Six studies defined 'belonging' more generally. Four studies defined 'belonging' through an engagement lens, one through a motivation lens, and another through school climate. The remaining studies cited different definitions (11 studies). Most studies did not provide a definition (28 studies).

All studies operationalised 'belonging' using self-reported data, either questionnaires or research-designed protocols. The most used questionnaire was Goodenow's (1993) PSSM (11 studies), followed by a scale used in the National Longitudinal Study for Adolescent Health based on the PSSM (6 studies), and 'The School Belonging Scale' developed and used in the Programme for International Student Assessment (3 studies).

Table 8*Most Cited Definitions for 'Belonging'*

Citation	Number of Citations	Definition
Goodenow & Grady (1993)	8	'The extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included and supported by others in the school social environment' (p. 80).
Blum et al. (2004)	7	Students believe that adults in the school care about their learning and them as individuals.
Hirschi (2017)	3	The social bond comprises four elements: (1) attachment, (2) commitment, (3) involvement, and (4) belief.
Centers for Disease Control (2009)	2	Students' belief "that adults and peers in the school care about their learning as well as about them as individuals" (p.3).
Wehlage (1989)	2	Students' perceptions that other people in the school environment are supportive and that, as students, they matter in the school community

5.4.4 Methodology Characteristics

5.4.4.1 Context. Most studies were situated within mainstream secondary schools (40 studies). Five studies included both secondary school and middle school contexts. Three studies included only the middle school context. Eight studies included alternative secondary school contexts, including one residential school. One study did not specify the school context because it focused on participants with chronic fatigue syndrome. Fourteen studies did not specify school context, drawing from international (4 studies) and state or district-wide data (10 studies). Two of the included studies explicitly selected their research sites because the local authority reported notably low 'attendance' rates, while one study chose its site owing to a documented improvement in 'attendance' rates.

5.4.4.2 Number of Participants. Overall, 648,159 participants were engaged in the research. Sixty-one studies included student participants in school at the time of sampling or the first sampling. Participants' ages ranged between 11 and 18. The following participant numbers are reported by participant type; therefore, study counts within each participant group will not reflect the total number of studies included in the review (see Figure 14), which comprised of 47 quantitative, 19 qualitative and five mixed-methods studies in total. Programme descriptions are not included in this reporting.

As reported, most student participants were involved in quantitative research (47 studies), with a pooled sample of 647,545 participants. As reported, a smaller proportion of the student participants engaged in qualitative research (11 studies), with a pooled sample of 401 students. The pooled sample for quantitative and qualitative student participants includes mixed-methods studies (5 studies).

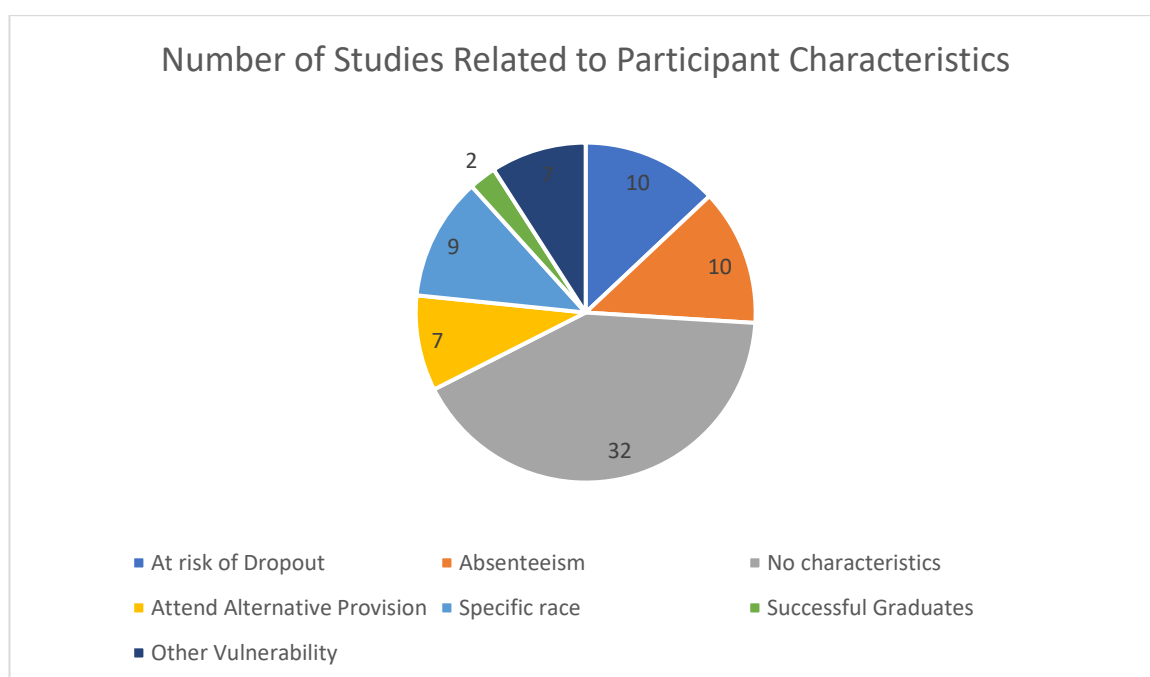
When considering different participant groups, teacher participants, former students, and parents were included in some studies. For other qualitative research, 69 former students participated (7 studies), followed by 129 teacher participants (8 studies) and two parent participants (1 study). For the mixed-methods studies, 13 teacher participants were included (across 2 studies). The ages of former student participants ranged from 19 to 40 years.

Some studies accessed the same data. This includes longitudinal studies following up with the same participants, where some attrition is expected. For instance, Chen, Gamble, and Lin (2023) reported a sample of 59,602 in 2015 and 38,865 participants in 2018. This also includes studies that accessed the same year of data within a database. For instance, five studies accessed data from the 1994-1995 National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health, two accessed 2012 Belgian data from the Programme for International Student Assessment, and two accessed the 2016-2017 COMPASS study data.

5.4.4.3 Participant Characteristics. Figure 15 illustrates the number of studies by participant characteristics. Most studies gathered evidence from the

general population (32 studies). Other studies focused on specific participant groups based on school absences, demographic characteristics, or school provision, including absenteeism (10 studies), risk of dropout/non-attendance (10 studies), specific race (9 studies), 'attendance' at an alternative provision (7 studies), and successful graduates despite vulnerabilities (2 studies). Other characteristics accounted for seven studies, including attending a school that increased 'attendance,' experiencing one or more child protection service records, participants identifying as transgender, from an immigrant background, English as an additional language, a diagnosed chronic fatigue syndrome, and a diagnosed disability. Six studies were coded multiple times because they specified more than one participant characteristic.

Figure 15
Number of Studies by Participant Characteristics

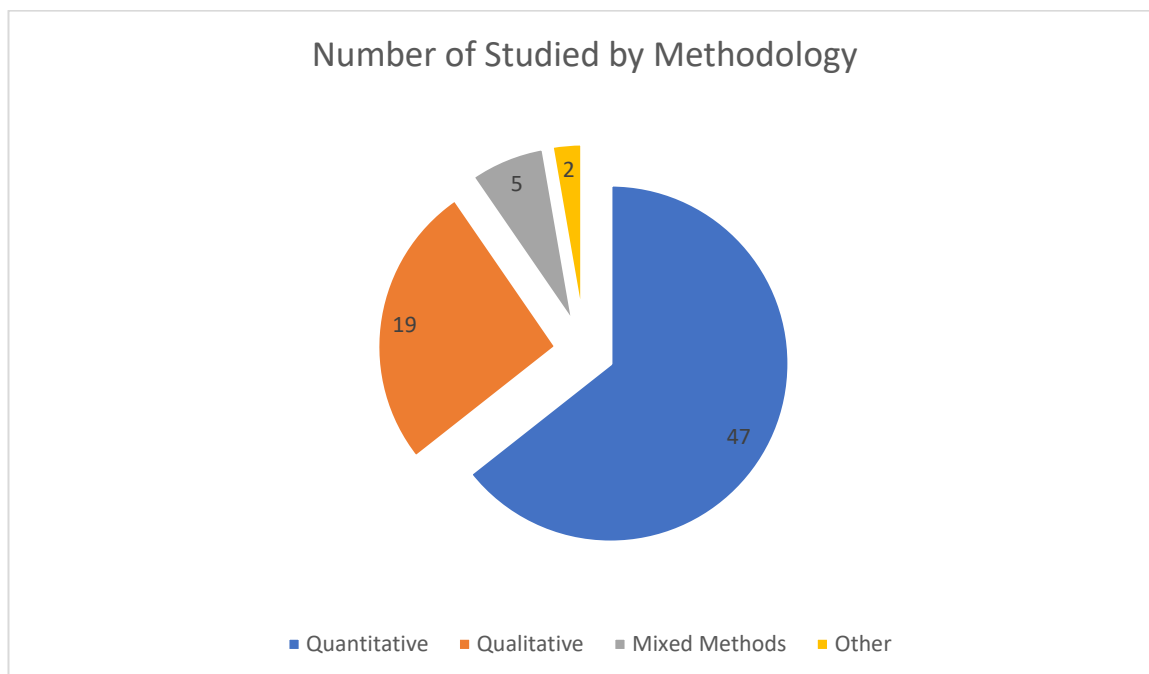


5.4.4.4 Methodology. Sixty-nine studies were non-experimental (94.5%), and four were experimental (5.5%). Figure 16 illustrates the number of studies by methodology. Forty-seven studies were quantitative (64.4%), with three using an experimental design. Nineteen studies were qualitative (26%). Five were mixed

methods (6.8%), with one using an experimental design. Two were categorized as others; these were program descriptions (2.7%).

Figure 16

Illustration of Number of Studies by Methodology



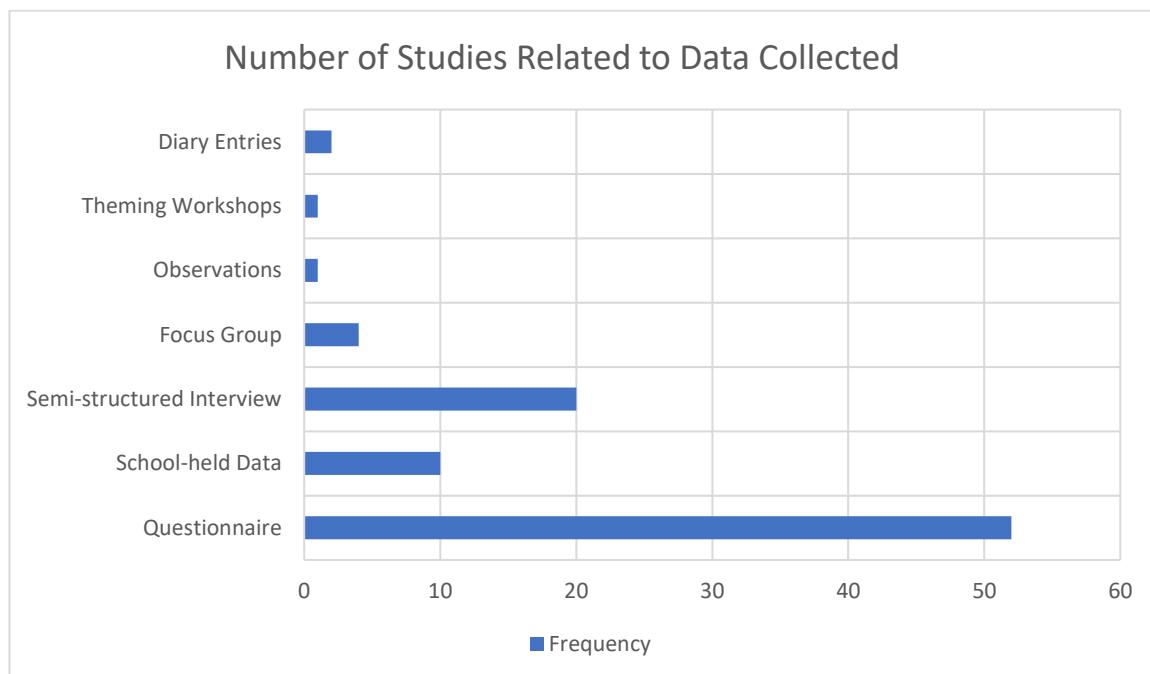
5.4.4.5 Methods. For quantitative data, twenty-five studies were cross-sectional, with one using a comparison group (34.2%), nineteen were longitudinal (26%), and three were quasi-experimental (4.1%). For qualitative data, twelve studies were case studies (16.4%), six were phenomenological (8.2%), and one was participatory (1.4%). For mixed methods, three studies were explanatory (4.1%) and two were exploratory (2.7%). Three studies utilised a control group (two quasi-experimental and one programme description), and two studies identified a comparison group.

5.4.4.6 Data Collection. Figure 17 illustrates the type of data collected by frequency. Twenty studies used a multi-method approach to data gathering, with two using three methods. Questionnaires were the most frequent data collection method, with fifty-two utilising this approach. Within this, fifty employed a survey methodology. Twenty-one studies employed semi-structured interviews. Other data collection methods included accessing school data (12 studies), focus groups (3

studies), diary entries (2 studies), non-participant observations (1 study), and theming workshops (1 study). This does not include the programme overviews.

Figure 17

Type of Data Collected by Frequency



5.4.5 Key Findings

5.4.5.1 Non-Experimental

5.4.5.1.1 Quantitative. Twenty-six quantitative studies reported a significant ($p < .05$) relationship between ‘belonging’ and ‘attendance’, indicating that lower ‘belonging’ is associated with lower ‘attendance’. Four studies reported partial support. Four studies reported a non-significant relationship. Two further studies reported an indirect effect. All studies employed parametric analysis, utilising correlation, regression analysis, multi-level analysis, or structural equation modelling.

Eight studies gathered data on ‘belonging’ and ‘attendance’, but did not conduct data analysis. For instance, one study explored ‘belonging’ and school absenteeism as variables that impact substance/polysubstance misuse. Three studies measured ‘belonging’, analysing it as school climate, but no separate analysis occurred.

Thirteen studies indicated that other variables mediated or moderated the pathway between 'attendance' and 'belonging'. 'Belonging' acted as a mediator in several studies. For example, factors such as peer victimisation, disciplinary fairness, and school environment influenced 'belonging', which in turn affected 'attendance'. In contrast, socioeconomic status and non-binary identification moderated this relationship. Two studies found only an indirect relationship between 'belonging' and 'attendance'. In these studies, 'belonging' was found to predict academic competence and perceptions of interpersonal competence ($p < .01$), as well as academic motivation, self-efficacy, and academic motivation ($p < .05$), which in turn impacted 'attendance'. See Appendix D for further information.

Four studies compared 'belonging' and 'attendance' between two populations. One study compared YP with chronic fatigue syndrome and matched controls. Participants with chronic fatigue syndrome reported lower levels of 'belonging' ($p < .05$) and 'attendance' than the comparison group ($p < .001$). However, it did not directly compare the relationship between 'belonging' and 'attendance'. The other study compared traveller and non-traveller participants. 'Belonging' was a predictor of 'attendance' ($p < .05$). Traveller participants reported lower 'belonging' ($p < .02$) and 'attendance' than the comparison group ($p < .001$). A third study found that 'belonging' was associated with decreased odds of dropping out after controlling for other variables. They also compared the 'belonging' of participants who dropped out of school with participants who did not and found a significant relationship between 'belonging' ($p < .001$) and school participation ($p < .001$). A fourth study found a significant difference between 'belonging' ($p < .001$) and school absences ($p < .03$) for transgender participants when compared to cisgender participants. A non-significant relationship was observed between concepts.

5.4.5.1.2. Mixed Methods. Four studies employed a non-experimental, mixed-methods approach. One study sought to explore the views of participants on school truants. Higher levels of 'belonging' were related to higher levels of truancy disapproval ($p < .001$), and lower levels of 'belonging' were related to higher levels of

truancy approval ($p < .001$). Higher school truancy was related to lower truancy disapproval ($p < .01$). Younger participants were likely to find truancy more attractive ($p < .001$). Another explored the impact of distance learning on persistently absent students and their school connectedness during the COVID-19 pandemic. Persistently absent participants reported a significant reduction in peer connectedness ($p < .001$) and teacher connectedness ($p < .001$) pre-COVID-19 and during comprehensive distance learning. A third explored 'belonging' within an alternative school. It gathered student participants' 'belonging' after moving to an alternative provision. A significant increase in 'belonging' was observed over time ($p < .01$). The fourth explored the views of teacher participants on increasing 'attendance.' It included a survey exploring teacher participants' views on school climate; 53.8% of participants indicated that students feel 'belonging' and community in school.

5.4.5.1.3 Qualitative. All included studies were quality appraised using the CASP tool. Appendix E outlines the quality appraisal of all qualitative studies. Most studies met all or nearly all the CASP criteria (18 studies), with only one meeting some of the requirements. This suggested that most research met methodological rigour, reliability, and validity criteria. The most common area for improvement was transparency. Studies were assessed as benefiting from more consideration of the researcher's role, potential biases, and clarity around procedures for replication and sampling methods.

The themes identified through the analytic process described in Section 5.3.5.2 are presented in Tables 9 and 10. Table 9 outlines the themes arising from participants' views, illustrating the intersection between 'attendance' and 'belonging'. Four overarching themes emerged: relationships, school, individual, and home and community factors. Table 10 outlines themes arising from participant views, illustrating divergence between 'attendance' and 'belonging' research. These align with relationships, school factors, and home factors.

Table 9*Themes Illustrating the Intersection Between 'Attendance' and 'Belonging'*

Superordinate Themes	Themes	Sub-Themes
Relationships	Peers	Peer interactions (5, 8) Peer influence (6,7) Peer relationships (9, 14)
	Teachers	Teacher attitudes and beliefs (8,12) Teacher relationships (15, 32) Advocacy (4,4)
	Community	Building connection with the community (4,4)
School Context Factors	Relationship-Building Opportunities	Opportunities to engage with teachers less formally (5,7) Smaller learning environments (4, 4)
	Individual-Level	Flexibility and support from school personnel (9,9) Support (15, 21)
	School-Level Supports	Environment (10, 13) Policies & procedures (4, 4) Access to a different provision (4,6)
Individual Factors	Motivation (6,8)	
	Engagement with School Offer (5,8)	
	Past Adversity and Coping Strategies (4, 6)	
	Attitude Towards School (4, 5)	
	Perception as a Learner (6, 10)	
	Experiences of Marginalisation (8,10)	
	A Sense of Belonging (15,16)	
Home Factors	Family Influence (6,10)	
	Family Home Life (5, 6)	

Note. Bracketed numbers indicate the number of studies and incidences.

Table 10*Themes Illustrating Divergence Between 'Attendance' & 'Belonging'*

Attendance	Superordinate Themes	Themes
	Relationships	Teacher to Teacher Relationships (1,1)
		Family Relationship with School (4,4)
	School Context Factors	Transition (4,7)
		Learning Relevance (5, 9)
		Learning Approaches (5,6)
		Student Choice (6,7)
	Individual Factors	Future Goals (4,5)
		Ill Health (4, 4)

Note. Bracketed numbers indicate the number of studies and incidences.

Figure 18 outlines themes related to 'belonging'. These themes were compared alongside Allen and Kern (2017) core elements of 'belonging': the importance of school interactions and experiences, the quality of teacher-student relationships, and student perceptions of school. Each identified theme was examined to determine how it corresponded to, supported, or extended these three elements, enabling a clearer understanding of how the qualitative findings reflect known dimensions of belonging. The shaded box illustrates factors that do not fit under each element, indicating factors found in the review studies that do not align with Allen and Kern's (2017) core components.

Figure 18

Illustration of Themes Categorised by Allen and Kern's (2017) 'Belonging' Core Elements

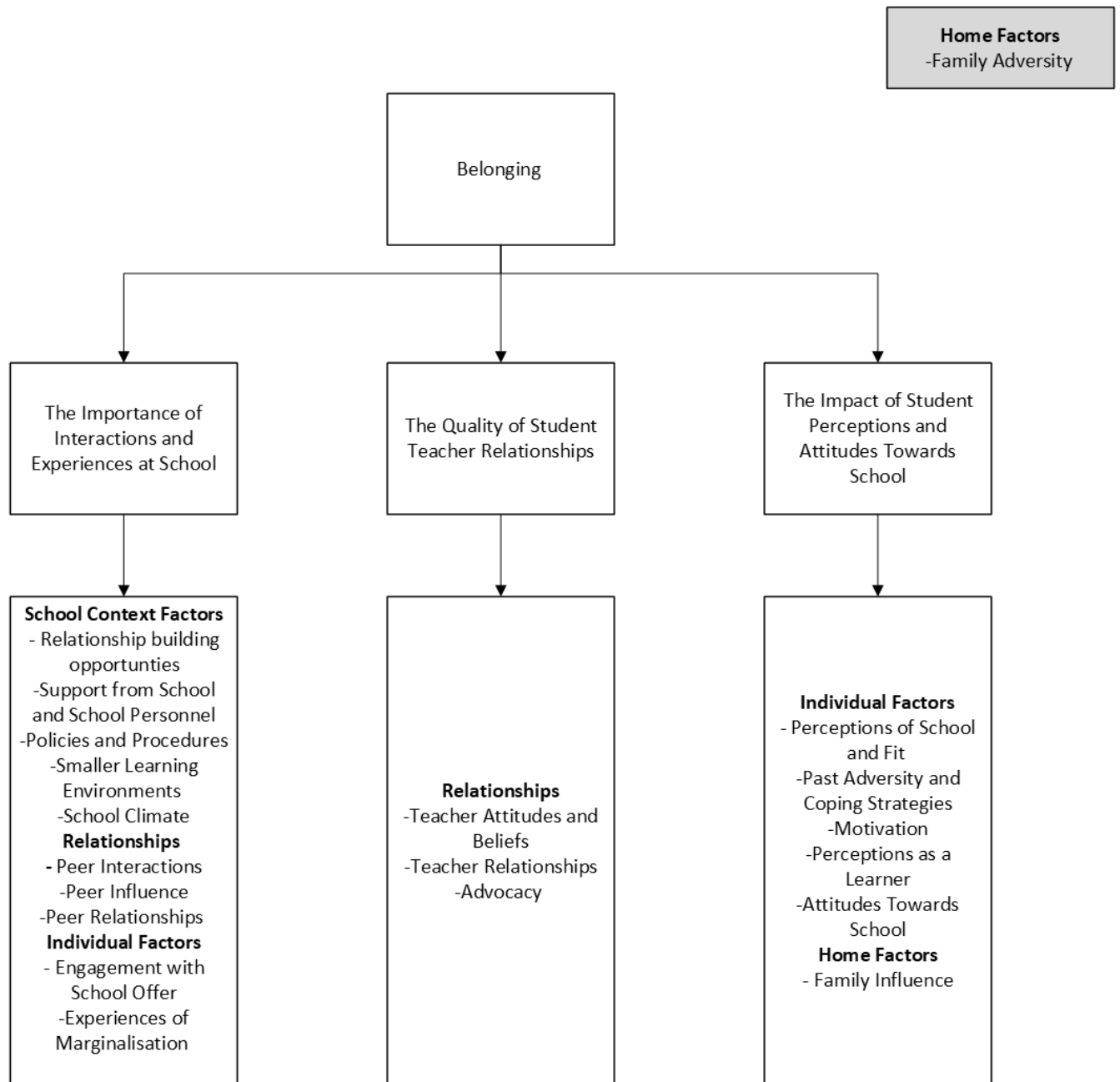


Figure 19 outlines a preliminary conceptual model. It illustrates the antecedents, mediating variables, and outcomes. It illustrates the final configuration of the themes as they relate to one another, showing how the antecedent factors lead to 'belonging', which influences 'attendance'. The bolded recursive connections indicate the cyclical, mutually reinforcing relationships identified in the findings. The shaded box contains factors that did not demonstrate an intersection between attendance and belonging within this analysis, including those identified in wider literature and those that appeared in only one domain.

Figure 19

Preliminary Conceptual Framework for 'Belonging' and 'Attendance'

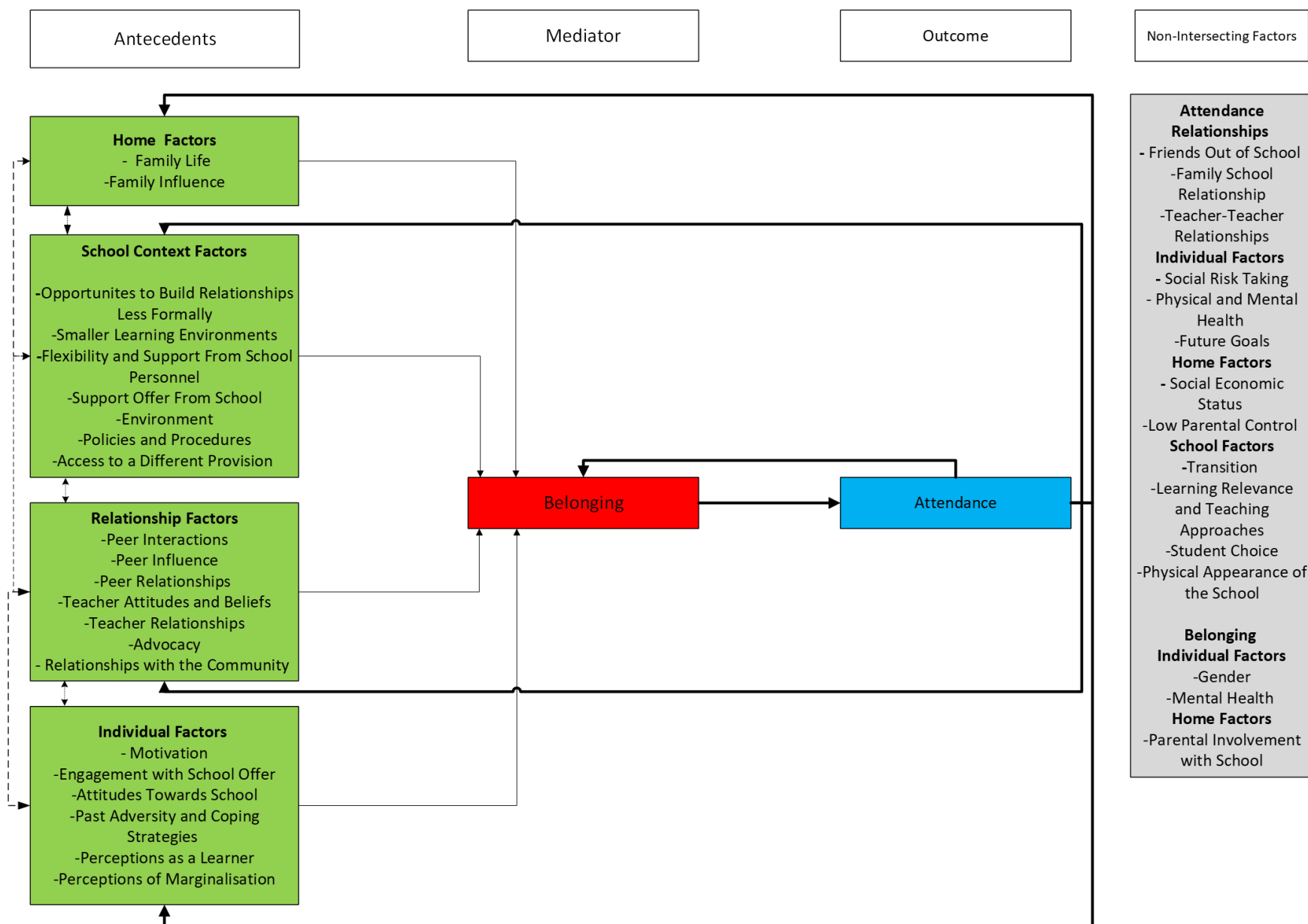


Table 11*Intervention Implementation by Study following the TIDieR checklist (Hoffmann et al., 2014)*

	Study 1 (Vera et al., 2016)	Study 2 (Bell, 2023)	Study 3 (Thayer et al., 2018)	Study 4 (Kuperminc et al., 2020)
Intervention	Summer dropout prevention programme	Strengths-based high school completion programme	A feedback intervention	A mentoring intervention
Core Elements	Seven subjects: reading, math, computer skills, life skills, career exploration, finance, and opportunities to build social skills.	Exposure to action research, globalisation, mentoring relationships, opportunities for leadership, and service-learning initiatives (for example, visiting the elderly, cleaning up local parks...)	The intervention followed: a positive greeting to the student, a statement indicating the purpose of the conversation, a wise statement, the content of academic feedback, and a positive open-ended question with reflection from participants.	Participants brought challenges from the week before; mentors drew on a variety of relevant activities as needed. The most common activities in group sessions were icebreakers (100%), academic check-ins (98%), games (98%), closing reflections (98%), and field trips (93%).
Delivered by	Teachers	Education faculty and graduate students.	School staff, school administrator, and school psychologist.	School staff and community members
Mode of Delivery	Small group	1:1, small group.	1:1	Small group (6-8)
Location of Delivery	High school	In and outside of school	High school	High school

Participants	High school guidance counsellors selected participants due to poor performance, or they were self-selected.	Eighth-grade teachers selected participants according to low reading and math grade point average, significant attendance problems, and significant absenteeism.	Participants were selected based on risk factors identified using an early warning system.	Participants were selected based on risk factors identified using an early warning system.
Duration	Six weeks	One year	Three feedback sessions over one week.	One year
Intensity	Four hours daily, 40 minutes per subject.	Participants met several times during the year, including twice-yearly visits to colleges. In school, they met with an advisor weekly, but the duration was unclear.	Each participant received one feedback session from the schoolteacher, administrator, and psychologist. The length of time it took for each statement is unclear.	Weekly for 50 minutes.
Delivery Fidelity	All participants completed the 6-week course with no absences.	Dropout was unclear. Implementation fidelity of weekly advisor meetings is unclear.	96% received the intervention as intended.	Attrition for the intervention group (19.3%) and comparison group (15.5%). Mentoring groups met 25-30 times (77% of groups had two or fewer cancellations)

5.4.5.2 Experimental. Four studies adopted an experimental design. Two studies sought to evaluate the impact of an intervention programme, which included a summer dropout prevention program and a strengths-based secondary school completion programme. One of these studies indicated a significant increase in 'belonging' after six weeks ($p < .01$) (Vera et al., 2016). Participants demonstrated an increased understanding of the purpose of school and future plans. No measure of 'attendance' was highlighted. The other study indicated increased 'belonging' ($p < .001$) and decreased school absenteeism ($p < .003$) over one year (Bell, 2023). There was also a significant post-test difference in 'attendance' between the control group and the intervention group ($p < .05$). A third study evaluated the impact of feedback on the 'belonging' and 'attendance.' Using a non-parametric test, an increase in 'belonging' ($p < .05$) and a decrease in absenteeism ($p < .05$) were indicated over time (Thayer et al., 2018). The final study explores a mentoring programme's impact on at-risk YP (Kuperminc et al., 2020). This study utilised a control group. A significant increase in 'belonging' ($p < .05$) and 'attendance' ($p < .05$) was observed between the pre- and post-test for the intervention group. Applying a Bonferroni adjustment here in light of statistical tests with multiple measures, differences between the intervention and control groups regarding 'belonging' and 'attendance' post-intervention were observed ($p < .007$). Five of the seven comparisons for external resources were statistically significant with this conservative criterion. These were school support, 'belonging', school meaningful participation, peer caring relationships, and prosocial peers. Only one comparison for internal resources was statistically significant: problem-solving. Table 11 provides an overview of the core components and implementation related to the studies' intervention.

5.4.4.2.1 Programme Descriptions. Two studies provided a summary and description of an intervention. One study aimed to support 'attendance' through a school-based rewards program, and the other focused on supporting young Latino people. The former study indicated a significant increase in 'attendance' across periods ($p < .001$), with a 12.2% increase indicated from baseline after one month, and a continued increase after months two and three. All participants reached 'attendance' above 90%. No significant differences were noted for the comparison group. The description did not report on 'belonging'. The latter study reported the significance of pre- and post-intervention in academic achievement and assertiveness self-efficacy; however, statistics were not reported. 'Attendance' and 'belonging' measures were gathered but not reported on. It is noted that all participants were reported to have graduated or were on track to graduate following the programme. Table 12 provides an overview of the reported implementation of programme descriptions.

Table 12

Overview of Programme Description Reported Implementation (Hoffmann et al., 2014)

	Study 1 (Young et al., 2020)	Study 2 (McWhirter et al., 2019)
Intervention	A multi-level school-based rewards programme designed to increase attendance	An intervention programme focusing on supporting Latina/o YP.
Core Elements	Daily check-ins, monthly celebrations and raffles, weekly breakfasts, and guest speakers sharing information such as stress management techniques. Parent meetings, phone calls, home visits, and referrals to community services.	Academic Support (learning strategies, thinking skills, and academic knowledge, transition skills, and workplace behaviours) Critical Consciousness (building community and universality, enhancing cultural pride, increasing critical reflection, and developing and using advocacy skills)
Delivered by	Social worker	University undergraduates
Mode of Delivery	Small group	1:1 or small group
Location of Delivery	High school	After high school
Participants	A committee, including social workers and school staff, selected participants. Selected participants demonstrated less than 90% attendance throughout the year and last month. Exclusion based on extenuating circumstances.	Participants were recruited through flyers and self-selection; it is unclear whether other inclusion or exclusion criteria were required.
Duration	One-three months	8 months
Intensity	Daily	Twice weekly, for two hours.
Delivery Fidelity	Unclear	Participants continued to attend, but specific fidelity is unclear. Varied engagement with participants between two and 46 sessions.

5.5 Discussion

Research has shown that 'attendance' and 'belonging' are interrelated (Chapter 4, p.49). Yet, the extent of this relationship, in terms of causality, strength, and mediating factors, remains to be determined. To date, no scoping review known to the author has explored the existing research on 'attendance' and 'belonging'. This scoping review systematically examines the relationship between 'attendance' and 'belonging' in secondary education, identifying research trends, gaps, and methodological limitations to inform future research and policy. This discussion includes an interpretation of study findings, a review of limitations, gaps in the literature, and implications for future research.

Seventy-three studies met the inclusion criteria. The included research was predominantly from peer-reviewed journals, with doctoral theses and one master's thesis also included. Peer-reviewed journals undergo a rigorous review process and publish evidence of impactful research in the field. The inclusion of doctoral theses reduces the bias of selective publication. This is because these sources often contain original, detailed research that may not be published in peer-reviewed journals, thereby mitigating selective publication bias and positive results bias. It is important to note that due to the inaccessibility of eThos during the literature search, the breadth and depth of unpublished peer-reviewed research may not be fully reflected. Despite this, including several types of peer-reviewed research provides a broad foundation for understanding the field of study.

5.5.1 Research Question 1: How Many Studies Focus on 'Attendance' and 'Belonging', and What Are Their Characteristics?

Research exploring 'attendance' and 'belonging' spanned thirteen countries. The distribution of studies across countries highlights the interest in this topic. However, almost all the research in this scoping review was conducted in North America and Europe. Of the 73 studies, 46 (63%) were conducted within America, with only 23 (31.5%) from other regions and 4 (5.4%) using international data sets. This aligns with the findings of Hamadi et al.'s (2024) scoping review, which reported that

American research was the second most predominant within the literature on 'attendance' problems. This suggests a broader pattern of jurisdictional dominance within the field. The results of this scoping review must be considered with this in mind. Of note is the lack of peer-reviewed studies from the UK, with no research noted. This aligns with Riley et al. (2020), who indicate a lack of 'belonging' research in the UK, contrasting with Hamadi et al. (2024), who found a high proportion of UK-specific research exploring 'attendance'. This suggests a gap in the literature exploring these two concepts within the UK. In addition, the lack of UK-specific research exploring 'belonging' and 'attendance' is particularly concerning because 'belonging' is grounded in an individual's context, including cultural aspects (El Zaatari & Maalouf, 2022; Mahar et al., 2013). Recently, non-peer-reviewed research has demonstrated the importance of 'belonging' for 'attendance' within England, UK (ImpactEd, 2024). However, to date, there has been little to no research undertaken within Scotland.

The publication rate slightly declined from 2018. This was a surprising finding, considering the increase in the publication rate for 'belonging' and 'attendance' individually (García-Moya et al., 2019; Martínez-Torres et al., 2024). This trend was also expected to be observed within 'attendance' and 'belonging' research, demonstrating that while these concepts have been considered individually, exploring both together remains an emerging field.

Within the research aims, there is an emphasis on factors and approaches that impact 'attendance' rather than those that impact 'belonging'. This provides evidence that research often aims to target and influence 'attendance'. This aligns with the increase in 'attendance' research (Martínez-Torres et al., 2024) and the level of importance local and international governments place on 'attendance' (Scottish Government, 2023a, 2023b; UNESCO, 2023). There is less research exploring ways to impact and increase 'belonging' in the context of YP who find attending school difficult. This is surprising, considering the evidence from this review that 'belonging' impacts 'attendance'.

5.5.1.2 Concept Definitions and Operation. The review highlighted that a sizeable proportion of studies did not define either ‘belonging’ (28 studies) or ‘attendance’ (24 studies). This is concerning as definitions are foundational to research. Without them, it is difficult to know what researchers mean by these concepts. This can lead to confusion and ambiguity within the literature base (Allen, Kern, et al., 2021; Elliott & Place, 2019; García-Moya et al., 2019; Hamadi et al., 2024; Havik & Ingul, 2021; Heyne et al., 2019; Kearney & González, 2022; Kearney et al., 2019). This lack of clarity can lead to challenges in measurement and operationalisation and likely add to the research-to-practice gap. For studies that included definitions, the terminology used alongside the operationalisation was highly variable.

In the case of ‘attendance’, the research included a wide variety of terms used in the literature. A total of twelve concepts were used to define school absenteeism. These terms aligned with the scoping reviews of Hamadi et al. (2024), Heyne et al. (2019), and Martínez-Torres et al. (2024). Studies adopted both narrow and broad definitions of school absenteeism; for instance, some studies utilised ‘attendance’, aligning with a dimensional view of school absences (Kearney & González, 2022; Knage, 2023), while others specified tardiness or class skipping (Havik & Ingul, 2021; Heyne et al., 2019). Most definitions used a within-young-person lens to define ‘attendance’. The most common terms were school dropout and truancy. This is different from Martínez-Torres et al. (2024), who found terms mainly described ‘attendance’ broadly. Consideration is also required regarding the terminology across contexts, as definitions may not be comparable. Gentle-Genitty et al. (2017) explored definitions of truancy in America and wider jurisdictions. In their research, whilst there was a degree of similarity in definitions, variability arose due to context and educational jurisdiction. A lack of statutory definition within the UK was also noted. Therefore, the same terminology may relate to different definitions, posing a comparability problem.

‘Attendance’ was predominantly measured through self-reported surveys. This is a challenge as students may not provide accurate and reliable information about their ‘attendance’ (Kearney & Childs, 2023; Keppens et al., 2019). For example, participants were asked to indicate how many times they missed school last month. Recording absenteeism in this way may be influenced by respondents’ memory or by students wanting to report what is expected of them, rather than by accuracy. Keppens et al. (2019) found that school-registered unauthorised absences were twice as large as compared to self-reported school absences. Some studies verified ‘attendance’ through school data. This provides a longitudinal measure of ‘attendance’. However, there are noted challenges associated with gathering ‘attendance’ in this way, such as through inconsistent reporting of the type of absenteeism (Birioukov, 2016; Giménez-Miralles et al., 2022; Kearney & Childs, 2023). In addition, almost all studies measured ‘attendance’ through physical presence within the school building. Only three measured intention to drop out, two measured tardiness, and two measured participation, suggesting ‘attendance’ is most often defined and operationalised in this way. However, recent literature highlights defining and measuring ‘attendance’ as wider than physical presence in a school building (Birioukov, 2016; Havik & Ingul, 2021; Kearney & González, 2022; Kearney et al., 2019). Accounting for these challenges, a few studies gathered multiple measures of ‘attendance’ supporting cross-validation.

A total of nine terms were used to define ‘belonging’. These terms align with García-Moya et al.’s (2019) scoping review. The most common term was ‘school belonging,’ followed by ‘school connectedness.’ Terms were also used interchangeably, with seven studies using two or more terms for ‘belonging’. For instance, Garwood and Moore (2021) used the term ‘school bonding’, and Solberg and Laundal (2024) used a ‘sense of school belonging’ whilst both adopted Goodenow & Grady’s (1993) definition of school membership. This demonstrates that research sometimes employs different terminology to illustrate the same concept (Voelkl, 2012). Indeed, Slaten et al. (2016) and Allen and Kern (2017) both assert that there is more consistency in how ‘belonging’ is defined rather than the

terms used to describe it. Expert raters are in alignment with the suitability of different terms as synonyms for 'belonging' (Alink et al., 2023). This review provides weight to this assertion, as despite the variability in terminology, the core elements of the definitions remained evident. That is, the importance of interactions and experiences in school, the quality of student-teacher relationships, and the impact of students' perceptions and attitudes toward school (Allen & Kern, 2017; García-Moya et al., 2019). Of note is that many definitions did not emphasise the impact of the individual on their 'belonging' (Mahar et al., 2013; St-Amand et al., 2017).

'Belonging' was gathered through self-reported measures using either a survey or semi-structured interviews. A few studies used multiple measures for 'belonging', providing cross-validation. The use of questionnaires within a survey approach supports the reliability and validity of measuring 'belonging' and allows for comparisons across time and demographics (Too et al., 2022). Many of the studies using measures from data sets used a smaller set of questions. An example of this is those who drew from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health. These scales are often criticised for not capturing the complexity of 'belonging', and it is often argued that longer scales, such as the PSSM, are preferable as a measure (Allen & Kern, 2017). Almost all studies utilised a unidimensional measure of 'belonging', aligning with García-Moya et al. (2019). Measuring 'belonging' in this way may not sensitively capture the multifaceted nature of the concept. Allen, Kern, et al. (2021) note that all measures assess an individual's perception of connection to a context and depend on interactions with others. However, as in definitions, there is a dearth of exploration about participants' motivation to connect and belong in context. Consideration is also required of these measures concerning diverse cultural contexts (El Zaatari & Maalouf, 2022; Too et al., 2022). Semi-structured interviews are grounded within an individual's context, addressing this concern and allowing for a deeper exploration of an individual's experiences. However, during semi-structured interviews, 'belonging' almost always emerged as a theme identified through gathering participant views on support and barriers related to 'attendance', but it was not

explicitly explored as a research aim. This means there may not have been a comprehensive measurement of 'belonging' in these studies.

It is interesting to note that despite the ongoing debate around the importance of distinguishing between school absences (Elliott & Place, 2019; Havik & Ingul, 2021; Heyne et al., 2019; Kearney & González, 2022; Knage, 2023), what is clear is that 'belonging' is linked to a YP's 'attendance' regardless of the type of absence (e.g., truancy or anxiety). This suggests that, regardless of underpinning needs, YP with higher 'belonging' are more likely to have lower school absences and vice versa. This supports findings that missing school, regardless of the reason, can impact YP's outcomes (Ansari & Pianta, 2019; Klein & Sosu, 2024b; Klein et al., 2022).

5.5.2 Research Question 2: Which Methodological Approaches Characterise the Research Conducted?

Nearly all studies were non-experimental. Non-experimental designs can be practical when researchers seek to gather and explore information on a subject. They can be descriptive, predictive, or explanatory (Robson, 2024). This highlights that exploring the relationship between 'attendance' and 'belonging' is an emerging field. There was a notable dearth of experimental studies within the research. This presents a clear gap within the knowledge base. Without experimental studies, it is difficult to ascertain whether the relationship between variables is causal or correlational (Chapter 5, section 5.5.4, p.111).

Almost all quantitative studies included were cross-sectional or longitudinal. A cross-sectional design collects data at one time point. It is often employed when exploring the prevalence of a relationship between variables, and allows for multiple variables to be gathered simultaneously (Robson, 2024). A disadvantage of this approach is that it provides a one-time measurement of a phenomenon, making it more susceptible to bias (Robson, 2024). Addressing this, several studies adopted a longitudinal panel approach, following the same participants across time points. This approach can avoid threats to internal validity by tracking trends and patterns

across time within the data to be analysed (Robson, 2024). Several studies accessed secondary data from databases, allowing for the analysis of data from many participants. This large sample size lowers errors in generalisation (Robson, 2024). However, these datasets often exclude students with persistent absenteeism due to selection bias, resulting in an underrepresentation of high-risk groups. In addition, this accounts for why many studies measured 'attendance' and 'belonging' but did not analyse the relationship because it was not the primary purpose of the research. These studies predominantly gathered data from the general population, with different thresholds assigned for absenteeism. Some studies indicated a floor effect (Xiaoli, 2024), whereby participants demonstrated a low level of absenteeism. Additionally, individuals who exhibit persistent absenteeism may not be adequately represented in studies, potentially leading to underrepresentation of YP at risk of persistent absenteeism (Kljakovic et al., 2021).

Other studies adopted a qualitative design. These studies predominantly adopted case-study and phenomenological approaches, exploring participants' experiences of 'attendance' and 'belonging' (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Both approaches seek to gather an in-depth examination of participants' experiences within their context. Adopting a case study approach can support the development of understanding the complex factors that impact a phenomenon, and a phenomenological approach endeavours to understand the lived experiences of individuals experiencing a phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). An outcome of both approaches is uncovering practical ways to support and develop interventions in the context of those experiencing them (Allen et al., 2023). However, transferability is a challenge, whereby findings may not apply to other contexts or participants due to small sample sizes (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In addition, temporal challenges must also be noted. Almost all studies gathered data at one time point. Research highlights that perceptions of 'belonging' can change and are dynamic (Barrett, 2022; Bell, 2023; Mahar et al., 2013; Virtanen et al., 2022). This means gathering data at one time may not capture changes in 'belonging' and 'attendance'

over time. A notable exception to this was one study's use of a participatory action research approach over time.

Few studies adopted a mixed methods approach. Most adopted a non-experimental approach, with two studies being explanatory and two studies being exploratory. One study adopted an experimental explanatory approach. The dearth of mixed methods designs is surprising, considering this approach can harness the strengths and offset the weaknesses of both quantitative and qualitative approaches (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). This approach can be particularly valuable when research seeks to explore a phenomenon and draw conclusions from multiple data sets to create new insights (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017).

5.5.3 Research Question 3: How Many Studies Include the YP's Voice, and What Are Their Characteristics?

Quantitative studies predominantly gathered data from student participants using closed-question survey methods. This approach provides some information from YP regarding their perceptions of 'belonging' and 'attendance', alongside other variables. Nevertheless, does not capture a rich depth of YP's views. This is particularly relevant with 'belonging' grounded in subjectivity (Goodenow & Grady, 1993; Mahar et al., 2013; St-Amand et al., 2017). The findings of the quantitative studies are highlighted further in this chapter (Chapter 5, section 5.5.5, p.114).

Qualitative research explored the views of YP at risk of school absenteeism or dropout. Despite the demonstrated link between 'belonging' and 'attendance', research rarely includes the voices of persistently absent students, leading to a potential gap in understanding their lived experiences. Of the fourteen studies that used or included a qualitative approach to gather YP's views, only four included YP with an identified 'attendance' challenge (either persistent absenteeism or truancy), four studies did not have specific inclusion criteria or indicated no vulnerabilities present in participant group, and five studies included YP at risk of persistent absenteeism, either due to race or by attending an alternative provision, but with no evidence that included participants were experiencing 'attendance' challenges. A

similar picture was also evident from former students' views. Of the seven studies that used or included a qualitative approach, only one included YP who dropped out of school. Six studies included YP at risk of persistent absenteeism: two included individuals attending an alternative provision, two did not specify inclusion criteria, and two included participants who successfully graduated. This suggests that although many studies included participants at risk of persistent absenteeism, few studies have explicitly gathered the views of those with secondary school absences. This means there is a gap in the literature on the views of persistently absent YP on their 'attendance' and 'belonging'.

Of these studies included, most explored YP's and former students' views on their 'attendance', with even less research exploring what 'belonging' means to YP with persistent absenteeism. This was surprising, given the evidence from this review of the importance of 'belonging' for 'attendance'. Alongside, research that has synthesised persistently YP's views on factors that support their 'attendance' demonstrates the importance of 'belonging' as a pre-requisite and reinforcing variable to their 'attendance' (Corcoran & Kelly, 2023; Ramsdal & Wynn, 2022). But supports the wider 'belonging' literature (Craggs & Kelly, 2018; Keyes, 2019; Shaw, 2019) that indicated a lack of YP's voices. Further research is required to explore how to impact 'belonging' in the context of 'attendance' research.

5.5.4 Research Question 4: How Many Studies are Intervention-based, and What Are Their Characteristics?

A limited number of intervention studies sought to explore 'attendance' and 'belonging', with four adopting an experimental design. Two further studies presented a description of a programme intervention. Experimental designs are often concerned with causation and seek to understand how the dependent variable impacts the independent variable (Robson, 2024).

Due to the lack of research within this sector, asserting a high degree of confidence in which aspects of these interventions are essential is difficult. The implementation of interventions ranges from three short feedback sessions to over

a year. This variability aligns with other research that found a range of timeframes with varying input intensities for 'belonging' interventions (Allen, Jamshidi, et al., 2022; Allen et al., 2018). All interventions are situated within tier 2 of Kearney and Grazyck's (2014; 2020) model for school absenteeism, with participants engaging with direct targeted intervention. This could suggest a lack of whole-school approaches that look specifically at 'belonging' and the importance of attending school, aligning with another research (Štremfel et al., 2024). In addition, none of the interventions involved external agencies or families, except for one programme description study, which social workers led. This is surprising as research has found other agency and family involvement vital for increasing 'belonging' and 'attendance' (Allen et al., 2023; Boaler & Bond, 2023; Greenwood & Kelly, 2019; Kearney & Childs, 2023; Ulaş & Seğer, 2024). The absence of family involvement contradicts research demonstrating that parental engagement is a key factor in 'belonging' and 'attendance'.

Surprisingly, whole school interventions aimed at increasing 'belonging' and 'attendance' were not evident in the review. This is different from 'belonging' research, such as Chapman et al. (2013)'s review highlighting the importance of whole school approaches in developing 'belonging', and findings from Allen et al. (2023) who identified the importance of policies and procedures in creating environments to increase 'belonging'. This is also different from Boaler and Bond (2023)'s research highlighting the importance of proactive school systems and methods and Kearney and Graczyk (2020) response to intervention model that demonstrates universal and primary prevention supports is essential to supporting 'attendance'. This finding evidences a clear gap in the evidence base.

All interventions took place within a school context, with one intervention taking place over the summer. This highlights the importance of delivering interventions within the YP's everyday environment and is supported by previous research suggesting school-based interventions increase relevance and continuity of support (Boaler & Bond, 2023; Keppens & Spruyt, 2020; Leduc et al., 2022; Ulaş &

Seçer, 2024). It may be expected that YP who find attending school difficult might also find attending an intervention difficult. The two shorter interventions demonstrated high implementation fidelity, indicating that participants engaged effectively with them. For the longer interventions, one study indicated a moderate attrition rate, while another did not provide information on participant dropout. It may be that longer interventions lead to disengagement over time. The fidelity of the programme description studies was unclear, making it difficult to determine whether the programme was delivered as intended and whether it is feasible within another context. Indeed, implementation fidelity is an issue raised within both 'attendance' and 'belonging' research (Chapman et al., 2013; Keppens & Spruyt, 2020).

Despite the variability, some commonalities underpinning interventions from 'belonging' and 'attendance' research are evident. These can be viewed through Allen et al.'s (2021) framework for 'belonging' interventions: opportunities, competencies, perceptions, and motivations. All interventions were implemented in a small group or 1:1 setting, providing opportunities to develop and strengthen relationships between other participants in a group and the facilitators. They provided availability, time, space, and people to enable 'belonging' to occur (Allen, Kern, et al., 2021). All interventions sought to build individual competencies, such as building social skills and applying skills in context. One intervention hypothesised an increase in self-fulfilling prosocial behaviour resulting from feedback without explicit teaching. Therefore, interventions must consider approaches to increase and strengthen skills required to attend school and to increase 'belonging' (Allen, Jamshidi, et al., 2022; Gubbels et al., 2019; Ulaş & Seçer, 2024). All interventions sought to support YP's motivations to belong. They specifically sought to involve YP and tailored the approach based on their challenges. The involvement of YP in research is of vital importance, as many YP have indicated low self-efficacy in creating change towards their 'attendance' and 'belonging' (Corcoran & Kelly, 2023). Finally, the interventions also sought to change participants' perceptions. All interventions emphasised the importance of checking in with participants. Two

interventions framed this through a positive approach: strengths-based feedback and a wise feedback statement. Others named checking in as a key component before and during intervention sessions. These check-ins aimed to increase trust and 'belonging' for YP who may have experienced distrust and isolation, therefore changing participants' perceptions of 'belonging' in school (Craggs & Kelly, 2018; Ramsdal & Wynn, 2022).

This suggests that any intervention that supports 'attendance' and 'belonging' must provide opportunities to belong, focus on building skills, involve the YP's voice, be tailored to need, and support positive perceptions of 'belonging' in school. However, further research is required to consider the most effective duration and intensity of interventions to aid effective implementation.

5.5.5 Research Question 5: What Are the Key Findings of the Research Included?

The evidence of the review confirms the relationship between 'attendance' and 'belonging'. Drawing from quantitative data, as 'belonging' increases, so does 'attendance', and vice versa, with 26 studies demonstrating the significance of this relationship, after controlling for other variables. This aligns with Korpershoek et al. (2020) meta-analysis, which illustrated the impact of 'belonging' on school absences and dropout after controlling for gender, age, and socioeconomic status. Many studies replicating the relationship between these concepts indicate a reliable link likely to have an actual effect. In addition, the replication across publications and researchers reduces the likelihood of bias in the research field. A smaller number of studies indicated that YP at risk of school persistent absenteeism demonstrate lower 'belonging' than their peers. This evidence suggests that YP with a lower 'belonging' are more likely to be absent from school and vice versa. This aligns with motivational and engagement theorists who illustrate recursion (Finn & Zimmer, 2012; Nouwen & Clycq, 2021). However, further research into this is required.

A total of 34 studies reported a direct effect, with 26 indicating significance, four indicating partial support and four indicating non-significance. For instance,

one study identified 'belonging' as an antecedent to academic motivation and competence, which impacted 'attendance' (Sorrenti et al., 2024).

Several studies also identified mediating and moderating factors. Eight studies identified a mediating effect, with factors such as peer victimisation, school, environment, and disciplinary fairness mediating 'belonging' and, therefore, 'attendance'. Three studies reported moderating effects, such as socioeconomic status and gender. Although it is noted that one study found no gender effects, and another found a significant effect for non-binary participants, indicating some nuance. This evidences the impact of other variables on the relationship between 'attendance' and 'belonging', aligning with research that demonstrated an ecological perspective across the systems an individual interacts with (Bianchi et al., 2022; El Zaatari & Maalouf, 2022; Gubbels et al., 2019; Leduc et al., 2022; Štremfel et al., 2024).

Considering mediating factors further, one study found that 'belonging' mediated the relationship between adversity, defined through adverse childhood experiences, and 'attendance', suggesting that 'belonging' is a protective factor. This contrasts with a study that indicated a non-significant effect of these concepts on participants in an armed conflict zone. Interestingly, whilst 'attendance' and 'belonging' were non-significant, 'belonging' was significant for school participation. This could be due to participants in an armed conflict zone experiencing frequent disruption to their routines and inconsistent 'attendance'. It is posited that disrupted 'attendance' is due to participants' basic needs being unmet, such as physical safety, and is unrelated to feelings of 'belonging' in school (Maslow, 1943). Meanwhile, 'belonging' impacted participation within the school, suggesting a plausible candidate relationship. These questions warrant further exploration but are outside the scope of this current study.

A further three studies indicated a non-significant relationship between 'belonging' and 'attendance', bringing the total to four. One explored the impact of 'belonging' on the school absences of transgender participants. The researchers

noted a lack of power in the analysis. Another explored Latino participants who persisted in schooling despite risk factors and indicated a high level of 'belonging' and 'attendance' within the sample. The final study indicated that school absences did not significantly correlate with any of the measures within the study and suggested a floor effect. For school absences, it means that most participants had very few absences, making it difficult to observe a strong connection between absenteeism and other outcomes. These reasons could explain why a non-significant relationship was indicated.

Several studies gathered 'attendance' and 'belonging' data, but did not compare them. This was due to studies exploring 'belonging' and 'attendance' data as variables related to a target variable, such as examining the impact of school factors, including 'attendance,' and 'belonging,' on alcohol use. This research did not explore the relationship between 'attendance' and 'belonging;' therefore, it is difficult to derive meaningful conclusions. However, evidence shows that several factors impact both 'attendance' and 'belonging' (Bianchi et al., 2022; El Zaatari & Maalouf, 2022; Gubbels et al., 2019; Leduc et al., 2022; Štremfel et al., 2024). It can be hypothesised that these factors are mediators. For instance, one study did not directly compare concepts but found both were negatively impacted by substance misuse. In contrast, another study that did compare concepts showed sequential relationships, illustrating that substance use impacted 'belonging' and diminished 'attendance,' highlighting two potential pathways for substance use, both direct and indirect.

Most qualitative data explored stakeholders' views on supporting 'attendance', with the importance of 'belonging' inductively emerging from data analysis, suggesting that 'belonging' is key to 'attendance'. Despite research demonstrating the importance of 'belonging' for 'attendance', there was a notable lack of qualitative research exploring this. Two studies explored what 'belonging' feels like for current and former students at risk of persistent absenteeism, and one study explored the impact of mattering on successful graduates. This also aligns with

‘belonging’ research (Chapter 5, section 5.5.3, p.111), which highlights a lack of qualitative research exploring YP’s views on ‘belonging’. As ‘belonging’ is demonstrated as a key variable for ‘attendance’, it is important to explore how this factor is influenced as a possible pathway to increase ‘attendance’.

5.5.5.1 Preliminary Conceptual Model. The conceptual model draws on the qualitative data and provides an overview of the relationship between ‘belonging’ and ‘attendance’ (Chapter 5, section 5.4.5, p.97). It illustrates ‘belonging’ as a key mediator for ‘attendance,’ demonstrating that increased ‘belonging’ leads to increased ‘attendance’ and recursion. This is supported by other research, which impacts this bidirectionality (Finn & Zimmer, 2012; Nouwen & Clycq, 2021), with further detail about antecedent variables. It is posited that ‘belonging’ is a key variable when considering ‘attendance,’ as many of the factors impacting ‘attendance’ can be viewed as key to ‘belonging.’

Firstly, there is a high degree of intersection between ‘belonging’ and ‘attendance’ research. This suggests that many factors that impact ‘attendance’ also impact ‘belonging’. The key themes that arose related to school factors, home factors, and individual factors align with an ecological perspective. These themes also align with ‘attendance’ and ‘belonging’ research (Bianchi et al., 2022; El Zaatar & Maalouf, 2022; Gubbels et al., 2019; Leduc et al., 2022; Štremfel et al., 2024). Indeed, many themes arising from the qualitative data can be categorised through the core elements of ‘belonging’: the importance of school interactions and experiences, the quality of teacher-student relationships, and student perceptions of school. Themes underpinning the importance of quality student-teacher relationships were teacher interactions, expectations, competence, and support. Therefore, many of the themes arising from research can be viewed as core elements of ‘belonging’. Thus, it follows that ‘belonging’ suggests a causal pathway that directly impacts ‘attendance’. This supports research, which posits that YP’s school absenteeism arises from a lack of ‘belonging’ and that disengaged YP are

searching for a climate of belongingness (Corcoran & Kelly, 2023; Ramsdal & Wynn, 2022) .

Some divergence was noted between ‘attendance’ and ‘belonging’ research. These are related to home factors, school factors, and relationships. All these factors were highlighted from quantitative data within the review and the broader literature base. For instance, transition was noted as an important factor for ‘attendance’. Other research has highlighted the impact of transition on ‘belonging’ (Corcoran & Kelly, 2023; Hebron, 2018). A reason for this discrepancy may be that few studies explicitly explore ‘belonging’.

Other factors were not evident from the qualitative data analysis but were found within the quantitative research (Chapter 5, section 5.4.5, p.90). Research demonstrated that socioeconomic status and gender identity moderate the relationship between ‘belonging’ and ‘attendance.’ Additionally, factors such as ethnic orientation, perceived cultural differences, and mainstream orientation were found to mediate ‘belonging’. This difference between qualitative and quantitative findings may be due to the scope of questions asked within the qualitative data. For instance, many qualitative studies did not stratify participants by socioeconomic status or gender. Further research would benefit from refining the preliminary conceptual model with further quantitative study analysis.

Indeed, the literature favoured micro-system factors impacting ‘attendance’, with less exploration of the impact of community on ‘attendance’ and ‘belonging’. This aligns with the broader research on both topics, which provides a similar picture (Allen et al., 2023; Štremfel et al., 2024). This may be due to studies conducted within a school context, aiming to influence systems where control and influence are most affected, which is less so in the home or community context. The qualitative data also highlighted the missing voice of parents, with only two parents included, which warrants further research. In addition, other research highlights that YP often consider school factors more important when considering their ‘attendance’. This may be due to YP interacting daily with their micro-system,

thereby, it may be perceived that school factors have more immediate or direct effects on their daily experiences and ‘belonging’ (Allen et al., 2023).

Within the model, the relationships between antecedent variables are illustrated as bidirectional. This is based on literature highlighting how different systems within an individual world interact, aligning with other research (Bianchi et al., 2022; El Zaatari & Maalouf, 2022; Gubbels et al., 2019; Štremfel et al., 2024) and outside of the evidence gathered within this review. It is hypothesised that antecedent factors can also influence and be influenced by one another. For instance, peer interactions have been found to impact attitudes towards school (Keppens & Spruyt, 2018), and access to relationship-building opportunities can increase perceived teacher support (Wang et al., 2024). Further exploration of how the interactions between the antecedent factors in the preliminary conceptual model are warranted.

The conceptual model validates the importance of ‘belonging’ as a key mediator of ‘attendance’ and suggests that ‘belonging’ is explanatory for ‘attendance.’

5.5.6 Limitations and Next Steps

Several limitations must be considered within this study. Firstly, this scoping review is not exhaustive despite an extensive systematic search. Studies were limited to research accessible to the researcher during the final search (July 2024). Where possible, this was mitigated by approaching researchers and universities to access all relevant research. However, some studies and databases were inaccessible, limiting access to grey literature. In addition, research was limited to English.

Secondly, studies were limited to a secondary school context. Previous research has highlighted that a YP's safe base and ‘belonging’ do not automatically transition to secondary school (Virtanen et al., 2022). In addition, research has shown that ‘attendance’ is often impacted in upper primary (Chapman et al., 2013). Therefore, further exploration of research in primary schools may be helpful. This

may be particularly pertinent to considering how 'belonging' can be bridged between primary and secondary school.

Thirdly, this review does not differentiate between school absenteeism and school dropout. This was mainly due to similar risk factors underpinning both, and YP with high levels of absenteeism being at greater risk of school dropout (Gubbels et al., 2019). However, further research could consider whether 'belonging' differs between school absenteeism and school dropout. In addition, there is scope to consider whether 'belonging' impacts the different underlying needs that school absenteeism addresses.

Fourthly, the generalisability of results should be considered through a cultural lens. Specifically, most of the research in this scoping review occurred in North America and Europe and may not represent other cultures' experiences and views of 'attendance' and 'belonging.'

In addition, whilst a relationship between 'belonging' and 'attendance' is evident, the extent of this relationship was not analysed. A small proportion of studies drew from the same databases. These would need to be removed to reduce bias in the research. Further analysis of the sources included in the evidence is required. This is currently out of the scope of this research.

Further, the preliminary conceptual model is underpinned by the qualitative data. Additional analyses of the quantitative data would be beneficial. This would support refinement and cross-validation of the model, which is currently out of the scope of this research. The literature search took place in July 2024, potentially excluding newer studies. A meta-analysis of effect sizes across quantitative studies would provide a more precise estimate of the relationship between 'belonging' and 'attendance'.

5.5.7 Summary

Despite the increase in research on both 'attendance' and 'belonging', the research on the relationship between these concepts is still emerging. As such, the

research is predominantly exploratory and cross-sectional, focusing on correlations rather than causal relationships. This review presents evidence of a relationship between 'belonging' and 'attendance', highlighting how 'belonging' can influence a student's likelihood to attend school regularly. Most of the existing research measures 'belonging' as an independent variable impacting 'attendance', indicating that students reporting higher levels of 'belonging' tend to attend school more regularly. However, there is a lack of qualitative research exploring this relationship, specifically with a focus on 'belonging' as a dependent variable. Evidence from the review and the preliminary conceptual framework validates the importance of 'belonging' as a key mediator for 'attendance'. In other words, a strong sense of 'belonging' plays a pivotal role in influencing 'attendance', and several key systems - relationships, school context factors, home factors, and individual factors - impact both 'attendance' and 'belonging'. However, the scoping review illustrates a dearth of research focusing on 'belonging' for YP struggling to attend school.

Chapter 6: Study 2 - Does 'Belonging' Matter for 'Attendance'? Exploring Youth Perspectives and a Candidate Intervention

6.1 Overview

Chapter 5 reports the findings from a scoping review of the extent of research on 'attendance' and 'belonging'. Drawing from 73 studies, it provides an overview of the research, synthesises the evidence, and identifies gaps in the literature. The review reveals a relationship between these concepts, and following analysis, a preliminary conceptual model is outlined, demonstrating the importance of 'belonging' as a key mediator for 'attendance'. It also illuminates several key considerations for further research, some of which are addressed within this study. These are highlighted as follows:

- There is an educational jurisdiction bias, with research from America dominating. No research was identified in the UK or Scotland.
- Despite the consensus on the subjective nature of 'belonging', the research noticeably lacks the voices of school-absent YP. A lack of parents'/carers' voices was also noted.
- Research predominantly adopts an exploratory design, with a dominance of cross-sectional studies.
- Few studies adopted a mixed methods design, with most adopting a quantitative survey approach.
- Few studies were experimental.
- 'Belonging' was most often measured as an independent variable for 'attendance'. The preliminary conceptual model demonstrates the importance of 'belonging' as a key mediator for 'attendance' and outlines possible antecedent variables

This study is situated within the Scottish context. It is designed to address the lack of YP's voice by seeking the views of persistently absent YP on their 'attendance' and sense of 'belonging'. Gathering parents'/carers' voices is currently

out of the scope of this study. Before outlining the research, purpose, and aims, it is important to consider facilitating the gathering of YPs' views in a meaningful way.

6.2 Meaningfully Gathering YP's Views

This study seeks to gather views of school-absent YP regarding their 'attendance' and 'belonging' and to involve them in the research process. Respect for children's freedom of expression and their views is enshrined in Articles 12 and 13 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNICEF, 1989). Listening to YP and acting on their views can have many benefits, including enhanced confidence, improved decision-making in policies, and greater engagement and participation. This study seeks to meaningfully involve YP in the research process, enabling them to influence the research process and contribute to finding solutions to issues that affect their 'attendance' and 'belonging' (Bradbury-Jones et al., 2018; Garcia-Quiroga & Agoglia, 2020).

Consequently, it is important to explore ways to facilitate meaningful participation. Firstly, it is important to note that there are numerous participation frameworks within the literature. While researchers caution that the most prominent frameworks may not necessarily be more accurate or relevant, they are often viewed as more useful by researchers (Corney et al., 2022). This study considers relevant frameworks for youth participation (Hart, 1992; Lansdown, 2018; Lundy, 2007; Shier, 2001).

Hart's (1992) ladder of participation is arguably one of the most well-known in the literature. It consists of eight steps, each representing a different degree of participation: manipulation, decoration, tokenism, assigned but informed, consulted and informed, adult-initiated and shared decisions, child-initiated and directed, and child-initiated shared decisions with adults. This model highlights non-participation alongside participation. Shier's (2001) 'Pathways to Participation' model adds to Hart's model by incorporating the commitment of individuals and organisations in the empowerment process. It helps adults reflect on how they support and impact youth participation through three stages of commitment: openings, opportunities,

and obligations. Within this model, a minimum level of participation is outlined for UNCRC Article 12 compliance, that is, children's views must be considered (Corney et al., 2022). Both illustrated models are hierarchical, outlining a spectrum of practices, with higher levels of the framework indicating increased participation and empowerment. They provide a clear framework for differing degrees of participation. Lansdown (2018) further simplified the degrees of participation, illustrating three categories: consultation, collaboration, and youth action (Figure 20). Consultation refers to asking YP for their views. This is adult-led. Collaboration refers to adults and YP working together. This is adult-initiated and involves a partnership with YP. Youth action refers to activities initiated by YP, where adults serve as facilitators, not initiators.

Figure 20
Modes of Participation (Lansdown, 2018, p.9).



All models discussed so far present different degrees of participation, whereas Lundy (2007) considers the different elements involved in YP's participation. They argue that participation involves listening to YP and ensuring that their views are taken seriously and acted upon. The model of participation comprises four steps that assist YP in participating:

- 1) Space: YP must be allowed to express themselves in a safe and inclusive space.
- 2) Voice: YP must be supported to express their views in a way that suits them.
- 3) Audience: YP's views must be listened to by decision-makers.
- 4) Influence: YP's views must meaningfully impact the decisions that affect them.

Unlike Hart and Shier's models, all elements must be present for meaningful participation. All steps must be implemented for a YP's right to participate. This model has been adopted across different countries and sectors (OECD, 2024).

The study draws on various participation frameworks from the literature to facilitate meaningful participation. This research is adult-initiated, with participants encouraged to share their views and make shared decisions. Contextualising this within Lansdown (2018), this research adopts a collaborative approach. The exploratory/confirmatory research design sought to gather YP's perspectives on 'belonging' and 'attendance' underpinned by Lundy's model (2007), alongside influencing the outcome and the process.

This study sought to explore and confirm YP's views on 'attendance' and 'belonging', subsequent conceptual models, and design a candidate intervention to increase 'belonging'. As outlined in the exploratory phase, YP described the centrality of their voice to any intervention design. This aligns with previous research underscoring participatory approaches as key to engaging YP meaningfully in the design and implementation of interventions, by supporting collaboration and empowering YP to ground solutions in their lived experiences (Anderson, 2020). Given the importance of youth agency in intervention success, the study evaluated approaches that emphasise co-creation and active participation throughout the research process. However, there is often a disparity when YP are involved in the research, where they are often underrepresented in the early design and data analysis stages (Shamrova & Cummings, 2017). Furthermore, research illustrates that action research principles have been found to influence participants' agency,

leadership, interpersonal relationships, and 'belonging' to the community, although further outcome studies are required (Anyon et al., 2018; Shamrova & Cummings, 2017).

The implementation of any intervention must be guided by clear techniques and guidelines to ensure its feasibility and sustainability (Fixsen et al., 2005; Fixsen et al., 2019; Proctor et al., 2011; Proctor et al., 2023). Interventions benefit from adherence to a clear set of techniques and guidelines rather than content (Anyon et al., 2018). Therefore, combining insights from youth participatory research with implementation science is crucial to designing interventions that are not only meaningful but also practical to adopt. Based on these considerations, several approaches were evaluated for their suitability as a candidate intervention. These were action research (Ali, 2020; Thompson, 2020), youth participatory action research (Anderson, 2020) and appreciative inquiry (Thompson, 2020; Whitney et al., 2019) (Appendix G). The rationale for the approach chosen is presented in the exploratory phase discussion (Chapter 5, section 6.6.5, p.210).

6.3 Research Aims

The purpose of this research is two-fold: it seeks to explore further the relationship between 'attendance' and 'belonging' and to co-create and present an intervention protocol. It seeks to validate the relationship between 'belonging' and 'attendance' and to explore causation, providing evidence of the relationships between variables and their broader implications. The research questions are highlighted next:

6.3.1 Exploratory Phase

- 1) What do YP think about 'attendance'/'belonging' at school?
- 2) In what ways do YP perceive the impact, if any, of 'attendance' and their 'belonging' at school?
- 3) To what extent can themes derived from the antecedents of the conceptual model account for the YPs' views?

- 4) To co-create a candidate intervention with YP to increase 'belonging' and 'attendance'.

6.3.2 Confirmability Phase

- 5) Do YP think the findings accurately reflect their experiences of 'belonging' and 'attendance'?
- 6) Do YP think the conceptual model accurately reflects their experiences of 'belonging' and 'attendance'?
- 7) Do YP think the findings accurately reflect their views on increasing 'belonging'?
- 8) Do YP think the proposed guidelines for intervention are a feasible way to support 'belonging' and 'attendance'?

6.4 Methods

6.4.1 Research Design

This research used a mixed-methods concurrent embedded design with a qualitative dominance, followed by a sequential qualitative follow-up (Almeida, 2018). This approach aligns with the researcher's epistemology, critical realism (Mukumbang, 2021). A mixed methods approach combines qualitative and quantitative methods (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). Participants' 'attendance' and 'belonging' were initially gathered through quantitative and qualitative data, followed by a qualitative approach to confirm the proposed conceptual model and intervention.

Due to the emerging research exploring the relationship between 'belonging' and 'attendance', an exploratory approach was an appropriate place to begin (Pérez Bentancur & Tiscornia, 2024). Confirmatory research compares the preliminary conceptual model alongside the exploratory findings before presenting this to participants for verification, exploring whether the relationship between 'belonging' is correlational or causal. This research design seeks to validate the relationship between 'belonging' and 'attendance' and explores the causal relationship, providing evidence of the relationships between variables and their broader implications. (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). Using an exploratory approach, followed by confirmatory research, enhances the research's trustworthiness (Pérez Bentancur & Tiscornia, 2024). The study's strategies to ensure research trustworthiness and rigour are summarised in Table 13.

Table 13
Strategies Supporting Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness Criteria	Strategies Used
Credibility	Cross-validation, triangulation of multiple data sources, and engagement over time.
Confirmability	Embedded participant feedback to ensure the final model was both evidence-based and participant-driven.
Dependability	Research diary detailing reflections and notes on the research process.
Transferability	Interviews provided thick description; views compared with the conceptual model.
Reflexivity	Ongoing reflection through the research diary to support transparency.
Rigour and Transparency	Eight participants from the exploratory phase completed the confirmability phase, meeting McKim's (2023) threshold.
Feasibility and Co-creation	Iterative, evidence-based, and co-created intervention development.

6.4.2 Ethical Considerations

This research adheres to the principles of the British Educational Research Association (2024) and the University of Strathclyde's Code of Practice on Investigations Involving Human Beings (2017). The Strathclyde University Ethics Committee (UEC23/95 Daly/Seaton) and the Local Authority Ethics Committee granted ethical approval for this research. The following ethical considerations were incorporated within the research methodology and integrated into the study design.

6.4.2.1. Consent and Coercion. Consideration was given to participant selection (Robson, 2024). Secondary school staff selected participants based on the inclusion criteria. The researcher had no prior relationship with the participants, reducing the risk of coercion. Candidate participants accessed a research information sheet outlining the research purpose, aim, and what would be expected of them (Appendix H). YPs over 11 were considered to have the capacity to consent

as they attended mainstream secondary schools. School staff presented the information to the participants to ensure an understanding of what was required, emphasising that participation was voluntary. No incentives were offered for participation. Staff also made reasonable adjustments for participants needing verbal explanations. Parent/carers consent was also sought (Appendix I). Continuous consent was supported and sought at multiple points within the research process (Robson, 2024).

6.4.2.2 Confidentiality. Measures were taken to ensure confidentiality through the research process (Robson, 2024). Participants were assigned unique codes to protect their anonymity. Interviews were recorded and transcribed with identifying details removed. Consent forms and raw data were securely stored.

6.4.2.3 Mitigating Risks. Several measures were taken to mitigate any risk to participants, including support before and after interviews (Robson, 2024). Interview questions were shared ahead of time. Consent was checked before the interview began, and participants were reminded that they could stop the interview at any time. Participants were informed that their pastoral support knew about their participation and would check in with them following the interview. Time was set aside after the interview for concerns. In addition, following the interview, participants were provided with information about other wellbeing services if required (Appendix J).

6.4.3 Pilot

Before beginning the main research, a preliminary pilot study was undertaken to assess the feasibility of the recruitment approach and the initial interview procedures (Chenail, 2011; Majid et al., 2017). Recruiting YP with secondary school absenteeism poses several challenges. For instance, frequent school absences often make it challenging to obtain these students' views within the school setting (Kljakovic et al., 2021). Piloting aimed to determine if the recruitment procedure was adequate. School A received assent, followed by consent from eight candidate participants and consent from five parents/carers (62.5%). The researcher

attended school on three occasions to gather data. According to Robson (2024) real-world research in educational settings with hard-to-reach populations often yields lower consent rates due to access difficulties and logistical constraints. This suggests that the recruitment strategy was adequate. Participant information is highlighted in Table 16.

The pilot aimed to assess whether the research approach allowed participants to participate meaningfully (Lundy, 2007), ensuring participants were given space, voice, audience, and influence within the research process. With this objective, several approaches were carefully examined, and semi-structured interviews were chosen. Post-interview, participants completed evaluation questionnaires for feedback and improvement. Participant responses are highlighted in Table 14. All participants felt listened to, were comfortable sharing their views, and had enough time. They felt their views were taken seriously, indicating the research allowed meaningful participation.

Table 14

Details of Pilot Feedback Related to Meaningful Participation for the Exploratory Phase

Questions	Count	Yes (Percentage)	No (Percentage)
Did the questions make sense?	5	100%	0%
Did you feel listened to during the interview?	5	100%	0%
Did you feel comfortable sharing your views	5	100%	0%
Did you have enough time to share your views?	5	100%	0%
Do you feel your views will be taken seriously?	5	100%	0%
Do you feel clear about how your views will be used?	5	100%	0%

One participant withdrew from the research, and four agreed to participate in the field testing of the second interview protocol. The above-mentioned process was followed, and feedback is highlighted in Table 15.

Table 15

Details of Pilot Feedback Related to Meaningful Participation for the Confirmatory Phase

Questions	Count	Yes (Percentage)	No (Percentage)
Did the questions make sense?	4	100%	0%
Did you feel listened to during the interview?	4	100%	0%
Did you feel comfortable sharing your views	4	100%	0%
Did you have enough time to share your views?	4	100%	0%
Do you feel your views will be taken seriously?	4	100%	0%
Do you feel clear about how your views will be used?	4	100%	0%

6.4.3.4 Pilot Study Revisions. The pilot also aimed to evaluate the interview protocol (Kallio et al., 2016). Participants were asked to share feedback on the number of questions and whether they made sense. Following the pilot interviews, several refinements were made. Pilot feedback indicated that participants found the interview questions clear and relevant, so no substantive wording changes were required. However, several procedural refinements were made to improve flow and engagement. One participant indicated there were too many questions. In response to this, the number of questions asked in a single sitting was reduced to avoid fatigue, and the interviewer adopted a less directive style, using fewer prompts to allow young people greater space to elaborate in their own words.

Additionally, while participants generally responded well to most questions, several showed a noticeable reduction in the depth of their answers when

discussing what schools could do to enhance belonging and attendance. To address this, an additional structured component was incorporated into the revised interview: the belonging intervention components. These involved participants rating the importance of different possible strategies using a short Likert-type scale, followed by discussion of their choices (See Chapter 6, Section 6.4.6.3, p132). This modification provided clearer prompts and concrete examples, helping to deepen reflection and generate richer qualitative data in this section of the interview.

6.4.4 Recruitment

6.4.4.1 Sampling Method. Non-probability purposive sampling was used to select participants for this research after considering other methods (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017; Robson, 2024). Non-probability sampling was selected as it is particularly useful when targeting specific groups, such as YP at risk of absenteeism. This approach allows researchers to concentrate on individuals most likely to exhibit the phenomenon under investigation.

6.4.4.2 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria. The study focused on YP aged 11-14 with moderate chronic school non-attendance attending a mainstream provision. This group was defined as missing more than 10% of school. The age range was chosen as research suggests that 'attendance' difficulties often emerge during early adolescence and are more prevalent in the second year of secondary school (Giménez-Miralles et al., 2022; John et al., 2022; Scottish Government, 2023b). Participants included in this research attended a mainstream secondary school. YPs with medically related absences, such as chronic health conditions, were excluded because these absences are directly related to medical needs.

6.4.4.3 Sample Size. The sample size was carefully selected to align with the research design. This study explored participants' views on their 'belonging' and 'attendance' and sought to capture rich insights (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017; Robson, 2024). Saturation was considered for determining the sample size (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022; Saunders et al., 2018). This is when further data collection no longer yields new themes or insights. Hennink and Kaiser (2022) found that a mean sample

size of 12-13 interviews typically achieves 90% saturation, with a range of between 9-17 interviews. Therefore, the minimum target sample size for this research was set at thirteen interviews. Ten participants were ultimately included in the study. Whilst this sample falls below the initial target, it was deemed sufficient as the interviews generated rich, detailed data, and recurring patterns began to emerge, indicating thematic saturation was approaching.

In addition, pilot data were included in the final sample because the research design accounted for multiple interviews. Therefore, data corruption was not a concern (Ismail et al., 2018; Van Teijlingen & Hundley, 2001).

6.4.4.4 Procedure. The recruitment process for this study was conducted in collaboration with secondary school deputy head teachers and guidance teachers. School staff were responsible for selecting YP who met the inclusion criteria outlined in an invitation letter (Appendix K).

Once candidate participants were identified, they received a participant information sheet and consent form (Appendix I). The consent form was adapted to suit the age of the participants, and school staff assisted in completing the form if necessary. School staff were vital in ensuring participants' consent was voluntary and informed.

Candidate participants were made aware that their participation depended on parent/carer consent. The parents and carers of assenting candidate participants were contacted via email by the school's deputy head teacher with an information sheet and consent form (Appendix H). The deputy head teacher then informed the researcher of consenting participants and arranged an appropriate time to conduct the interviews.

Following consent, several steps were taken to prepare YP for participation. Prior to the interview, the YP's guidance teacher met with them to share the interview protocol and ask whether the YP wanted to complete the PSSM questionnaire before the interview or with the researcher present. At this point,

guidance teachers also rechecked consent. During the first interview, consent was rechecked by the researcher, and participants were reminded that they could withdraw from the study at any time. All participants opted to complete the questionnaire during the exploratory interview. The measure was introduced verbally, with its purpose explained. Participants were invited to read items themselves or have them read aloud. This flexible administration ensured accessibility and consistency while maintaining the self-report nature of the measure. Participants were also presented with a copy of the interview protocol. Following the exploratory interview, participants were asked to indicate whether they would like to participate in the confirmatory interview. Participants were also provided with information about resources they could access if required after the interview, and their guidance teacher checked in with them afterwards.

Prior to the confirmatory interview, additional time was scheduled with the guidance team to recheck participant consent; if consent was confirmed, participants were provided time to review the information below prior to the interview. Participants were provided with a copy of the interview protocol, a summary of the findings from the exploratory phase, and the candidate intervention materials. The summary and candidate intervention guide used simplified language and incorporated visuals to support accessibility and comprehension (Appendix V and Appendix U). Both documents were designed to prepare students for the confirmatory discussion, enabling them to reflect on their experiences and ideas beforehand, where their views were sought on the accuracy of the summary of results, the conceptual model and the relevance and feasibility of the proposed intervention component

During the interview, following consent, the information was revisited in sections, allowing time for discussion and clarification. Participants were given the option to have any material read aloud to ensure understanding and comfort throughout the process. The conceptual model was presented visually, using simplified language and colour coding to show how factors such as belonging,

attendance, and relationships connected. During the confirmatory interview, the researcher walked participants through the model, explaining each part and asking whether it reflected their experiences or if anything was missing or needed to change. This approach allowed young people to engage with the model in an accessible way and contribute to refining it for the final stage of the research.

At the beginning of the confirmatory interview, pilot participants were asked to complete the revised belonging intervention components ranking task to provide more depth to their views on how to increase belonging.

6.4.5 Participant Information

Ten participants consented to participate in the research; all participants took part in the exploration phase, and eight also participated in the confirmation phase.

Table 16 outlines the participants' gender and 'attendance' rate. There was an equal representation of male (five) and female (five) participants, and their 'attendance' rates ranged between 71.8% and 89.9%. Research suggested that researchers should aim to follow up with at least half of the participants involved in the initial phase, and ideally, all participants would agree to participate (McKim, 2023).

Following the exploratory phase, eight participants consented and participated in the confirmability phase.

Table 16

Details of Participants' Gender and 'Attendance'

Participant Number	Gender	'Attendance' Rate
1 *	Male	88.1%
2 *	Female	86.4%
3 *+	Male	83.8%
4 *	Male	89.3%
5 *	Male	85.5%
6	Female	89.8%
7	Female	88.1%
8+	Female	76.2%
9	Female	89.9%
10	Male	71.8%

Note. * = Participation in the pilot. + = Withdrawal from the confirmability phase

6.4.6 School Context Information

Two secondary schools participated in this study, both located within Local Authority X. Nine participants were drawn from one of the schools. Both schools are non-denominational and serve rural catchments, drawing students from their respective towns and villages, with similar school rolls, 685 and 687 respectively (Scottish Government, 2024b).

As noted in Chapter 1, the predominantly rural nature of Local Authority X can pose additional challenges to 'attendance', including long travel times and limited access to support services. Both schools are therefore representative of the wider rural secondary school context within which this research is situated, and while the themes identified may resonate beyond this setting, transferability to urban or more densely populated local authorities should be considered carefully.

6.4.7 Data Collection and Measures

Information for this research was collected through 'attendance' data from the school's data system, a questionnaire, and two semi-structured interviews. The 'attendance' data was used to verify that the participants met the inclusion criteria for the research. Additionally, 'attendance' and 'belonging' measures facilitated comparison. Semi-structured interviews aimed to gather in-depth insights from participants through a structured approach, allowing flexibility for probing questions to gain clarity of meaning. An iterative approach was adopted, and two semi-structured interviews were conducted.

6.4.7.1 'Attendance' Data. Participants 'attendance' data were gathered from SEEMIS. This is Scotland's Education Management Information System that schools use to record education-related data (Giménez-Miralles et al., 2022). Participants 'attendance' data is shared as a percentage throughout the year, with information indicating the type of absence recorded.

6.4.7.2 'Belonging' Measure. Consideration was given to scales previously used within 'belonging' research. This included, but was not limited to, 'The School Connectedness Scale' (McNeely et al., 2002), 'Basic Psychological Needs Satisfaction Scale' (Ryan & Deci, 2000), and 'The School Belonging Scale' (Anderman, 2002).

Goodenow (1993) 'Psychological Sense of School Membership Scale' (PSSM) was selected from several candidate measures (Appendix L). The PSSM is a self-reported questionnaire designed to capture adolescents' perceptions of 'belonging' within a school environment. It includes 18 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = not true at all and 5 = completely true). This scale was chosen for several reasons, including its accessibility and ease of administration, effectiveness, reliability, validity within this study population, and wide use (Too et al., 2022).

The scoping review carried out by Too et al. (2022) notes that the PSSM is a frequently cited measure, with 109 studies citing its reliability or validity. Eighty-five studies reported Cronbach's alpha of > 0.70 , suggesting good internal consistency. Two studies reported inconsistent reliability when using this measurement with adapted scale versions outside their countries of origin. This research uses the original PSSM, with a Cronbach's alpha between 0.77 and .875, and is, therefore, reliable (Goodenow, 1993).

When considering validity, the scale demonstrates evidence of content, convergent, discriminant, and measurement invariance validity, which collectively suggest it is a robust measure of 'belonging'. Too et al. (2022) further outline research demonstrating these strengths. However, when considering construct validity, there is inconsistency in the literature. This measure was initially developed on a unidimensional scale to measure belongingness (Goodenow, 1993). However, a substantial body of research has consistently found that the scale captures multiple underlying dimensions rather than a single construct (Appendix M). For example, more recent factor analysis studies have suggested a more complex three or four-factor structure (Ye & Wallace, 2014). Ye and Wallace (2014) examined data from 890 secondary school students aged between 13 and 19, using exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses. The exploratory factor analysis identified a four-factor model. The model demonstrated a good fit to the data. However, the negatively worded items were problematic as they cross-loaded onto other factors and had weak correlations. This finding has been replicated in further studies (Hussain et al.,

2018). The confirmatory factor analysis confirmed the four-factor structure, with weak or cross-loaded items being deleted, and a three-factor 15-item model was suggested. The factors found were general identification with school (e.g., I feel like a real part of (name of school)), connection to peers (e.g., other students in this school take my opinions seriously), and connection to teachers (e.g., Most teachers at (name of school) are interested in me). These findings, supported by other work (Appendix M), demonstrate that the PSSM consistently distinguishes between multiple, theoretically meaningful aspects of 'belonging', such as identification, peer relationships, and teacher connection. Although one study by Gaete et al. (2016) reported a unidimensional structure after removing negatively worded items, such findings appear to be context-specific. They are outweighed by the wider body of research consistently supporting a multidimensional model. Given that the multidimensional structure has been consistently demonstrated in Western and English-speaking contexts (Ye & Wallace, 2014; You et al., 2011), this is the most appropriate interpretation for the present UK-based study. This also aligns with this research's definition of 'belonging' as a complex construct (Chapter 3, section 3.3, p.29). Therefore, in the present study, the PSSM will be treated as a multidimensional scale, and analyses based on a single composite score will be avoided, as such an approach would imply unidimensionality that is not supported by the weight of evidence.

6.4.7.3 'Belonging' Intervention Components. Following pilot feedback (Chapter 6, section 6.4.3, p.130), which highlighted reduced depth in responses to open-ended questions about increasing belonging, a structure ranking task was added to the interview protocol. The components for a 'belonging' intervention were designed by the researcher and based on study 1 findings (Chapter 5, section 5.5.5, p.114) and informed by a review of relevant literature (Chapter 2, section 2.7, p.19 and chapter 3, section 3.7, p.37). Four domains, relationships factors, school factors, individual factors and home factors, guided the development of 33 strategies. Additional components such as recognising strengths and involving young people in co-design were drawn from literature emphasising agency and

strengths-based practice. The ranking task asked participants to sort these strategies by importance and explain their choice. The components are highlighted in Appendix M.

6.4.7.4 Semi-Structured Interview Design. Kallio et al. (2016) provide a framework for designing semi-structured interviews, including the appropriateness, retrieving and applying previous knowledge, formulating a preliminary interview protocol, conducting pilot testing, and presenting the complete interview protocol. This framework guided the development of both the exploratory and confirmatory interview stages within this study. The key steps, rationale, and outcomes for each stage are summarised in Table 17 and Table 18..

When designing the interview protocol for the exploratory phase, the available questions from the methods sections of the 19 identified qualitative studies from the scoping review were extracted and analysed for similarities in focus. Questions were then grouped into conceptual categories, from which six themes were identified: comparisons between educational settings, interpersonal relationships in school, post-school trajectories, attendance patterns, factors influencing attendance, and perception of school. This content-based synthesis process of existing research instruments was undertaken to ensure comprehensive coverage of topics relevant to the research questions. Examples of this analysis are available in Appendix O.

A small number of Likert-type rating questions were included in the interview schedule, not for quantitative analysis but as a conversational tool to help participants express their views. These short rating prompts (for example, asking participants to rate how connected they felt to school) helped YP articulate their experiences, when open-ended questioning alone might have been challenging. Not all participants were asked these questions, as they were utilised as a tool to clarify meaning and to generate richer discussion.

Table 17*Development and Testing of the Exploratory Interview Protocol*

Section	Focus	Rationale
Identifying the Appropriateness of Using a Semi-Structured Interview Approach	Selection of interview method	Candidate approaches (e.g., focus groups) were ruled out due to confidentiality and recruitment concerns. Semi-structured interviews were selected as they use open-ended questions to gather participants' personal experiences and opinions (Robson, 2024). This approach offers structure while allowing flexibility to explore emerging ideas and clarifications, increasing accuracy and depth of data collection. It also enables participants to share their views privately.
Formulation of the Exploratory Interview Protocol	Design and piloting of exploratory phase	Questions were based on the PSSM (Goodenow, 1993) to enhance data rigour (Robson, 2024). Questions such as "What does 'belonging' mean to you?" and "What does it feel like to be part of your school?" were reworded to remain open-ended and unbiased. Qualitative literature from the scoping review was cross-referenced, revealing six themes: comparisons between schools, relationships, post-school plans, attendance, factors influencing attendance, and perceptions of school. Questions about post-school plans were excluded to focus on current experiences of students in mainstream secondary schools.
Pilot Testing the Exploratory Interview Protocol	Field testing and refinement	Responses were consistent, indicating question clarity. Feedback focused on question sense, interview length, and clarity. Interviews lasted 36–60 minutes; four participants found the number of questions appropriate, one felt there were too many. Adjustments included reminding participants they could skip questions and reducing follow-up questions. Abstract questions were restructured into closed questions with prompts for clarity.

Note. Table summarises the design, piloting, and refinement of the exploratory interview protocol. Detailed materials are provided in Appendix O and Appendix Q.

Table 18*Development and Testing of the Confirmatory Interview Protocol*

Section	Focus	Rationale
Formulation of the Confirmatory Interview Protocol	Validation and intervention feedback	The confirmatory protocol was structured into two parts: validation of findings (member checking) and feedback on intervention viability (implementation outcomes). The design was informed by McKim's (2023) member-checking framework and Proctor et al.'s (2011; 2023) implementation outcomes. Participants reviewed summaries of results and proposed intervention guidelines, responding to questions on acceptability, appropriateness, and feasibility. Questions on fidelity, cost, and penetration were excluded as the intervention was still in design stages.
Pilot Testing the Confirmatory Interview Protocol	Field testing and refinement	Four participants field-tested the confirmatory interview protocol. Questions about sustainability were challenging due to their hypothetical nature. In line with Proctor et al. (2011), outcomes such as fidelity, cost, and sustainability are better assessed post-implementation, so the question was removed. Interviews lasted 25–35 minutes; three participants found the length and number of questions appropriate; one found too many. The protocol was refined by reducing prompt questions.

Note. Table summarises the development, validation, and refinement of the confirmatory interview protocol. Full interview materials are provided in Appendix Q, Appendix R and Appendix W.

6.4.8 Data Analysis

6.4.8.1 Exploratory Phase Quantitative Data. As indicated previously, the PSSM scale contains both positively and negatively worded items (Goodenow, 1993) (Appendix S). However, Ye and Wallace (2014) removed the negatively worded cross-loading items to achieve a simple structure. The means and standard deviations were reported to describe the three established and resulting subscales: identification and participation in school, perception of fitting in among peers, and

generalised connection to teachers reported by participants. To interpret participant scores, high and low values were defined as one standard deviation above or below the mean (Cohen, 2013).

When considering a 'belonging' intervention, participants were asked to rate the key components in order of importance using a 5-point Likert scale (1= Not important, 5 = very important). Likert scales are ordinal. However, they can be analysed as interval data if the distribution is reasonably symmetrical (Byrne, 2010). Accordingly, the mean and standard deviation were calculated to summarise central tendency and variability. However, inspection of the data revealed an outlier, which was dealt with by using the median as a measure of central tendency. This non-parametric measure was chosen as it offers a robust central tendency estimate under conditions of skew (Sullivan & Artino Jr, 2013). This approach ensured that non-normal distribution characteristics did not unduly influence conclusions drawn about the perceived importance of intervention components.

For analysis, the pilot participant data were included, as there was strong alignment in both rank order and mean scores across items. The highest-ranked strategies were identical across groups, emphasising student agency, personalised support, and opportunities for participation, while the lowest-rated strategies also matched, reflecting lower perceived importance of parental or structural incentives. This consistency indicates that pilot and non-pilot participants interpreted the ranking task in a comparable way and supports the inclusion of pilot data in the final analysis.

6.4.8.2 Exploratory Phase Qualitative Data. Several approaches to thematic analysis, such as thematic analysis, template analysis, matrix analysis, and interpretative phenomenological analysis, were considered alongside their benefits and limitations (Appendix T).

Approaches were adopted to ensure the research's trustworthiness (Chapter 5, section 5.3.5.1, p.74). The research design supports credibility by engaging with participants over time and triangulating through multiple sources of information.

The researcher supported credibility and reflexivity by keeping a diary and engaging in self-reflection. Two reviewers completed the coding for a sample of interviews, supporting cross-validation and confirmability. The researcher made available the raw data and examples of the coding process to support dependability and transferability. An inductive and abductive approach was used for data analysis, depending on the research questions.

An inductive approach was used for questions that sought to explore participants' perspectives on 'attendance' and 'belonging' without a pre-defined framework. This approach is exploratory, building theoretical understanding (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This analysis was chosen as these questions seek to explore the participants' views on 'attendance' and 'belonging'. For these questions, reflexive thematic analysis was adopted (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun et al., 2019). This approach systematically examines themes within data transparently and credibly (Nowell et al., 2017). This analysis followed six steps: familiarisation with the data, generating the initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and writing up. Two researchers independently engaged with the data and generated initial codes. The lead researcher analysed all data sets, with the second researcher analysing a random selection of over 10% of interviews, which were coded by an independent reviewer (total = 40%)(Boyle et al., 2016). Therefore, familiarisation with the data, generating the initial codes, and searching for themes were completed independently before the researcher met to discuss their interpretations. This coding process was not intended to establish inter-coder reliability; rather, it sought to support reflexive dialogue. This discussion functioned as a space for critical reflection, enhancing the trustworthiness of the data. The theme development remained iterative and meaning-focused in line with the principles of reflexive thematic analysis. An example of an inductively coded theme is presented in Appendix X.

An abductive approach was used to ascertain the extent of alignment between the themes identified as antecedents within the conceptual model from

Study 1 (Chapter 5, section 5.4.5, p.94) and the participants' views, alongside identifying any missing or unanticipated insights. An abductive approach combines data- and hypothesis-driven reasoning to explore explanations (Thompson, 2022). A template analysis followed by a thematic analysis was adopted for these questions. A template analysis is a flexible approach to data analysis that allows for starting with some a priori themes (Brooks et al., 2015). This method was chosen to utilise the preliminary antecedents of the conceptual model as pre-defined themes, allowing for continued refinement through data analysis. Further themes are then generated to encompass any data not captured within the template analysis. This analysis followed six steps (King et al., 2018): familiarisation with themes, preliminary coding, developing the initial template, applying the data to the full data set, refining the template, and interpreting and reporting the results. The pre-existing themes from the conceptual framework were used as preliminary codes for the initial template (Appendix Y). Following this, a random sample of the data was analysed using these codes (three interviews, 30%). Any data not captured within this analysis process was inductively coded, and the template was revised (Appendix Y). Two reviewers were involved in the data analysis at this stage. Following the independent creation of the template, the reviewers met to compare their themes, agreement, and discrepancies. After this, one reviewer analysed the full data set, refining the template as new themes emerged. Appendix Z presents examples of one theme, sub-themes, and coded data related to all participants. Appendix Z illustrates a sample of a participant's transcript, and Appendix AA illustrates a sample of the deductive coding trail.

6.4.8.3 Confirmatory Phase Qualitative Data. Data analysis sought to evaluate the accuracy of the summary of findings and the amended conceptual model. It also sought to gather participants' views on the feasibility and appropriateness of the candidate intervention. This phase adopted a mixed methods approach, utilising frequency-based and thematic analyses. The matrix captured patterns of agreement, while the thematic analysis provided depth and context, allowing findings to be both confirmed and extended.

A matrix summary table was used to organise and present participant feedback during the confirmability phase. This approach allows for the systematic exploration of individual responses across key domains: perceived accuracy of data and suggestions for additions or removals. Using a matrix supports transparency and enables composition, supporting identification and divergence (Miles et al., 2020). The frequency of agreement or disagreement provides a descriptive indicator of confirmability. The summary outlines the extent to which participants agreed with the findings, providing an accessible overview of participant validation. In addition, thematic analysis provided insight into the perceived feasibility and appropriateness of the proposed candidate intervention, capturing participant nuance beyond frequency counts. The matrix specifically supported an evaluation of confirmability by identifying levels of agreement with the findings and any areas of perceived omission or misrepresentation.

Braun and Clarke (2006); Braun et al. (2019) analysis explored participants' views in greater depth. This allowed for identifying themes related to the accuracy of findings and whether anything was missing or incongruent with participant views. The thematic analysis complemented the matrix by exploring feasibility and acceptability. It provided a nuanced understanding of the participants' feedback, complementing the frequency data and enhancing the trustworthiness of the findings. Examples of codes and themes are provided in Appendix DD.

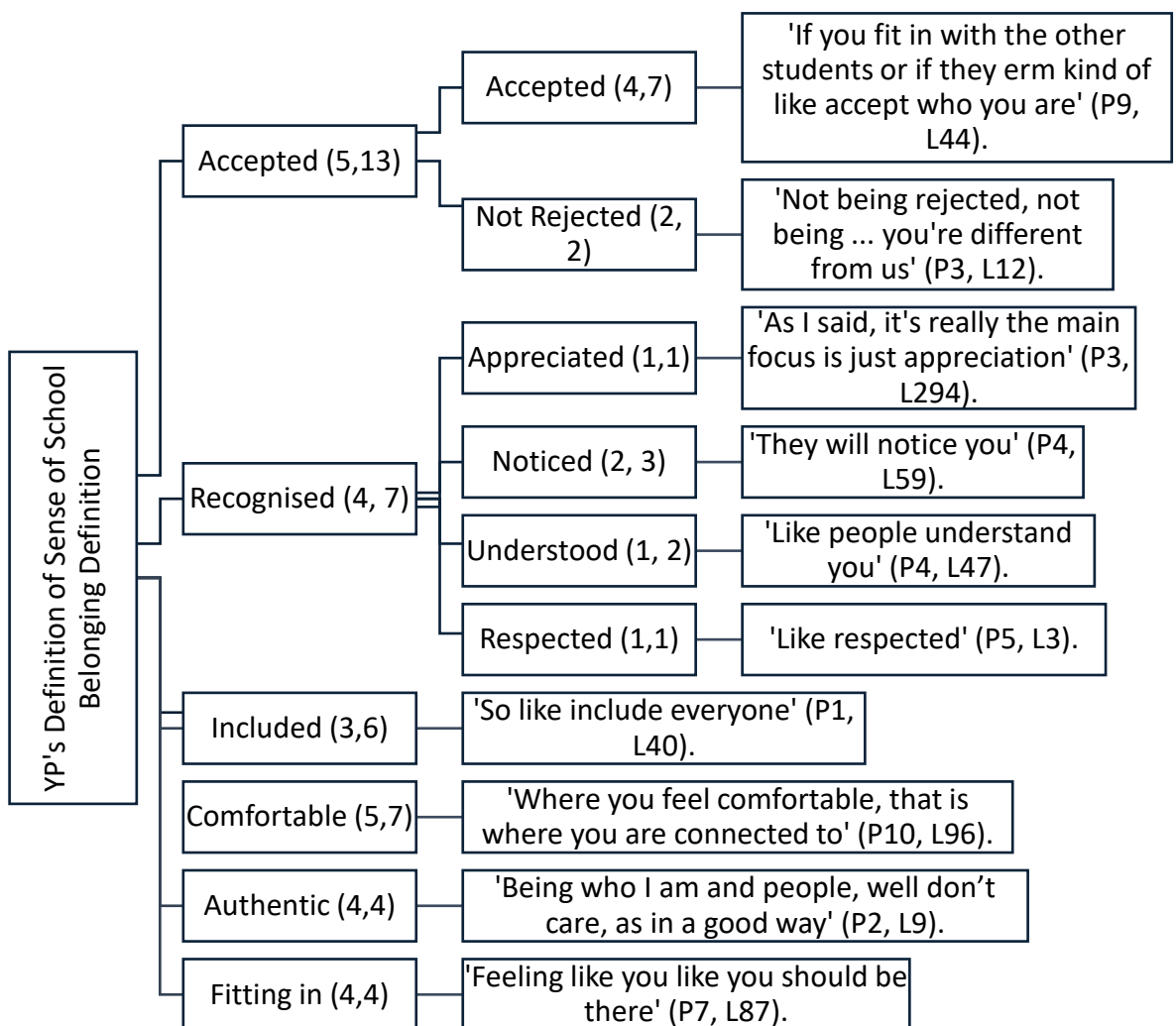
6.5 Results

6.5.1 Research Question 1: What Do YP Think About 'Attendance'/'Belonging' at School?

6.5.1.1 How Do YP Define 'Belonging'? Figure 21 illustrates participants' definition of 'belonging'. They defined 'belonging' through six themes: feeling accepted, recognised, fitting in, comfortable, authentic, and included.

Figure 21

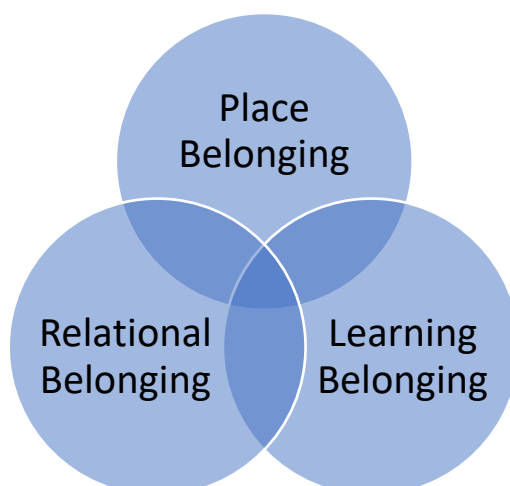
YP's Definition of School Belonging: Themes, Sub-themes and Quotes



Note. P = Participant; L = Line number in transcript. Bracketed numbers indicate participants and incidences.

Figure 22 illustrates ‘belonging’ as connected to various contexts, including place belonging, relational belonging, and learner belonging. Five participants illustrated how ‘belonging’ to a physical space was important for a broader sense of ‘belonging’. Seven participants described relational belonging as important for their ‘belonging’. One participant described this broadly as “connected to people, other people in school and teachers” (P10, L101). In contrast, other participants described this as “having lots of friends” (P7, L86), or as having some friends but not being friends with everyone (P4, L48). Five participants illustrated the importance of belonging as a learner in the classroom.

Figure 22
Dimensions of ‘Belonging’



6.5.1.2 How Do YP View Their Sense of ‘Belonging’? Table 19 presents the descriptive statistics of a multi-dimensional measure of connection to teachers, identification and participation in school, and perceptions of fit with peers (Ye & Wallace, 2014), from the PSSM (Goodenow, 1993). Connection to teachers indicated a mean of 3.63 (SD =0.81), with a range of 2.25 to 4.75. This suggests participants reported average levels of connection, though there was variability in their experiences. This is similar to identification and participation, with a mean of 3.20 (SD=0.84) and a range of 2.00-4.75. Perception of Fit with Peers demonstrated the

lowest mean ($M=3.05$, $SD=0.86$), and the widest range from 1.5 to 4.5, suggesting notable differences in how participants perceived their fit within their peer group. On average, participants reported an average sense of ‘belonging’ ($M=3.18$, $SD=0.71$), with scores ranging from 2.08 to 4.97.

Table 19
Descriptive statistics for Participants ‘Belonging’

Participant	Connection to Teacher	Identification and Participation	Perception of Fit
1	4.75	4.75	4.50
2	4.00	4.25	3.75
3	4.50	3.00	3.00
4	2.25	3.50	3.00
5	2.75	3.75	3.75
6	4.75	3.25	2.50
7	3.50	2.00	2.00
8	3.00	2.75	3.75
9	3.25	3.75	2.75
10	3.50	2.00	1.50
Mean	3.52	3.20	3.05
Standard Deviation	0.81	0.85	0.86
Range	2.50	2.75	3.00

A sensitivity analysis was also conducted to examine the assumptions underlying a multidimensional (Gaete et al., 2016) or a unidimensional analysis of ‘belonging’ (Ye & Wallace, 2014) (Appendix CC). This analysis does not test the factor structure of the scale, which would require a larger sample and confirmatory factor analysis. Rather, it illustrates the implications of assuming a unidimensional model by comparing overall scores with domain scores and participants’ reported ‘belonging’.

6.5.1.3 How Do YP View Their ‘Attendance’? Table 20 outlines participants’ attendance rate and their perceptions of their attendance. As demonstrated, participants expressed varying views on their ‘attendance.’ Seven out of ten participants reported good ‘attendance’ despite meeting the criteria for chronic absenteeism, with ‘attendance’ rates ranging from 76.10% to 89.80%. This suggests there may be a disconnect between perceived absenteeism and recorded

absenteeism. For example, one participant estimated their 'attendance' alongside describing it as mostly good:

"I think my mum said I was off at least once every like two weeks, but I don't think it is that bad, but she is like oh it's really bad, and I don't think it is that bad, and I am like pretty much late every day, that is pretty bad, but like yeah. I would say mostly good attendance, I think I have got like 75% maybe 80% attendance" (P7, L34-36).

This finding is significant as it evidences that most participants do not view their 'attendance' as problematic, even when it falls below expected thresholds. Only one participant described their 'attendance' as poor, whilst another described it as fluctuating depending on external factors, such as peer relationships and subjects.

Table 20*Comparison Between Actual and Perceived 'Attendance'*

Participant	'Attendance' Rate (Percentage)	Perceptions on 'Attendance'
1	88.10	Good Attendance
2	86.40	Good Attendance
3	83.80	Good Attendance
4	89.30	-
5	85.50	Good Attendance
6	89.80	Good attendance
7	88.00	Good Attendance
8	76.20	Poor attendance
9	89.90	Good attendance
10	71.80	Fluctuating

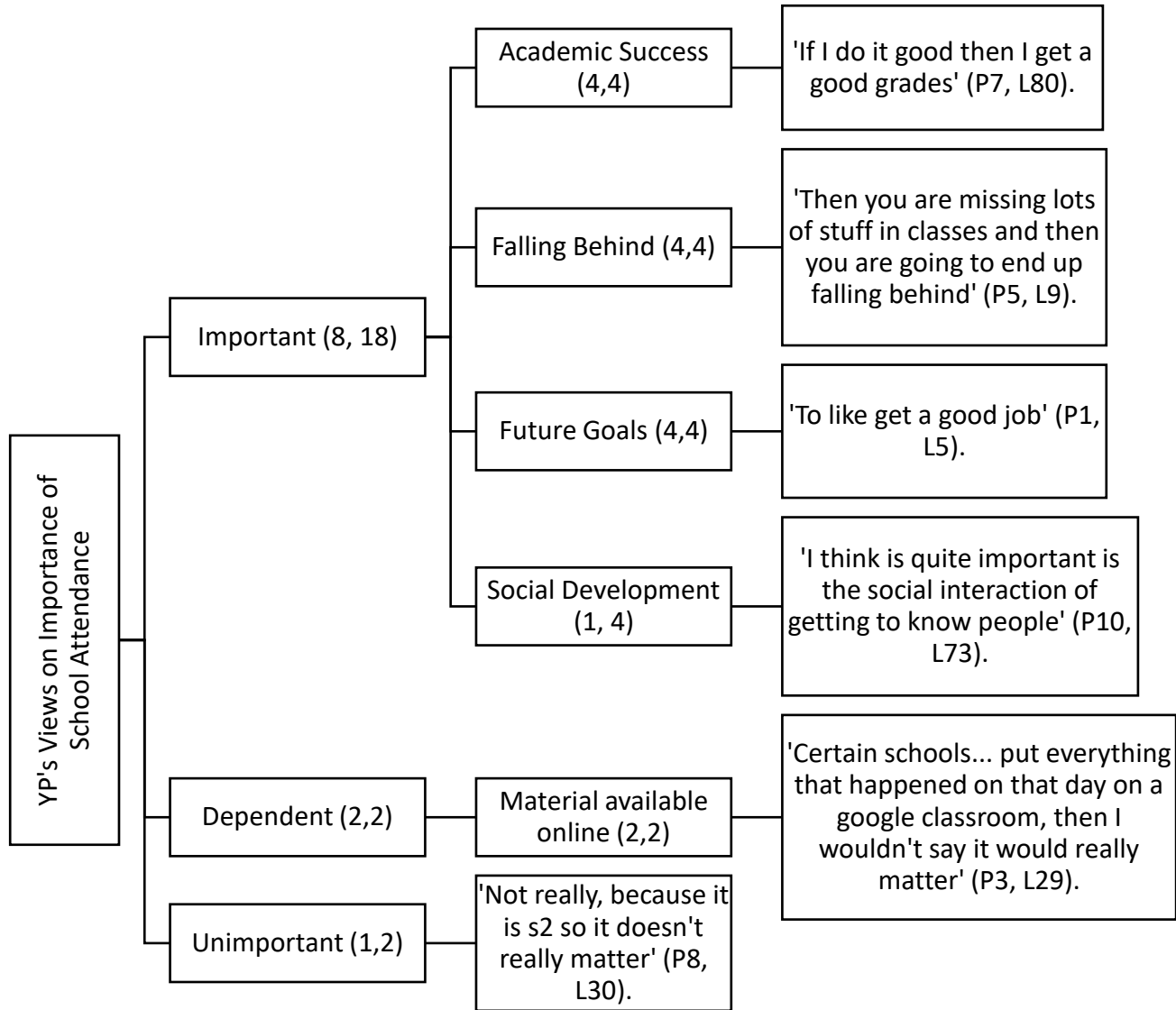
6.5.2 Research Question 2: In What Ways Do YP Perceive the Impact, If Any, of 'Attendance' and Their 'Belonging' at School?

6.5.2.1 Do YP Think 'Attendance' is Important?

Figure **23** outlines YP's views on the importance of 'attendance'. Eight participants indicated that 'attendance' was important. Participants shared that 'attendance' was important for academic success, future goals, preventing falling behind in learning, and social development. Two participants indicated that its importance might be somewhat dependent on whether school materials were available online. One participant indicated that 'attendance' was unimportant, as they were only in year 2 of secondary school.

Figure 23

YP's Views on the Importance of 'Attendance': Themes, Sub-themes, and Quotes



Note. P = Participant; L = Line number in transcript. Bracketed numbers indicate participants and incidences.

6.5.2.2 Do YP Think 'Belonging' Is Important? Six participants indicated that 'belonging' was important. Three participants stated that it depended on certain

factors, and one indicated they did not know. 'Belonging' was important for social connections and emotional comfort. For example, one participant noted, "It feels a lot better to be around people than being by yourself" (P4, L25). Other participants suggested that the importance of 'belonging' was dependent on the individual. For example, one participant noted,

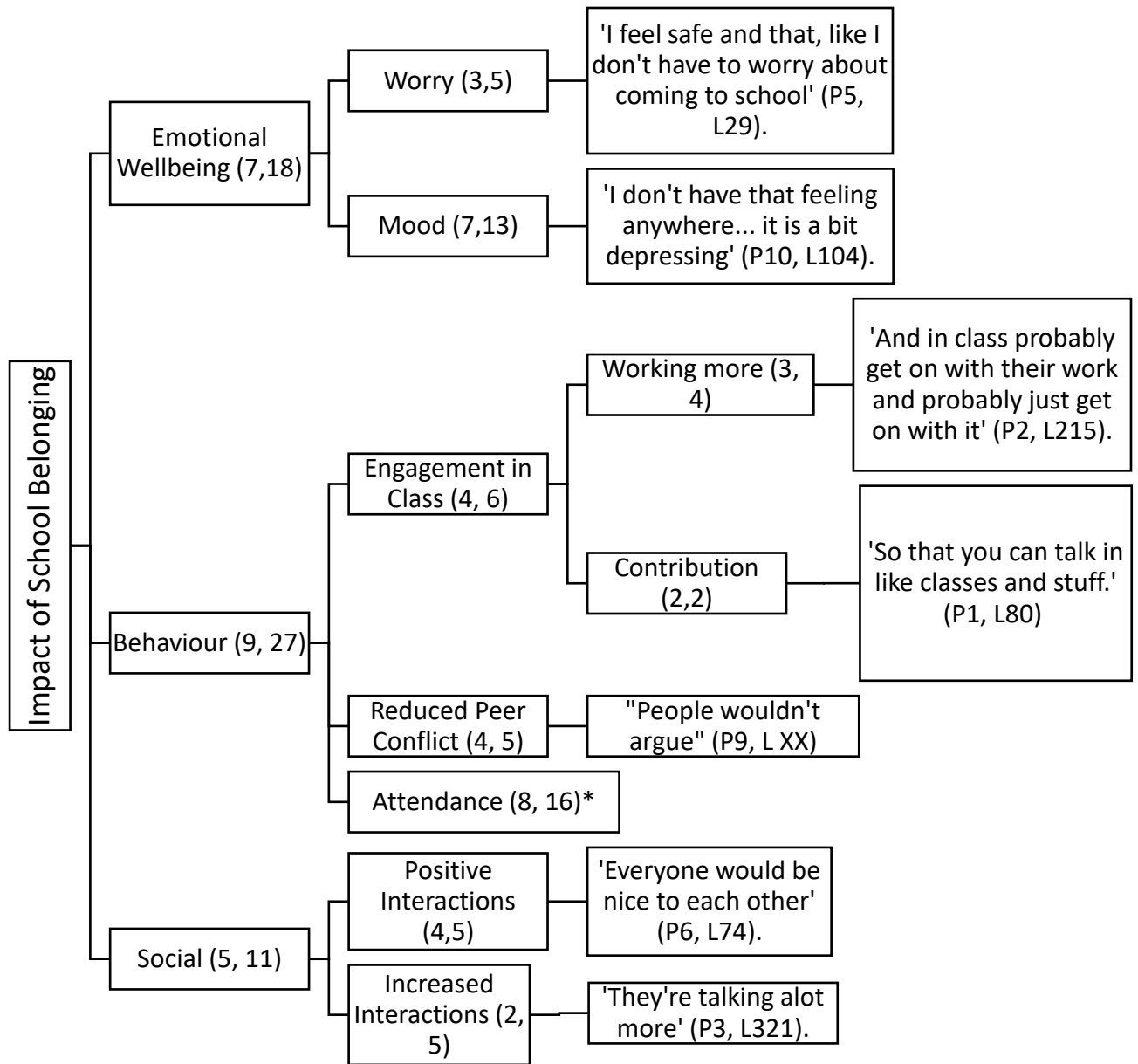
"It depends on the person you are in my opinion, because I never it never got it. Never really got to me, needing to belong in certain places, is it's more if I found like if I was accepted by like three people that would be fine to me, even just one person would be fine to me" (P3, L67-69).

Another participant indicated that whilst 'belonging' mattered most of the time, there were certain situations where it mattered less, for example, when something in school must be done, like taking a test.

6.5.2.3 What Are YP's Views on the Impact of 'Belonging'? Figure 24 outlines participant views on the impact of 'belonging', with three themes emerging: emotional well-being, behaviour, and social impacts. Within emotional well-being, participants linked increased 'belonging' to lower worry and higher happiness, and vice versa. For behavioural changes that were most frequently discussed, 'belonging' was associated with increased 'attendance' and contribution/class output, alongside lower peer conflict. 'Attendance' was a large sub-theme, which is discussed next. Participants also noted social impacts, such as peers being nicer and more talkative when they felt 'belonging.' Notably, not all participants view 'belonging' as equally important. Whilst most articulated its centrality to their engagement with learning and wellbeing, others were more uncertain or ambivalent. For instance, one participant stated, "I don't really think like that" (P8, L97).

Figure 24

YP's Views on Impact of 'Belonging': Themes, Sub-themes and Quotes



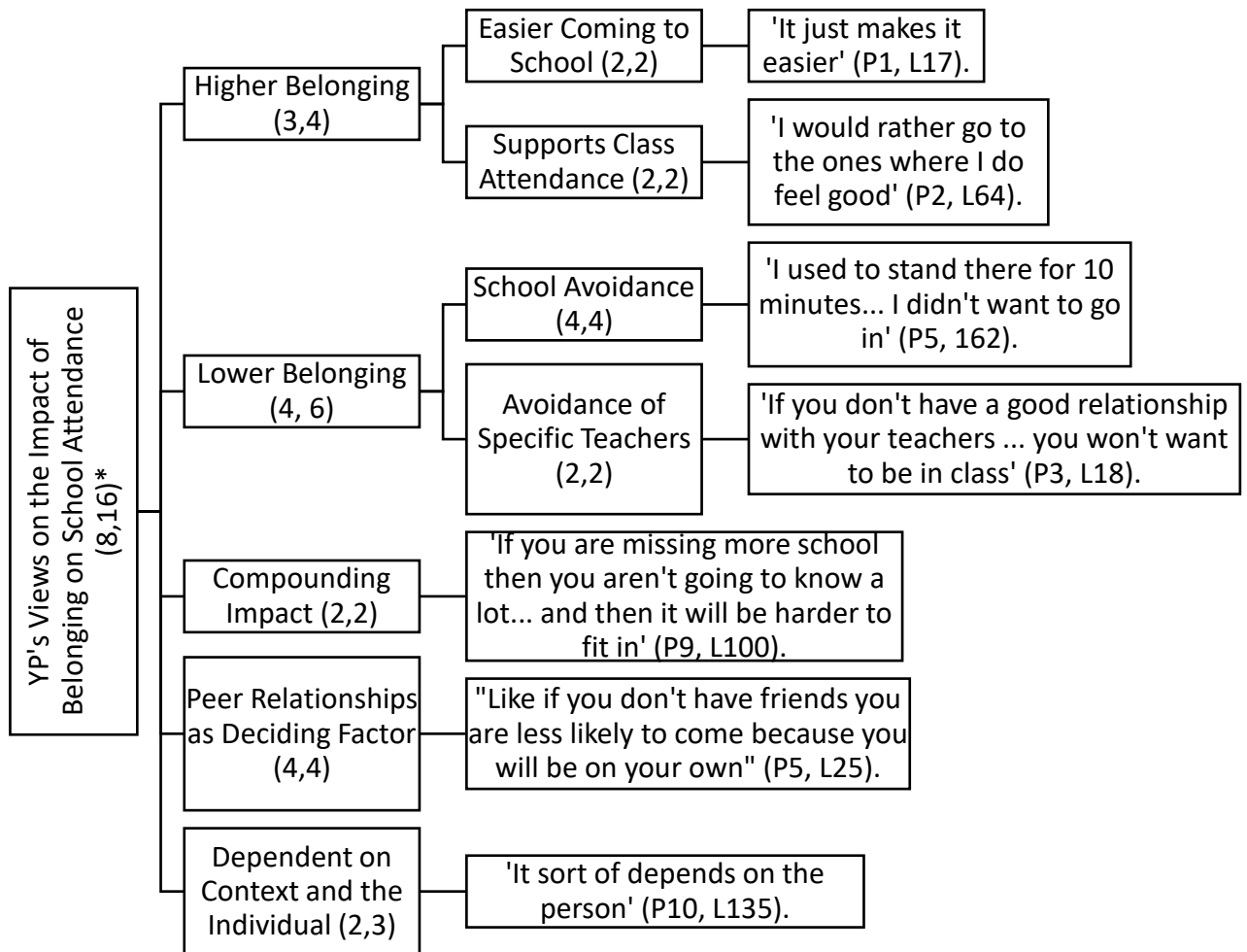
Note. P = Participant; L = Line number in transcript. Bracketed numbers indicate participants and incidences. The asterisk (*) denotes the relationship between 'belonging' and 'attendance', which is discussed next.

6.5.2.4 Do YP Perceive a Relationship Between Their 'Belonging' and 'Attendance'? Eight participants indicated a relationship between 'belonging' and 'attendance.' One participant did not indicate a relationship, stating that nothing can help their 'attendance,' suggesting no perceived connection between 'belonging' and 'attendance.' One participant was part of the pilot protocol, where this question was not directly asked.

Figure 25 outlines participants' views on the impact of 'belonging' on 'attendance'. For those participants who did perceive a relationship, higher 'belonging' was associated with easier 'attendance' and class attendance. In comparison, lower 'belonging' was linked to school avoidance and avoidance of specific classes. Participants shared that peer relationships emerged as a central factor to 'attendance,' with their presence or absence significant to their 'attendance' at school. Additionally, two participants also highlighted the compounding impact of absenteeism, describing how failing academically makes it harder to re-engage and fit in. Finally, two participants indicated that the relationship between 'belonging' and 'attendance' varied depending on the individual and context.

Figure 25

The Relationship Between 'Belonging' and 'Attendance': Themes, Sub-themes, and Quotes



Note. P = Participant; L = Line number in transcript. Bracketed numbers indicate participants and incidences.

6.5.3 Research Question 3: To What Extent Can Themes Derived From the Antecedents of the Conceptual Model Account for the YP's Views?

6.5.3.1 What is the Alignment Between the Antecedents of the Conceptual Model and YP's views? Table 21 illustrates the alignment between the preliminary conceptual model's antecedents and the codes' directionality. In this analysis, alignment refers to the extent to which young people's views correspond with the antecedents identified in the preliminary conceptual model. Higher percentages indicate stronger agreement between the proposed factors and participants' perspectives. Relationship factors demonstrated strong alignment, with peer influence, peer relationships, and teacher relationships showing 90-100% alignment. Other school context factors, including wider support, culture, and climate, showed moderate alignment (70%). Themes such as advocacy and relationship with the school community indicated no alignment (0%). Individual factors such as motivation and perceptions as a learner evidenced moderate alignment (70%-80%). For home factors, family influence demonstrated a moderate alignment (60%), whereas family/home life has a lower alignment (20%).

6.5.3.2 What is the Divergence Between the Antecedents of the Conceptual Model and YP's Views? Table 22 illustrates the emerging themes of 'belonging' beyond the preliminary conceptual model. In this analysis, divergence refers to themes expressed by young people that do not align with, match, or appear within the antecedents of the preliminary conceptual model, indicating additional or alternative factors beyond those initially identified. These factors align with the overarching themes of relationships, school context, individual, and home factors. Participants illustrated a consistent alignment of teacher interaction (100%). School context factors, such as opportunities to engage with peers and school spaces, demonstrated moderate to high agreement (70-80%). For individual factors, participants illustrated moderate alignment for learning enjoyment (70%) and lower alignment for self-efficacy (50%).

6.5.3.3 Updated Conceptual Model. Figure 26 illustrates the updated conceptual model. It illustrates the antecedent, mediating variables, and outcomes.

Recursion is demonstrated through bolded connections. The divergence between the preliminary conceptual model and participant views led to important refinement and additions. For example, teacher interactions emerged as a distinct theme from teacher relationships, with participants indicating a difference between macro-level perceptions of relationships and day-to-day micro-interactions. Similarly, opportunities to engage less formally with peers captured the importance of school systems creating opportunities outside the classroom for 'belonging'. Other refinements to the model were made related to themes initially associated with 'attendance' but found also to impact 'belonging'. These were school spaces, learning enjoyment, and learning relevance. Participants identified access to physical spaces where they can be themselves as important for 'belonging'. Participants also indicated that the enjoyment and relevance of the curriculum contributed to their 'belonging'. These findings led to the addition of five sub-themes to the conceptual model, grouped into the following thematic categories:

- Relational factors: teacher interactions and opportunities to engage less formally with peers.
- Environmental factors: school spaces.
- Learning-related factors: learning enjoyment and learning relevance.

Two themes, advocacy and community links, were removed from the conceptual model due to decay. That is, these concepts lacked empirical support from participants' narratives. These themes were not raised by participants, suggesting that they were not a salient factor in their lived experiences of 'belonging'. Their removal reflects the iterative nature of the model's development. It suggests that in this context, 'belonging' may be more strongly shaped by experiences within the school itself, rather than by external advocacy or broader community engagement.

Table 21

The Alignment Between the Preliminary Conceptual Model and Participant Views on 'Belonging' Illustrated by Number of Mentions and Valence

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Alignment (Percentage)	Mentions
Relationships												
Peer Relationships	2 (+)	10 (+)	6 (+) 1 (^)	5(+) 1(^) 1(-)	3 (+) 1 (^) 1(-)	13 (+) 12 (-)	4(+) 6(-)	4 (+)	5 (+)	5 (+) 1(^) 1(-)	100%	57 (+) 21(-) 4 (^)
Peer Interactions	4 (+)	3 (+) 2 (-)	3 (+) 2(-)	2(+) 1 (-)	1(+) 2(-)	1 (+) 5 (-)	1 (+) 2(-)	1 (+)	1(+) 2 (-)	2 (+) 3(-)	100%	17 (+) 21 (-)
Peer Influence	1 (+)	2 (+) 2 (-)	2 (+) 4 (-)	2 (-)	4(-)	5 (-)	1(+) 2(-)	1 (-)	3 (+) 1(-)	1 (+) 2(-)	100%	10 (+) 23 (-)
Teacher Relationships	2 (+)	4 (+) 2 (-)	8 (+) 2 (-)		2 (+) 3 (-)	4 (+)	1(+) 1(-)	4(-)	3 (+) 2(-)	5(+) 4(-)	90%	29 (+) 18 (-)
Teacher Attitudes and Beliefs		1 (+) 2(-)	3 (+)	1 (+) 1(-)	2 (-)	1 (+)	1(-)			1(+)	70%	7 (+) 6(-)
Advocacy											0%	
Building Connection with the Community											0%	
School Context Factors												
Wider Support	2 (+)	3 (+)	1 (+)		1 (+) 1(-)	1 (+) 5 (-)	4 (-)			4 (+)	70%	12 (+) 10(-)
Culture and Climate	1 (+)	4 (+)	2 (+) 1 (-)		2 (+) 1(-)	3 (+) 1 (-)	1(+)			1 (+) 2(-)	70%	14 (+) 5 (-)
Flexibility and Support from School Personnel		3 (+)	5 (+) 1(-)	2 (+) 1(-)	2 (+)	5 (+) 1 (-)	1(+)				60%	18(+) 3(-)

Opportunities to Engage with Teachers Less Formally	1 (+)	1 (+)	1(+)		2 (+)		2 (+)		60%	7 (+)
Policies and Procedures		6 (-)		6(-)	1 (+) 5 (-)	4 (-)		6(-)	50%	1(+) 27 (-)
Smaller Learning Environments	3(+)	2 (+)				1(+)			30%	6(+)
Access to a Different Provision				1(+)	2 (+)				20%	3(+)
Individual Factors										
Perception as Learner	1 (+) 3 (-)	1(+)	2 (+)		1 (+) 2(-)	1 (-)	2(-)	5 (+) 2(-)	1(+)	80% 11(+) 10(-)
Motivation	3(+) 1(-)	1 (+) 1 (-)		2(+) 1(-)	2 (+)		2 (-)	1 (+)	1(+)	70% 10 (+) 5(-)
Engagement with School Offer	1 (+)	1(-)	1 (+)	1(-)		1 (-)	2 (-)	1(+)		70% 3(+) 5(-)
Attitude Towards School	1 (+) 1(-)	3 (+)		1(-)	1(-)	2 (-)	1(+) 3(-)		1 (+)	70% 6(+) 8(-)
Experiences of Marginalisation			2(-)	2 (-)	6 (-)		1 (-)			40% 11(-)
Past Adversity and Coping Strategies		2 (-)		1 (-)	5 (-)				2(-)	40% 11(-)
Home factors										
Family Influence	1(+)		1 (-)		1 (+)	3(+) 5(-) 1(^)	2(+) 4(-)		1(^)	60% 7 (+) 10 (-) 2 (^)
Family Culture					1 (-)	3(-)				20% 4(-)

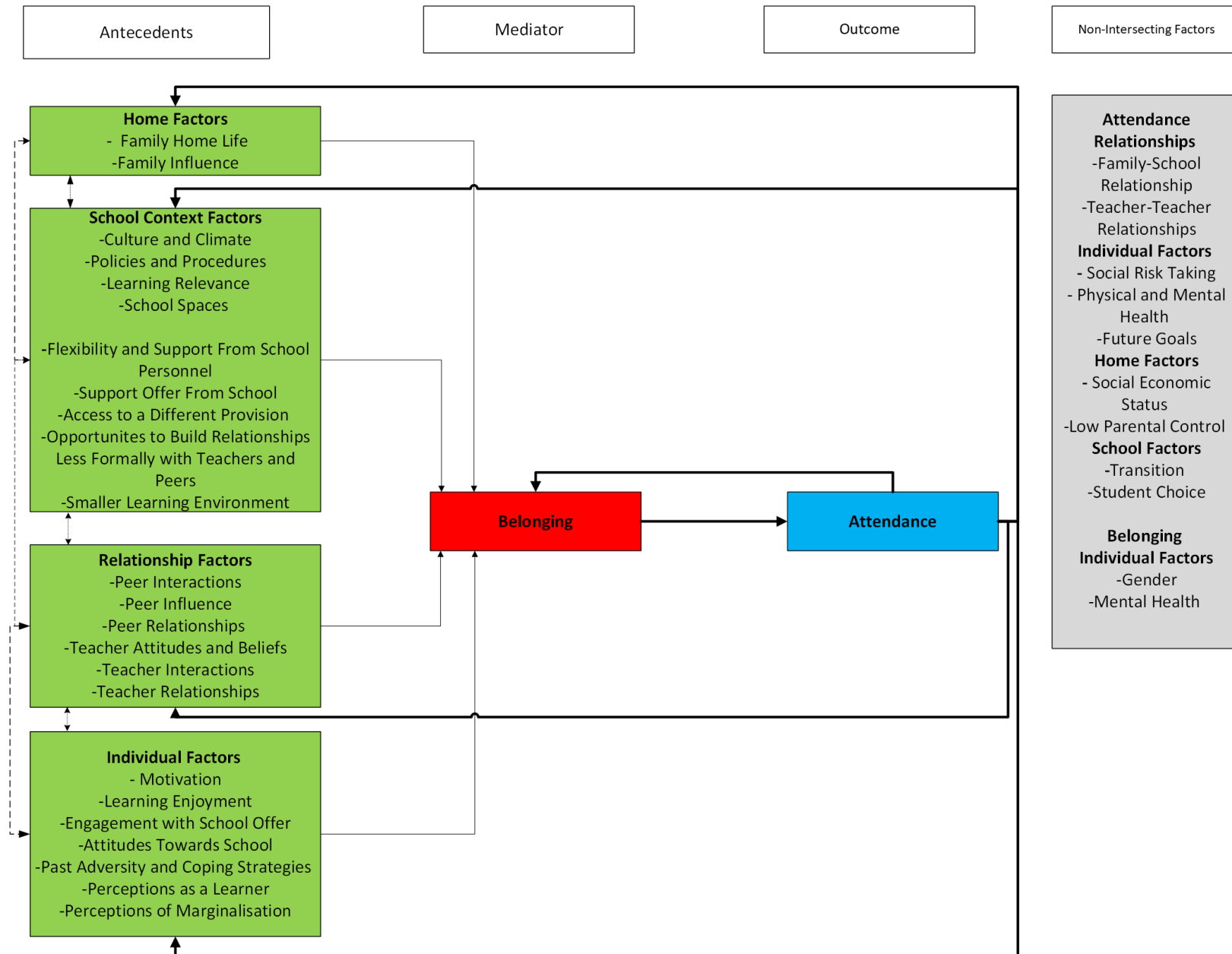
Table 22

Emerging Themes on 'Belonging' Beyond the Conceptual Model Illustrated by Number of Mentions and Valence

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Total	Mentions
Relationships												
Teacher interactions	3 (+)	3 (+) 3 (^)	3 (+) 3 (-)	2 (^)	1 (+) 5 (-)	1 (+) 1 (^)	1(+) 1(-)	3 (-)	1 (+)	4 (+) 2(-)	100%	17(+) 14 (-) 6 (^)
School Context Factors												
Opportunities to Engage with Peers	3 (+)	1 (+)	1 (+)	4 (+)		1 (+) 2 (-)	3 (+)	1(+)	2 (+)		80%	16(+) 2(-)
School Spaces	2 (+)	3 (+)	1 (+)			2 (+)	1 (+)		1 (+)	3(+) 2(-)	70%	13 (+) 2(-)
Learning Relevance	2(+)	1(-)		1(-)	1(-)	8 (-)					50%	2(+) 11(-)
Individual Factors												
Learning Enjoyment	2(+)	1 (+)	2(+)		1 (+)		1 (+) 1(-)		4 (+)	3 (+)	70%	14(+) 1(-)

Figure 26

Updated Conceptual Model of 'Belonging': Antecedents, Recursive Pathways, and Removal of Non-Salient Concepts



6.5.3.4 What Are YP's Views on the Factors that Increase or Decrease

'Belonging'? Table 21 illustrates the alignment and valence between the antecedents of the conceptual model and 'belonging'. In this analysis, valence reflects the emotional or evaluative tone of participants' comments. Positive comments are indicated by (+), negative comments by (-), and neutral comments by (^). These symbols illustrate whether participants viewed a factor as supportive, challenging, or neither. The valence of participants' views on 'belonging' reveals positive and negative mentions across different themes. This demonstrates how antecedents can foster and reduce 'belonging.' Teacher and peer relationships exhibited positive valence, with more mentions of positive experiences. Other factors, such as peer influence, policies, and procedures, illustrated negative valence dominance. Participants described positive and negative mentions for all of the themes, with the exceptions of smaller learning environment (positive valence), opportunities to engage with teachers less formally (positive valence), access to a different provision (positive valence), attitudes towards school (positive valence), past adversity and coping strategies (negative valence) and experiences of marginalisation (negative valence). This demonstrates that some antecedents are consistent facilitators of 'belonging.' Overall, participants indicated positive mentions for many themes within the conceptual model, particularly in areas like peer relationships and motivation. However, negative mentions remained significant in certain areas, such as policies and procedures.

Table 22 outlines the valence of emerging factors that impact 'belonging'. The valence of the themes was predominantly positive; however, each theme was mentioned negatively. Notably, positive valence dominance was found in opportunities to engage with peers, access to school spaces, and learning enjoyment. In contrast, learning relevance was the only theme demonstrating negative valence dominance.

6.5.4 Research Question 4: Co-Creating a Candidate Intervention to Increase 'Belonging'.

6.5.4.1 Do YP Think 'Belonging' Can be Changed? Participants had varying views on whether 'belonging' was static or dynamic. Two participants indicated 'belonging' was changeable, while four indicated it was partially changeable. Three participants indicated that 'belonging' was not changeable, and one participant did not know.

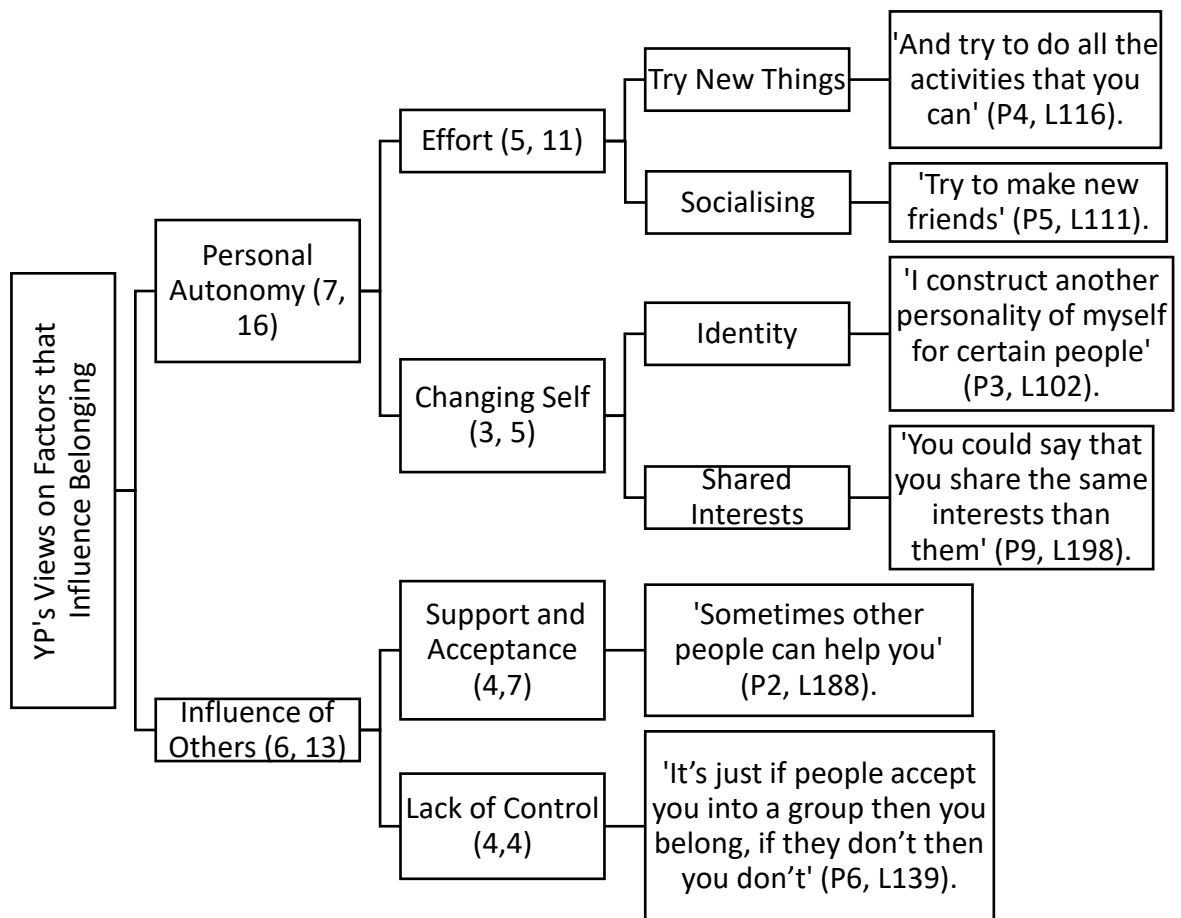
Figure 27 outlines four key themes that influenced a participant's 'belonging': personal agency, effort, changing self, and influence of others. Personal agency acknowledges that 'belonging' is partly within the individual's control through effort and self-change. Participants described making an effort to try new things and engage with others to increase 'belonging'. Participants described changing themselves through modifying their personalities and behaviours to align with group norms or shared interests. One participant described the mixed success of this strategy and a tension between authenticity and adaptability.

"I tend to construct another personality of myself for certain people. So, like, for maybe one group, I might have this personality. Next group, (...) I'll have another one, and it's it's an odd thing, (...). It's not helpful. Sometimes it is, sometimes it's not" (P3, L102).

Participants indicated the external influence of others as another key theme. They illustrated the positive influence of others on their 'belonging' through support and encouragement, as well as the negative influence of rejection. Participants illustrated a lack of control over their 'belonging' due to external influences.

Figure 27

YP's Views on Factors that Influence 'Belonging': Themes, Sub-themes and Quotes

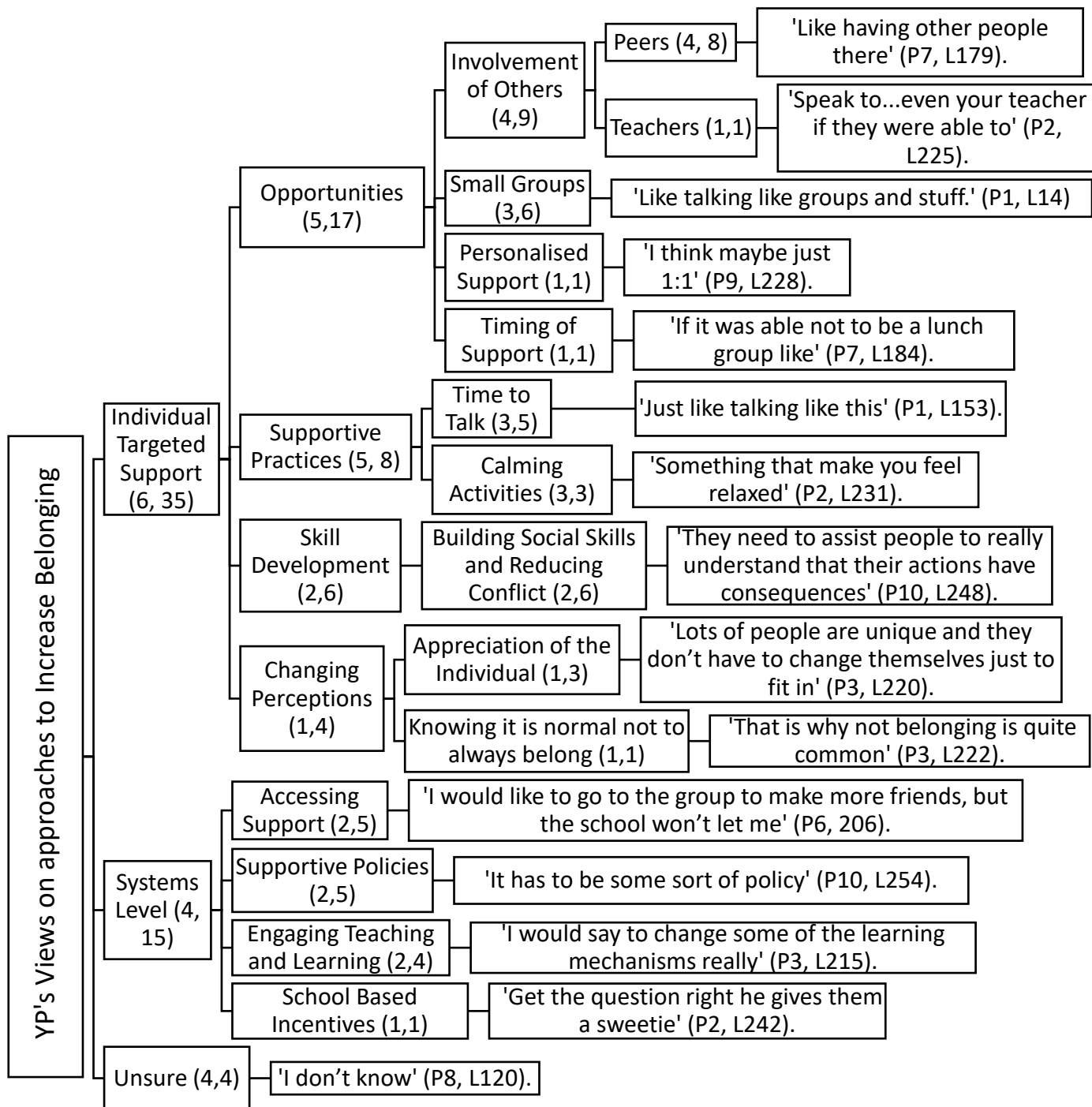


Note. P = Participant; L = Line number in transcript. Bracketed numbers indicate participants and incidences.

6.5.4.2 What Strategies and Approaches Do YP Think Support ‘Belonging’? Three participants indicated uncertainty about how to increase ‘belonging’. One participant indicated uncertainty and suggested a few ideas. Six participants illustrated different ways to improve ‘belonging’. These included individualised and targeted support, such as increased opportunities, skills development, changing perceptions, and supportive practices for self-regulation. Participants also described the importance of systems-level approaches such as supportive policies, knowing how to access supports, and engaging in learning and teaching approaches.

Figure 28

YP's Views on Strategies to Increase 'Belonging': Themes, Sub-themes and Quotes.



Note. P = Participant; L = Line number in transcript. Bracketed numbers indicate participants and incidences.

6.5.4.3 What Are the Key Components of an Intervention to Increase

‘Belonging’? Table 23 illustrates participants' views on the importance of key components to support ‘belonging’. The highest rated strategies were knowing how to engage with peers ($M=4.44$, $SD=0.88$), having a say in decisions about learning ($M=4.40$, $SD=0.54$), and recognising what is going well ($M=4.33$, $SD=0.7$). Other components rated as important included involving YP in designing the approach, online participation opportunities, understanding how school related to future goals, and building relationships with peers in school, all with means of 4.11 and Standard Deviations between 0.78 and 1.16. Notably, access to small group work with peers had low variability ($M=3.89$, $SD=0.33$), evidence that all participants agreed on its moderate importance for ‘belonging’. Conversely, one-to-one mentoring had the most variable response ($M=3.67$, $SD=1.50$), indicating the mixed views of its importance among participants. Four strategies and supports were unimportant for their ‘belonging.’ These were access to extra-curricular activities ($M=2.78$, $SD=1.01$), positive parent/carers views on ‘attendance’ ($M=3.22$, $SD=0.83$), attendance’ monitoring and regular feedback ($M = 3.00$, $SD = 1.12$), and active parent/carers involvement in school ($M=2.78$, $SD=0.97$). Lower importance was associated with wider standard deviations, illustrating higher variance.

After visual inspection of the data, a sensitivity analysis using median scores was conducted to account for a possible skew in the data to ensure robust interpretation, particularly given the small sample size and ordinal nature of the scale (Ghasemi & Zahediasl, 2012). In most cases, the median scores aligned closely with the mean scores, suggesting symmetry. For instance, knowing how to engage with peers had both a high mean ($M=4.44$) and a high median ($Md=5.00$), and access to extracurricular activities had both a low mean ($M=2.78$) and a median ($Mdn=3.00$). Overall, the medians support the means while ensuring that skewed distributions do not unduly influence interpretation.

Table 23*YP's Ratings of Strategies and Supports to Increase 'Belonging'*

Supports and Strategies for 'Belonging'	Number of Participants	Mean	SD	Median *
Knowing how to engage with peers	9	4.44	0.88	5
Having a say in decisions about your learning	9	4.40	0.54	4
Recognising what is going well in school	9	4.33	0.7	4
Involving YP in designing the approach	9	4.11	1.16	5
Online participation opportunities	9	4.11	0.78	4
Understanding how school relates to future goals	9	4.11	0.78	4
Building relationships with peers in school	9	4.11	0.92	4
Knowing how to manage overwhelming emotions	9	4.00	1	4
Personalised support from school	9	4	1	4
Recognising your strengths	9	4	0.87	4
Positive parent/carer views on belonging at school	9	4	1	4
Access to small group work with peers.	9	3.89	0.33	4
Support to reduce conflict with peers	9	3.89	0.92	4
Feeling confident as a learner	9	3.89	0.78	4
Knowing how to handle feeling isolated at school	9	3.78	1.20	4
Building relationships with teachers	9	3.67	1	4
One-to-one mentoring	9	3.67	1.5	4
Early identification of reduced attendance	9	3.56	0.88	4
Understanding the impact of missing school	9	3.38	0.91	3
Access to school-based incentives	9	3.33	0.87	3
Support for the transition from primary to secondary	9	3.33	0.71	3
Positive parent/carer views on school attendance.	9	3.22	0.83	3
Building relationships with the local community	9	3	1.12	3
Attendance monitoring and regular feedback	9	3	1.12	3
Active parent/carer involvement in school.	9	2.78	0.97	3
Access to extra-curricular activities	9	2.78	1.01	3

Note. * Medians calculated for sensitivity analysis.

6.5.5 Research Question 5: Do YP Think the Findings Accurately Reflect Their Experiences of ‘Belonging’ and ‘Attendance’?

Overall, responses from the semi-structured interview were predominantly positive, validating the summary of findings. All participants confirmed the accuracy of the findings (Table 24). Seven participants found the summary accurate and aligned well with their experience, while three offered specific refinements. One participant indicated that the findings were mostly positive but disagreed with the notion that YP experience a lack of peer belonging. This view was incongruent with their perspective, suggesting that this part may not universally apply, and individuals may experience ‘belonging’ differently. Two participants suggested refinements. One participant indicated, “School attendance should be based on how you are doing in school, not if you are coming to school” (P6, L87). They recommended explicitly defining ‘attendance’ as wider than physical presence in the school building within the summary of findings. They also highlighted the importance of emphasising the impact of negative peer interactions, which they felt were present but not fully captured in the findings. Another participant recommended removing the section highlighting one participant's views that ‘attendance’ does not matter, stating, “I think it is the person that (...) says belonging doesn’t matter. I think that is the only one that I just directly disagree with” (P10, L23).

Table 24

Matrix of YP Feedback on Summary of Findings: Accuracy, Refinements, and Suggested Removals

Participant	General Thoughts	Accuracy	Additional	Removal
1	Mostly Positive	Accurate, but strongly identifies as belonging with peers, so questions the relevance of this specific part to their experience	None identified	None identified
2	Positive	Accurate	None identified	Would remove the part about attendance not mattering in the second year
3	Positive	Accurate	None identified	None identified
5	Positive	Accurate	None identified	None identified
6	Mostly Positive	Accurate	Emphasise the impact of negative peer interactions, explicitly outline an attendance definition in belonging, highlighting progress over physical attendance	None identified
7	Positive	Accurate	None identified	None identified
9	Positive	Accurate	None identified	None identified
10	Positive	Accurate	None identified	Would remove the part about attendance not mattering in the second year

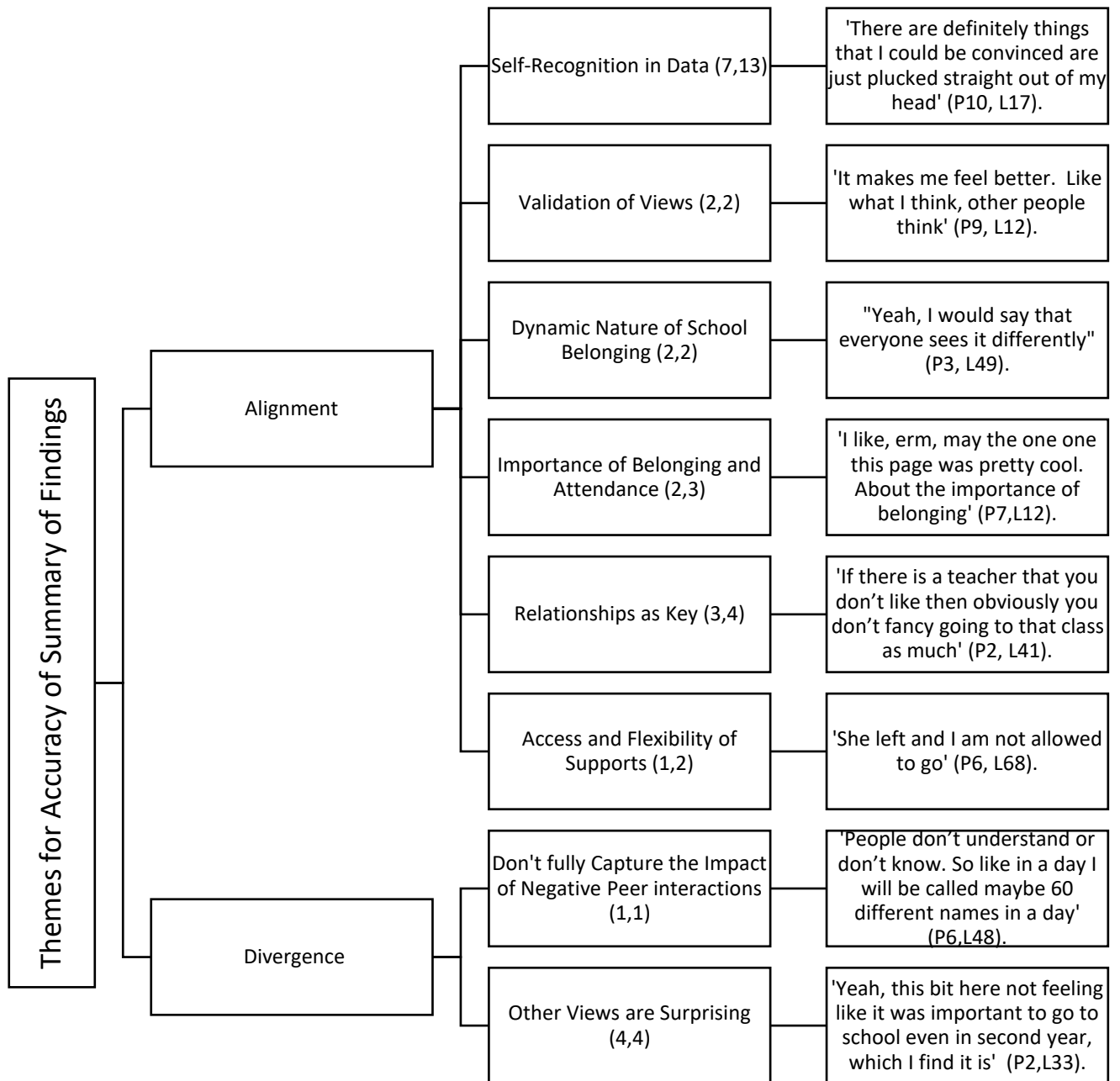
When exploring this data further, seven participants recognised their voices and perceptions in the summary, reinforcing their accuracy (Figure 29). For example, one participant said, “I can actually kind of remember saying them” (P3, L39). Themes emerged, demonstrating that participants felt the summary accurately captured their experience: self-recognition in the data and validation of their views. In addition to this, participants indicated several themes that resonated with them the most, including the dynamic nature of ‘belonging’, the importance of ‘belonging’ and ‘attendance’, the key role of relationships, and the access and flexibility of school supports. Certain areas of divergence were also noted, including an underrepresentation of the impact of negative peer experiences and a disconnect with another participant's views in the data. These differences were acknowledged and updated in the summary to ensure that minority perspectives were still represented, even if not universally held (Appendix U). Notably, this is related to one participant’s feedback that ‘attendance’ does not matter due to the school year. This participant did not participate in interview two, which limited the opportunity to explore or validate their perspective further. In addition, two participants were surprised by the definition of persistent school absenteeism, which indicated that.

“I just like cannot believe that like over 10% is classed as persistent absences. I didn’t realise that, I thought it would be 20 or 30% not 10%, so that means I am persistent absence. I didn’t even realise that” (P3, L178).

This suggests a disconnect between professional language and YP’s understanding of persistent absentees. Building on this feedback, changes were made to the summary of results (Appendix U).

Figure 29

Themes Related to the Accuracy of the Summary of Findings



Note. P = Participant; L = Line number in transcript. Bracketed numbers indicate participants and incidences.

6.5.6 Research Question 6: Do YP Think the Conceptual Model Accurately Reflects Their Experiences of ‘Belonging’ and ‘Attendance’?

Overall, feedback was largely positive, confirming the model’s accuracy while offering insights for refinement (Table 25). All participants agreed that the model accurately described their experience, reinforcing its overall validity. Three participants suggested additional refinements. One participant reflected on their surprise that gender differences were not mentioned, and suggested further consideration of these factors is required within the model, which should be addressed through future research. Another participant suggested expanding school spaces to include not only areas accessible to YP but also the physical design of the school building. Finally, one participant indicated a preference for the term participation rather than ‘attendance’ or being explicit about what ‘attendance’ means in the model. A note was added to the summary of results to illustrate this distinction.

Table 25

YP Perspectives on the Accuracy and Relevance of the Conceptual Model for 'Belonging' and 'Attendance'

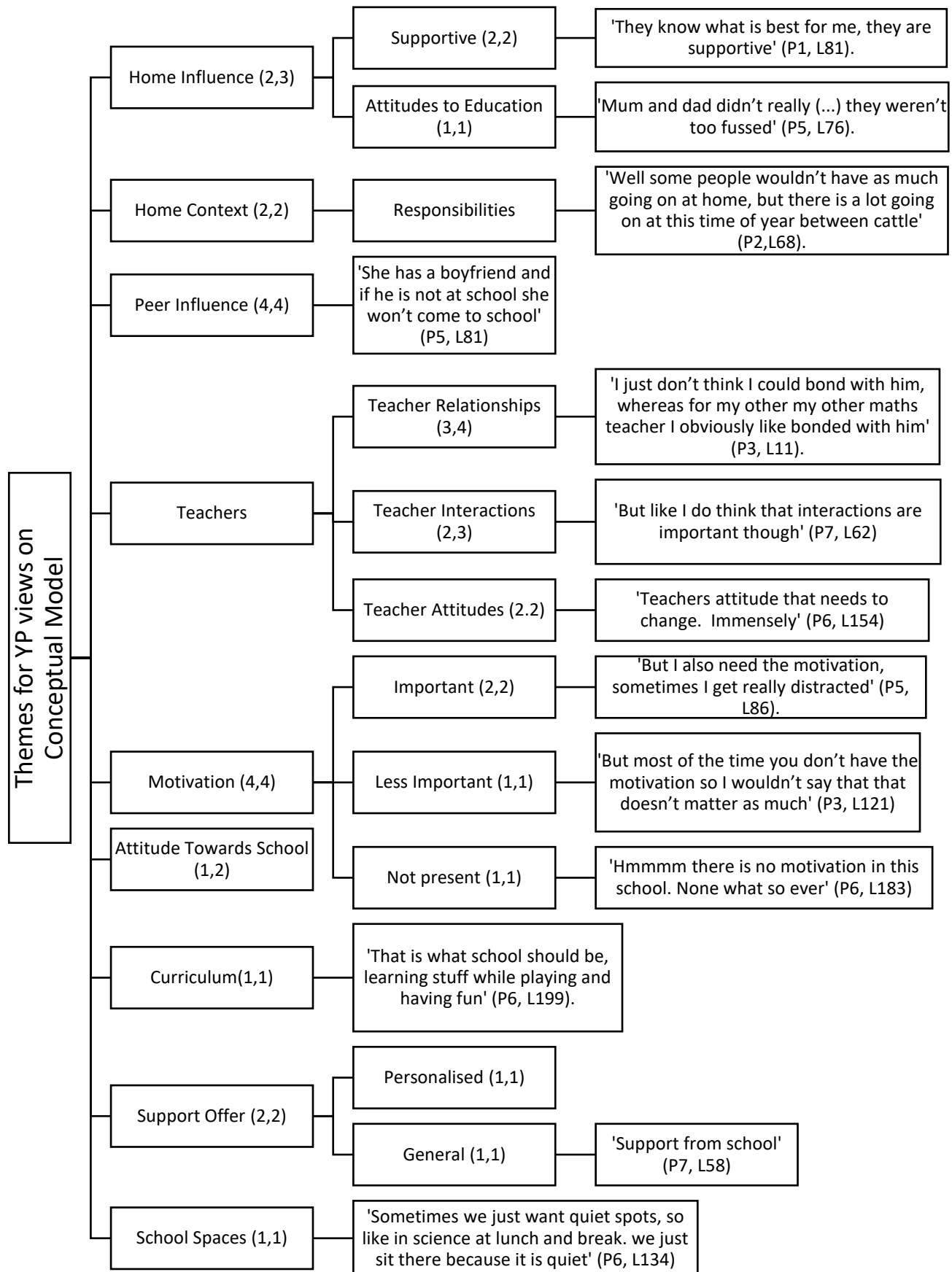
Participant	General thoughts	Accuracy	Additional	Removal
1	Positive	Accurate	None identified	None identified
2	Positive	Accurate	None identified	None identified
3	Positive	Accurate	None identified	None identified
5	Positive	Accurate	None identified	None identified
6	Mostly positive	Accurate	Outlined more clarity around the attendance definition	None identified
7	Positive	Accurate	None identified	None identified
9	Positive	Accurate	Gender dynamics in belonging are possibly underrepresented	None identified
10	Positive	Accurate	Expand access to school spaces to include the physical school design	None identified

When discussing the conceptual model, participants agreed with many of its components (**Error! Reference source not found.**). Themes emerged, highlighting a alignment supporting validation. All participants discussed the importance of relationships, illustrating their centrality for 'belonging.' Five participants highlighted the importance of home factors. Two participants discussed the importance of school factors. Four participants highlighted individual factors; however, whilst all participants thought this was important, one participant suggested these may be less influential in shaping 'belonging' compared to external relationships. Future research should consider the weighting of individual factors within the model. One participant indicated they felt all factors were important, suggesting they all matter

equally for 'belonging'. No major contradictions were raised regarding the model's structure. However, one participant indicated they felt that mental health was important for 'belonging', which may best fit within individual factors within the model.

Figure 30

Themes for YP's Perspectives on the Conceptual Model of 'Belonging' and 'Attendance'



Note. P = Participant; L = Line number in transcript. Bracketed numbers indicate participants and incidences.

6.5.7 Research Question 7: Do YP Think the Findings Accurately Reflect Their Views on Increasing ‘Belonging’?

Overall, participants responded positively to the proposed strategies from study 1 and the exploratory phase of study 2 to increase ‘belonging’, with all stating the summary reflects their views, supporting the accuracy and validating the findings (Table 26). Most participants (Seven) agreed without suggested changes when asked their opinions on the strategies. One participant agreed broadly but disagreed with the low prioritisation of ‘attendance’ monitoring and feedback, and parent/carer views on ‘attendance,’ stating:

“I think that just gives you a boost, like if your parents don’t care if you go to school or not, like obviously you are probably just not going to go, whereas if your parent do care, they have to, like I erm, like my own parents, you have to go to school” (P3, L168).

Another participant reiterated that not wearing a uniform may also increase ‘belonging.’ One proposed a minor word change, amending ‘teaching as fun and relevant’ to ‘teaching as interesting and relevant.’ No participants identified the removal of information.

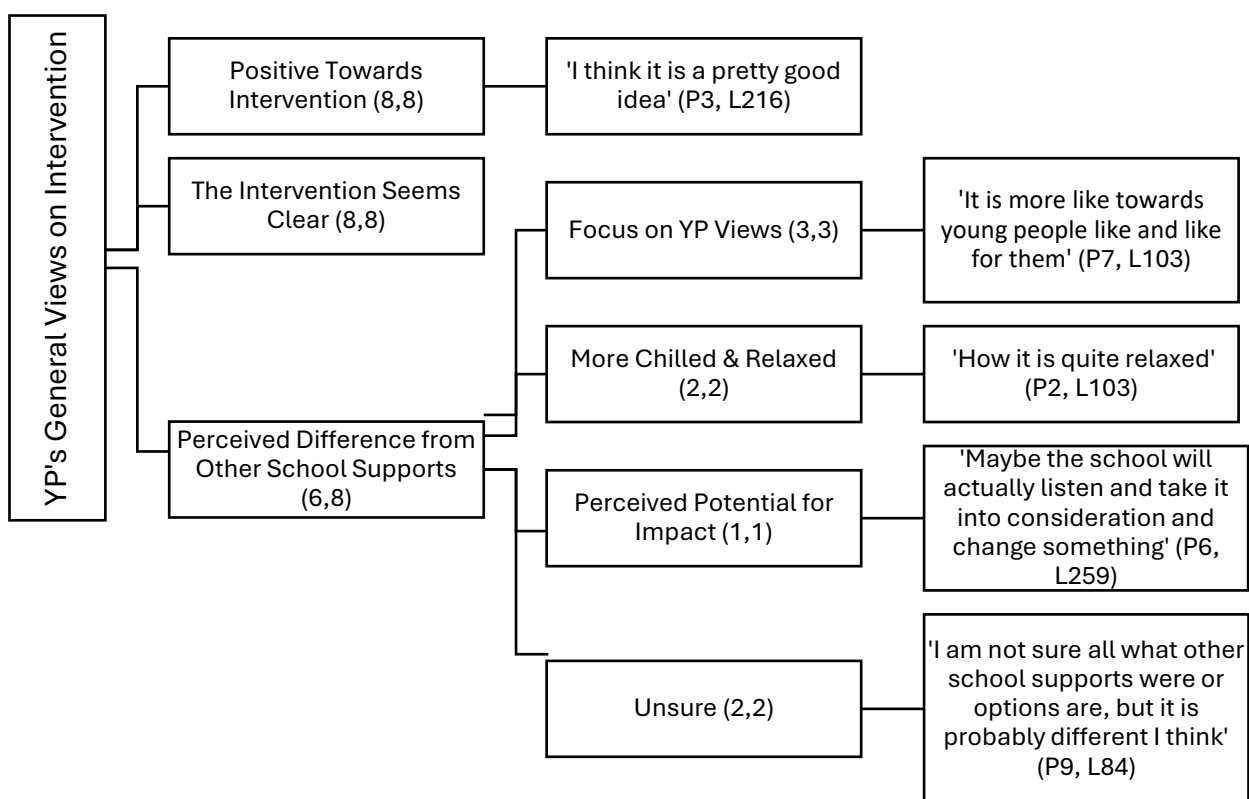
Table 26*Matrix of YP's Feedback on the Accuracy of Findings Regarding 'Belonging'*

Participant	General Thoughts	Accuracy	Additional	Removal
1	Positive	Yes	None identified	None identified
2	Positive	Yes	None identified	None identified
3	Positive	Yes, agrees with the most important supports to increase belonging, but disagrees with attendance monitoring and feedback, and parent/carer views on attendance as being the least important.	None identified	None identified
5	Positive	Yes	None identified	None identified
6	Mostly Positive	Yes	None identified	None identified
7	Positive	Yes, and clarified that no uniform may increase belonging	None identified	None identified
9	Positive	Yes	None identified	None identified
10	Positive	Yes	Yes, suggested changing 'teaching as fun and relevant' to 'teaching as interesting and relevant'	None identified

6.5.8 Research Question 8: Do YP Think the Proposed Guidelines for Intervention are a Feasible Way to Support 'Belonging' and 'Attendance'?

6.5.8.1 General Thoughts about the Intervention. Figure 31 outlines the themes of general thoughts on the interventions. Participants expressed positive views towards the intervention, with all stating it as helpful or good. They all expressed that the intervention was clear and easy to understand. Six participants perceived the intervention as different from existing support in schools, primarily relating this to its focus on YP's views, the relaxed format, and the possibility of creating meaningful change. These are important considerations for intervention accessibility and design choices. Two participants indicated that they thought the project was different but were unable to describe how, illustrating that they were not fully aware of all the supports available in school.

Figure 31
YP's General Views on the Intervention

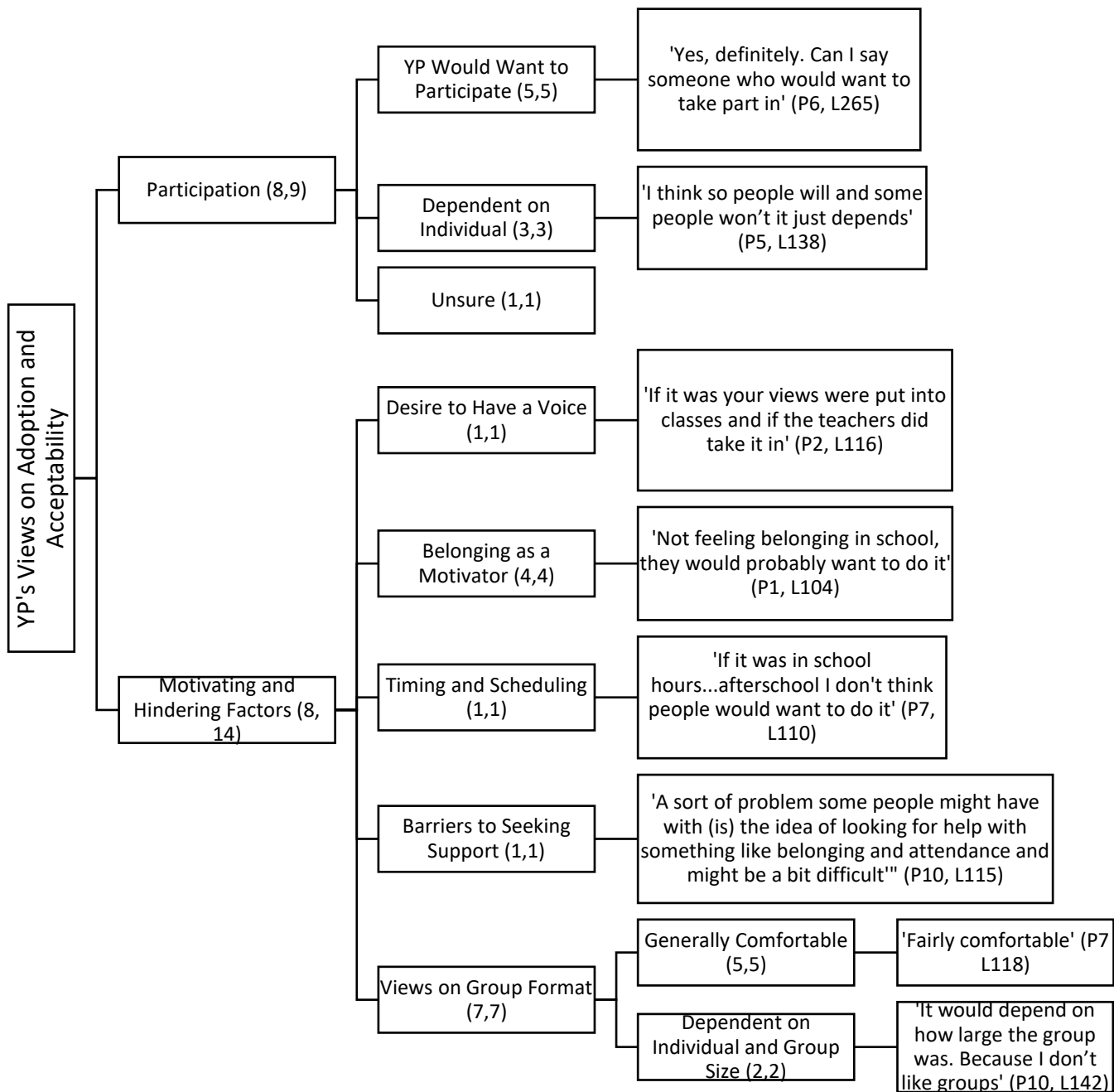


Note. P = Participant; L = Line number in transcript. Bracketed numbers indicate participants and incidences.

6.5.8.2 Adoption and Acceptability. Figure 32 outlines participants' views on the adoption and acceptability of the intervention. These are grouped by likely participation, as well as motivating and hindering barriers. Overall, most participants (Five) indicated that YP would be willing to participate in the intervention. However, others (Three) indicated that engagement would depend on the individual but did not specify the basis of this dependence. These findings indicate acceptability, with some variability depending on the individual. Two primary motivators for participation emerged from the data: the desire to be heard and improved 'belonging'. This suggests that these motivators should be emphasised in the way the intervention is introduced and framed to YP. In contrast, two participants identified time and scheduling as potential barriers to participation, along with a reluctance to seek support. Most participants (Five) reported general comfort in the small group format of this intervention. Two participants indicated that comfort was conditional on group size and may depend on the individual. This indicated that motivation to engage and contextual factors can influence the adoption and acceptability of the intervention. It also illustrates that the group format of this intervention is acceptable, but it is caveated with consideration required for group size and dynamics. These considerations were added as a design note in the intervention guidelines (Appendix V).

Figure 32

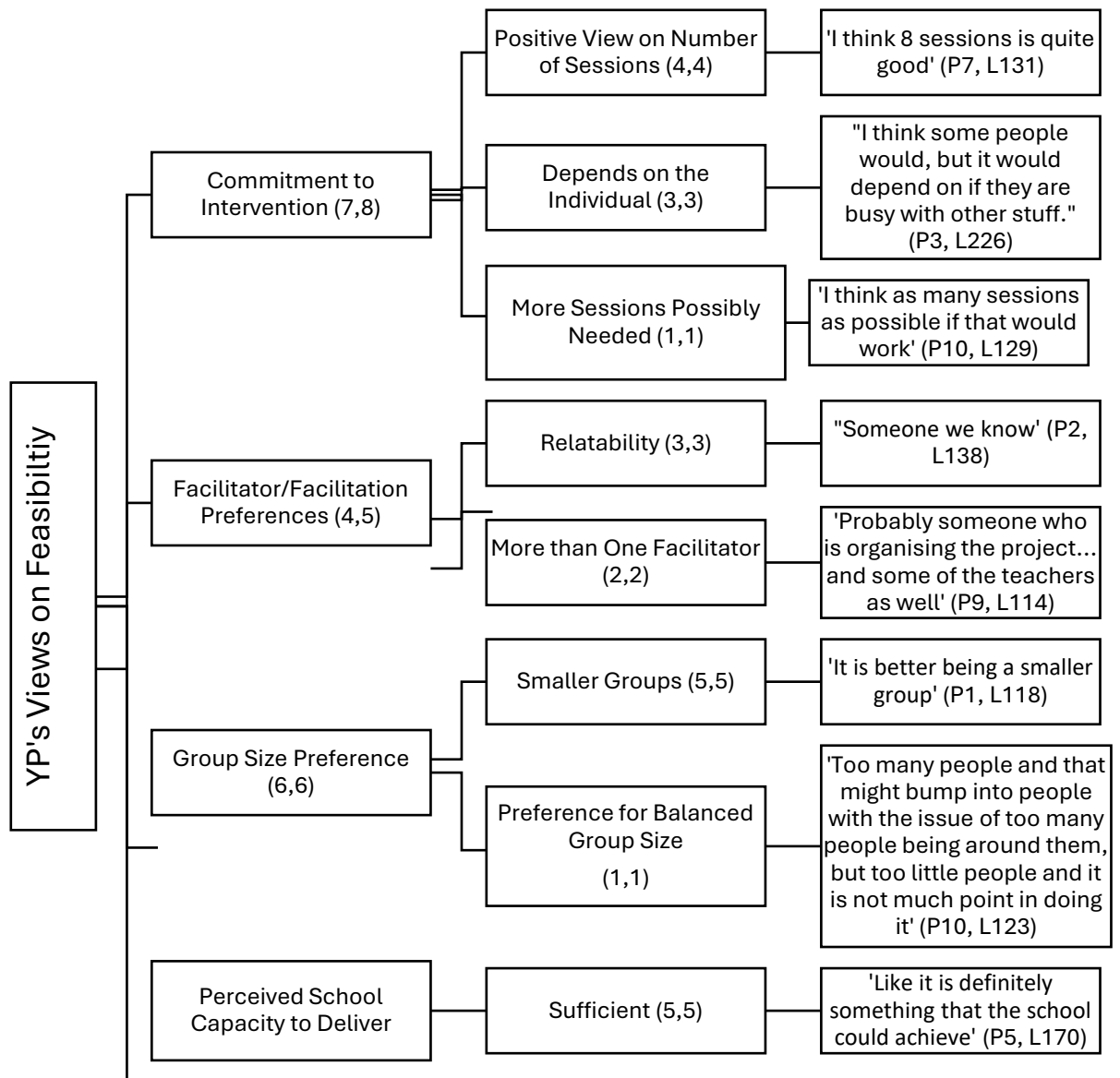
YP's Views on Intervention Adoption and Acceptability



Note. P = Participant; L = Line number in transcript. Bracketed numbers indicate participants and incidences.

6.5.8.3 Feasibility. Figure 33 illustrates participants' views on the feasibility of the intervention. Aspects explored included the proposed structure of the intervention, preferences for delivery (facilitators and group format), and school capacity to deliver. Participants indicated that the proposed structure of the intervention was reasonable, with most stating that the number of sessions was appropriate, and one participant suggested possibly increasing the number of sessions for YP. Other participants illustrated individual variation in the number of sessions. Four participants emphasised the importance of facilitators being relatable, relaxed, and understanding. Five participants expressed the importance of smaller groups, suggesting that the group size be reduced slightly. However, one participant emphasised the importance of balance in considering group size, noting that both too few participants and an insufficient number of managers can hinder the intervention. Five participants perceived that secondary schools have the capacity to implement the intervention. These findings suggest that the intervention is feasible when it is personalised to individuals and specific school contexts.

Figure 33
YP's Views on Intervention Feasibility



Note. P = Participant; L = Line number in transcript. Bracketed numbers indicate participants and incidences.

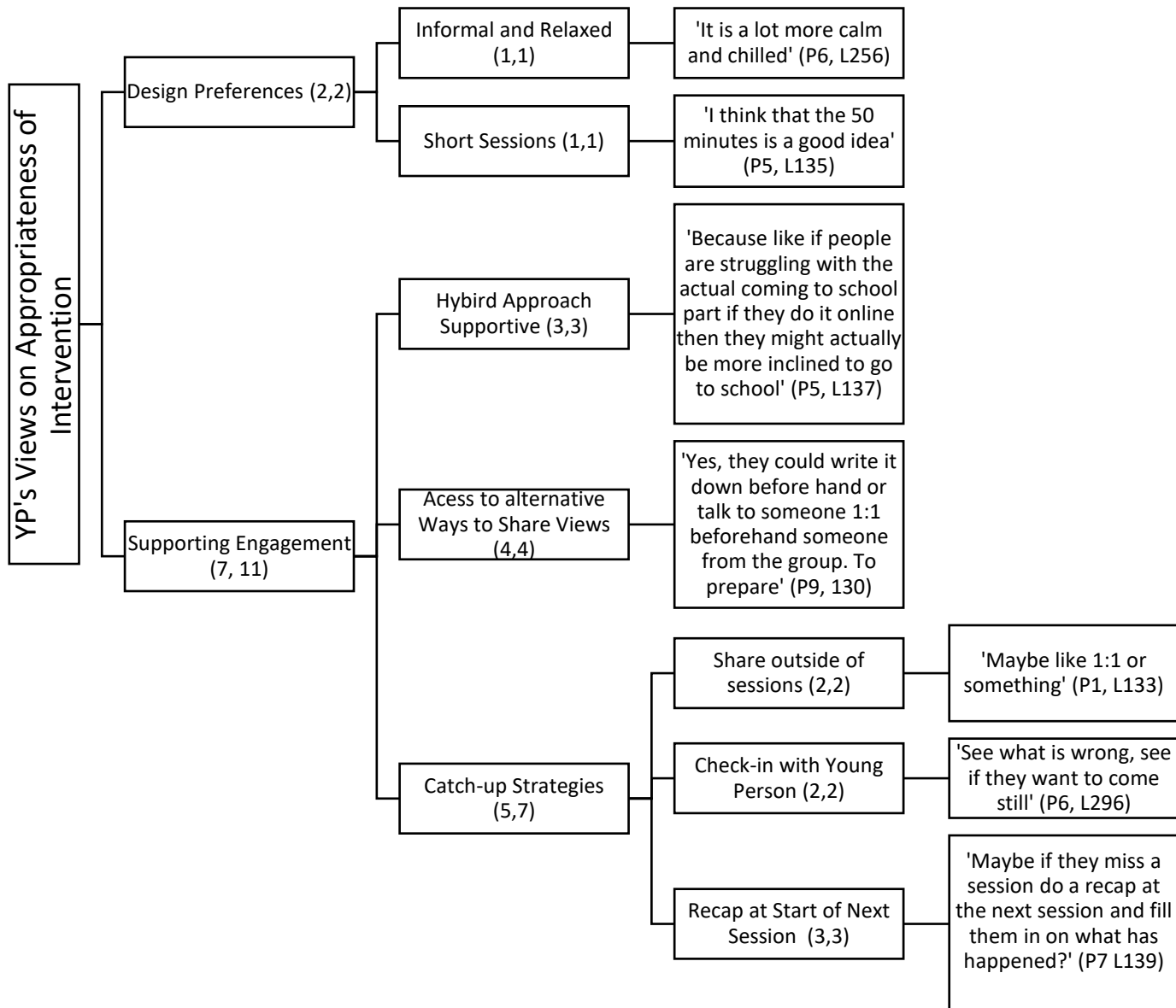
6.5.8.4 Appropriateness and Accessibility. Figure 34 illustrates participants' views on the appropriateness and accessibility of the intervention. Participants indicated design preferences for the intervention, including remaining informal and YP-focused. They suggested a range of practical strategies to support YP's engagement:

- 1:1 support as an alternative to group participation.
- Opportunities to share views in writing rather than speaking.
- Online or hybrid participation options.
- Catch-up strategies (e.g., recapping sessions).
- Regular check-ins with those struggling to attend.

Online and written participation were especially valued by students who were less confident speaking in groups. These adaptations would likely increase accessibility for participants who may find the intervention difficult to access.

Figure 34

YP's Views on Intervention Appropriateness



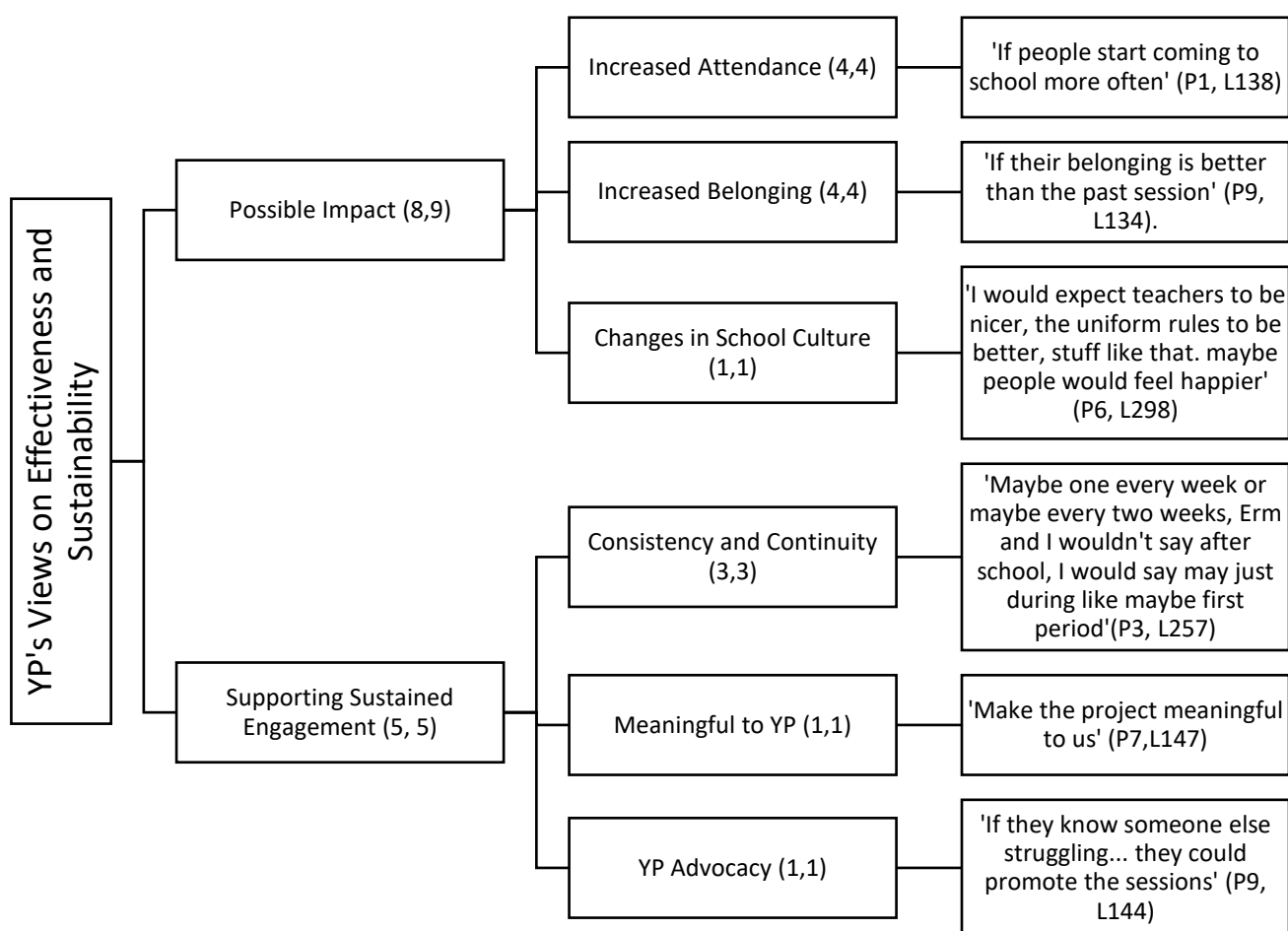
Note. P = Participant; L = Line number in transcript. Bracketed numbers indicate participants and incidences.

6.5.8.5 Effectiveness and Sustainability. Figure 35 outlines participant views on intervention effectiveness and sustainability. Participants proposed various indicators of effectiveness, including improved 'attendance', improved 'belonging', and positive changes to school culture. Participants indicated that the sustainability

of the intervention was linked to meaningful change for YP and involvement and support from YP who have participated in the intervention. Consideration should be given to how best to demonstrate this in practice, such as using ambassadors or co-facilitators. Consistency over time and integration into school life were also indicated as key to sustainability.

Figure 35

YP's Views on Effectiveness and Sustainability



Note. P = Participant; L = Line number in transcript. Bracketed numbers indicate participants and incidences.

6.5.8.6 Overview of Thematic Findings to Proctor et al. (2011)

Implementation Outcomes. Table 27 links the thematic findings to Proctor et al. (2011)'s implementation outcomes. Across all participants, the acceptability of the intervention was high, but some noted it depended on context and personal relevance. Participants indicated they would engage if they found the intervention to be personally relevant. Adoption was also linked to individual interest and contextual factors, such as timing and scheduling, with some participants highlighting potential challenges if sessions conflicted with other activities, suggesting that the intervention should take place during school hours, but not during social times. Participants indicated that the intervention was appropriate, with the approach's informal feel and embedding in the youth voice. Participants illustrated that the intervention was feasible, with eight sessions being suitable, and schools having the necessary resources to implement the intervention. Finally, participants stated that the intervention may be sustainable if it were part of the school routine, resulted in meaningful changes, and involved previous participants in its advocacy, suggesting an important implementation strategy.

Table 27*YP Perspectives on Intervention Implementation Outcomes*

Implementation Outcome	Summary	Example Quote
Acceptability	Generally positive, but conditional. This increased when the project was seen as personally relevant.	'Yes, definitely. Can I say someone who would want to take part in' (P6, L265)
Adoption	Participation would be influenced by personal relevance and practical considerations such as support timing.	'If it was in school hours...afterschool I don't think people would want to do it' (P7, L110)
Appropriateness	Strong when the project feels informal, youth-led, and accessible.	'I think that the 50 minutes is a good idea' (P5, L135)
Feasibility	Participants indicated the intervention was feasible, stating the number of sessions was manageable, and schools likely have the resources to support	'It is better being a smaller group' (P1, L118)
Sustainability	Sustainable if it becomes embedded in routine, feels meaningful, and supports others.	'If they know someone else struggling... they could promote the sessions' (P9, L144)

Note: This table integrates findings from the qualitative data with Proctor et al. (2011) Implementation Outcomes.

6.6 Discussion

6.6.1 Overview

This study builds on Chapter Five's scoping review, outlining the relationship between 'attendance' and 'belonging,' and presents a preliminary conceptual model illustrating 'belonging' as a key mediator of 'attendance'. Two key findings informed the design of this study. First, the review revealed a strong educational jurisdiction bias, with most studies conducted in America and no studies identified within the UK or Scotland. Second, despite recognising the subjective nature of 'belonging', there was a lack of research involving the voices of school-absent YP. This study employs an iterative exploratory/confirmatory approach, aiming to validate the relationship between 'belonging' and 'attendance', explore causation, and present a co-created candidate intervention guide protocol. This chapter discusses and synthesises the findings related to the following outlined research questions. This discussion includes an interpretation of study findings, a review of limitations, gaps in the literature, and implications for future research.

6.6.2 Research Question 1: What Do YP Think About 'Attendance'/'Belonging' at School?

6.6.2.1 Definition of 'Belonging'. Firstly, it is important to note that these findings reflect the views of YP in this study and should be interpreted with appropriate caution. YP's definition of 'belonging' aligned with Goodenow (1993). This study reflects a range of perspectives, though there was strong thematic overlap across participants. They emphasised the importance of being accepted (five), maintaining oneself as an individual (four), and being included (three). Four YP highlighted the importance of being recognised through being seen, valued, understood, and respected, which relates to being known as an individual (Craggs & Kelly, 2018). This highlights that 'belonging' is not the same for everyone; it is grounded in context, reciprocal, and subjective to an individual's experience (Mahar et al., 2013).

Five YP indicated that 'belonging' means 'being included' and 'not rejected.' This may be because inclusion provides opportunities to foster 'belonging' (Allen, Kern, et al., 2021). However, the importance of meaningful inclusion needs to be considered, as inclusion alone does not automatically lead to 'belonging'. Kovač and Vaala (2021) suggest that people strongly tend to differentiate, evaluate, and sort people into social categories, 'in-groups' and 'out-groups, which undermines inclusion efforts. They argue that inclusion is a complex form of 'belonging'. Considering 'belonging' further, it inherently involves the process of categorisation, with a group, a place, or as a learner. However, this also means that others are not a part of that group, evidenced by the code of 'not being rejected'. This adds weight to 'belonging' as dynamic, meaning that it can shift depending on time, relationships, and contexts (El Zaatari & Maalouf, 2022; Mahar et al., 2013). For instance, a student might feel strong 'belonging' in the classroom but feel excluded from the broader school community. Therefore, providing opportunities to belong through inclusion is simply not enough to foster 'belonging' alone, as individuals may still perceive being part of an in-group or out-group. When defining 'belonging', inclusion is important, but it does not capture the complexity of 'belonging' alone.

YP also defined 'belonging' as 'being accepted' (Five) and 'fitting in' (Four) whilst being 'authentic to themselves' (Four). Fitting in can be defined as congruence with other people, whereas authenticity implies being true to oneself. This recognises that sometimes tension emerges through conflicting needs between authenticity, fitting in, and acceptance (Allen, Kern, et al., 2021; Kovač & Vaala, 2021), which may be further magnified in adolescence as identity develops, as self-exploration and social validation become central to the formation of a sense of self (Branje et al., 2021; Erikson, 1968). This reflects a continuous push and pull between one's identity and context (Mahar et al., 2013). Therefore, interventions must provide space for students to express who they are, whilst supporting opportunities to connect with others in ways that foster acceptance and 'belonging'.

Most YP (Seven) described their ‘belonging’ as rooted in relationships. This reinforces the importance of interactions with others, alongside the quality of relationships within a school setting (Allen & Kern, 2017; Kuttner, 2023). However, the way they described these relationships varied. For instance, two YP emphasised that it was not the number of people they belonged with, but rather the quality of relationships that was most important- both with peers and school staff (Allen & Kern, 2017; Allen, Slaten, et al., 2021; Baumeister & Leary, 2017).

Whilst many definitions have focused on relational ‘belonging’ (Allen, Kern, et al., 2021), YP (Five) also described ‘belonging’ to a place and as learners. That is, YP belong to their school as a physical space. This manifests as a “feeling of being at home” (Riley et al., 2020, p. 2). These feelings applied to the school as a whole system, but it was also important to have other spaces, such as outdoor areas or classrooms. Kuttner (2023) illustrates that YP are active agents in establishing a place of ‘belonging’ in schools, as they help create the space by interacting with it. A pertinent question is how schools create ‘belonging’ within their physical spaces.

Five YP also defined ‘belonging’ as a learner. This was linked to learning enjoyment, engaging in tasks, and feeling comfortable in the classroom. This strengthens research outlining the importance of an effective learning environment (El Zaatar & Maalouf, 2022) and the impact of perceived mastery as a learner on ‘belonging’ (Korpershoek et al., 2020). Aligning with ‘Self-Determination Theory’ (Ryan & Deci, 2000, 2017), this suggests that ‘belonging’ satisfies the need for relatedness and is related to competence and autonomy, which are essential for intrinsic motivation and engagement. This research further expands this view by highlighting that ‘belonging’ is not only about being with others but is also tied to feeling capable and connected through learning. Interventions must therefore balance these dimensions, ensuring YP feel connected, capable, and safe - socially, physically, and academically. However, there is a need to also acknowledging the tension between inclusion and attainment agendas (Högberg & Lindgren, 2023). It may be that a focus on attainment magnifies YP’s experience of ‘otherness’ as a

learner. This raises a key policy question: if 'belonging' is too narrowly framed around inclusion or attainment, it risks overlooking how these elements interact. Future research should consider how this dynamic might affect YP's 'belonging'.

When considering YP's definition of 'belonging', these findings both align and extend the work of Goodenow (1993). For example, these findings strengthen that 'belonging' is rooted in relationships. However, many YP (Eight) placed significance on place and 'belonging' as a learner, suggesting a broader conceptualisation than what is captured within their definition and a need to expand current definitions and frameworks to include these dimensions.

6.6.2.2 YP's Views on Their 'Attendance' and 'Belonging'. YP had varying degrees of 'belonging' across both quantitative and qualitative data in school, demonstrating that 'belonging' is not fixed. They stated that 'belonging' depended on context and was influenced by interactions between peers and teachers. These findings reinforce and extend existing conceptualisations of 'belonging' by highlighting its multifaceted nature across people, places, and purposes (Allen, Slaten, et al., 2021; Allen et al., 2018; Corcoran & Kelly, 2023; El Zaatari & Maalouf, 2022; Mahar et al., 2013). This understanding of 'belonging' as shaped by intersecting relational and contextual factors may explain why some YP report a sense of connection in certain areas of school life, but not others (Kuttner, 2023). Notably, not all YP with persistent absenteeism experience low 'belonging'. Some YP expressed strong 'belonging' to teachers, peers, or school while feeling alienated from other aspects of school life. For example, one participant described "Some of the classes, like, (I) enjoy it. It kind of feels like I belong there. And other classes that I am not so fond of - I would rather go to the ones where I do feel good about. It's easier to go to class" (P2, L63). This strengthens the view that 'belonging' cannot be reduced to a single experience but is multifactorial, relational, and situational (El Zaatari & Maalouf, 2022). While research question three aims to explore the antecedent factors that impact 'belonging', a question worthy of further research may be at what point a YP's experience of 'belonging' shifts towards not 'belonging'.

Answering this question is currently beyond the scope of this research. However, further exploration could help explain why some YP maintain a sense of connection in school despite challenges and why others disengage more quickly.

Differences were observed between YP's questionnaire responses and their qualitatively reported perceptions of 'belonging'. This suggests a difference between quantitative and qualitative measures, perhaps indicating that quantitative measures capture general 'belonging' while qualitative methods reveal more context-specific, fluctuating experiences. This may be due to the multi-dimensional nature of 'belonging', supporting other research (Ye & Wallace, 2014). When exploring the three dimensions proposed by Ye and Wallace (2014) - identification and participation in school, perception of fit with peers, and connection to teachers - there was high variability across scores. This suggests that YP may experience and interpret dimensions of 'belonging' differently and highlights a need for more nuanced measurements. These dimensions can shape how 'belonging' is perceived and reported. All of the YP who qualitatively reported a low/no sense of 'belonging' at school had higher variability. However, variability alone does not account for all YP, as two individuals who exhibited high variability also expressed 'belonging'. This highlights the complexity of 'belonging' as a construct and reinforces the need for mixed methods approaches in research, which Study 1 highlighted as lacking in the studies reviewed. A risk to a single-method design is that it may overlook the complexity and situational variability of 'belonging', leading to incomplete or misleading conclusions (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). This highlights the importance and value of cross-validating and triangulating quantitative data with qualitative data to gain deeper insights. Previous research used a mixed methods approach when defining 'belonging', illustrating similarities between participant statements and PSSM statements (Shaw, 2019). Similar themes are also demonstrated in this study's findings, for example, one YP described having a higher connection with a teacher because they talked together more, which aligns with question seven from the questionnaire of having at least one teacher or adult to talk to in school. This suggests reliability in the factors underpinning 'belonging' within

the qualitative and quantitative data. However, it does not account for the discrepancy between reported 'belonging' within the qualitative and quantitative data. To date, no research known to the researcher has explored why this discrepancy might be present.

Of note is that many YP (Seven) did not consider their 'attendance' poor despite meeting the criteria for persistent absenteeism. This illustrates a difference between YP's perceptions of 'attendance' and reported school measures. It suggests that YP may not recognise the extent of their school absences. This aligns with Keppens et al. (2019), who found that school-reported data on unauthorised absences were twice as large as self-reported school absences. One possible reason may be that YP are unaware of how their 'attendance' is monitored or what constitutes persistent absenteeism. For instance, one YP described their parents highlighting their 'attendance' as 'bad' but said they themselves did not think it was 'that bad.' While early identification and intervention are considered important for persistently absent YP (Canbolat, 2024), these findings evidence a disconnect between the systems tracking and monitoring 'attendance' and the views of persistently absent YP on their 'attendance' (Giménez-Miralles et al., 2022). This gap may indicate the need for more transparent communication between schools, families, and YP about how 'attendance' is tracked, what threshold indicates a concern, and the potential consequences of missing school. In addition, some YP described difficulty accessing timely support and help within school, suggesting schools may not be intervening at the right time for some of these YP. For instance, one YP described asking for help, but the request was not acted upon, possibly because the teacher did not think they needed it. This points to a relational issue, where differences in perception between staff and students may lead to support being overlooked, even when explicitly requested. This suggests there are other systemic challenges to accessing support for deteriorating 'attendance' (Kearney & Graczyk, 2014; Kearney & Graczyk, 2020).

6.6.3 Research Question 2: In What Ways Do YP Perceive the Impact, if any, of ‘Attendance’ and Their ‘Belonging’ at School?

6.6.3.1 Importance of ‘Attendance’ and ‘Belonging’. Most YP (Eight) indicated the importance of ‘attendance’ for learning attainment and future goals. This aligns with other research showing the link between ‘attendance’, attainment, and lifelong goals (Ansari et al., 2020; Dräger et al., 2024; Klein & Sosu, 2024b; Klein et al., 2022). This also reflects findings from study 1, where YP indicated the importance of ‘attendance’ and ‘belonging’ for future plans and goals (Lieblein et al., 2018; Rangel-Clawson, 2017; Van Den Berghe et al., 2022). These findings demonstrate that most YP think school is important. This aligns with the importance of curriculum relevance and pupil-centred learning, as outlined by the Curriculum for Excellence (Scottish Government, 2010). Adding to this, one YP described ‘attendance’, and therefore, school in general, as only relevant during examination years, suggesting that there may be different perspectives for some YP depending on whether they are within compulsory education. However, this was not a widely held view. This perhaps illustrates a systemic issue with how education is framed, emphasising exam preparation. Such framing may inadvertently contribute to disengagement among students who do not yet see the immediate relevance of schooling outside of assessment periods. One YP indicated the importance of ‘attendance’ for social development; however, this was not a widely held view. This aligns with research (Ansari & Pianta, 2019; John et al., 2022) demonstrating that missing school has the potential to impact social-emotional development. Therefore, the benefits of ‘attendance’ on social and emotional development were not immediately apparent for YP.

Almost all YP (Nine) indicated that ‘belonging’ was important, but it depended on the individual (Three), and one YP indicated that ‘belonging’ was not important. This strengthens research that has illustrated the role of ‘belonging’ in several outcomes for YP (Allen et al., 2024; Arslan et al., 2020; Korpershoek et al., 2020; Rose et al., 2024). Three YP discussed that the importance of ‘belonging’ was

dependent on individual factors. One YP shared that 'belonging' was important to them, but perhaps not to others who are 'completely detached from everything around them and get on fine.' This illustrates that this YP's perspective is that not everyone needs to experience high levels of 'belonging' to manage school. This highlights an important consideration: someone cannot truly know the internal experiences of others, as 'belonging' is deeply subjective. Another shared the importance of quality over quantity in relationships, suggesting that 'belonging' everywhere and with everyone is unnecessary to feel 'belonging'. A third illustrated that context also matters. For instance, 'belonging' mattered less in certain academic situations, such as taking a test, where the need to complete a task may be weighted as more important than 'belonging' for a short period. This example illustrates the dynamic nature of 'belonging' (Mahar et al., 2013), where the salience of 'belonging' can shift across situations. Recognising variability in the importance of 'belonging' echoes research (Allen, Kern, et al., 2021; Korpershoek et al., 2020), where an individual's subjectivity moderated 'belonging' (García-Moya et al., 2019; Mahar et al., 2013). This contributes theoretically to existing frameworks by illustrating that YP differ not only in how much they value 'belonging' but also in when and where it becomes important to them.

One YP expressed that 'belonging' was not important at all. This outlier is important as it challenges the assumption that 'belonging' is universally valued, and that for some YP, feelings of connection may be overshadowed by other negative school experiences. A possible reason for this YP's viewpoint was that nothing matters or would make a difference to them and their current school experience. This lack of competency and autonomy to influence their situation may lead to emotional withdrawal as a form of self-protection (Kljakovic et al., 2021; Pikkarainen et al., 2021; Ryan & Deci, 2000), where they dismiss the importance of 'belonging' because they do not see its value, but also institutional or relational neglect, where the YP feels overlooked or unsupported by the school system or its staff. This raises questions about the assumption underpinning 'belonging' models, that it is a fundamental need. This case suggests that when a YP feels disempowered and

disconnected from school, they may reject 'belonging' and may require a more personalised approach.

6.6.3.2 'Belonging' as a Protective Factor. The YP who indicated that 'belonging' was important discussed its impact primarily on their emotional well-being, social experiences, and behaviour. These findings reinforce existing research that highlights its role in shaping YP's daily experiences in school (Allen et al., 2024; El Zaatari & Maalouf, 2022; Štremfel et al., 2024). YP illustrated that 'belonging' impacted their emotional well-being, improved their happiness, and reduced their worries. This strengthens other research where 'belonging' is protective against mental health difficulties, including anxiety and depression (Cohman, 2023; Marraccini & Brier, 2017). These qualitative findings provide a valuable perspective that the benefits of 'belonging' are not abstract but experienced by YP within their school communities.

YP also illustrate that 'belonging' is associated with reduced peer conflict and increased social comfort. This strengthens previous research findings where experiences of bullying can decrease 'belonging' (Chen et al., 2023; Gowing, 2019; Moyano & Sánchez-Fuentes, 2020). This also cross-validated research that found teacher and peer views that negative interactions and relationships impact 'belonging' (Barrett, 2022; Craggs & Kelly, 2018; Greenwood & Kelly, 2019).

Finally, 'belonging' was also reported as important for behavioural engagement and participation. YP described a positive feedback loop where feeling accepted and supported in school led to increased contributions and motivation in class. For instance, one YP highlighted difficulty engaging with learning due to their relationship with the class teacher. This supports previous research that indicates when students feel connected to their peers and teachers, they are less likely to engage in behaviours that lead to disengagement (Ewing et al., 2023; Keppens & Spruyt, 2015; Keppens & Spruyt, 2019; Van Eck et al., 2021). YP also described the impact of 'belonging' on their 'attendance', which is explored in greater detail next.

6.6.3.3. 'Belonging' and 'Attendance'. Almost all YP (Eight) illustrated a direct relationship between 'attendance' and 'belonging', confirming a direct pathway between 'attendance' and 'belonging' as explored in study 1 and illustrated in the conceptual model, and hypothesised in previous research (Bowles & Scull, 2019; Corcoran & Kelly, 2023; Ramsdal & Wynn, 2022). YP described how feeling 'belonging', through relationships with peers and teachers, increased their motivation to attend school and classes. YP reported being more likely to attend classes where they felt comfortable, valued, and had positive relationships. This adds weight to previous findings from studies exploring the views of both school-absent YP and successful and unsuccessful graduates, who identified these factors as impacting 'attendance' (Chen et al., 2023; Corcoran & Kelly, 2023; Flores, 2017; Pendergast et al., 2018; Ramsdal & Wynn, 2022).

In contrast, when YP described feeling a low 'belonging', they experienced higher emotional discomfort and school avoidance strategies, such as skipping classes, arriving late, or missing school entirely. As highlighted above, these behaviours were often rooted in negative experiences with teachers (Two) or peers (Four), with individual variation noted. In addition, some YP highlighted that relationships served as a protective factor and that knowing that friends were at school motivated 'attendance'. This aligns with the SSMD's emphasis on the importance of interpersonal connections in fostering school engagement, where a disruption to 'belonging' can result in disengagement (Nouwen & Clycq, 2021; Skinner et al., 2008). That is, where perceptions of 'belonging' are high, 'attendance' is higher, and when 'belonging' is low, 'attendance' is lower.

For some YP, 'belonging' and perceptions of competence were important. This aligns with SSDM (Nouwen & Clycq, 2021; Skinner et al., 2008) which emphasises the importance of relatedness and competence, and how disruptions to these can undermine 'attendance'. For instance, one YP noted that missing school due to a lack of 'belonging' led to knowledge gaps, which in turn made it harder to fit in. This illustrates how unmet needs may compound over time, with an often

cumulative effect (Chu et al., 2019; Corcoran & Kelly, 2023; Gubbels et al., 2019). This reinforces theories (Finn & Zimmer, 2012; Skinner et al., 2008) and research (Gowing, 2019; Rangel-Clawson, 2017) illustrating a feedback loop between 'attendance' and 'belonging', confirming the recursion present in the preliminary conceptual model (Chapter 6, Section 6.6.3, p.155).

Extending research further, this study confirms that 'belonging' is a key mediator for 'attendance', helping to explain how a range of antecedent's impact 'belonging' and 'attendance' (Chapter 6, section 6.5.3, p.156). Notably, in the pilot, this relationship emerged organically; four out of five YP illustrated a connection without being directly asked. This suggests that 'belonging' is inherently tied to many YP's decision to attend school. This further validates the conceptual model, demonstrating how this relationship emerged naturally for most YP without priming.

However, one YP indicated that 'belonging' did not matter for 'attendance'. One possible explanation for this was their expression of hopelessness when creating change, and the view that 'attendance' is irrelevant in year 2 of secondary school, as there were no qualifications. This reflects challenges within the Scottish education context, where there continues to be a focus on supporting school relevance and engaging all students, particularly those in early secondary education (OECD, 2021). Understanding this through the SSMD, it may be that this YP's lack of perceived control and agency towards their 'attendance' illustrates their lack of autonomy, and their perception of school relevance illustrates an absence of competence (Nouwen & Clycq, 2021; Skinner et al., 2008). For this YP, the lack of autonomy over their 'attendance' and the perception that school added little to no value contributed to their school disengagement, making 'belonging' at school unimportant.

6.6.3.4. Summary. YP's definition of 'belonging' aligned with Goodenow (1993), emphasising the importance of being accepted, recognised, and authentic to oneself. 'Belonging' was described as relational, spatial, and academic. Most YP (Nine) illustrated the importance of 'attendance' for future vocational and academic

goals when asked whether attending school was important and if so, why, and they described the importance of 'belonging' and its impact on mental health, wellbeing, social experiences, and behaviour. Most YP (Nine) reported a strong connection between 'belonging' and 'attendance'. Feeling valued and supported increased their motivation to attend, while negative interactions and perceptions of fit often led to school avoidance. One YP questioned the relevance of school and the importance of 'belonging' in creating change, especially when feeling hopeless. These findings suggest that 'belonging' plays an important role in shaping 'attendance', but that it must be understood within the complexities of individual experiences, contextual factors, and systemic influences.

6.6.4 Research Question 3: To What Extent Can Themes Derived From the Antecedents of the Conceptual Model Account for YP's Views?

6.6.4.1 Alignment. Some themes derived from the conceptual model's antecedents strongly account for YP's views, with complete agreement indicating saturation. This strengthens the validity of other research, emphasising that peer and teacher relationships are foundational to YP's 'belonging' (Allen, Slaten, et al., 2021; Allen et al., 2018; Craggs & Kelly, 2018; Gowing, 2019; Štremfel et al., 2024). This has implications for intervention design (Chapter 6, section 6.5.3, p.155).

Other themes demonstrate moderate alignment with most YP, indicating their impact on 'belonging'. Factors such as teacher attitude, wider school support, and flexibility from school staff were indicated as important by many but not all YP. This illustrates a clear thematic presence of these antecedent factors, but variability in YP's experiences. This reflects the individual and context-dependent nature of 'belonging' (El Zaatari & Maalouf, 2022; Mahar et al., 2013).

Moderate alignment may indicate the varying degrees to which these factors are visible to YP. This highlights a difference between themes that are universally core to 'belonging', and others that require schools to base supports on personalised needs intentionally (Allen, Jamshidi, et al., 2022; Greenwood & Kelly, 2019). Variation suggests that 'belonging' cannot be addressed through a one-size-

fits-all approach; rather, interventions must be adaptable and specific to the context and the YP's needs (Štremfel et al., 2024).

6.6.4.2 Divergence. There was some divergence between YP's views and the antecedent factors impacting 'belonging' arising from the scoping review. This is unsurprising, given that much of the research examined in study 1 explored stakeholders' views on supporting 'attendance', with the importance of 'belonging' emerging from the data. Therefore, the scoping review may not fully capture the factors impacting 'belonging' from a YP's perspective.

Some of the divergences led to clarifying and refining themes within the preliminary conceptual model, such as teacher interactions and opportunities to engage with peers. For instance, all YP discussed the importance of teachers' interactions for their 'belonging'. This theme was conceptually different from teacher relationships, as it related to the daily interactions experienced at a micro-level rather than YP's perceptions of relationships at a macro level. Interactions are the building blocks for relationships (Pendergast & O'Brien, 2022; Pennings & Hollenstein, 2020). This refinement illustrates a move beyond categorising positive or negative relationships, to considering how interactions foster and impact relationships and 'belonging' in school more closely. This divergence led to refining the conceptual model, adding teacher interactions. Similarly, there was moderate agreement from YP highlighting the structured and unstructured opportunities for engagement with peers outside of the classroom, such as through organised activity weeks or during social times. This highlights the importance of non-academic activities, either organised or facilitated by the school, for 'belonging' (Miles, 2018). The preliminary conceptual model considered peer relationships, interactions, and influence as antecedent factors for 'belonging'. However, it did not fully capture the school system practices that facilitate opportunities to build relationships in school. This further illustrates how school contexts can facilitate or hinder the development of 'belonging' (Štremfel et al., 2024).

Some themes identified in study 1 were associated with ‘attendance’ and not with ‘belonging’. Following this analysis, some of these themes were corroborated and added to the amended conceptual model, such as physical school spaces, learning enjoyment, and learning relevance. YP illustrated that ‘belonging’ was spatial, with many indicating that it was fostered by accessible spaces where students can be themselves and find respite from the busy nature of secondary schools, supporting Kuttner (2023). This highlights the importance of environmental factors in building ‘belonging’, an area currently overlooked in ‘belonging’ models.

Other factors related to ‘belonging’ as a learner include relevance and enjoyment of learning. This suggests that emotional engagement with the curriculum's content impacts ‘belonging’ in school, supporting Korpershoek et al. (2020) and Sorrenti et al. (2024). Therefore, ‘belonging’ cannot be detached from pedagogy; it is linked to how learning feels and resonates with YP.

Some themes illustrated low or no alignment. This suggests these themes were not experienced by the YP in this study, indicating their possible irrelevance to ‘belonging’. However, it may also indicate missed opportunities or unmet needs. For instance, three YP described the importance of a small learning environment, and two described the importance of moving to a different provision for ‘belonging’. A lower alignment is not unexpected if not all YP included in the research had such experiences. This may indicate systemic challenges in accessing school support, necessitating consideration of whether the absence of these antecedents points to irrelevance to ‘belonging’ or an overlooked area of need.

6.6.4.3 YP’s Views on the Factors that Impact Their ‘Belonging’. The valence analysis sought to explore how positive and negative experiences of antecedent factors foster or hinder a sense of ‘belonging’. YP’s perceptions highlight a complex interplay between relationships, contextual, and individual factors (Nouwen & Clycq, 2021; Skinner et al., 2008). This is evidenced by the presence of positive and negative incidences in almost all factors. Certain antecedents emerged as consistently positive, such as smaller learning environments, informal teacher

engagement, and access to alternative provisions. Others were consistently more negative, such as learning relevance, school policies, and marginalisation. This evidence suggests that some aspects of the school experience can act as strong factors to foster 'belonging', whereas others can actively hinder it. For instance, those that enhance connection, relevance, and autonomy are perceived to increase 'belonging', whereas unmet needs and systemic challenges often decrease 'belonging'.

Firstly, it is important to consider whether valence interacts with YP's perceived 'belonging'. Two YP reported a high positive valence but indicated no 'belonging'. This suggests that individuals may still feel disconnected from school despite having experienced positive variables associated with 'belonging'. It may be that YP shared specific instances, rather than describing a holistic 'belonging'. Alternatively, 'belonging' may have been impacted by a few but highly influential negative experiences, such as bullying or disconnection from the curriculum. In contrast, two YP demonstrated high negative valence alongside perceived 'belonging'. This suggests they maintain a positive perception of 'belonging' despite frequent negative interactions. It may be that protective factors, such as buffering within one or two relationships, affected these YP's experience of 'belonging'. This suggests that for some YP, there is a disconnect between experience and perception, where 'belonging' is not a direct sum of positive or negative interactions but how YP interpret these. Six YP demonstrated consistency between perceived 'belonging' and valence - this evidence aligns with perceived 'belonging' and the valence of their narratives. The modest sample size and imbalance of comments across participants do not lend themselves to a more detailed analysis. However, future research with a larger sample size would make such an analysis instructive. The presence of differences for some YP raises an important question for future research that is currently beyond the scope of this research: why can some individuals maintain 'belonging' in the face of adversity when others feel alienated despite positive experiences?

6.6.4.4 Summary. This analysis demonstrates that ‘belonging’ is multi-faceted, relational, contextual, and individual, building on previous research (Mahar et al., 2013; Allen et al., 2018; El Zaatari & Maalouf, 2022). Several themes, particularly relational, strongly aligned with the conceptual model, indicating saturation and validating current research. Moderate alignment was found in other areas, such as teacher attitudes, wider support, and attitudes towards school, supporting the context-dependent and individualisation of ‘belonging’. This suggests that while relationships are vital, their effectiveness relies heavily on their quality and consistency. Some divergence was also noted, as specific antecedents showed low alignment, and new themes emerged. Whilst many YP experienced protective relational and school-level supports, the persistent presence of negative valence across themes, particularly evidenced in policy, peer influence, and marginalisation, underscores the fragility and dynamic nature of ‘belonging’ for many YP. Some YP reported ‘belonging’ despite negative experiences, and vice versa. Overall, these findings reinforce the need for models and interventions to be relationally grounded, flexible to individual and contextual differences, and shaped by the voices and experiences of YP themselves.

6.6.5 Research Question 4: To Co-Create a Candidate Intervention With YP to Increase ‘Belonging’ and ‘Attendance’.

6.6.5.1 Self-Efficacy to Increase ‘Belonging’. YP expressed variable views on the changeability of ‘belonging’, with most indicating it was changeable or partially changeable, and others expressing that it was not or that they ‘didn’t know’. This perhaps illustrates the level of control YP have in effecting change in their world, aligning with the SSMD, which highlights how perceptions of autonomy and relatedness influence engagement and ‘belonging’ (Nouwen & Clycq, 2021). Research highlights that ‘belonging’ is malleable, with some interventions demonstrating impact (Bell, 2023; Kuperminc et al., 2020; Thayer et al., 2018; Vera et al., 2016). Therefore, there is possibly a disconnect between the literature and the lived experiences of YP, possibly due to unsuccessful attempts by YP to increase

their 'belonging' or a lack of exposure to school practices that promote it. This highlights the need for greater visibility and accessibility of supports in schools, which could be helped by teacher training, involving YP in designing interventions, and targeted interventions.

YP described 'belonging' as being impacted by both internal and external factors. Internal factors were underpinned by personal autonomy, supported by effort, and changing oneself. This suggests that 'belonging' is agentic (Kuttner, 2023) and self-determined (Mahar et al., 2013; Nouwen & Clycq, 2021). Effort related to trying new things and engaging with others. This mirrors Allen, Kern, et al. (2021) competencies and motivations for 'belonging', where YP can be supported to build the skills they need to increase 'belonging'.

YP also discussed changing themselves and modifying interests to align with group norms (Tomova et al., 2021). This reflects the stage of identity versus role confusion described by Erikson (1968), in which adolescents explore different roles and social identities to form a coherent sense of self, often adapting to group expectations as part of this process. This strategy was seen as sometimes effective but not universally positive. One YP described creating multiple personas depending on the situation, creating a tension between one's authentic self and fitting in. This further illustrates how YP adapt their true identity to fit with their peers or others (Craggs & Kelly, 2018). External factors were underpinned by the influence of others, including support and acceptance or bullying. These are supported by previous research (Moyano & Sánchez-Fuentes, 2020). This theme recognises that 'belonging' may be changeable but is impacted by certain systemic and relational barriers out of YP's control. This reflects findings from research (Štremfel et al., 2024), and reinforces the need to consider how policy can actively support and promote 'belonging'. The presence of both perceived agency and external barriers suggests that 'belonging' is neither wholly fixed nor completely flexible, but rather a dynamic interplay of personal and contextual factors. In this study, YP referred to policy and implementation as contributing to external factors, such as disciplinary

approaches. This provides an essential consideration for future research, highlighting the need to integrate better and extend existing frameworks and models of 'belonging' to include the role of policy-level influences.

6.6.5.2 'Belonging' Intervention Parameters. The strategies and approaches suggested by YP to increase their 'belonging' largely align with the literature (Allen, Kern, et al., 2021). As expected, strategies related to the micro level had the most mentions, whereas the meso level had fewer mentions (Štremfel et al., 2024). However, YP also noted the importance of the school as a system directly impacting their 'belonging', such as school spaces, school culture, and policies.

YP described the importance of developing competencies related to building social skills and conflict resolution, supporting existing literature (Allen, Jamshidi, et al., 2022; Greenwood & Kelly, 2019). However, study 1 identified that few interventions explicitly targeted competencies, focusing instead on increasing 'attendance'. This suggests a gap between the skills YP believe they need and what interventions have specifically targeted when exploring 'belonging' and 'attendance' interventions.

YP described the importance of opportunities to belong. They valued small group settings, involvement of peers and staff, and timely interventions. This illustrates a desire for targeted but relational opportunities. Study 1 similarly found that existing interventions operated at a tier 2 targeted level (Kearney & Graczyk, 2014; Kearney & Graczyk, 2020), with a lack of whole school opportunities. The absence of these approaches contrasts with YP's emphasis on their importance. This aligns with broader research advocating the importance of systemic initiatives (Boaler & Bond, 2023; Chapman et al., 2013; Štremfel et al., 2024), and could reflect potential resourcing challenges (such as staffing) or other competing priorities within the school system.

YP emphasised the importance of supportive practices, easy access to help, and the impact of school policies on increasing 'belonging'. These findings are consistent with previous research (Allen, Jamshidi, et al., 2022; Greenwood & Kelly,

2019). Study 1 found that longer interventions had mixed engagement (with attrition and implementation challenges), suggesting how interventions are experienced by YP (in terms of accessibility and relevance) is important. Shorter interventions appeared to achieve higher fidelity, perhaps aligning with YP's views on timely and accessible support. Therefore, interventions may be more effective when brief, frequent, and integrated into daily school routines.

YP indirectly described the importance of motivations to belong, highlighting the normalisation of not always 'belonging' and the appreciation of individuality. Study 1 did not find interventions explicitly designed to enhance YP's motivation to belong, suggesting further gaps. This may reflect conceptual oversight, as the intersection of 'belonging' and 'attendance' is still an emerging area of research; therefore, it is perhaps unsurprising that few studies have explored this directly, and interventions are lacking. Also missing within interventions and the broader literature was family involvement, which is surprising considering its importance (Allen et al., 2023; Boaler & Bond, 2023; Kearney et al., 2023).

The uncertainty of some YP on increasing 'belonging', and therefore, 'attendance', echoes findings from study 1. When variability in intervention design and reporting made it difficult to ascertain which aspects of an intervention were most effective, this reflects broader challenges highlighted in the literature relating to conceptual clarity (García-Moya et al., 2019), measurement (Too et al., 2022), and intervention design and delivery (Allen, Jamshidi, et al., 2022; Allen et al., 2018).

6.6.5.3 Importance of Intervention Components. YP indicated several components were necessary for fostering 'belonging'. They rated several key components as very important. Before considering this further, it is important to recognise a possible ceiling effect. However, high ratings across components may reflect genuine consensus rather than measurement limitations alone, and the findings should be viewed with this in mind.

YP rated personalised support from school and having a say in decisions very highly. This is unsurprising as 'belonging' is not a one-size-fits-all experience; it is

shaped by an individual's subjective perceptions, relational experiences, and sense of safety within their environment. Therefore, support mechanisms should be tailored and responsive to YP's needs and contexts (Allen, Kern, et al., 2021; Craggs & Kelly, 2018; Mahar et al., 2013). The prioritisation of involving YP strengthens the argument for a participatory approach (Lansdown, 2018). Study 1 highlighted a gap in interventions that included YP, further reinforcing a disconnect between best practice and implementation. This also supports Study 2's iterative design to actively involve YP in developing the conceptual model and candidate intervention, reinforcing the value of their lived experience in shaping relevant and feasible supports.

Interestingly, online opportunities for participation were rated as equally important to having a say in decisions. This may be particularly pertinent for YP who find physically attending school difficult due to a variety of reasons, and is relevant in a post-pandemic context. YP did not expand on the practicalities of online working. Future work should consider the feasibility of embedding online elements in intervention delivery.

Building relationships with peers and managing overwhelming emotions were also prioritised. These findings are consistent with research (Allen et al., 2023; El Zaatar & Maalouf, 2022; Ulaş & Seçer, 2024). Of note is the emphasis on emotional regulation skills, an area less frequently highlighted within 'belonging' and 'attendance' interventions. This suggests that future interventions should incorporate emotional regulation strategies explicitly within the content.

Another important component was recognising what is going well in school. This aligns with strength-based approaches emerging within education (Whitney et al., 2019) and reflects the importance YP place on being seen for their capacities rather than their problems (Allen et al., 2023). Protective factors identified in other research - such as positive self-perception, pro-social behaviour, and perceived teacher support - reinforce the importance of building upon what students do well (Leduc et al., 2022; Ulaş & Seçer, 2024). However, interventions reviewed in study 1

focused on deficits rather than strengths, suggesting a misalignment between current practice and YP's perspectives. This highlights the need for a paradigm shift toward asset-based and appreciative frameworks in intervention design approaches.

Additionally, YP rated parent/carer involvement and positive parental views as unimportant for their 'belonging'. This is interesting considering study 1 and wider literature emphasise its importance (El Zaatari & Maalouf, 2022; Štremfel et al., 2024). This might be because YP distinguish and separate home and school environments, with limited crossover in their experience of 'belonging'. It may also be that the YP included in the study did not experience significant adversity at home, making home factors less prominent for them. This warrants further research to better understand how YP interpret the role of parents in their 'belonging'.

Similarly, 'attendance' monitoring and feedback were also rated as of low importance. This diverges from the literature that emphasised the importance of early identification of 'attendance' difficulties. This is possibly because almost all YP did not realise their absences were persistent, suggesting gaps in how the system communicates or tracks attendance. This disconnect highlights the importance of how 'attendance' is framed and communicated to YP. Interventions that seek to improve 'attendance' may need to move beyond monitoring and instead focus on building connections in school.

6.6.5.4 Rationale for Candidate Intervention Approach. Based on these findings, Appreciative Inquiry (AI) was selected as a candidate approach for the intervention. This was due to its strengths-based focus (Whitney et al., 2019) and co-constructed, collaborative approach focusing on relationships (Lundy, 2007). It was chosen as it maps closely onto several key intervention components prioritised by YP. When selecting this intervention approach, it was not possible to include all the priorities identified by YP. For example, emotional regulation, though important, was excluded because AI emphasizes strengths and relational processes rather than direct skill-building, helping keep the intervention both feasible and aligned with YP's key priorities. AI aligns with YP's expressed desire to be recognised for their

strengths, rather than viewed through a deficit lens, and fits well with their prioritisation of supportive, relational approaches. It offers flexibility in its application, meaning that it can be adapted for both whole-school and more targeted interventions, depending on the group's thoughts and views. This is important given the resourcing and time pressures within schools, as well as the importance of timely and accessible supports, as identified by the YP (Štremfel et al., 2024). Its focus on what is already working well provides a useful framework to embed support within already established school practices.

6.6.5.5 Summary. This section highlighted YP's views on increasing 'belonging'. They highlighted that internal and external factors shape their 'belonging'. They identified key strategies to foster 'belonging', including the development of social and emotional competencies, timely supports, opportunities for participation, and school-wide approaches. YP emphasised the importance of personalised support, voice in decision-making, relational opportunities, and recognition of strengths. These views highlight gaps between existing intervention practices and their lived experiences, underscoring the need for strengths-focused, relational, and participatory interventions. This also points to the value of co-designing future research and programmes with YP, ensuring their insights directly inform the development of meaningful and relevant interventions.

6.6.6 Research Question 5: Do YP Think the Findings Accurately Reflect Their Experiences of 'Belonging' and 'Attendance'?

YP confirmed the accuracy of the summary of findings, providing support for their validity. The consistency across the exploratory and confirmatory phases adds weight to the robustness of the analysis (Birt et al., 2016; Lincoln & Guba, 1986; McKim, 2023). As many stated, self-recognition in the themes presented suggests that analytical interpretations resonate with the YP who contributed the data. These responses reinforced the credibility of the findings. They supported participant validation through the member-checking process (Birt et al., 2016) and aligned with the critical realists' stance to uncover underlying structures and explore YP's views (Bhaskar, 2013; Mukumbang, 2021).

When considering alignment, several themes were particularly resonant for YP, including the dynamic nature of 'belonging', the importance of relationships, and the need to access flexible supports. YP's views support the belief that 'belonging' is not static but shifting and is influenced by relationships, transitions, and the broader school environment. This supports previous literature and the conceptual model, highlighting the dynamic nature of 'belonging' and its dependence on wider ecological factors (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; El Zaatari & Maalouf, 2022; Mahar et al., 2013).

It is noted that YP illustrated some divergence, suggesting that the summary of findings may not universally reflect all their views. Rather than undermining the conclusions, this enhances the credibility of the analysis. For instance, one YP said that 'attendance' does not matter during their second year. Several other YPs directly disagreed with this view, suggesting it was an outlier. Framing this as an outlier clarifies group-level consensus while still valuing individual voice. YP requested the removal of this view from the research or a more explicit acknowledgement of it as an outlier in the results. This illustrates YP's active role in the reporting of findings. Disconfirming evidence must be represented within qualitative research, ensuring a balanced and holistic interpretation of views (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). However, care is required when presenting findings to ensure that outlier views are not interpreted as representative. Therefore, this view remained with explicit acknowledgement of contrasting views.

In addition, one YP emphasised the need for 'attendance' to be more clearly defined, noting that it should be wider than 'just coming to school'. This aligns with the research's definition and that of other researchers, who have called for a broader definition of 'attendance' and participation to encompass not only physically attending school but also engagement with learning (Kearney & González, 2022). Another YP raised concerns about the underrepresentation of the impact of negative peer interactions. Further research is required to examine this. This suggests that certain factors may be more impactful for YP than initially

captured in the summary of results. For this YP, peer relationships and negative interactions were central to their 'belonging' (Allen & Kern, 2017; Chen et al., 2023). This aligns with the conceptual model, which illustrates factors impacting 'belonging', but further investigation is required to determine their effect on 'belonging'.

Finally, overall, these findings contribute to a more nuanced understanding of what 'belonging' and 'attendance' mean from the perspective of YP, supporting the study's validity and enriching future directions for research and practice. Together, these findings clarify what 'belonging' and 'attendance' mean for YP and set the stage for assessing the accuracy and validity of the conceptual model.

6.6.7 Research Question 6: Do YP Think the Conceptual Model Accurately Reflects Their Experiences of 'Belonging' and 'Attendance'?

The results reinforce the validity and relevance of the conceptual model developed to explain 'belonging' and its intersection with 'attendance'. This member-checked analysis enhances the model's content validity, demonstrating that it accurately captures the experiences of YP it sought to describe (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). This also reflects a critical realist positionality and participatory stance (Anyon et al., 2018; Mukumbang, 2021). It is also consistent with other research indicating that co-constructed knowledge enhanced the trustworthiness of participatory research (Bradbury-Jones et al., 2018).

As expected, relationships emerged as a central theme, with all YP demonstrating their significance to 'belonging'. This is consistent with the literature and the SSMD, which emphasises the social context in satisfying the need for engagement (Connell, 1991; Nouwen & Clycq, 2021; Pikkarainen et al., 2021). YP indicated that teacher relationships were particularly salient for them. This echoes study 1 and the exploratory phase of this study, alongside the wider literature. This consistent emphasis on the teacher-student relationships further validates this component of the model. YP highlighted informal or incidental interactions as important, illustrating possible avenues for intervention. They described moments

outside the classroom, such as casual conversations or shared humour, as making them feel that teachers genuinely cared.

Home factors were also discussed. YP highlighted both supportive families and competing demands from home. These findings lend support to research that illustrates the impact of family influence and dynamics on 'belonging' (Allen et al., 2018; Štremfel et al., 2024). However, it is noteworthy that YP also indicated that home factors were somewhat less important when considering ways to increase their 'belonging'. This aligns with the broader research on both topics, which provides a similar picture (Allen et al., 2023; Štremfel et al., 2024). This may be due to studies conducted within a school context, which aim to influence systems where control and influence are most affected, whereas this is less so in the home or community context. Nevertheless, the validation of this factor in the model highlights its importance and may inform further multi-agency approaches. As study 1 evidenced the notable absence of parental views in current research, further study with this stakeholder group is warranted.

School-related factors were indicated as aligned, although these were discussed less frequently. YP notably agreed with the support offered by schools, the impact of school spaces, and the curriculum, further supporting previous research (Allen, Kern, et al., 2021; Korpershoek et al., 2020; Sorrenti et al., 2024; Štremfel et al., 2024). That is, YP illustrated that the access and design of the school environment impacted how welcome they feel, whereas curricular elements related to their fit and engagement with learning opportunities. One explanation for the lower frequency of discussion may be that school factors often impact YP distally. That is, school factors may be less visible to YP or experienced indirectly through policy and practice rather than daily interaction.

Individual factors were also discussed, although variability was noted across experiences for YP. For example, two YP stated motivation was essential for 'belonging', while one indicated it was less relevant. This may be due to YP experiencing different levels of basic need satisfaction (Pikkarainen et al., 2021;

Ryan & Deci, 2017). It is noted that this study did not explore which need was most affected among YP. However, this variability is captured within the conceptual model, which reinforces the importance of context-specific approaches to intervention. For instance, when autonomy is absent, an individual's 'belonging' may rely more heavily on external validation. However, when autonomy is present, 'belonging' may emerge more intrinsically, supported by internal validation. The relationship between 'belonging' and its impact on extrinsic and intrinsic motivation may be worthy of further exploration.

Two YP indicated that both gender and mental health may be important for 'belonging'. While this factor appears in some of the 'belonging' literature, and is noted in the conceptual model's grey box, neither was illustrated in study 1 nor by participants during the exploratory phase of this study. One YP discussed the importance of mental health and its impact on an individual's interactions and relationships with others, suggesting that mental health is a potential mediating factor that warrants further exploration to understand its role as a cause and effect on 'belonging'. Another YP expressed a possible gender difference in 'belonging', although study 1 highlights a lack of consensus in the research. The few divergences noted offer possible next steps for further analysis.

Overall, YP's views strengthened the credibility and validity of the conceptual model, providing considerations for practice and intervention design. The consistency of findings across phases, alongside consideration of accommodating and further exploring other themes, demonstrates its ecological validity, supporting scalability and adaptability in schools.

6.6.8 Research Question 7: Do YP Think the Findings Accurately Reflect Their Views on Increasing 'Belonging'?

Feedback from YP supported the overall accuracy and relevance of the parameters for increasing 'belonging'. In the main, YP (Seven) agreed with the ranking of the support strategies, indicating a preference for relational and participatory approaches, such as having a say, opportunities to build relationships, and

involvement in co-design. These were favoured over more administrative strategies like monitoring and tracking, which were seen as less important. YP who feel connected, capable, and autonomous are more likely to engage in learning and attending school (Nouwen & Clycq, 2021).

One YP disagreed with the ranking of parental/carer views and 'attendance' feedback. This suggests that there is some variation in how YP perceive the role of families and feedback from school in their school lives. This also aligns with higher standard deviations within lower-ranked items, suggesting the need for further nuance in interpreting aggregated rankings (Chapter 6, section 6.5.4, p.166). Another YP suggested amending 'teaching as fun and relevant' to 'teaching as interesting and relevant'. This perhaps highlights the importance of meaningful learning for YP, rather than just learning that is fun. When learning is viewed as relevant and interesting, it is more likely to meet YP's competence and autonomy needs, increasing connection to the subject and intrinsic motivation (Nouwen & Clycq, 2021; Ryan & Deci, 2017).

The YP participating mainly agreed that diversity was required to increase 'belonging', with opportunities for personalisation needed within any intervention. This aligns with the SSDM and supports the conceptual model, which recognised how variability in contextual experience shapes an individual's motivational state, influencing outcomes such as 'attendance' (Nouwen & Clycq, 2021; Pikkarainen et al., 2021). The prioritisation of relational and participatory approaches by YP reinforces the importance of environments that meet psychological needs as a foundation for promoting 'belonging' (Allen et al., 2023; Corcoran & Kelly, 2023; Lieblein et al., 2018).

Overall, YP's feedback verifies the credibility of the findings and enriches the conceptual model by considering possible ways to impact 'belonging' through the reinforcement of participatory, relational, and personalised supports in its promotion, underscoring the importance of maintaining a relational, participatory, and personalised focus in future practice and research.

6.6.9 Research Question 8: Do YP Think the Proposed Guidelines for Intervention are a Feasible Way to Support 'Belonging' and 'Attendance'?

This section examines YP's perceptions of a candidate intervention aimed at improving 'attendance' and 'belonging'. It is structured using Proctor et al. (2011); Proctor et al. (2023) implementation outcomes as a framework for analysis.

6.6.9 1 General Thoughts. YP's first impressions of the intervention were positive. This initial buy-in signals early-stage acceptability, which is an essential factor for implementation success (Fixsen et al., 2005; Fixsen et al., 2019; Proctor et al., 2011).

Several (six) YP felt that it was different from other existing school supports because it was voluntary and designed with their input. They valued the intervention's focus and the possibility of creating meaningful change. This highlights the possible readiness for change and reflects YP's views that school settings are important contexts for creating change, particularly when interventions are inclusive and strengths-focused (Allen et al., 2018; Štremfel et al., 2024).

YP indicated that the intervention was easy to understand, which suggests that the materials and proposed structure were accessible to the target audience. YP felt that a strength of this intervention was the weight given to their views, which supports the rationale for choosing a participatory approach that values YP's voice (Lundy, 2007; Whitney et al., 2019).

6.6.9.2 Adoption/Acceptability. YP believed that their peers would be interested in the intervention, especially those with lower 'belonging' or who were disengaged at school. This reflected previous research showing how co-designed interventions are more relevant to marginalised youth (Anyon et al., 2018; Shamrova & Cummings, 2017). As noted in the findings, 'belonging' itself may act as a motivator for engagement.

Whilst most YP (Five) indicated they would want to participate in the intervention, others (Three) indicated that their willingness to participate would

depend on the individual. One YP indicated, “The idea of looking for help (...) may be difficult” (P10, L115), suggesting that readiness and willingness to engage are important. This could also reflect wider issues of stigma and help-seeking behaviours identified in existing research (Gulliver et al., 2010). This further reinforces the importance of context in shaping engagement decisions, supporting and Proctor et al. (2023) in their emphasis on appropriateness, as well as Fixsen et al. (2005) recommendation that interventions need to consider individual readiness.

One YP indicated that having a voice was important for participation. This reflects Lundy (2007) who emphasise that interventions must seek to hear YP and actively consider their voices in decision-making. This further reinforces interventions that account for meaningfully listening to YP may have higher adoption and acceptability for those participating in them (Garcia-Quiroga & Agoglia, 2020).

When considering acceptability, most YP were positive about using a small group format. However, this was contingent upon group dynamics, supporting previous findings illustrating that some YP engage well in in-group dialogue, where others prefer smaller, more individualised approaches (Lansdown, 2018). Offering flexibility in participation formats or preparation for sessions when required was perceived to enhance the acceptability and accessibility of the intervention.

Time and logistical considerations also influenced acceptability. For instance, YP expressed a preference for embedding the intervention within the school timetable, rather than outside class time. This supports Chapman et al. (2013) where interventions were more successful when embedded within the school routines. These findings highlight the importance of structural acceptability, where interventions are more feasible and engaging when integrated into existing school structures.

6.6.9.3 Feasibility. YP were generally positive about implementing the intervention, particularly the number of sessions. While one YP acknowledged that engagement with the sessions could be affected by external factors like individual

circumstances, another suggested that additional sessions might be beneficial if feasible. This echoes research that emphasises intervention dosage must be responsive to contextual demands and the needs of the target group (Fixsen et al., 2019). The number of sessions was chosen to align with Appreciative Inquiry's 5-D cycle (Define, Discover, Dream, Design, and Deliver), alongside an initial information session, and to allow for flexibility to spend more time on a section as required (Thompson, 2020; Whitney et al., 2019).

YP illustrated the importance of facilitator characteristics. They strongly emphasise the importance of relatable and approachable facilitators. This highlights facilitator relational competence, that is, the capacity to build authentic, empathic relationships, as a key component of implementation success (Fixsen et al., 2005; Fixsen et al., 2019). This is unsurprising, as findings reinforce that relationships are a core component of 'belonging' and 'attendance'. Two YP illustrated the importance of multiple facilitators. This could potentially improve group dynamics and allow for greater flexibility in supporting involved participants through diverse support, conflict management, and adaptability.

This is possibly supported by the fact that YP indicated a strong preference for small group sizes. Five YP indicated that larger group sizes can be intimidating and overwhelming. At the same time, one YP expressed concerns that too few participants may limit the meaningfulness of the intervention, emphasising the importance of balance. Following on from this, an amendment was made to the proposed group size from 6-8 participants to 5-6 participants.

When considering systems-level feasibility, YP felt that their schools had the relevant resources to implement this intervention. However, caution is required when interpreting this as it relates to perceived feasibility from YP and may differ from school-level capacity. Five YP expressed confidence in the school's ability to provide space, time, and staff. This indicates a promising level of organisational readiness, a precursor to implementation success (Fixsen et al., 2005; Proctor et al.,

2023). However, it is recognised that YP may not be aware of wider organisation constraints, such as competing priorities, staffing, or timetable pressures.

6.6.9.4 Appropriateness/Accessibility. YP provided valuable insights into how the intervention could enhance accessibility for the intended participants, discussing design preferences and ways to support engagement. For instance, YP emphasised the importance of sessions being relaxed and informal, youth-focused, and limited to the time of a school class.

In the main, YP (Seven) endorsed supporting different ways to engage learners. Three YP supported a hybrid approach, combining in-person and online delivery as appropriate. They indicated that flexible approaches to engagement would likely widen accessibility for YP who are persistently absent from school. Four YP suggested alternative ways of sharing thoughts in a group format, such as preparing views in advance, writing or drawing thoughts, and speaking to someone beforehand. The intervention may benefit from optional participation menus or communication preference tools. This supports the importance of providing YP with choice and control over how they participate in interventions (Anderson, 2020). YP also provided suggestions to accommodate absences through informal check-ins, recaps, and summaries.

6.6.9.5 Effectiveness. YP indicated a hopeful view of the intervention's potential to impact and improve 'attendance' and 'belonging'. These perceived outcomes closely align with the goals of interventions aimed at increasing school connectedness, which is associated with a range of positive outcomes, including reduced absenteeism, improved mental health, and greater academic motivation (Allen et al., 2018). One YP suggested the possibility of changes in school culture, pointing to potential shifts beyond the participating individuals. This echoes AI's focus on systemic changes based on individuals' positive envisioning (Whitney et al., 2019). Further exploration of evaluating the candidate intervention will support sustainability and impact.

6.6.9.6 Sustainability. YP shared that to be sustainable, the project must be ongoing, routine, and embedded within school life. YP described it as not feeling like a one-off, temporary support. For YP, an intervention becomes sustainable when it feels stable, expected, and integrated into daily school life (Fernandes et al., 2024)

One YP indicated that it is essential for the intervention to be meaningful to them. Another YP discussed the importance of youth-led promotion. Both of these themes support the growing literature on youth participatory action research, emphasising the importance of youth involvement in creating meaningful changes within their context, as well as the impact of peer legitimacy and influence in supporting the sustainability of an intervention for other YP (Shamrova & Cummings, 2017).

The findings of this study indicate that the candidate intervention is perceived as acceptable, feasible, and appropriate by YP. They suggested that the intervention was potentially effective, but stressed the importance of relational components, group sizes, and the timing of supports. Further suggestions were made to widen accessibility for YP and accommodate absences. These suggestions were incorporated into amended guidance for implementation (Appendix V).

6.6.10 Limitations and Next Steps

The findings of this study must be considered with limitations in mind. The iterative design of this research sought to gather and verify the perspectives of persistently absent YP on 'belonging' and 'attendance'. In addition, these views represent persistently absent YP and do not account for YP experiencing higher or lower 'attendance'. The conceptual model and candidate intervention were developed and reviewed by a small number of persistently absent YP. This ensured that the model was grounded in the lived experiences of the target group. This approach enhances ecological validity, though it may limit generalisability across broader school populations. Further involvement and validation from other YP would further strengthen this model.

It is also noted that this analysis does not separate YP by their perception of 'belonging'. Further analysis should consider whether there is a threshold of positive experiences, whether 'belonging' is protected, or whether negative experiences degrade 'belonging'. This could involve exploring YP who experience different levels of 'belonging' (those who consistently feel connected, those who feel disconnected, and those where 'belonging' fluctuates across contexts). Further exploration is also warranted by YP who have high or low perceptions of 'belonging' in school. In addition, the sample was not categorised by characteristics such as gender, which limits exploration of how experiences of 'belonging' and absence may differ across subgroups.

The measures used within the study should also be considered. For instance, YP were selected to participate based on their school-reported 'attendance' data, which should be considered when interpreting the results. Scotland has no mechanism yet for accurately reporting nuance within the 'attendance' data (Giménez-Miralles et al., 2022). This means that the study may overlook other forms of engagement with learning. Additionally, a potential ceiling effect was observed in several items within the sorting activity, where participants consistently rated components highly. The potential influence of social desirability on participant responses, particularly in highly rated components, should be considered. This effect may limit the ability to detect meaningful differences or prioritise areas for intervention and should be considered when interpreting these findings. A next step would be to refine this measure, possibly by expanding the scale used, rephrasing items for greater nuance, or introducing ranking.

Whilst the conceptual model presents factors that impact 'belonging', it does not seek to assign effect sizes for them. Further research should be conducted to determine the extent of the relationships between factors, 'belonging', and 'attendance'. Additionally, saturation was not reached for some antecedent factors, demonstrating that 'belonging' is context-specific. This highlights the need for further research to explore the factors in greater depth and across other

populations. An important emerging research question is why some individuals can maintain 'belonging' in the face of adversity, while others feel alienated despite positive experiences. Understanding this could offer valuable insights for more targeted and effective interventions.

Other stakeholders did not formally review the conceptual model and candidate intervention. Next steps include triangulation with additional stakeholder groups - such as school staff, parents/carers, and other relevant parties - in line with co-design principles. These views must be included to verify the feasibility and practicality of the model and candidate intervention. Additionally, this will facilitate further refinement of the conceptual model. Future research would benefit from incorporating a wide range of voices to offer a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between 'belonging' and 'attendance'.

It is also important to note that the candidate intervention was presented conceptually. As the intervention was reviewed conceptually, not piloted, YP considered the idea without direct experience. This means YP were considering the idea of an intervention but had no direct experience of it. A logical next step is to pilot the candidate intervention to gather data to support its effectiveness and implementation.

Finally, this research is situated within Scotland's school context and reflects the experiences of YP within this cultural context. Future work should consider how these findings translate to other educational and cultural settings.

6.6.11 Conclusion

This study provides an insight into the views of persistently absent YP on their 'belonging' and 'attendance', offering important considerations for future interventions. In the exploratory phase, YP's definition of 'belonging' aligned with Goodenow's definition, viewing it as relational, spatial, and academic. They illustrated the impact of 'belonging' on their 'attendance', mental health, and future aspirations. However, 'belonging' was also experienced as fragile and context-dependent, reliant on an individual's context.

Analysis of the conceptual model showed strong alignment, particularly when considering relational factors. However, moderate and low alignment in some areas suggests the need to refine the model further to ensure it captures the complex and dynamic nature of 'belonging'. Protective factors for 'belonging' were evident, such as supportive relationships, but persistent negative experiences related to policies, marginalisation, and peer influence highlighted the vulnerability of 'belonging' for many YP in secondary education. This highlights the need for school and system-level policies that do not just target 'attendance' directly but focus on creating environments where 'belonging' is actively supported and protected.

The confirmatory phase of this study deepens the understanding of how persistently absent YP perceive 'belonging' and its relationship to 'attendance'. One YP noted, "It makes me feel better. Like what I think other people think" (P9, L12). This demonstrates how reflecting their views in the exploratory phase fostered 'belonging' and accurately captured their perspectives. YP confirmed the conceptual model's relevance, reinforcing its trustworthiness and credibility, while also highlighting several areas for refinement, including the theme of mental health, gender, and the impact of negative peer interactions.

YP prioritised strategies that were relational, personal, provided opportunities for meaningful participation, and recognised strengths. They also supported the acceptability, feasibility, and appropriateness of the candidate intervention and offered additional insights to improve its design and delivery. This phase illustrates the value of youth co-validation in considering how concepts interact and in the development of interventions. As one participant reflected, "...and maybe the school will actually listen and take it into consideration and change something" (P6, L259), underscoring the importance of flexible, youth-centred approaches, which are context-specific and capable of evolving with the needs of the YP they aim to support.

Of note is the study identified gaps between YP's lived experiences and current interventions. These findings highlight the need for 'belonging' interventions that are centered relationally, grounded in young agency, and situated within context, ensuring the authentic involvement of YP. Together, these components could form the basis of a guiding framework for future co-designed interventions - one that places relationships, voice, and lived experience at the core of design and delivery.

Chapter 7: Final Conclusions

7.1 Overview

Chapter 7 brings together the findings from the two research studies presented in this thesis. Study 1 (Chapter 5) presents a scoping review of the existing literature exploring the relationship between ‘attendance’ and ‘belonging’ in secondary education, mapping the breadth of research and identifying gaps in understanding. Study 2 (Chapter 6) builds upon this review through an iterative (exploratory and confirmatory) research design, gathering the views of persistently absent YP to validate a conceptual model and co-create a candidate intervention to increase ‘belonging’ and ‘attendance’. By combining a scoping review with the lived experiences of YP, this research aimed to advance the theoretical understanding of ‘belonging’ and ‘attendance’, and to contribute to practice by providing evidence-informed strategies that bridge theory and application, this final chapter reviews the research aims and objectives, outlines the key conclusions from both studies, discusses their implications, and outlines future directions for further research.

7.2 Aims and Objectives of the Thesis

The research aimed to understand the relationship between ‘attendance’ and ‘belonging’ in secondary education.

The specific objectives were to:

- Map the extent of the research in the secondary education sector, exploring study and methodological characteristics.
- Identify any gaps in the literature related to causality, inclusion of YP’s voices, and intervention-based studies.
- Further analyse the research to support the development of a conceptual model of the relationship between ‘belonging’ and ‘attendance’, validated by the views of YP.
- Explore and confirm YP's views on ‘attendance’ and ‘belonging’.

- Design a candidate intervention protocol based on persistently absent YP's views to improve 'belonging' and 'attendance'.
- Assess YP's views on the feasibility, acceptability, and accessibility of the candidate intervention.

7.3 Key Conclusions

This thesis confirms that 'belonging' is a significant factor that influences 'attendance'. The findings across both studies consistently highlight that 'belonging' is both a protective and fragile construct, influenced by an individual's context and shaped by a wide range of factors - individual, school, home, and relational.

Study 1 demonstrates that whilst there is growing interest in the intersection between 'belonging' and 'attendance', an educational jurisdiction bias is present. Research remains predominantly exploratory and cross-sectional, with limited studies including the views of persistently absent YP or evaluating interventions aimed at impacting both factors. Additionally, research often measures 'belonging' as an independent variable relating to 'attendance', rather than as a complex bidirectional process. The final conceptual model demonstrates the importance of 'belonging' as a key mediator for 'attendance' and presents the antecedent variables that impact it.

Study 2 addresses these gaps by gathering the voices of persistently absent YP. It confirms 'belonging' as a significant mediating factor in 'attendance'. The views of YP align with the preliminary conceptual model, particularly when considering relational factors. They also suggested changes, such as the inclusion of gender and mental health. YP's views led to refinements of the model to ensure its accuracy.

YP shared that both internal and external factors influenced their 'belonging'. Their 'belonging' was vulnerable to disruption by school policies, marginalisation, and negative experiences and interactions. Protective factors, such as positive relationships, were essential. When considering the candidate intervention, YP valued its focus on strengths and the relational participatory

approach, which they thought provided opportunities for changes and personalisation within the process. YP viewed the candidate intervention as acceptable, feasible, and accessible, although further validation and piloting are required before any conclusions can be drawn.

Together, both studies illustrate that ‘belonging’ is dynamic and is continually constructed and reconstructed ecologically, across relational, individual, school, and home systems.

7.4 Implications for Practice

This research offers several implications for practice and policy.

Firstly, approaches aimed at improving ‘attendance’ must centre on supporting ‘belonging’. This research calls for a shift from focusing on increasing YP’s physical ‘attendance’ at school, towards supporting their perceptions of ‘belonging’ to place, in relationships, and as learners. For example, while having backup relationships is important, YP indicated that overall, it is the quality, consistency, and authenticity of these relationships that matter most. Therefore, consideration is required not only to provide opportunities to develop relationships (although this is somewhat important) but also to be cognisant of how YP perceive themselves and others within these relationships. Practice and policy, aligned with frameworks such as *Getting it Right for Every Child* (Scottish Government, 2008), should consider how best to support ‘belonging’, as it is a key mediating variable for ‘attendance’.

Secondly, interventions need to involve YP in their design and implementation in a meaningful way (Anderson, 2020). Interventions should acknowledge that YP are not passive recipients of support. Instead, they bring their lived experiences and ideas, which can create important changes to the support they receive. This suggests that co-production and meaningful consultation should be embedded within school improvement priorities. It is worth noting, though, that some YP may require support and structure to participate meaningfully. For example, some YP were not aware of what resources were available or how to

articulate their needs. This research finding indicates that schools should consider appropriate mediation to support engagement with co-designing processes.

This further highlights the need for changes to how 'attendance' is monitored within schools. YP highlighted that feedback about their 'attendance' was not the most important parameter for increasing their 'belonging' or engagement in school. However, they were often unaware that they were persistently absent. YP also highlighted challenges in accessing support within school. Ensuring pathways to access support are visible and timely is important. Therefore, there is a need to consider how YP recognise their persistent absenteeism and how they can access timely support to address the issue before it escalates.

Policies were almost exclusively viewed negatively by the YP participating in study 2, which has implications for school and national-level policies. There is a need to revisit how these policies are implemented and experienced by the individuals they aim to support. For example, many schools in Scotland adopt a restorative practice approach to conflict (Scottish Government, 2024a). Still, YP described perceived unfairness in discipline practices in their schools, often feeling punished and misunderstood. This suggests a lack of transparency and possible presence of power imbalances in the implementation of these policies. Re-examining how policies, such as restorative practice, are implemented and experienced by YP is therefore essential when considering 'belonging' and 'attendance'.

Finally, there is no one-size-fits-all solution to supporting YP's 'belonging' and 'attendance'. However, the conceptual model maps out the antecedent factors to 'belonging' and how they can increase 'attendance'. This provides valuable considerations for schools when thinking about whether there are gaps in how they currently support persistently absent YP.

7.5 Directions for Future Research

This thesis highlights several areas for possible further research:

Firstly, there is a need for longitudinal quantitative studies to understand the strength and direction of the relationship between 'belonging' and 'attendance'. Much of the current research is cross-sectional, making it difficult to draw causal conclusions. In addition, a meta-analysis exploring 'attendance' and 'belonging' may also provide a more precise estimate of the current research on the relationship between 'belonging' and 'attendance'. It may also provide an understanding of the magnitude of the relationship across different contexts.

Secondly, stakeholder validation of the conceptual model is also required to strengthen its trustworthiness and relevance. Similarly, it would be helpful to explore the views of other vulnerable groups, increasing the generalisability of the model. This may include YP from diverse backgrounds or demographics, such as gender, as requested by a YP in this study.

There is also a need to consider the possibility of disconfirming views. Within this research, one participant indicated opinions that did not align with the majority. Understanding why this YP held differing views can help highlight the variability in factors that impact 'belonging' and 'attendance'. In addition, exploring such disconfirming views can inform personalised or tiered interventions, ensuring that support is responsive to individual needs rather than assuming a one-size-fits-all approach.

There is likely also merit in exploring whether a difference is present between persistent school absence and dropout. While many factors intersect between these concepts, some differences have been noted (Gubbels et al., 2019). Therefore, exploring whether a difference is also seen for 'belonging' would be of value and may lead to intervention considerations.

Notably, a lack of systemic approaches to support 'belonging' and 'attendance' was noted in the literature. Indeed, YP reported experiencing higher feelings of 'belonging' in classes where they had more positive interactions with their teachers, which may indicate a positive direction for intervention research. The lack of systems-level research is surprising, as this research, alongside previous

research, highlights the importance of school culture and policies for 'belonging'. This may reflect research's focus on targeting change for the individual rather than organisational structures. Therefore, future work should consider not only which school system factors impact 'belonging', but also the extent to which they do so.

Similarly, a lack of intervention studies was found; therefore, piloting and evaluating the candidate intervention is an important next step. Gathering the views of other stakeholders will also be vital when considering the implementation of this intervention (Fixsen et al., 2005; Proctor et al., 2011). Whilst YP indicated that they thought the approach was acceptable, feasible, and accessible, it is necessary to consider whether this is the case. Piloting would allow for analysis of intervention outcomes and subsequent refinements.

Furthermore, this research raised other interesting questions, such as why some people maintain 'belonging' despite their experiences, while others experience a more vulnerable 'belonging'. A better understanding of this will enable schools to provide targeted support at the right time for YP.

7.6 Final Thoughts

This research has highlighted that 'belonging' is essential for YPs 'attendance', well-being, and future aspirations. It confirms that 'belonging' is not simply a by-product of 'attendance', but a key mediator. By combining a scoping review with lived experiences, this research offers a conceptual foundation for future research. It identifies the need for youth-centered, relational, and responsive interventions, presenting a candidate intervention. At its core, this research calls for a reorientation of school systems to place 'belonging' at the heart of education. 'Belonging' is a necessity. If 'attendance' is to be improved, then school environments must be places where YP can be their authentic selves and are *seen*, *valued*, and *connected*. These findings demonstrate that 'belonging' can both anchor and unravel 'attendance,' highlighting its central role in YP's engagement with school.

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Appendix A: Definitions of ‘Belonging’ Mapped to Mahar et al.’s (2013) Five Themes

Theorist	Definition	Subjectivity	Groundness	Reciprocity	Dynamism	Self-determination
Baumeister & Leary (1995)	“a pervasive drive to form and maintain a minimum quantity of lasting, positive and significant interpersonal relationships.” (p. xx)	Partially	No	Partially	No	Partially
Blum et al., (2004)	“feeling close to, a part of, and happy at school; feeling that teachers care about students and treat them fairly; and feeling safe at school” (p.3)	Yes	Yes	Partially	Partially	No
CDC (2009)	“School connectedness is the belief by students that adults and peers in the school care about their learning as well as about them as individuals.”	Yes	Partially	Partially	No	No
Goodenow (1993)	“a student’s sense of being accepted, valued, included, and encouraged by others (teachers and peers) in the academic classroom setting and of feeling oneself to be an important part of the life and activity of the class. More than simple perceived liking or warmth, it also involves support and	Yes	Yes, although name academic classroom setting	Yes	Yes	Yes

	respect for personal autonomy and the student as an individual.” (p.80)						
Hirshi (1969, 2017)	“Attachment describes the strength of the bonds and relationships ... with an individual's social environment ... institutions ... like school or friends.” (p.xx)	Partially	Yes	Partially	Partially	No	
Kuttner (2023)	“School belonging is a dynamic social process in which students engage interpersonal relationships, intersecting and fluid identities, their locations within systems of power, and the politics of inclusion and exclusion as they establish a place for themselves and realize their right to be - and feel that they are - valued and active participants, on their own terms, in formal educational spaces.” (p.2)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	
Voekl (1995)	“representing attachments and bonding between an individual and an institution” (p.18)	No	No	No	No	No	
Wehlage (1989)	“Students’ perceptions that other people in the school environment are supportive and that, as students, they matter in the school community” (p.102)	Yes	Yes	Partially	Partially	No	

Note. Mahar et al. (2013) five themes are subjectivity, groundedness, reciprocity, dynamism and self-determination.

Appendix B: Scoping Review Data Extraction Tool

Author

Smith, J; Smith & Seaton; Smith et al

Title Source

Full title

Publication

Journal or depositary.

Year of Publication

2014-2024

Jurisdiction of Study

USA, UK, Aus...

Date data extracted.

e.g sampling period of information or unknown

Type of Evidence Source

Review articles, Peer-reviewed articles, dissertation.

Aim of article

Narrowed to one sentence.

Methodology

Quantitative, Qualitative, and Mixed Methods

Methods

Options for quantitative: non-experimental, quasi-experimental, randomised control trial.

Options for qualitative: case study, ethnographic, action research, phenomenology.

Data collection

Surveys, questionnaires, interviews, focus groups etc

Terminology

School connectedness, belonging, emotional engagement...

Attendance, at risk of non-attendance, dropout, truancy....

Definitions

Attendance definition (e.g. missing x number of days at school) or no definition provided

School belonging definition (e.g. Goodenow & Grady, 1993) or no definition provided

Data collection tools

Psychological Sense of School Membership, Student Engagement Instrument...

Location data of study

Geographic location. For review articles where possible included the databases searched.

Type and local of school

Type of school (alternative/specialist, mainstream), Rural, Urban etc.

Participants

1. Student (include age range and mean), Graduates, Teachers, Parents, Senior school leaders, social workers, and educational psychologists. (Include Number)
2. Vulnerability (at risk of non-attending, not attending, disability, marginalisation)

Primary affiliation of primary author

Location the primary author is linked too.

Key Findings

Qualitative Data- Overarching themes

Quantitative Data- direct or indirect relationship between attendance and belonging. Other factors as appropriate.

Appendix C: Summary of Data Extracted from the Scoping Review Studies

Number of included studies	73
Authors	Vera (x2) McWhirter (x2) Keppens & Spruyt, (x2) 67 other authors
Type of Evidence/	Peer reviewed
Publication	Journal articles- 57 Book Chapter- 1 Dissertations – 15
Date of publication	2014- 2; 2015- 5; 2016- 13; 2017- 8; 2018- 12; 2019- 3; 2020- 8; 2021-5; 2022-7; 2023-6; 2024-4
Location of study	USA- 46; Australia- 5; Belgium- 4; International- 4; Turkey -2; Canada- 2; Malaysia- 2; Norway- 2; Sweden- 2; Ireland -1; Israel- 1; Morrocco- 1; Italy- 1
Publications	Journal of School Nursing (2) Journal of Youth and Adolescence (2) Youth and Society (2) Journal of School Psychology (2) Journal of Career Development (2) Walden University (2)
Aim of study	8 studies explored school belonging, its relationship to other factors and stakeholder views. 26 studies focused on school attendance and its relationship to other factors. 19 studies sought to explored both.

	18 factors related to other constructs.
	2 programme overviews
Experimental/non-experimental	69 non-experimental (2 programme reviews) 4 experimental
Qualitative (19)	Exploring views towards non-attendance (16) Young people Views of absentees- 1 (Sundelin, 2023); Views of dropouts -2 (Pangelinan, 2018, Slaten, 2015); At risk students- 2 (Ewing, 2021; Whitau, 2022); Views of truants - 2 (Min et al., 2022; Ismail, 2016); No identified needs- 2 (Liebleina et al., 2018; Pendergast, 2018); Views on tardiness-1 (Warne 2020); Former students Alternative high school students -2 (Flores, 2015; Fortner, 2021); Successful school completers- 2 (Hagen, 2016; Rangel-Clawson, 2017), Other Staff that increased whole school attendance- 1(Miles, 2018) Teacher views- 2 (Pendergast et al., 2018; Van Den Berghe, 2022) Teacher and parent views on tardiness- 1 (Warne 2020) Reviews (removed) Synthesis of young people views (Non-attendance) -1 (Corcoran & Kelly, 2023) Review of truancy interventions- 1 (Keppens & Spruyt, 2020) Review of literature relating to dropout - 1 Ramsdal & Wynn, 2022) Conceptualisation of ebsa- 1 (Hamilton, 2024) Exploring views towards belonging (3) Young people Transitional year -1 (Solberg, 2024)

Former students	
Alternative high school students - 1(Barrett, 2020)	
Successful school completers- 1 (Navarro, 2020)	
Other reviews (removed)	
Understanding the relationship between substance misuse and other factors- 1 (Hong et al., 2014)	
Exploring homophobic and factors that influence -1 (Moyano, 2020)	
School climate through Taguiris - (Arslan, 2020)	
Attendance focus- 16 incidents (16 studies)	
Belonging focus - 3 incidences (3 studies)	
Mixed Methods (5)	Exploratory
	Views of truants- 1 (Keppens & Spruyt, 2015)
	Views of chronic absentees on school connectedness during covid distance learning- 1 (Swartz & Benz, 2022)
	Evaluation of a dropout prevention programme- 1, (Vera et al., 2016)
	Explanatory-
	Teacher understanding effective practices for non-attendees- 1 (Nerveza-Clark,2020)
	Student and Teacher insights on school connectedness- 1, (Garwood & Moore, 2021)
	Attendance focus - 3
	Belonging focus - 2
	Quantitative (47 (3Attendance (7) experimental)
	Relationship between ses and attendance- 1 (Mooney et al., 2023)
	Exploring the relationship between school attendance and individual, school and family variables-1 (Demir et al., 2016)

Exploring the impact of non-cognitive skills on behavioural disengagement-1 (Palardy & Rumberger, 2019)

Examining the relationship between ACES and school absenteeism- 1 (Duke et al., 2020)

Factors related to academic intentions for at risk young people- 1 (Vera et al., 2018)

Exploring factors for academic success for at risk young people- 1 (Jimerson et al., 2016)

Relationship between exclusion and delinquency mediated by school connectedness- 1 (Pesta et al., 2023)

Belonging (3)

Exploring the impact of school connectedness on school outcomes- 2 (O'Connor 2017; Tomek et al., 2017)

Exploring the relationship between classroom management, school belonging and three dimensions of engagement-1 (St-Amand, 2017)

Belonging and attendance (19)

Relationship between school connectedness and high school graduation- 2 (Lemkin et al., 2018; Niehaus et al., 2016)

Examining the impact of school connectedness on thoughts of dropping out/drop out - 1 (McWhirter et al., 2018)

Examining the relationship between school connectedness, attendance, and attainment- 2 (Keppens & Spruyt, 2019; Pirtle, 2023)

Examining the effects of school bonds on behaviour- 1 (Peguero et al., 2016)

Relationship between emotional engagement and behavioural disengagement/ dropout/absenteeism-4 (Wang & Fredrickson, 2014; Markowitz 2017; Ruebeck et al., 2017; Garcia-Garcia & Valls, 2022))

Exploring the link between school climate and dropout/attendance- 7 (Sorrenti et al., 2024; Cohen, 2018; Hamlin, 2021; Kotok et al., 2016; Van Eck et al., 2017; Pampati et al., 2020; Orphinas & Raczynski, 2015)

Exploring differences in the relationship between school belonging and absenteeism for travellers and non-travellers -1 (Frehill & Dunsmuir, 2015).

The link between school transfers and school dropout and school attachment -1 (Langenkamp, 2016)

Other (15)

Impact of peer victimization impact on mediators- 1 (Chen et al., 2023)

Impact of cyberbullying on outcomes- 1 (Morin et al., 2018)

Impact of perceived discrimination on academic achievement- 1 (Hood et al., 2017)

Examination between school safety and school climate- 1 (Williams et al., 2018)

Impact of school climate as a resilience factor in armed conflict zones- 1 (Yablon, 2015)

Views on student perceptions of school-based racial-ethnic socialization on outcomes- 1 (Gilbertson, 2021)

Impact of parental incarceration on school characteristics and belonging- 1 (Nichols et al., 2016)

A comparison of social-emotional factors for learning- 1 (Jackson et al., 2021)

Linking labour market to psychosocial school determinants in school- 1 (Virtanen et al., 2024)

Exploring the impact of polysubstance misuse- 1 (Yang et al., 2023)

Impact of school factors on alcohol use- 1 (Vaughan et al., 2016)

Exploring factors that impact prescription opioid use- 1 (Zuckerman, 2020?)

Exploring school functioning in young people with chronic fatigue- 1 (Knight et al., 2018)

	To investigate the predictive validity of two competing measurement models underlying the student subjective well-being questionnaire- 1 (Arslan & Renshaw, 2017) Exploring the indirect effects of adolescent immigrants' acculturation orientations on school adjustment - 1 (Schnachner et al., 2017)
Experimental	Quantitative- The impact of an intervention on belonging and attendance. (Bell, 2014) Impact of mentoring on belonging and school participation- 1 (Kuperminc et al., 2020) Impact of wise feedback on the sense of belonging and truancy- 1 (Thayer et al., 2018) Mixed Methods- Impact of a summer program on belonging - 1 (Vera et al., 2016) Attendance dependent variable- 1 Belonging dependent variable- 1 Both dependent variables- 3
Method of study	Quantitative- 47 Qualitative- 19 Mixed methods- 5 Other- 2
Methods	Quantitative- Cross-sectional 25 (Arslan & Renshaw, 2017; Cohen, 2018; Demir et al., 2016; Duke, 2020; Frehill & Dunsmuir, 2015; Gilbertson, 2024; Hamlin, 2021; Keppens & Spruyt, 2019; Knight et al., 2018; Kotok et al., 2016; McWhirter et al., 2018; Morin et al., 2018; O'Conner, 2017; Palardy & Rumberger, 2019; Pampati et al., 2020; Peguero et al., 2016; Pirtle, 2023; Schachner et al., 2017; Sorrenti et al., 2024; St-Amand et al., 2020; Van Eck et al., 2016; Vaughan et al., 2016; Vera et al., 2018; Williams et al., 2018; Yablon, 2015) Longitudinal 19

(Chen et al., 2023; Garcia-Garcia & Valls, 2022; Hood et al., 2017; Jackson et al., 2021; Jimerson et al., 2016; Langenkamp, 2016; Lemkin et al., 2018; Markowitz, 2017; Mooney et al., 2023; Niehaus et al., 2016; Nichols et al., 2016; Orphinas & Raczynski, 2015; Pesta, 2023; Ruebeck, 2017; Tomek et al., 2017; Virtanen et al., 2024; Wang & Fredrickson, 2014; Yang et al., 2023; Zuckerman et al., 2020.)

Quasi-experimental- 3 (Bell, 2014; Kuperminc et al., 2020; Thayer et al., 2018)

Qualitative- Case study- 12 (longitudinal -1),

(Barrett, 2022; Ewing et al., 2021; Ismail & Jusoh, 2016; Miles, 2018; Navarro, 2020; Pendergast et al., 2018; Pangelinan, 2018; (Solberg & Launda, 2024); Sundelin et al., 2023; Van De Berghe et al., 2022; Warne et al., 2020; Whitau et al., 2022)

Phenomenological- 6

(Flores, 2016; Fortner, 2021; Hagen, 2016; Min et al., 2022; Rangel-Clawson, 2017; Slaten et al., 2015)

Participatory- 1 (Liebleina et al., 2018)

Mixed methods

Exploratory- 2, (Keppens & Spruyt, 2015; Swartz & Benz, 2022)

Explanatory- 3(Garwood & Moore, 2021; Nerveza- Clark, 2020; Vera et al., 2016)

Other- 2 (McWhirter et al., 2019; Young et al., 2020)

Data collection	Quantitative - Survey- 50 • Questionnaire- 2 (Thayer et al., 2018; Vera et al., 2016) • School held data -12 (Bell, 2014; Cohen, 2018; Frehill & Dunsmuir, 2015; Gilbertson, 2024; Hamlin, 2021; Hood et al., 2017; Jimerson et al., 2016; Nerveza-Clark, 2020; Pirtle II, 2023; Ruebeck, 2017; Thayer et al., 2018; Van Eck et al., 2016)
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Qualitative- Semi-structured interviews -21

(Barrett, 2022; Ewing et al., 2021; Flores, 2016; Fortner, 2021; Garwood & Moore, 2021; Hagen et al., 2016; Ismail & Jusoh, 2016; Keppens & Spruyt, 2015; Liebleina et al., 2018; Miles, 2018; Min et al., 2022; Navarro, 2020; Nerveza-Clark, 2020; Pangelinan, 2018; Pendergast, 2018; Rangel-Clawson, 2017; Slaten et al., 2015; Solberg & Launda, 2024; Sundelin et al., 2023; Van Den Berghe et al., 2022; Vera et al., 2016.)

Focus groups- 3 (Liebleina et al., 2018; Warne et al., 2020; Whitau et al., 2022)

Non-participant observations- 1 (Min et al., 2022)

Theming workshops- 1 (Liebleina et al., 2018)

Diary entries- 2 (Navarro, 2020; Min et al., 2022)

Summary of intervention- 2

Multiple data points- 20

(Bell, 2014; Cohen, 2018; Frehill & Dunsmuir, 2015; Garwood & Moore, 2021; Gilbertson, 2024; Hagen et al., 2016; Hamlin, 2021; Hood et al., 2017; Jimerson et al., 2016; Keppens & Spruyt, 2015; Liebleina, 2018 (3); Min et al., 2022 (3); Navarro, 2020; Nerveza-Clark, 2020; Pirtle II, 2023; Ruebeck, 2017; Swartz & Benz, 2022; Thayer et al., 2018; Van Eck et al., 2016; Vera et al., 2016)

Terminology

Alienation - 2 (Garcia-Garcia & Valls, 2022, **Rangel-Clawson, 2017**).

Affective/Emotional Engagement - 5 (Markowitz, 2017, **St-Amand et al., 2017**, Van Den Berghe et al., 2022, Wang & Fredrickson, 2014, Pangelinan, 2018)

Relatedness - 2 (Flores, 2016, Whitau et al., 2022)

School Attachment - 5 (Demir et al., 2016, **Keppens & Spruyt, 2015**, Kotok et al., 2016, Langenkamp, 2016, Pirtle II, 2023)

School Belonging - 29: (Barrett, 2022, Bell, 2014, Chen et al., 2023, Ewing et al., 2021, Fortner, 2021, Gilbertson, 2024, Ismail & Jusoh, 2016, Knight et al., 2018, Liebleina et al., 2018, Min et al., 2022, Mooney et al., 2023, Navarro, 2020, Nichols et al., 2016, O'Connor, 2017, Orphinas & Raczynski, 2015, Palardy & Rumberger, 2019, Pendergast et al., 2018, Schachner et al., 2017, Slaten et al., 2015, Solberg & Launda, 2024, **St-Amand et al., 2017**, Sundelin et al., 2023, Thayer et al., 2018, **Van Eck et al.,**

2016, Warne et al., 2020, Williams et al., 2018, Vera et al., 2016, Vera et al., 2018; Zuckerman et al., 2020)

School Bonding - 7 (Keppens & Spruyt, 2015, Keppens & Spruyt, 2019, Miles, 2018, Peguero, 2016, Pesta, 2023, Rangel-Clawson, 2017, Young et al., 2020)

School Climate - 3 (Cohen, 2018, Nerveza-Clark, 2020, Van Eck et al., 2016)

School Connectedness - 26 (Arslan & Renshaw, 2017, Bell, 2014, Cohen, 2018, Duke, 2020, Frehill & Dunsmuir, 2015, Garwood & Moore, 2021, Hagen, 2016, Jackson et al., 2021, Jimerson et al., 2016, Keppens & Spruyt, 2015, Lemkin et al., 2018, McWhirter et al., 2018, McWhirter et al., 2019, Min et al., 2022, Morin et al., 2018, Nerveza-Clark, 2020, Pampati et al., 2020, Palardy & Rumberger, 2019, Sorrenti et al., 2024, Swartz & Benz, 2022, Thayer et al., 2018, Tomek et al., 2017, Vaughan et al., 2016, Yablon et al., 2015, Yang et al., 2023, Zuckerman et al., 2020)

School Membership - 1: Hood et al., 2017.

Dropout-22

(Arslan & Renshaw, 2017, Barrett, 2022, **Duke, 2020**, Flores, 2016, Frehill & Dunsmuir, 2015, Kotok et al., 2016, Lemkin et al., 2018, McWhirter et al., 2018, McWhirter et al., 2019, Miles, 2018, **Nerveza-Clark, 2020, O'Connor, 2017**, Orphinas & Raczynski, 2015, **Pangelinan, 2018**, Peguero, 2016, Pesta, 2023, Rangel-Clawson, 2017, Sundelin et al., 2023, Van Den Berghe et al., 2022, Vera et al., 2016, Vera et al., 2018, **Wang & Fredrickson, 2014.**)

Truancy- 17

(Chen et al., 2023; **Duke, 2020**; Ismail & Jusoh, 2016; **Keppens & Spruyt, 2019**; Keppens & Spruyt, 2015; **Kuperminc et al., 2020**; **Miles, 2018**; Min et al., 2022; Morin et al., 2018; Nichols et al., 2016; Schnachner et al., 2017; **Sorrenti et al., 2024**; Vaughan et al., 2016; Virtanen et al., 2024; Yang et al., 2023; **Young et al., 2020 Zuckerman et al., 2020**)

School attendance-9

(Bell, 2014, Cohen, 2018, Ewing et al., 2021, Liebleina et al., 2018, Pirtle II, 2023, Rubeck, 2017, Whitau et al., 2022, Yablon et al., 2015, **Young et al., 2020**)

School absence-9

Demir et al., 2016, Hamlin, 2021, Hood et al., 2017, Jackson et al., 2021, Langenkamp, 2016, Mooney et al., 2023, Pampati et al., 2020, **Warne et al., 2020**; Tomek et al., 2017.

At-risk youth-8

Fortner, 2021, Garwood & Moore, 2021, **Kuperminc et al., 2020**, **Pangelinan, 2018**, Pendergast et al., 2018, Slaten et al., 2015, Solberg & Launda, 2024, Thayer et al., 2018.

Behavioural engagement-7

Garcia-Garcia & Valls, 2022, Gilbertson, 2024, Markowitz, 2017, Niehaus et al., 2016, Palardy & Rumberger, 2019, St-Amand et al., 2017, **Wang & Fredrickson, 2014**.

School refusal-1

(Sorrenti et al., 2024)

Class skipping-2

(Keppens & Spruyt, 2019; Zuckerman et al., 2020;)

Chronic absenteeism-4

(Garcia-Garcia & Valls, 2022, Nerveza-Clark, 2020, Swartz & Benz, 2022, Van Eck et al., 2016.)

School completion/persistence to graduation-6

(Hagen, 2016, Jimerson et al., 2016, Lemkin et al., 2018, Miles, 2018, Rangel-Clawson, 2017 Navarro, 2020.)

School participation-2

(Knight et al., 2018; O'Connor, 2017)

Safety absenteeism- 1

Williams et al., 2018;

Tardiness -1 Warne et al., 2020

More than one term- 18

Duke, 2020; Garcia-Garcia & Valls, 2022, Keppens & Spruyt, 2015; Keppens & Spruyt, 2019, Lemkin et al., 2018, Kuperminc et al., 2020; Miles, 2018, Nerveza-Clark, 2020, O'Connor, 2017, Pangelinan, 2018, Rangel-Clawson, 2017, Sorrenti et al., 2024, St-Amand et al., 2017, Van Eck et al., 2016, Warne et al., 2020,

Wang & Fredrickson, 2014, Young et al., 2020, Zuckerman et al., 2020

Multiples: **Belonging- 6 (7 counts)**

(Keppens & Spruyt, 2015 (3); **Nerveza-Clark, 2020; Rangel-Clawson, 2017**; St Amand et al., 2017; Van Eck et al., 2016; **Young et al., 2020**)

Attendance- 15- (16 incidences)

(Duke, 2020; Garcia-Garcia & Valls, 2022, Keppens & Spruyt, 2019, Lemkin et al., 2018; Kuperminc et al., 2020, Miles, 2018 (3), **Nerveza-Clark, 2020**, O'Connor, 2017, Pangelinan, 2018, **Rangel-Clawson, 2017**, Sorrenti et al., 2024, Warne et al., 2020, Wang & Fredrickson, 2014, **Young et al., 2020**; Zuckerman et al., 2020)

Attendance Definitions	Attendance -25 Frequency of unexcused absences within a period of time- 7 (Demir et al., 2016, Frehill & Dunsmuir, 2015, Miles, 2018, Morin et al., 2018, Schachner et al., 2017, Vaughan et al., 2016, Young et al., 2020.) Three different percentages of missed time- 1 (Garcia-Garcia & Valls, 2022) Missing part or the entire day of school without a legitimate excuse -2 (; Duke et al., 2020; Keppens & Spruyt,2019) Missing greater than 10% of school year - 9 (Demir et al., 2016, Hamlin et al., 2021, Kuperminc et al., 2020, Nerveza-Clark, 2020, Pampati et al., 2020, Pirtle II, 2023, Swartz & Benz, 2022, Williams et al., 2018, Young et al., 2020) Safety absenteeism -1 Williams et al., 2018 Kearney's definition of school attendance - 1 (Warne et al., 2020) Frequency of absences within a period of time- 4 (Cohen et al., 2018, Ismail & Jusoh, 2016, Mooney et al., 2023, Van Eck et al., 2016) Dropout - 16
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Leaving training and education without completing secondary education (Barrett, 2022, Bell, 2014, Duke et al., 2020, Frehill & Dunsmuir, 2015, Liebleina et al., 2018, McWhirter et al., 2018, Miles, 2018, O'Connor, 2017, Orphinas & Raczynski, 2015, Pangelinan, 2018; Peguero et al., 2016, Rangel-Clawson, 2017, Ruebeck, 2017, Slaten, 2015, Solberg & Launda, 2024, Van Den Berghe, 2022.)

Graduate -5

Individual with a high school diploma or GED- 4 (Hagen, 2016; Kotok et al., 2016; Lemkin et al., 2018; Navarro, 2020)

School completion- 1 (Jimerson et al., 2016)

At risk- 6

Students who are less likely to graduate or who have high academic failure rates- 6 (Fortner, 2021, Flores, 2016; Kuperminc et al., 2020, Pangelinan, 2018, Sundelin et al., 2023; Thayer et al., 2018)

No Definition- 24 (Arslan & Renshaw, 2017, Chen et al., 2023, Ewing et al., 2021, Garwood & Moore et al., 2021, Gilbertson, 2024, Hood et al., 2017, Jackson et al., 2021, Keppens & Spruyt, 2015, Knight et al., 2018, Langenkamp, 2016, McWhirter et al., 2019, Min et al., 2022, Nichols et al., 2016, Pendergast et al., 2018, Pesta, 2023, Sorrenti et al., 2024, Tomek et al., 2017, Vera et al., 2018, Virtanen et al., 2024, Whitau et al., 2022, Yang et al., 2023, Yablon, 2015, Zuckerman et al., 2020.)

Behavioural engagement -5

Observable behaviours such as being present, coming to class on time and being engaged- 4 (Markowitz, 2017, Niehaus et al., 2016, St-Amand et al., 2017, Wang & Fredrickson, 2014.

Behavioural disengagement

Problem behaviours such as poor attendance, truancy, and disciplinary problems- 1 (Palardy & Rumberger, 2019)

Multiple definitions - 8 (Demir et al., 2016, Duke, 2020, Frehill & Dunsmuir, 2015, Kuperminc et al., 2020, Miles, 2018, Pangelinan et al., 2018, Williams et al., 2018, Young et al., 2020).

Attendance Measures (excluding programme descriptions)	Measures Quantitative Frequency of missed school days - 9 (Cohen, 2018, Garcia-Garcia & Valls, 2022, Langenkamp, 2016, Mooney et al., 2023; O'Connor, 2017, Pampati et al., 2020, Peguero et al., 2016, St-Amand, 2017, Tomek et al., 2017.) Frequency of skipping school - 12 (Chen et al., 2023, Duke, 2020, Keppens & Spruyt, 2019, Markowitz, 2017, O'Connor, 2017, Palardy & Rumberger, 2019, Schachner et al., 2017, Sorrenti et al., 2024, Vaughan et al., 2016, Virtanen et al., 2024, Yang et al., 2023, Zuckerman et al., 2020). Number of reported truants in peer group- 1 (Keppens & Spruyt, 2015) Graduated or non-graduate- 6 (Jimerson et al., 2016, Kotok et al., 2016, Lemkin et al., 2018, Niehaus et al., 2016, Orphinas & Raczynski, 2015, Wang & Fredrickson, 2014). Tardiness/skipping classes- 3 (Niehaus et al., 2016; Palardy & Rumberger, 2019, St-Amand, 2017.) Highest completed grade -1 (Pesta, 2023) Intention to drop out/reenroll- 3 (Vera et al., 2016; Tomek et al., 2017; Vera et al., 2018) Frequency of illness absence (Parent reported) - 1 (Knight et al., 2018) Frequency of non-attendance due to anxiety -1 (Sorrenti et al., 2024) Frequency due to violence/school closures -1 (Yablon et al., 2015) Scales (10) Resilience and Youth Development subscale from the Health Kids Survey -1 (Kuperminc et al., 2020) Risk Behaviours Scale (Genctaririm & Ergene, 2014)- 1 Arslan & Renshaw, 2017) The Cause of Absenteeism Scale (Designed by researchers)- 1 (Demir et al., 2016)
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Child and Adolescent Scale of Participation scale -1 (Knight et al., 2018)

Adapted question from YRBS (CDC, 2011) - 1 Nichols et al., 2016.

Unclear -1 (Jackson et al., 2021)

Perceptions of Education Barriers-1 (McWhirter et al., 2017)

Meaningful participation questionnaire (Constantine & Vernard, 2011)- 1 (Orphinas & Raczynski, 2015)

The school participation scale- 1 (Wang & Fredrickson, 2014)

Youth Risk Behaviour Survey (CDC, 2009)- 1 Williams et al., 2018

School held data 12 (Bell, 2014, Cohen, 2018, Frehill & Dunsmuir, 2015, Gilbertson, 2024, Hamlin, 2021, Hood et al., 2017, Jimerson et al., 2016, Nerveza-Clark, 2020, Pirtle II, 2023, Ruebeck, 2017, Thayer et al., 2018, Van Eck et al., 2016.)

Researcher designed protocol - 24 (Barratt, 2022, Ewing et al., 2021, Flores, 2016, Fortner, 2021, Garwood & Moore, 2020, Hagen, 2016, Ismail & Jusoh, 2016, Keppens & Spruyt, 2015, Liebleina et al., 2018, Miles, 2018, Min et al., 2022, Navarro, 2020, Nerveza-Clark, 2021, Pangelinan, 2018, Pendergast et al., 2018, Rangel-Clawson, 2017, Slaten, 2015, Solberg & Launda, 2023, Sundelin et al., 2023, Swartz & Benz, 2022, Van Den Berghe et al., 2022, Vera et al., 2016, Warne et al., 2020, Whitau et al., 2022.)

Two measures-13 (Cohen, 2018, Jimerson et al., 2016, Keppens & Spruyt, 2015, Knight et al., 2018, Nerveza-Clark, 2020, Niehaus et al., 2016, O’Conner, 2017, Palardy & Rumberger, 2019, Ruebeck, 2017, Sorrenti, 2024, Tomek et al., 2017, Vera et al., 2016, Wang & Fredrickson, 2014)

Belonging Definition	‘the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included and supported by others in the school social environment’ (p. 80)” (Goodenow & Grady, 1993)- 8 (Barratt, 2022, Bell, 2014, Cohen, 2018, Frehill & Dunsmuir, 2015, Hood et al., 2017, Navarro, 2020, Schachner et al., 2017, Solberg & Launda, 2024.)
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the belief by students that adults in the school care about their learning and about them as individuals” (Blum & Libbey, 2004) - 7 (Garwood & Moore, 2021, Hagen, 2016, Kotok et al., 2016, Langenkamp, 2016, Niehaus et al., 2016; Orphinas & Raczynski, 2015, Pirtle II, 2023)

School Bonding - Hirschi holds that pupils who feel connected to school-conforming others, for example, prosocial class and schoolmates, parents, and teachers, will be less likely to skip classes- 3 (Keppens & Spruyt, 2019; Peguero et al., 2016; Pesta, 2023)

students’ belief “that adults and peers in the school care about their learning as well as about them as individuals” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2009)- 2 (Lemkin et al., 2018; Rangel-Clawson, 2017;)

Students' perceptions that others in the school are on their side and that they matter in the school community (Wehlage, 1989) - 2 (Vera et al., 2016; Vera et al., 2018.

One reference (11)

belonging can be defined as a feeling that one is a significant member of the school community, is accepted and respected in school, has a sense of inclusion in school, and includes school as part of one’s self-definition (Voelkl, 1996)- 1 (O’Connor, 2017)

School bonding can be understood as the attachment a student holds to school-conforming peers, teachers, and his/her school. (Battistich & Hom, 1997)- 1 (knight et al., 2018)

A student’s sense of “relatedness, sense of community, sense of school or classroom membership, support, and acceptance (Osterman, 2000)- 1 (Swartz & Benz, 2022)

"...the need to be and perception of being involved with others at differing interpersonal levels (...) which contributes to one’s sense of connectedness (being part of, feeling accepted, and fitting in), and esteem (being cared about, valued and respected by others), while providing reciprocal acceptance,

caring and valuing to others." (Somers et al., 1999)- 1
(Pendergast et al., 2018)

individual's feeling of being "at home" in the symbolic sense of being familiar, comfortable, secure, and emotionally attached to a place, a culture, a group or even a situation (Yuval-Davis, 2006)- 1 *(Liebleina et al., 2018)*

as the perception of belonging to peers, specifically the perception that students help, like, trust, and respect one another (Bradshaw et al., 2014)-1 *(Morin et al., 2018)*

"...volitional involvement in relationships, contexts, and activities which he or she finds positive, worthwhile, and important" (Karchar, 2004, p. 13)- 1 *(McWhirter et al., 2018)*

four definitional attributes: students must (1) feel a positive emotion towards school; (2) maintain positive social relationships with their peers and teachers; (3) perceive a synergy (harmonization) and a certain similarity with the members of the group; and (4) become actively involved in the school environment- 1 *(St-Amand, 2017)*

as an attachment and commitment to the school and the teachers (Maddox and Prinz 2003)- 1 *(Nichols et al., 2016)*

identified student alienation and misbehaviour in the educational context according to two subdimensions: instrumental and expressive identification with school (no reference)- 1 *Garcia- Garcia & Valls, 2022.*

the degree to which students feel they are a part of their school (i.e., sense of belonging), feel they are close to others at school, and are treated fairly by teachers and peers. (No reference)- 1 *(Vaughan et al., 2016)*

Engagement Lens (4)

Belonging defined through engagement. Psychological engagement is also internal in nature, and includes feelings of belongingness or identification with school and peers, and relationships with teachers and peers (No reference)-1
Ruebeck- 2017

Emotional engagement: "emotional" (i.e., interpersonal relationships, affective reactions to teachers, classmates,

academics and schools) (Fredrickson et al., 2004)- 1 Van Den Berghe et al., 2022

School engagement: The level of connectedness with the school environment as perceived by students, which contributes to their motivation to achieve (Moreira et al., 2015)- 1 Pangelinan, 2018.

Emotional engagement is conceptualized as identification with school, which includes belonging, enjoyment of school learning, and valuing or appreciation of success in school-related outcomes (Finn, 1989; Voelkl, 1997)- 1 Wang & Fredrickson, 2014

Motivation -1

Relatedness is defined as the need for “psychological sense of being with others in secure communion or unity” (Ryan & Deci, 1985, p. 7)- 1 Flores, 2016

School climate lens- 1

School connectedness viewed through school climate- described as beliefs, interactions, relationships, and organizational features that shape the experience of school life (Aldridge et al., 2018)- 1 (Hamlin, 2021)

General definition- 6

Connectivity is the quality, state, or capability of being connective or connected (Merriam-Webster Inc.)-1 (Nerveza-Clark, 2020)

“refers to the connection” youth have with their schools (Maddox

and Prinz)- 1 (Miles, 2018)

most definitions cover three aspects of the school environment: school-based relationships and experiences, student-teacher relationships and students’ feelings about school (Allan, 2018)- 1, Mooney et al., 2023

Sense of social connectedness (No reference)- 1 Palardy & Rumberger, 2019

	students' sense of connection to school, sense of safety, and happiness (no reference)- 1 <i>Kuperminc et al., 2020</i> defined as students' sense of connection to and liking of school (No reference)- 1 <i>Markowitz, 2017.</i> No definition provided (28) (<i>Arslan & Renshaw, 2017, Chen et al., 2023, Demir et al., 2016, Duke, 2020, Ewing et al., 2021, Fortner et al., 2021, Gilbertson, 2024, Jackson et al., 2021, Jimerson et al., 2016, Ismail & Jusoh, 2016, Knight et al., 2018, McWhirter et al., 2019, Min et al., 2022, Pampati et al., 2020, Slaten et al., 2015, Sorrenti et al., 2024, Sundelin et al., 2023; Thayer et al., 2018, Tomek et al., 2017, Van Eck et al., 2016, Virtanen et al., 2021, Warne et al., 2020, Whitau et al., 2022, Williams et al., 2018, Yang et al., 2023, Yablon, 2015, Zuckerman et al., 2020.</i>)
Belonging Measures	PSSM (Goodenow, 1993)- 11 (Bell, 2014, Cohen et al., 2018, Garwood & Moore, 2021, Gilbertson, 2024, Hood et al., 2017, Knight et al., 2018, Mooney et al., 2023, Thayer et al., 2018, Tomek et al., 2017, Vera et al., 2016, Vera et al., 2018)
Excluding programme descriptions.	The School Climate Survey (Contillon et al., 2003)-2 (Cohen et al., 2018; Van Eck et al., 2016) One measure (17) Social Bonds Measure (Hirschi, 1969)- 1 (Keppens & Spruyt, 2015) School Climate Assessment Instrument (Shindler, 2016)- 1 Nerveza- Clark, 2020) The Comprehensive School Attachment Scale (Adapted by Acarbay, 2006)- 1 Demir et al., 2016; The Belonging Scale (Fredrickson & Baxter, 2007) - 1 Frehill & Dunsmuir, 2015 The School Connectedness Scale (Resnick et al., 1997)- 1 Frehill & Dunsmuir, 2015 The School Connectedness Scale (Lohemier & Lee, 2011) -1 Pirtle ii, 2023 The Sense of School Community Scale (Battistich et al., 2004)- 1 Frehill & Dunsmuir, 2015

The Student Engagement Scale (Cornell, 2016)- 1 Williams et al., 2018;

The School Attachment Scale (Hill, 2006)- 1 Demir et al., 2016

The What's Happening In This School? (WHITS; Aldridge & Ala', 2013) questionnaire- 1 Sorrenti et al., 2024

Subscale of Janosz & Bouthillier, 2007 (French)-1 (St-Amand et al., 2022)

The School connectedness subscale from Hemingway- 1 (McWhirter et al., 2018;

The Student Subjective Wellbeing Scale (Renshaw, 2015)- 1 Arslan & Renshaw, 2017

The Resilience and Youth Development subscale from the Health Kids Survey (Hanson & Kim, 2007)- 1 Kuperminc et al., 2024

The School Identification Scale (Finn & Voelkl, 1993)-1 Wang & Fredrickson, 2014

The Student Engagement Instrument (Appleton, 2006)- 1 Ruebeck, 2017.

Unclear- 1 (Pampati et al., 2020)

From databases- 17

Data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health)-6 Jimerson et al., 2016, Langenkamp, 2016, Markowitz, 2017, Nichols et al., 2016, Pesta, 2023, Vaughan et al., 2016)

Data from PISA-3 (Chen et al., 2023, Keppens & Spruyt, 2019, Schachner et al., 2017

Data from the High School Longitudinal Survey (2009) - 2 (Kotok et al., 2016; O'Connor, 2017).

Data from International Study of City Youth (ISCY)- 2 (Garcia-Garcia & Valls, 2022; Palardy & Rumberger, 2019;)

Data from the Compass study- Measured by the Centre for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale- 2 (Yang et al., 2023; Zuckerman et al., 2020)

Data from the Educational Longitudinal Study of 2002-2 (Niehaus et al., 2016; Peguero et al., 2016)

One reference (11)

Data from the Mobile Youth Poverty Study- 1 (Tomek et al., 2017)

Data from Longitudinal Study of Australian Children -1 (Mooney et al., 2023)

Sessentials survey- 1 (Jackson et al., 2021)

Data from the Healthy Teens Longitudinal Study - 1 (Orphinas & Raczynski, 2015)

National Authority for Measurement and Evaluation in Education based on the California School Climate and Safety Survey - 1 Yablon, 2015;

Data from the California Health Kids Survey -1 (Morin et al., 2018)

Data from the Minnesota Student Survey -1 (Duke, 2020)

New York City's Learning Environment Survey (2011,2012)- 1 (Hamlin, 2021)

Data from the Northern Swedish Cohort- 1 (Virtanen et al., 2024)

Data from the Longitudinal Studies of Child Abuse and Neglect (Runyan et al., 2014)- 1 Lemkin et al., 2018

Data from the Maternal and Child Supplement to the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY) -1 Markowitz, 2017

Multiple Measures- 8 incidences (Cohen, 2018 (2); Demir et al., 2016 (2); Freehill & Dunsmuir, 2015 (3); Garwood & Moore, 2021 (2); Keppens & Spruyt, 2015 (2); Nerveza-Clark, 2020 (2); Vera et al., 2016 (2).

Coded twice to illustrate database gathered from and questionnaire used- only counted once for overall count in results section (Tomek et al., 2017; Mooney et al., 2023)

Two databases: Markowitz, 2017

Research designed protocol (24) (Barratt, 2022; Ewing et al., 2021; Flores, 2016; Fortner et al., 2021; Garwood & Moore, 2021; Hagen, 2016; Ismail & Jusoh, 2016; Keppens & Spruyt, 2015; Liebleina et al., 2018; Miles, 2018; Min et al., 2022; Navarro, 2020; Nerveza-Clark et al., 2020; Pangelinan, 2018; Pendergast et al., 2018; Rangel-Clawson, 2017; Slaten et al., 2015; Solberg & Launda, 2024; Sundelin et al., 2023; Swartz & Benz, 2022; Van Den Berghe et al., 2022; Vera et al., 2016; Warne et al., 2020; Whitau et al., 2022.)

Appendix D: Quantitative Studies Illustration of the Analysis, Directionality and Significance of the Relationship Between Attendance and Belonging

Study (Year)	Direct Effect	Indirect Effect	No Comparison	Moderating Effect	Mediating Effect	Type of Analysis	Notes
Arslan and Renshaw (2018)	Yes*					Correlation	
Bell (2023)			No				
(Chen et al., 2023)	Yes*				Yes*	Structured Equation Modelling	Peer Victimisation mediated by belonging
(Cohen, 2019)	Yes*					Regression Analysis	
Demir and Karabeyoglu (2015)	Yes*				Yes*	Structured Equation Modelling	School environment mediated by belonging
Duke (2020)	Yes*				Yes*		Adversity mediated by belonging
Frehill and Dunsmuir (2015)	Partial					Regression	Model 1 revealed a significant relationship between belonging and attendance. Model 3 school belonging is non-significant, but group membership is significant, and mothers' education.

Garcia-Gracia and Valls (2023)	Yes*	No	Multi-level analysis	No effect for gender
Gilbertson (2024)	Yes*	Yes*	Correlation / Anova	Effect of nonbinary participants
Hamlin (2021)	Yes*		Regression	
Hood et al. (2017)	Yes		Correlation	
Jackson et al. (2020)	Yes*		Value added model	
Jimerson et al. (2016)	No		Regression	
Keppens and Spruyt (2018)	Yes*		Multi-level analysis	
Knight et al. (2018)		No		
Kotok et al. (2016)	Yes*		Yes*	Structural Equation Modelling Academic Climate, Disciplinary Order and Disciplinary Fairness Mediated Belonging
Kuperminc et al. (2020)	Yes*		Structural Equation Modelling	
Langenkamp (2016)		No		

Lemkin et al. (2018)	Partial			Multi-variable analysis	One factor of the school connectedness measure was significant, but others were not
Markowitz (2017)		No			
McWhirter et al. (2018)	Yes*		Yes*	Regression	Discrimination Experience and educational barriers mediated by belonging
Mooney et al. (2023)	Yes*		Yes*	General linear model	Belonging moderated by SES
Morin et al. (2018)	Yes*			Multi-level analysis	
Nichols et al. (2016)	Partial				A significant relationship for school completion but not truancy
Niehaus et al. (2016)	Yes*			Structural Equation Modelling	
O'Connor (2018)	Yes*			Regression	
(Orpinas & Raczynski, 2016)	Yes*			Regression	

Palardy and Rumberger (2019)	Yes*			Multi-level analysis	
Pampati et al. (2020)	No				
Pesta (2023)	Yes*			Regression	
Peguero et al. (2016)	Yes*			General Linear Model	
Pirtle II (2023)	Yes*			Correlation	
Ruebeck (2017)		No			
Schachner et al. (2017)	Yes*		Yes*	Structural Equation Modelling	Mainstream orientation, ethnic orientation, perceived cultural differences, trust in language at home, and first-generation mediated by belonging.
Sorrenti et al. (2024)		Yes*	Yes*	Structural Equation Modelling	Belonging mediated by students' perceptions of interpersonal competence, and their perceptions of academic competence
St-Amand et al. (2022)	Yes*			Structural Equation Modelling	
Thayer et al. (2018)		No			

Tomek et al. (2017)	Partial					Regression	A significant relationship was found for middle school but not for high school
Vaughan et al. (2016)			No				
Van Eck et al. (2021)			No			Multi-level analysis	
Vera et al. (2018)	Yes*			Yes*		Structural Equation Modelling	School belonging is mediated by academic self-efficacy and academic motivation
Virtanen et al. (2024)			No				
Wang and Fredricks (2014)	Yes*					Multivariate latent growth model	
Williams et al. (2018)	Yes*					Regression	
Yablon (2015)	No					Correlation	
Yang et al. (2023)			No				
Zuckermann et al. (2020)			No				
Total (Number of Studies)	34	2	11	3	8	-	For direct effect, 26 significant, 4 non-significant, 4 partial support.

Appendix E: Critical Appraisal Skills Programme Checklist Analysis (2024) for All Qualitative and Non-Experimental Mixed Methods Studies

CASP Analysis	Q1. Was There a Clear Statement of the Aims of the Research?	Q2. Is The Methodology Appropriate?	Q3. Was the Research Design Appropriate?	Q4. Was the Recruitment Strategy Appropriate?	Q5. Was the Data Collected in a Way to Address the Research Issue?	Q6. Has the relationship between Researcher and Participant been Adequately Considered?	Q7. Have Ethical Issues Been Considered?	Q8. Was the Data Analysis Sufficiently Rigorous?	Q9. Is there a Clear Statement of the Findings?	Q10. How Valuable is the Research?
Barrett (2022)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Ewing et al. (2023)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Partially
Flores (2017)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Partially	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Fortner (2022)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
(Garwood & Moore, 2021)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Hagen (2016)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Partially	Yes	Partially	Yes	Yes	Yes

Ismail and Jusoh (2016)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Partially	No	Yes	Partially	Yes	Yes	Partially
(Keppens & Spruyt, 2015)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Partially	Partially	No	Partially	Partially	Yes	Yes
Lieblein et al. (2018)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Partially	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Miles (2018)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Min et al. (2022)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Partially	Yes	Yes	Yes	Partially
Navarro (2020)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
(Nerveza -Clark)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Pangelinan (2018)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Partially	Yes	Partially	Yes	Yes	Partially	Yes
Pendergast et al. (2018)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Partially	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Rangel-Clawson (2017)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Slaten et al. (2015)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Solberg and Laundal (2024)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Partially	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Sundelin et al. (2023)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
(Swartz & Benz, 2021)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	Partially	Yes	Yes
Van Den Berghe et al. (2022)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Partially	Yes	Partially	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Warne et al. (2020)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Partially
Whitau et al. (2022)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Partially	Partially	Partially	No	Yes	Yes	Partially

Appendix F: Example of Comments for Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (2024) Checklist Questions

Question	Barrett (2021)
Q1	The research aims are clearly stated.
Q2	Qualitative methods are appropriate
Q3	The research justified why the approach was taken.
Q4	The researcher explains how and why participants were recruited, alongside recruitment challenges
Q5	Interviews, length of interview named, interview protocol provided, audio recorded, and saturation not named. Member checking was named, and reflections were provided on why this was not pursued.
Q6	The researcher explicitly reflects on the role of research, situated in positionality, and mitigates for this.
Q7	Consent, confidentiality, right to withdraw, and rechecking consent.
Q8	There is detail about the analysis process, and quotes provided to support findings. Memoing was used, and reflections were provided on memo checks. Thick description used
Q9	Findings are discussed in relation to existing research, and implications for practice are identified. Limitations and delimitations are considered, and trustworthiness is considered.
Q10	There is a discussion about the significance of the study. Some transferability considered
Overall	The study meets all of the CASP criteria.

Appendix G: Comparison of Action Research, Youth Participatory Action Research and Appreciative Inquiry

	Action Research (Ali, 2020; Thompson, 2020)	Youth Participatory Action Research (Anderson, 2020)	Appreciative Inquiry (Ali, 2020; Thompson, 2020)
Origin	Education	Education	Business
Aim	Solving practical problems in context	Youth-led research to create change	Identifying and building upon what is working well
Process	Plan-Act-Reflect-Evaluate	Similar to AR, with more youth participation at every stage	Define- Discover-Dream-Design- Deliver
Level of Youth Involvement	Variable- depending on the design	High- co-created at every stage	Variable- can be led or co-led, depending on the design
Advantages	Practical and Iterative. Problem-focused. Active participation. Encourages collaboration. Useful for professional development. It can involve people from across the organisation. Empowerment of participants.	Practical and Iterative Problem focused Active participation Encourages collaboration with equal power sharing. Focus on those most affected by an issue and their lived experiences. Youth-owned process.	Practical and Iterative Focuses on strengths Encourages collaboration and improves relationships. It has been found to increase group identification and cohesiveness Can involve people from across the organisation Proactive

	Data-driven. Useful for programme evaluation. Effective when a reactive approach is needed.		
Risks	Resource and time-intensive. Problem-solving focus may lead to rigid thinking and limit meaningful change.	Resource and time-intensive. Careful consideration of equal participation. Existing power dynamics and their impact on the project. Difficulty recruiting hard-to-reach participants.	May invalidate negative thoughts. May be less suitable as a reactive approach.

Appendix H: Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form for Parent/Carers

Name of department: School of Psychological Science and Health

Title of the study: Gathering Young People's Views on Belonging in School

Introduction

My name is Fiona Seaton, and I am currently undertaking a research project with the University of Strathclyde. I also work as an Educational Psychologist with XX Council. **You have been sent this form as your young person under the age of 16 has indicated a desire to be part of this research. Their participation requires your permission. If you grant permission, kindly sign and return the consent form provided below. It's important to note that your young person cannot participate in this research without your consent.**

This research is supported by a chief investigating officer, Clare Daly.

What is the purpose of this research?

This research aims to understand how secondary-aged students, at risk of disengagement, feel a sense of belonging in school. This research targets students in secondary 2, a stage where noticeable attendance issues often arise. It is hoped this research will assist schools in considering methods to increase their school's belonging and attendance. I hope this will help further research to improve young people's feelings of belonging. Central to this research is the perspective of the young people themselves, as their views and experiences will be pivotal in shaping the outcomes. I am interested in exploring how young people define belonging, what factors impact their feelings of belonging, how schools currently support belonging, and potential strategies to enhance a sense of belonging.

Does your young person have to take part?

Your young person's participation is entirely voluntary. They can withdraw at any time without detriment. However, you or they will not be able to withdraw any information once it has been anonymised.

What will your young person do in the project?

Firstly, your young person will be asked to complete a short questionnaire. They can complete this by themselves or with support from their guidance teacher.

Your young person will be invited to participate in two semi-structured interviews three months apart, lasting around 45 minutes and 30 minutes. The interviews will be audio-recorded and will take place during school hours. Your young person will miss class for this meeting, which will occur between October and March.

During the first interview, your young person will be asked questions about their experiences of school belonging. These questions will be shared before we meet so your young person knows what to expect. They will be asked to share what it feels like to belong to their school, how their school supports belonging, and what they could do to increase their feelings of belonging. During the second interview, your young person will be asked their views about an intervention to improve school belonging and school attendance. Your young person will only need to share what they feel comfortable with.

If your young person becomes upset, they will be supported to speak to me or their guidance teacher. They will also be given information about Togetherall, a digital mental health service.

They will also be asked to answer a short questionnaire to gather their views.

Why has your young person been invited to take part?

Your young person has been invited to participate because they are aged 11-14 years old, attend mainstream school and are in S2 of secondary education. They have also missed over 10% of schooling in the last school year. Your young person's views are essential. Their views will help Local Authority A Secondary Schools better support young people who find attending school difficult. Their views will form the basis for an intervention to increase young people's sense of connection in schools.

The criteria for a young person to take part are:

- Aged between 11 and 14 years old, attending S2 of secondary education.
- Attends mainstream education.
- Has missed more than 10% of school in the last year.

What information is being collected in the project?

The research will discover young people's experiences of belonging within their secondary school. Your young person's attendance data will be gathered from your school's electronic record management system. Your young person's views will be collected through a questionnaire and two semi-structured interviews. They will be collated, anonymised and summarised. The school will also share your young person's attendance data with the researcher. Your young person will also complete a short questionnaire to gather their views.

Who will have access to the information?

This research will be supported by Grant Murray (Local Authority A Research Assistant) and Clare Daly (Chief Investigating Officer). Your young person's Guidance Teacher will access their attendance data from the school's electronic record management system.

All information will be held confidentially. The information your young person shares will be anonymised with a code, and I will retain the key. Questionnaires will be scanned, anonymised, and held securely on OneDrive. The interviews will be recorded. The recording will be typed and anonymised. All information will be held securely on one drive. A summary of key themes from all the interviews will be made available to research participants.

The information will be written up as part of a doctoral thesis, and aspects of the research may be submitted for journal publication in the future.

Where will the information be stored, and how long will it be kept?

The information will be held for up to 5 years before being destroyed. It will be summarised in my final report, which may be available to people in Local Authority A and at the University for many years. The anonymous research data will be stored indefinitely in a repository. It may be shared or reused.

Thank you for reading this information - please ask any questions if you are unsure about what is written here.

All personal data will be processed per data protection legislation. Please read our [Privacy Notice for Research Participants](#) for more information about your rights under the legislation.

What happens next?

If you have any questions, please email Fiona.seaton@strath.ac.uk. If you grant permission for your young person to participate, please complete the attached consent form and email it back to your young person's guidance teacher. If you do not wish them to participate in the research, please inform the school. We would like to thank you for reading this and for your attention.

Researchers contact details:

If you have any questions about this research, please email Fiona.seaton@strath.ac.uk.

Chief Investigator details:

My supervisor is Clare Daly (Clare.daly@strath.ac.uk).

The University of Strathclyde Ethics Committee granted this research ethical approval.

If you have any questions/concerns during or after the research or wish to contact an independent person to whom any questions may be directed or further information may be sought, please contact:

Secretary to the University Ethics Committee
Research & Knowledge Exchange Services

University of Strathclyde
Graham Hills Building
50 George Street
Glasgow
G1 1QE.

Telephone: 0141 548 3707

Email: ethics@strath.ac.uk

Consent Form for Consent for Young People from Parents/Carers

Name of department: School of Psychological Science and Health

Title of the study: Gathering Young People's Views on Belonging in School

- I confirm that I have read and understood the Participant Information Sheet for the above project, and the researcher has answered any queries to my satisfaction.
- I confirm that I have read and understood the Privacy Notice for Participants in Research Projects, how my young person's personal information will be used, and what will happen to it (i.e., how it will be stored and for how long).
- I understand that my young person's participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw from the project at any time, up to completion, without giving a reason or without any consequences.
- I understand that I can request the withdrawal from the study of some personal information and that, whenever possible, researchers will comply with my request. This includes the following personal data:
 - audio recordings of interviews that identify my young person;
 - My young person's personal information is from transcripts.
- I understand that anonymised data (i.e., data that do not identify my young person personally) cannot be withdrawn once they have been included in the study.
- I understand that any information recorded in the research will remain confidential, and no information identifying me will be made publicly available.
- I consent for my young person to participate in the project.
- I consent to being audio recorded as part of the project.

(PRINT NAME)	
Signature of Participant:	Date:

Appendix I: Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form for Young People

Name of department: School of Psychological Science and Health

Title of the study: Gathering Young People's Views on Belonging in School

Introduction

My name is Fiona Seaton, and I am currently undertaking a research project with the University of Strathclyde. I also work as an Educational Psychologist with XX Council. This information sheet provides information about the research so that you can decide whether you would like to take part. Understanding why the research is being done and what will happen is essential. Please ask if there is anything that is not clear.

My supervisor's name is Clare Daly; she assists me in ensuring that my research is the best it can be. Grant, a research assistant in XX, will also be involved in the study. He will help in the interview with me, taking notes on your views and checking them with you at the end of the session. Your guidance teacher will help me access information about your attendance at school.

What is the purpose of this research?

I am interested in understanding how secondary-aged students who find engaging with learning and attending school difficult feel a sense of belonging in school. I hope this information will help secondary schools to know how individuals define belonging, what impacts their sense of belonging and how it can be increased in school.

Do you have to take part?

It is up to you whether you would like to participate in this research. It is okay if you do not want to participate. If you do decide to take part, you will be given this information sheet to keep. You will also be asked to sign a consent form. If you change your mind about participating, that is okay, too. You can withdraw at any point.

Before deciding whether to participate, you need to know that you cannot join without your parent/carer(s) consent.

What will you do in the project?

Firstly, you will be asked to complete a short questionnaire. You can complete this yourself, or your guidance teacher will support you.

You will be invited to take part in two semi-structured interviews. The first will last around 45 minutes and the second 30 minutes. They will be audio recorded. Grant and I will also be taking notes during the interview. These notes will be summarised and sent back to you at the end of the meeting to check for accuracy. They will be held at

your school during regular school hours. You will be invited to take part between February and March.

During the first interview, you will be asked some questions about your experiences of belonging to your school. Before we meet, I will share these questions so you know what to expect. I will ask you to share what it feels like to belong to your school, how your school supports belonging and what can be done to enhance individual feelings of belonging. You only need to share what you feel comfortable with. Your guidance teacher will know you are attending this interview and will check in with you afterwards.

During the second intervention, I will share ideas for an intervention to increase attendance and belonging in your school. You will be asked your views.

At the end of each interview, you will also be asked to complete a short questionnaire on the process of gathering your views.

If you feel worried or upset after the meeting, you can speak directly with your guidance teacher or with me. You will also be given information about Togetherall, a digital mental health service that can be accessed.

Why have you been invited to take part?

You have been invited to participate because you are in S2 at your school and missed more than 10% of the last school year. Your views are essential. I hope this research will help schools increase young people's feelings of belonging and school attendance. This research may not help you now, but I hope it will help other young people.

The criteria for young people to take part are:

- Aged between 11-14 years old.
- Attending a mainstream secondary school.
- Have missed more than 10% of school in the last year.

What information is being collected in the project?

The research will explore young people's experiences of belonging in secondary school. Your attendance data will be gathered from your school's electronic record management system.

Your views will be gathered through a questionnaire and a semi-structured interview. They will be collated, anonymised and summarised. Once data has been anonymised, it cannot be withdrawn from the research, as your information will not be identifiable. The information from the first interview will be anonymised by April 2025. The information from the second interview will be anonymised by August 2025. Your school will also share your attendance data with the researcher. I hope this information will

help schools consider ways to help young people feel a sense of belonging in their schools. I hope this will help further research enhance young people's feelings of belonging.

Who will have access to the information?

This research will be conducted with support from Grant Murray (Local Authority A Research Assistant) and Clare Daly (Chief Investigating Officer). Your Guidance Teacher will access your attendance data from your school's electronic record management system.

All information will be held confidentially. This means it will be kept private. All names and identifying information will be removed. A code will be created, and I will retain the key. The questionnaires will be scanned, anonymised, and held securely on OneDrive. This is a Microsoft cloud service where files are stored and protected. An audio recording of the interview will be made. The recording will be typed and anonymised. All information will be held securely on OneDrive. A summary of the semi-structured interview themes will be made available to you. At the end of the interview, you will be asked if you want this information shared with you. You will be asked to share your email address if you want this information. This summary will be shared via email.

Where will the information be stored, and how long will it be kept?

Information will be held for up to 5 years before being destroyed. I will use the information you provide to write up the research project and some of it to write a journal article. The anonymous research data will be stored indefinitely in a repository. It may be shared or reused.

Thank you for reading this information - please ask any questions if you are unsure about what is written here.

All personal data will be handled according to Scottish Laws. Please read our [Privacy Notice for Research Participants](#) for more information about your rights under these laws.

What happens next?

Please ask your guidance teacher whether you would like to participate in this research project. You should sign the consent form on the next page. Your guidance teacher will then contact your parents for their permission. Before the interview, your guidance teacher will let you know the time and date of the meeting. Before the meeting, they will share the questions to consider with you. They will help you and others in your school participate in the conference.

If you choose not to participate, thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet.

After the research has been completed, a summary will be available to you if you are interested. Please ask your guidance teacher or your parent/carer if you wish for a copy.

Researchers contact details:

If you have any questions about this research, please email
Fiona.seaton@strath.ac.uk.

Chief Investigator details:

My supervisor is Clare Daly (Clare.daly@strath.ac.uk).

The University of Strathclyde Ethics Committee granted this research ethical approval.

If you have any questions/concerns during or after the research or wish to contact someone else with questions or further information, please contact:

Secretary to the University Ethics Committee
Research & Knowledge Exchange Services
University of Strathclyde
Graham Hills Building
50 George Street
Glasgow
G1 1QE.

Telephone: 0141 548 3707

Email: ethics@strath.ac.uk

Consent Form for Young People

Name of department: School of Psychological Science and Health

Title of the study: Gathering Young People's Views on Belonging in School

- I confirm that I have read and understood the Participant Information Sheet for the above project, and the researcher has answered any queries to my satisfaction.
- I confirm that I have read and understood the Privacy Notice for Participants in Research Projects and understand how my personal information will be used and what will happen to it (i.e., how it will be stored and for how long).
- I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I can withdraw from the project at any time, up to completion, without giving a reason or consequences.
- I understand that I can request the withdrawal from the study of some personal information and that, whenever possible, researchers will comply with my request. This includes the following personal data:
 - audio recordings of interviews that identify me.
 - my personal information from transcripts.
- I understand that unnamed data (i.e., data that do not identify me personally) cannot be withdrawn once they have been included in the study.
- I understand that any information recorded in the research will remain confidential, and no information identifying me will be publicly available.
- I consent to being a participant in the project.
- I consent to be audio-recorded as part of the project.

(PRINT NAME)	
Signature of Participant:	Date:

Appendix J: Information For Young People After the Semi-Structured Interview

Thank you for participating in the semi-structured interview today. Hopefully, this study will help schools know how they can better support young people's belonging and attendance. Your views are central to this.

Your guidance teacher knows you have participated in this interview today and will check in with you later.

Please remember if you become upset after the interview, you can seek support from your guidance teacher, me, and Grant. You can contact me at Fiona.seaton@strath.ac.uk. You can also contact Clare (Chief Investigating Officer) at clare.daly@strath.ac.uk

If you would prefer to share your worries with someone else you can contact Togetherall, a digital mental health service. You can access their support here: <https://togetherall.com/en-gb/>

You can also withdraw from this research at any time before the information from today is anonymised.

Thank you,

Fiona

Appendix K: Letter Inviting Staff

[DATE]

Dear Guidance Teachers,

I am writing to you to invite the young people in your schoolhouse to participate in research exploring the views of young people at risk of disengaging from education. This study will be led by myself, Fiona Seaton (Researcher) supported by Grant Murray (Research Assistant). I am studying towards a Doctorate in Educational Psychology at the University of Strathclyde. The study will be supervised by Dr Clare Daly (Programme Director, University of Strathclyde), and agreement has been sought from XX Council for the study to take place.

What is the purpose of this research?

This research aims to gather the experiences of at-risk secondary-aged young people and explore ways to increase their belonging in school. This initial study aims to lay the foundation for a larger-scale project aimed at increasing at-risk young people's belonging and attendance in school.

Recognising the importance of belonging, I am motivated to explore how young people define belonging, what factors impact their belonging and how their belonging could be increased within their school.

Who is invited to take part?

Young people aged between 11-14 years old, attending mainstream school and in S2 of secondary education are invited to take part. This is usually when attendance difficulties become apparent. Young people must have missed more than 10% of schooling over the school year.

What does the project involve?

Identified young people will be invited to complete a questionnaire and attend two semi-structured interviews to explore their experiences of belonging in school.

What will you do in the project?

Step 1

You are being asked to consider the above criteria and identify potential candidates to take part in the research. You are being asked to share the information form and consent forms with an identified young person. **Before young people decide whether to take part, they need to know that you cannot participate without your parent/carer(s) consent.** It is also important that young people know that participation is voluntary, and they have a right to withdraw at any time.

Step 2

If a young person consents to participate, you will be asked to share the parent/carer information sheet and consent form with the young person's parent/carer.

Step 3

Once consent has been confirmed, you will be asked to support the young person to complete a short questionnaire. You will also be asked to share their attendance data.

Step 4

Following the first semi-structured interview, you will be asked to check in with the young person to make sure they are okay.

Step 5

Following the second semi-structured interview, you will be asked to check in with the young person to make sure they are okay.

Why have I been asked to take part?

You have been invited to select candidate participants as you have pastoral responsibility for the young people in your care.

Who will have access to the information shared?

All information will be held confidentially. All names and identifying information will be removed. A code will be created, and I will retain the key. The questionnaires will be scanned, anonymised, and held securely on OneDrive. A recording of the semi-structured interviews will be made. The recording will be typed and anonymised. All information will be held securely on one drive.

I, Grant (the research assistant) and Clare (the chief investigating officer) will all have access to the data that is taken.

Where will the information be stored and how long will it be kept?

Information will be held for up to 5 years before being destroyed. I will use the information you provide to write up the research project and some of the information to write a journal article.

Thank you for reading this information - please ask any questions if you are unsure about what is written here.

What happens next?

Should you wish to discuss anything further a meeting can be arranged. If you would like to participate in this research, please complete the consent below and return via email.

The next step would be to contact candidate participants to discuss the research. If consent is gained, please email the researcher directly with the parent/carer contact details.

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to email Fiona.seaton@strath.ac.uk.

Thank you for considering the information included in this letter. Please do not hesitate to contact the researchers using the details on the attached Participant Information Sheet if you have any questions in the meantime.

Kindest regards,

Fiona Seaton

Fiona.seaton@strath.ac.uk

Clare Daly

Clare.daly@strath.ac.uk

(PRINT NAME)	
Signature of Participant:	Date:

Appendix L: Comparison of Candidate ‘Belonging’ Questionnaires

Measure	Linked Definitions	Detail	Factors	Strengths	Limitations	Thoughts
Basic Psychological Needs Satisfaction in Schools (Ryan & Deci, 2000)	Based on Self-Determination Theory	15-item Likert Scale	3 subscales: Autonomy, Relatedness (School belonging), and Competence	Valid and Reliable Differentiated peer/friend relationships	Not specific to belonging Relatedness subscale captures relational aspects, but perhaps not wider. Adapted for adolescents from an adult scale	Has broader relevance to motivational theories. Unsure if it captures belonging widely enough
Hemingway Measure of Adolescent Connectedness (Karchar, 1999, 2001)	Based on Baumeister and Leary (1995)	74 item Likert Scale Looks at family, friends,	11 Factors: Mother, Neighbourhood, Reading, Friends, Different Cultures, Religion, Teachers, present/future self,	Valid and Reliable Designed for adolescents	Lengthy	Time-intensive, feasibility?

school and self Peers/classmates, Father, Differentiated and school peer/friend relationships

Psychological Sense of School Membership (Goodenow, 1993)	Based on Goodenow definition	18-item Likert scale	Originally unidimensional but no factor analysis conducted and other research indicated multi-dimensions: School, teachers, peers	Valid and Reliable Multi-dimensional	Factor structure debated, particularly across cultures	Feasible Need to consider a possible sensitivity analysis to address factorial structured
				Specifically designed to measure belonging		
				Designed for adolescents		
				Short and accessible		

School Belonging Scale (Anderman, 2002)		5-item Likert scale	Single factor	Valid and Reliable Quick and Simple	Measures belonging unidimensional. Does this oversimplify a complex construct?	Query depth of analysis
School Connectedness Scale (McNeely et al., 2001)	Derived from Add Health Study underpinned by Osterman (2000)	54-item Likert Scale	Initially 4 factors, then widened to 7 factors in 3x3 matrix: Negative connection, Connection with adults, Peer connection, Involvement, Emotional connection, Value school, Comfort at school	Valid and Reliable Multi-dimensional Also includes involvement and value	Length Captures various dimensions of school connectedness, but does not distinguish belonging as a whole.	Time-intensive, feasibility?

Appendix M: Development of Strategies for Ranking and Origin

The table below summarises how each strategy incorporated into the ranking and discussion task was derived from the qualitative synthesis or informed by relevant literature. The list is representative rather than exhaustive and was developed to guide discussion in the exploratory phase.

Strategy / Component	Origin	Supporting Source or Theme
Recognising what is going well in school	Literature informed	Attendance and Belonging Literature
Recognising your strengths	Derived from scoping review	Individual factors
Receiving regular feedback	Literature informed	Attendance literature
Feeling confident as a learner	Derived from scoping review	Individual factors
Knowing the purpose of school	Derived from scoping review	Individual factors
Knowing how school relates to your future goals	Derived from scoping review	Individual factors
Feeling like you fit in school	Derived from scoping review	Relationship factors
Feeling in control of learning (choice)	Literature informed	Self-determination & autonomy (Ryan & Deci, 2000)
Feeling safe in school	Derived from scoping review	School context
Knowing what helps when feeling overwhelmed (emotion regulation)	Literature informed	Attendance and belonging literature

Knowing what to do when feeling isolated	Literature informed	Attendance and belonging literature
Knowing how to engage with peers	Derived from scoping review	Relationship factors
Knowing the impact of school absenteeism	Literature informed	Attendance and belonging literature
Knowing what will happen if bullying occurs	Derived from scoping review	School factors
Support to reduce conflict with peers	Derived from scoping review	Relationship factors
Access to school-based incentives	Literature informed	Attendance and belonging literature
Attendance monitoring and regular feedback	Derived from scoping review	School factors
Active parent/carers involvement in school	Derived from scoping review	Home factors
Positive parent/carers views on school attendance	Derived from scoping review	Home factors
Positive parent/carers views on belonging to school community	Literature informed	Belonging
Involving young people in designing the approach	Literature informed	Attendance and belonging literature
Personalised support from the school	Derived from scoping review	School factors
Access to small group work with peers	Derived from scoping review	School factors
Alternatives to mainstream schooling	Derived from scoping review	School factors

Early identification of reducing attendance	Literature informed	Attendance literature
Relationship-building opportunities with peers	Derived from scoping review	Relationship factors
Relationship-building opportunities with teachers	Derived from scoping review	Relationship factors
Relationship-building opportunities in the local community	Literature informed	School factors
1:1 mentoring	Literature informed	Attendance literature
Participation in school activities	Derived from scoping review	Attendance and belonging literature
Online opportunities for participation	Literature informed	Attendance and belonging literature
Access to extra-curricular activities	Derived from scoping review	School factors
Support for transitioning from primary to secondary	Derived from scoping review	Belonging literature

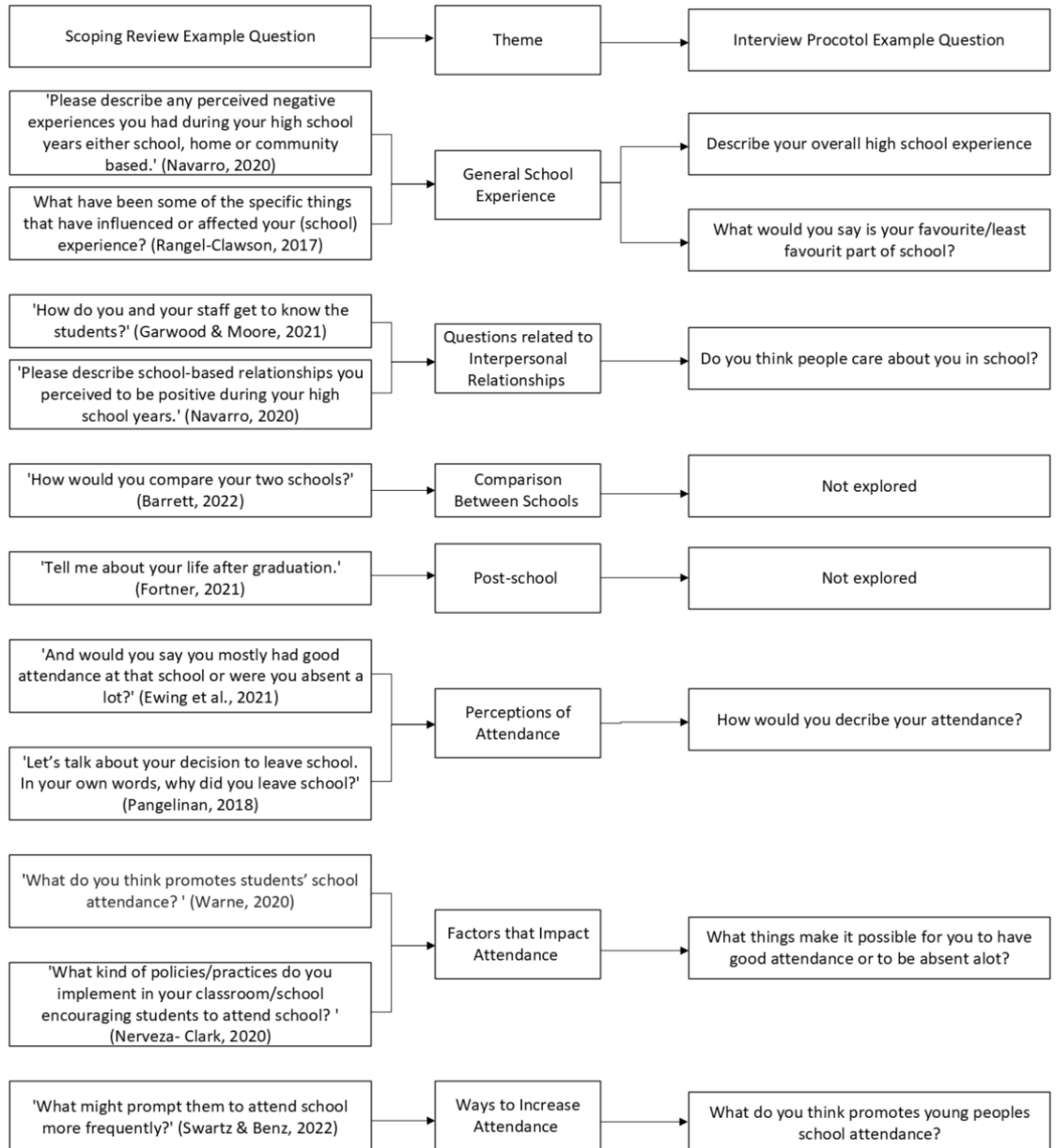
Note. Items were selected to reflect key factors identified in the scoping review and relevant literature. Following pilot feedback that open-ended questioning produced limited depth, these components were used in a ranking exercise to explore the perceived importance of each strategy and to prompt richer discussion.

Appendix N: Comparison of the Cross-Cultural Validations of the Psychological Sense of School Membership Scale

Authors	Language	Country	Number of Factors	Factors	Number of Questions	Type of Analysis
Goodenow (1993)	English	US	1	Belonging	18	None
Hagborg (1994)	English	US	3	Belonging, Rejection, Acceptance	11	Exploratory Factor Analysis
Cheung and Hui (2003)	Chinese	Hong Kong	2	School belonging, Feelings of rejection	18	Principal Component Analysis
O'Farrell & Morrison (2003)	English	US	1	Student feelings of belonging and acceptance	5	Exploratory Factor Analysis
Cheung (2004)	Chinese	Shanghai, Hong Kong	2	School belonging, Feelings of rejection	18	Principal Component Analysis followed by Varimax rotation
Ye & Wallace (2004)	English	US	3	Identification and participation in school; perception of fitting in among peers; connection to teachers	15	Both Exploratory Factor Analysis and Confirmatory Factor Analysis

You et al.(2011)	English	Australia	3	Caring relationship, Acceptance, Rejection	12	Both Exploratory Factor Analysis and Confirmatory Factor Analysis
Togari et al. (2011)	Japanese	Japan	3	Acceptance by teachers,13 Acceptance by students, Belonging		Multigroup Confirmatory Factor Analyses
Abubakar et al.(2015)	Various	Netherlands; Kenya; Indonesia; Spain	1	Belonging with different subscales based on the target	18	Reliability analysis; Multigroup Confirmatory Factor Analyses
Gaete et al. (2016)	Spanish	Chile	1	Belonging	13	Both Exploratory Factor Analysis and Confirmatory Factor Analysis

Appendix O: Analysed Questions from Qualitative Studies for Interview Protocol



Appendix P: Young Person Feedback Questionnaire

Please read the questions below carefully and circle the response that is most appropriate.

1.	Did you feel the questions asked made sense?	Yes	No	
2.	Did you feel listened to during the interview?	Yes	No	
3.	Did you feel comfortable sharing your views?	Yes	No	
4.	Did you have enough time to share your views?	Yes	No	
5.	Do you feel your views will be taken seriously?	Yes	No	
8.	The length of the semi-structured interview	Too long	Too short	Just right
9.	The number of questions asked was	Too many	Too few	Just right
10.	Do you feel clear about how your views will be used?	Yes	No	
11.	Would you like to take part in interview 2?	Yes	No	

Appendix Q: Exploratory Phase Revised Interview Protocol

Overarching question	Supplementary questions
Describe your overall high school experience.	What would you say is your favourite part of the school? What would you say if your least favourite part of the school
How would you describe your attendance at school?	if good attendance: What things made it possible for you to have good attendance? If absent: What kinds of things would lead to you being absent a lot?
Would you say you mostly had good attendance at that school or were you absent a lot?	What do you think promotes students' school attendance?
Do you think attending school is important, if at all? Please explain why or why not.	On a scale, if at all, how much does school attendance matter? 5 point likert scale- A lot, not a lot...
What does belonging mean to you?	Can you explain a time when you felt like you belonged? Can you explain a time when you didn't feel like you belonged?
Do you think a sense of school belonging matters? If so why/why not?	On a scale, how much, if at all, does a sense of belonging matter? 5 point likert scale- A lot, not a lot... If I had a magic wand and everyone felt they belonged in school, what would be different?
How does your sense of belonging at school relate to your attendance, if at all?	On a scale, how much, if at all, does a sense of belonging matter impact school attendance? 5 point likert scale- A lot, not a lot...
What does it feel like to be part of your school?	<u>Context</u> Are there places within the school where you feel you belong more or less? Please explain.

Relationships

Based from PSSM

On a scale of 1-10, how much do you feel people at school understand you?

Do you feel people care about you in school?

Do you get on with the teachers in school?

Tell me about the people you like to spend time with at school.

Is important to be a part of a group?

Perception of value

Do feel your opinions are valued in your school? Please explain.

On a scale of 1-10, How much do you feel respected by people in your school?

How much, if at all, control do individuals have over their belonging in school?

What advice would you give a friend who does not feel like they belong in school?

Is there anything that they could do to increase their sense of connection in school?

What experiences, if any, do you have regarding belonging at school?

Is there anything your school does well to increase belonging?

Is there anything that schools do that decreases your sense of belonging?

What more could the school do to make students feel they belong more?

If you were asked to design an intervention or program aimed at increasing young people's belonging to school what would be important to include?

Who would be important to include? peers, teachers, and parent?

For pupils would support target of all young people or certain young people? If so, who?

Where would it take place?

What would it involve doing?

Would the intervention be run 1:1, in small group, in a whole class, or in more than one way?

	How long would it last? Give options
	How frequent would it be? Give options
Please sort the following elements in two ways for an intervention to increase school belonging and attendance.	Recognising what is going well in school. Recognising your strengths Receiving regular feedback Feeling confident as a learner. Knowing the purpose of school. Knowing how school relates to your future goals. Feeling like you fit in school.
First, please sort into very important, important, neither important nor unimportant, unimportant, and very unimportant	Feeling in control of learning e.g., having choice Feeling safe in school Knowing what helps to help when feeling overwhelmed with an emotion e.g., worry. Knowing what to know when feeling isolated in school. Knowing how to engage with peers in school. Knowing the impact of school absenteeism.
Pick the top four for importance. Please explain your choices.	Knowing what will happen if bullying occurs. Support to reduce conflict with peers. Access to school-based incentives Attendance monitoring and regular feedback. Active parent/carers involvement in school. Positive parent/carers views on school attendance. Positive parent/carers views on belonging to your school community. Involving young people in designing the approach Personalised support from the school. Access to small group work with peers. Alternatives to mainstream schooling. Early identification of reducing attendance. Relationship-building opportunities in school with peers Relationship-building opportunities in school with teachers. Relationship-building opportunities in the local community.

1:1 mentoring

Participation in school activities.

Online opportunities for participation.

Access to extra-curricular activities

Support for transitioning from primary to secondary.

Would you like to share
anything else?

Appendix R: Confirmability Phase Revised

Interview Protocol

Member-checking of Findings

Overarching Questions	Possible additional questions
After looking at what we found, what are your general thoughts? Do they make sense to you? (General Thoughts)	• When looking at these findings, does anything stand out the most? • Were there any surprises in the data? • Is there anything in the findings that feels particularly important or meaningful to you? • Do you think the findings fully explain why school belonging and attendance matter or do not matter?
Do you feel the findings reflect what you said and your experience? Please explain. (Accuracy question)	• Do the findings fit with your school experience? • Is there anything in the findings that feels particularly important or meaningful to you?
What could be added to the findings to capture your experiences better? (Addition question)	• Is there anything missing from the findings?
If there is anything you would like removed, what would that be and why? (Removal question)	• Is there anything that does not match your experience? If so, please explain why this might be? • Is there anything in the findings that you disagree with? If yes, please explain.

Memberchecking of Conceptual Model

Overarching Questions	Possible additional questions
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Does this model make sense?	• How would you describe this model in your own words?
(General Thoughts)	• Do these ideas make sense to you?
Does this model help explain your experience in your school and your sense of school belonging?	• Do these themes fit how you feel about being a part of your school? • Are there any themes that are particularly true for you? Please explain. • Are there any themes that don't fit with your school experience? Please explain. • Do you feel your views are reflected in this model?
(Accuracy question)	
Do you think anything important about your school experience is missing?	• Can you think of anything else that affects how you feel about your school and attendance?
(Addition question)	
Would you make any changes to the model?	• Would you change how these words are described? • Are the themes in the model connected in a way that makes sense to you?
(Removal question)	
Feasibility, acceptability and accessibility of Candidate Intervention	
Overarching Questions	Possible additional questions
What are your initial thoughts about this project?	• Does it sound like something that could help? • Is anything unclear or confusing? • Do you think this approach is different from other school-based supports? If so how.
(General Thoughts)	
Is this something young people would want to take part in?	• Do you think young people your age would be interested in this project? • What would make you want to join something like this? Would anything stop you? • How comfortable would you feel sharing your thoughts and experiences in a group like this? Please explain
(Adoption/Acceptability)	

	• How should we explain this project to young people to encourage participation? • Do you think this project would work in your school?
Is this intervention realistic and practical? (Feasibility)	• Do you think young people could stick with all eight sessions? What might get in the way? • Who do you think should facilitate the sessions? • Would young people rather be in smaller or bigger groups (like a class)? • Do you think schools have what they need to run this project (time, space, people)? Please explain
Are there any groups of students who might find it harder to take part? (Appropriateness/Accessibility)	• What could help students who find school attendance tough to join in still? • What should we do if a young person misses a session? • Is offering both in-person and online options helpful? Would another format work better? • How can we support students who might struggle to talk about their experiences?
What changes would you expect after completing this project? (Effectiveness)	• How would we know that the project is helping students feel more connected to school? • Would this project have a long-term impact, or would young people need ongoing support? • What could make the changes last?
How can this project have a lasting impact? (Sustainability)	• What would make this feel like a normal part of school, not just a temporary thing?

Appendix S: Psychological Sense of School Membership Questionnaire

Psychological Sense of School Membership Scale

Circle the answer for each statement that is most true for you.

1) I feel like a part of my school.	Not at all true 1	2	3	4	Completely true 5
2) People at my school notice when I am good at something.	Not at all true 1	2	3	4	Completely true 5
3) It is hard for people like me to be accepted at my school.	Not at all true 1	2	3	4	Completely true 5
4) Other students in my school take my opinions seriously.	Not at all true 1	2	3	4	Completely true 5
5) Most teachers at my school are interested in me.	Not at all true 1	2	3	4	Completely true 5
6) Sometimes I feel as if I don't belong in my school.	Not at all true 1	2	3	4	Completely true 5
7) There is at least one teacher or adult I can talk to in my school if I have a problem.	Not at all true 1	2	3	4	Completely true 5
8) People at my school are friendly to me.	Not at all true 1	2	3	4	Completely true 5
9) Teachers here are not interested in people like me.	Not at all true 1	2	3	4	Completely true 5
10) I am included in lots of activities at my school.	Not at all true 1	2	3	4	Completely true 5
11) I am treated with as much respect as other students in my school.	Not at all true 1	2	3	4	Completely true 5
12) I feel very different from most other students at my school.	Not at all true 1	2	3	4	Completely true 5
13) I can really be myself at my school.	Not at all true 1	2	3	4	Completely true 5
14) Teachers at my school respect me.	Not at all true 1	2	3	4	Completely true 5
15) People at my school know that I can do good work.	Not at all true 1	2	3	4	Completely true 5
16) I wish I were in a different school.	Not at all true 1	2	3	4	Completely true 5
17) I feel proud to belong to my school.	Not at all true 1	2	3	4	Completely true 5
18) Other students at my school like me the way that I am.	Not at all true 1	2	3	4	Completely true 5

Goodenow, C., 1993

Appendix T: Comparison of Qualitative Analysis Methods

Analysis Methodology	Detail of Approach	Advantages	Disadvantages	Thoughts on Feasibility & Accessibility
Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006)	A method of identifying and analysing patterns/ themes within research through a six-stage process.	Flexible across a range of theoretical frameworks. Easy to understand and apply. Transparent Process	May overlook nuance in data. Consideration is required of the researchers' biases and assumptions.	Feasible with small sample sizes. Aligns with epistemology by uncovering structures and weighting the importance of individuals' experiences and perceptions. Clear and easy application Trustworthiness can be increased through multiple coders. Compatible with research design.
Template Analysis (King et al. 2018)	A thematic approach that uses a coding template as a structured list of codes to analysis textual data. It allows for apriori and emergent themes	Alls for structured and flexible analysis Uses an abductive approach Suitable for multiple-coders	Less flexible than inductive approaches Bias of initial themes needs consideration	Feasible with small samples Aligns with epistemology Clear and easy application Trustworthiness can be increased through coders.

				Appropriate when research is guided by frameworks
				Compatible with research design.
Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967)	Systematic methodology focused on generating theory inductively, grounded in data	Generates new theory through research. Outcome is determined by the data gathered. Concurrent analyses and data gathering occur (Hussein et al., 2014)	Resource intensive, exhaustive approach. Literature review needed void of researcher developing assumptions. (Hussein et al., 2014)	Requires a larger sample size. Constructivist nature and requirement to avoid assumptions prior to data gathering means incompatible with study 1 and research approach
Content Analysis	Focus on making sense of the content of messages.	Systematic approach. Results can be synthesis quantifiably- allowing for both qualitative and quantitative analysis. Once code book is designed, analysis can be efficient. Code book increases replicability.	Creating code book is resource intensive. Focus on predefined codes/ Analysis focuses codes from the content and not account for broader context.	Relies on more than one coder Focus on predefined codes limits the analysis for more nuanced understandings of individual experiences. Rigidity incompatible with research approach.

Interpretative Phenomenology Analysis	Seeks to examine lived experiences, & how individuals make sense of these first-hand experiences.	Seeks to understand participant experiences, and captures depth of experiences. Allows for thick descriptions. Analyses beyond initial themes to interpret the why behind participants perceptions.	Time intensive. May lack generalisability. Requirement for researcher to constantly reflect on their interpretation. Requirement for advanced interpretive skill, which novice researchers may struggle with.	Feasible with a small sample size. Focuses deeply on individuals experience. Compatible with research design.
Narrative Analysis	Analyses personal stories or accounts to understand how individuals construct meaning.	Provides insights into individual experiences and broader contexts. Considers the whole story.	Time intensive. Requirement of long and detailed data gathering. May lack generalisability. Consideration is required of the researchers' biases and assumptions. Consideration needed to ensure data coding does not lose meaning of story.	Feasible but may be difficult with limited data and small sample size. Compatible with research design.

Appendix U: Summary of Results for Young People

Overview

This study looked at how you feel about school belonging and school attendance. We wanted to understand:

1. What do you think about school attendance and school belonging?
2. How do school belonging and school attendance affect you?
3. Whether your experiences match what other research says.
4. What could help improve school belonging?

Here is what we found:

What do you think about school attendance and school belonging?

What does 'Belonging' at school mean to you?

Feeling accepted • <i>"You are accepted for who you are"</i>	Being recognised • <i>"and possibly noticed you're there, yeah"</i>	Fitting in • <i>"erm if you fit in with the other student"</i>
Feeling comfortable • <i>"just kind of feels homely in a way"</i>	Being themselves • <i>"Just, hmm, being allowed, being who I am and people, well don't care. As in a good way."</i>	Being included- • <i>"Like just feeling like included"</i>

You described feeling a sense of belonging in school in different ways. You mentioned six key things:

You also described different types of belonging.:

- Feeling like you belong somewhere - having a relax spot at lunch
- Belonging with people - with your friends, peers, and teachers
- Belonging as a learner- feeling like you fit in with your learning

Do you feel like you belong at school?

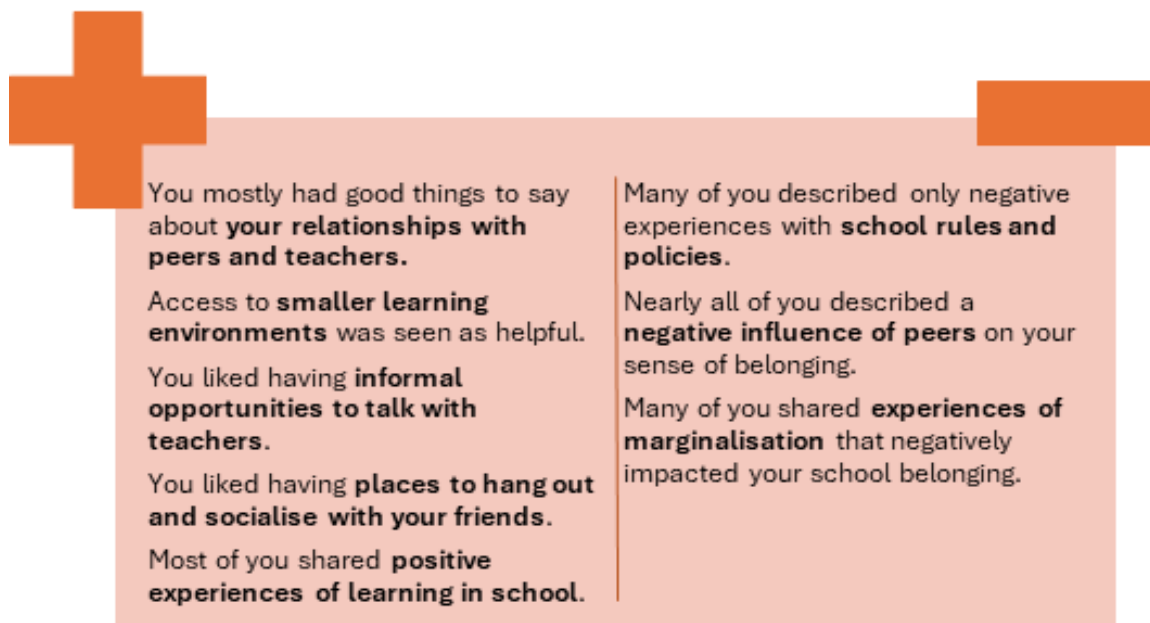
We used a questionnaire to explore your overall sense of belonging, connection to teachers, identification, and participation, and fit with peers.

- Most of you felt an average sense of belonging
- Connection to teachers had the highest scores and the most significant difference between young people. This suggests your feelings were mixed about your connection to teachers.
- Identification and participation had an average score, indicating that some of you felt involved in your school and connected to activities, while others were less involved.
- Feeling like you fit with peers had the lowest scores, suggesting differences in how you feel you fit with your peers.

Even though the number showed some of you had a stronger sense of belonging, your personal responses did not always match. Some of you said you belonged, even if your score was low. Others had high scores but didn't *feel* like they belonged. That shows that numbers don't always tell the full story - your words and experiences matter.

How do you feel about belonging at School?

What is mostly positive and negative?



You mostly had good things to say about your relationships with peers and teachers. Access to smaller learning environments was seen as helpful. You liked having informal opportunities to talk with teachers. You liked having places to hang out and socialise with your friends. Most of you shared positive experiences of learning in school.	Many of you described only negative experiences with school rules and policies. Nearly all of you described a negative influence of peers on your sense of belonging. Many of you shared experiences of marginalisation that negatively impacted your school belonging.
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What do you think about your attendance?

School attendance means how much and how often you are present and taking part in school learning - whether that's in the school building, online, or somewhere else.

You had different opinions about your attendance.

- Most of you thought your attendance was good, even if attendance met the criteria for persistent absenteeism (missing more than 10 % of school).
- Some indicated poor attendance due to problems with friends and disliking certain subjects.
- Others described attendance as fluctuating, depending on what was happening in school that day.

How does School Attendance and Belonging affect you?

Is school attendance important?

Most of you indicated that school attendance was important, but not everyone agreed.

- Most of you thought school attendance was important for learning and future goals.
- Other young people said attendance was important for social development.
- One young person felt attendance wasn't important due to being in secondary 2. *This was because there were no examinations in secondary 2, so they felt it didn't matter right now.*

Is school belonging important?

Almost all of you felt that belonging was important, but it depended, and one person did not know.

- Some of you said it was important for certain people but not for everyone, or in certain situations. For instance, one young person shared, *"Like some people (are) like completely detached from like everything around them and get on fine. I kind of wish I could be like that"* and another stated when something in school must be done, like taking a test, belonging mattered less.

How does belonging affect you?

Feeling like you belong can:

- Reduce worry and low mood, and increase happiness
- Make it easier to join in class and reduce disagreements with peers.
- Help people be kinder and more open.

Do young people think belonging affects their attendance?

Almost all of you said that feeling like you belong at school directly impacts whether you want to go to school.

- When you know you will see a teacher you like, meet your friends, or have a subject you enjoy, you're more likely to show up.
- But attendance can feel much harder if you feel left out, disconnected or have fallen out with a peer.
- One young person shared that they did not think belonging mattered, as nothing could help their attendance. So, for most of you, belonging matters. But it's not the same for everyone.

How do young people's views align with the picture from published research?

We looked at the factors that impact school belonging from published studies and explored whether these matched your views.

You agreed with the research about:

- Teachers and friends matter the most.
- School culture and access to school support make a difference.
- Motivation and how you feel about school are important.
- Support from your parents/carers also matters.

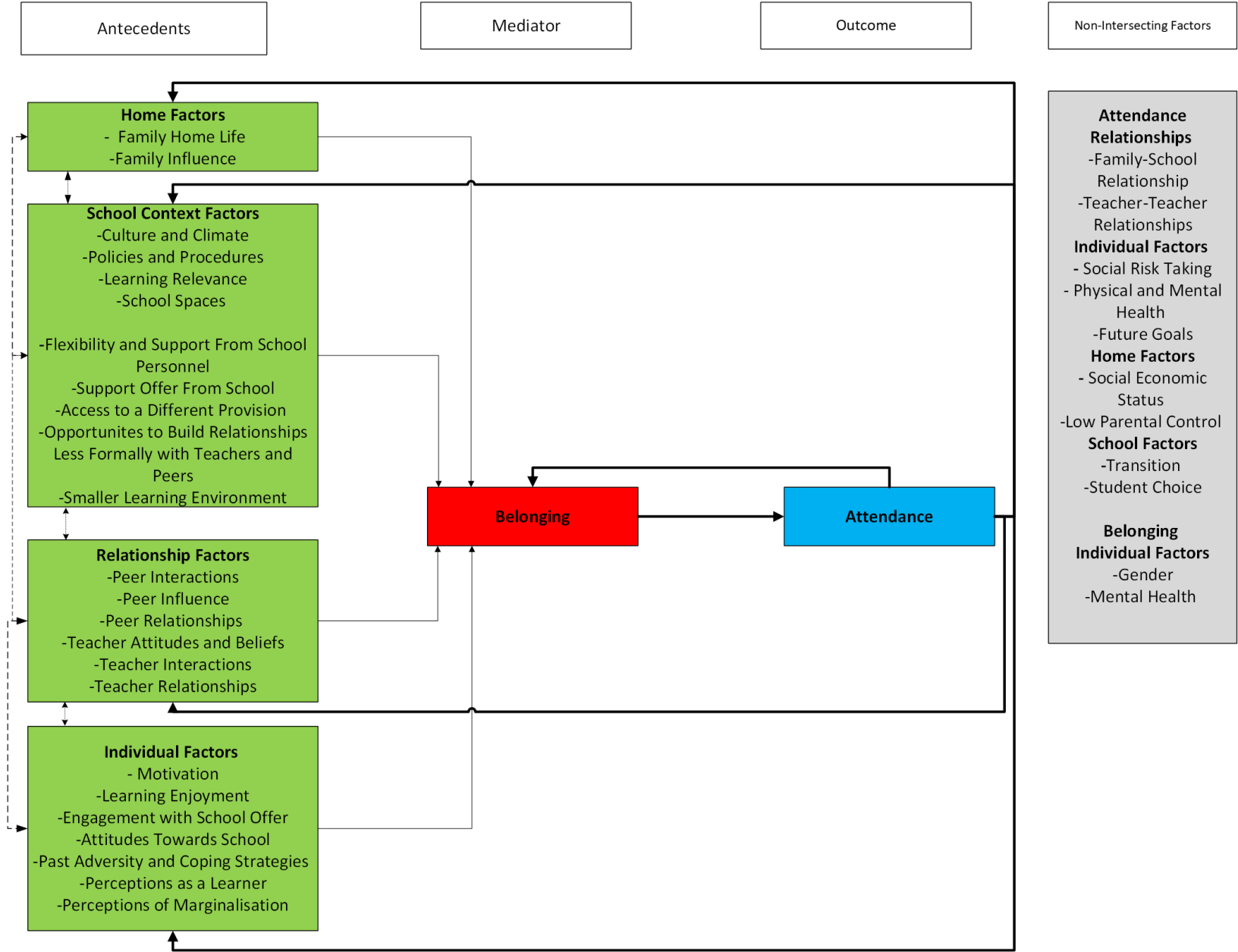
You didn't mention:

- Connection with the community or teachers advocating for you.

You added:

- **Enjoyable and interesting** learning matters.
- Having spaces to relax and see your friends helps.

Updated Conceptual Model with YP views



How can Belonging be Improved?

Can you change your sense of belonging?

Your views were mixed: most of you said belonging was changeable or partially changeable. Others said it was not changeable, and one young person was unsure.

Some of you said belonging can be improved through effort, participation in activities, and self-change. Others said it was influenced by things outside one's control, like being excluded or rejected from a group.

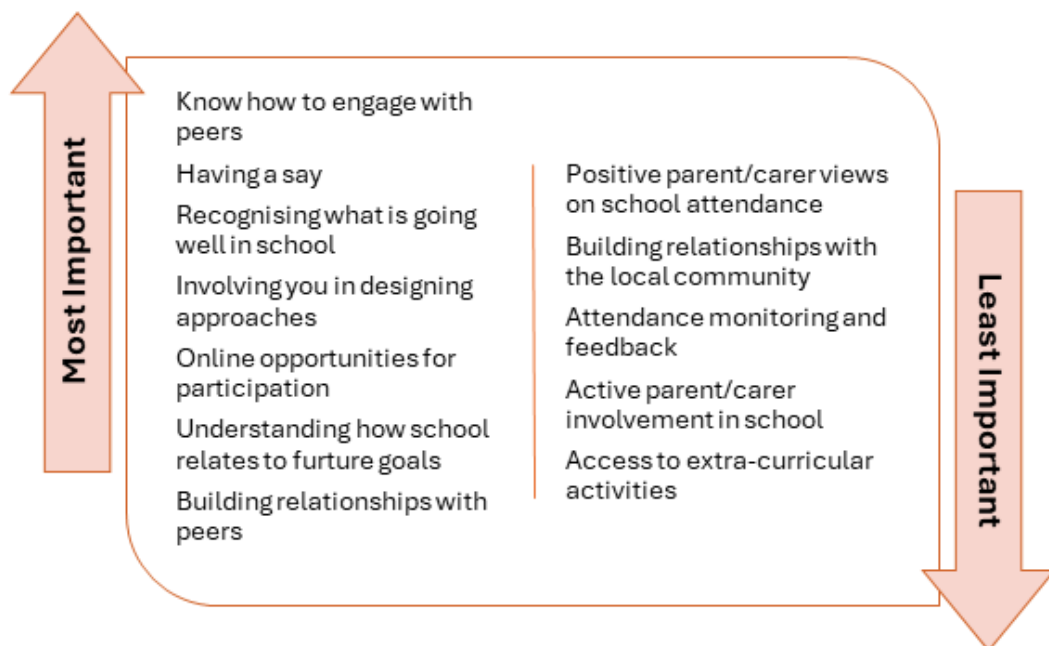
What Could Help Improve School Belonging?

You suggested two ways to improve school belonging: personal/individual support and school support. These included:

- Small groups and personalised help.
- Learning how to interact better with peers.
- Knowing that not fitting in all the time is okay.
- Time to relax and talk.
- Teaching that is fun and relevant
- Knowing how to access support
- And supportive systems and fair rules, like uniform expectations and behaviour policies.

What Would Help You Feel More Belonging at School?

You rated various strategies for supporting school belonging.



TL/DR- What you told us...

- Belonging = feeling accepted, included and being yourself
- You can belong to a space, with people or as a learner.
- Feeling like you belong helps you go to school and feel better.
- Teachers and friends matter the most.
- Some things (peer drama and school rules) make you feel left out.
- Not everyone agrees on whether belonging can change.
- You had great ideas of what might help, like having your say, personalised support and building on what is going well.

Note. Highlighted sections indicate changes based on confirmability phase.

Appendix V: Guidelines for Intervention Protocol (Schools Version)

Draft Guidelines for Student-Led Belonging Intervention to Reduce Persistent Absenteeism for Schools

Introduction

Creating a sense of belonging in schools is important for school attendance. This guideline outlines an intervention framework that integrates student voice and participatory approaches to enhance your and other students' sense of belonging and attendance at school.

Rationale

In Scotland, more and more young people are missing school. Persistent absenteeism (missing more than 10% of school over a year) is rising, especially in secondary school. School attendance matters and is important for: attainment, future employment, and health.

Many young people don't feel like they belong in school. This is particularly true for young people from diverse or underrepresented backgrounds, young people with additional support needs and secondary school students.

What can help?

Research shows that belonging in school is important. It helps to reduce worry, increase happiness, and impact how often a young person attends school. When young people feel they belong in school, staying engaged and involved is easier.

This guide is about helping young people feel more connected to school by listening to what really matters to them and making changes based on these ideas.

How is This Different from Other Approaches?

The key difference with this guide is the focus on a sense of school belonging. Many schools already offer support, like mentoring or early identification of reducing attendance, but these often focus on increasing attendance or achievement rather than on how young people feel about being in school. This guide shifts the focus to belonging, ensuring every student feels accepted, included and themselves. When belonging improves, attendance and emotional well-being also increase.

What Helps Young People Feel Like They Belong?

We have listened to young people, and here are some of the most essential things that help young people feel like they belong.

- 1. Feeling supported by People Who Care Increases Belonging**

Relationships with teachers, peers and friends matter. Knowing someone who cares is at school helps young people come to school. It is important to have opportunities to build relationships in school.

2. Support to Build Skills Increases Belonging

Young people say it can be hard to make friends or know how to fit in. Helping students develop confidence in social situations and reducing conflict with peers helps.

3. Changing How Young People See School Increases Belonging

Young people say it's important that school is a place where they can be themselves. Alongside knowing it is normal not always to feel a sense of belonging. Supporting young people in exploring their strengths and rethinking negative past experiences helps rebuild their relationship with school.

4. Making School More Supportive Increases Belonging

Young people say it helps to have ways to calm down, like relaxing activities, and both informal and formal chances to talk. They also need to know how and where to get support when needed.

Other ways school supports belonging include:

Fair policies Increase Belonging

- Young people notice when rules are applied inconsistently. Schools should involve students in shaping and implementing policies, such as behaviour or uniform guidelines.

Making Learning Engaging Increases Belonging

- Young people told us that relevant, meaningful, and enjoyable learning helps students feel capable and connect.

How Will This Be Done?

Young people told us that interventions must include their views, involve them in decision-making, and build on what is going well in school. They must also involve personalisation, opportunities to build skills, and include other peers. In addition, they must consider different ways of participation, e.g., online/in person.

Candidate Approach

Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) means that young people do not just participate in a project but help lead it. They are co-researchers, not just participants. Young people identify what matters to them most and work alongside adults to design, implement and reflect on changes in school.

Appreciative Inquiry is a strengths-based process that focuses on what works well in school and how to build upon it. This approach was chosen as young people told us that being strengths-based was important for their school belonging. Appreciative Inquiry follows five steps (Figure 1):

1. *Define- What are we exploring together? (e.g., belonging)*
2. *Discover- what is working well?*
3. *Dream- what could it look like?*
4. *Design- what steps must happen to make this a reality?*
5. *Deliver- testing out and trialling the implementation.*

Figure 1: A visual of the Appreciative Inquiry Process (Reference).

Key Elements

1. Purpose

This project is about making school a place everyone feels like they belong. By participating in this project, we'll work together to improve school support so that everyone feels a stronger sense of belonging, which can help with coming to school. We also hope to evaluate the project and whether participating in such projects helps young people feel connected to school.

2. Target population

Who will be invited to take part?

Young people told us they must be included in any interventions to increase their belonging and attendance at school. They told us it is important to include other peers and teachers in any approach. Therefore, a small group approach was selected as appropriate.

Invited to take part will be:

- Secondary school students between secondary school years one and three (aged 11- 15 years)
- Young people with persistent absences (missing more than 10% of school)
- Teachers (e.g., guidance teachers or class teachers)

Young people told us they would prefer interventions in a small group with opportunities for 1:1 support as needed. Each group will consist of approximately 6-8 students and 1-2 teachers, ideally including those who interact frequently with the selected students.

3. Ethics and Consent

Before participating, individuals will be given information about what to expect from the project and a consent form. It is important to know that participation is voluntary and that anyone taking part can withdraw at any time. Ethical approval will be sought from Local Authority Council before implementation.

4. Setting

This project will adopt a hybrid approach. Young people told us they would prefer interventions to take place in school, but that it is important to have opportunities to engage online.

Sessions will take place in person at school. When young people cannot participate, they will be provided another way of sharing their views, such as via an online meeting.

5. Structure and Duration

Each session will last 50 minutes or one school class period.

This project will follow an appreciative inquiry approach, which adopts five stages and will run for eight sessions. Sessions will be delivered weekly or fortnightly over a 2-3-month period, allowing flexibility based on participant needs.

A note: further sessions may be added as required through discourse with the participants. This is because appreciative inquiry is a reflective process, and further time may need to be spent on each stage.

6. Intervention Components

Session 1 (Introductory Session):

- This session introduces the project's purpose. It will outline what participatory action research is and the steps of appreciative inquiry.
- This session will explore group agreements, emphasising power sharing and mutual respect.
- Participants will be introduced to belonging and some possible overarching questions, which will be refined during the discussion.
- Participants will be asked to consider possible skills they may require to support the process, for instance, noting down key parts of a conversation.

Session 2/3 (Define and Discover):

- This session will explore what a sense of belonging means to participants, how they currently experience it in school and if it matters.

- It will begin with participants being asked to consider what belonging means to them in the widest sense.
- Participants will also be presented with possible definitions of belonging, and be asked to discuss their thoughts.
- Participants will be asked to share stories about feeling a sense of belonging, in pairs, before sharing wider with the group.
- As the session progresses, participants will be asked to consider belonging within their school context.
- Participants and the facilitator will note key parts of the conversation to capture key thoughts. They will be asked to consider how best to present this information. This could be through drawings, pictures, or other means.

Session 4 (Dream):

- This session will explore what a school where everyone feels a sense of belonging looks like, without barriers such as resourcing and practicalities.
- Vision planning will consider building on what is already going well in school.
- This will include discussing belonging with people, belonging somewhere, and belonging as a learner.
- Participants will be asked to consider practices supporting school belonging and how these might differ from current practices.
- Participants will be asked to select 2/3 ideas to focus on.

Note: Young people told us it is sometimes difficult to think of ways to increase belonging. Therefore, information from other young people can be shared during these sessions, if required.

Session 5/6 (Design/Deliver):

- Participants will be asked to focus on the 2/3 ideas to think about how to create change.
- Participants will consider what they can do to make their dream a reality through brainstorming.
- Participants will be asked to create three action steps to enhance belonging.
- Consideration will be given to who might need to be involved and relevant people who may help with the plan.

- In this session, students will begin implementing their ideas or take steps toward sharing their proposed changes with relevant stakeholders (e.g., teachers, leadership). This may include preparing a presentation, creating materials (posters, videos), or meeting with school staff to discuss the changes.
- Participants will commit to actioning one or two next steps.
- Further opportunities will be provided to reflect on the next steps delivered and consider other possible ways forward.

Session 7 (Reflect)- two months following.

- *In this session, participants will be asked ways to share the project more widely within the school.*
- *In addition, participants will be asked to reflect on the appreciative inquiry process (outlined in the evaluation section).*

7. Implementation Plan

What schools are asked to provide:

- Facilitators: An Educational Psychologist and a staff member from the pilot school.
- Time: Each session will run for 50 minutes.
- Space: A confidential space for group discussions
- Support: Senior Leadership Support, embedded within school improvement planning, a willingness to consider changes suggested by the project.

8. Evaluation

Measures will be collected pre, post, and at two-month follow-ups. This will be through the psychological sense of a school membership questionnaire, a self-reported form, and attendance data. Participant reflections will inform future cycles of the project.

Measuring the process:

- Do participants have higher school belonging after participation in the project?
- Has participants school attendance increased after participation in the project?
- How well was the intervention protocol implemented?

- Was the project enjoyable for participants?
- Was the project relevant and meaningful to the young people?
- Was the project easy to implement?
- Was the project delivered as intended? E.g., did any participants drop out?
- Were changes implemented through the project sustained?

Measuring changes designed through the process:

This will be considered within the appreciative inquiry process.

9. Sustainability and Scalability

A prerequisite to this project is senior leadership support. This project must be embedded within wider school improvement planning.

Sustainability and scalability will be considered through the evaluation.

Appendix W: ‘Belonging’ Matters: A Student Guide to ‘Belonging’ and ‘Attendance’.

Introduction

Feeling like you belong in school is important for how often you attend and how you feel when you are at school. This guide is about helping you and your peers feel more connected to school by listening to what really matters to you and by coming up with ideas to increase school belonging.

Why does this matter?

In Scotland, more and more young people are missing school. Missing more than 10% of school is known as persistent absenteeism, which is becoming a big problem in schools, particularly secondary schools.

School attendance matters and is important for:

- Attainment
- Future employment
- Health and well-being

At the same time, many young people, particularly those with additional support needs and secondary school students, don't feel like they belong in school. A strong sense of belonging helps young people to feel happier at school, enjoy their learning and attend school.

This guide helps schools focus on belonging, not just attendance.

What helps?

We asked young people what helps them feel like they belong. Here is what they said really helps:

- Knowing someone cares
- Learning skills to build confidence in social situations.
- Being authentically you and recognising your strengths
- A more supportive school environment
 - Fair and supportive policies
 - Clear access to support

- Relaxing spaces
-

How will this work?

Young people told us that interventions must include their views, involve them in decision-making, and build on what is going well in school.

This project is different because you will not only participate but also help lead it. Instead of adults deciding what should change, you will help shape the ideas.

This project will use youth participatory action research, which means you will be involved in researching, designing, and testing ideas to increase belonging in your school. It will use an appreciative inquiry approach, which is strengths-based and focuses on what works well and how to build on it.

Who can be involved?

- Young people aged 11-15 years (S1-S3)
- Young people who have missed more than 10% of school.
- Teachers (guidance or class teachers)

Teachers will be there to support the project. Their role is to listen to your ideas and to bring your ideas to life.

Each group will be made up of 7-10 participants (6-8 young people and 1-2 teachers).

Do young people need to take part?

No, participation in the project is completely voluntary. Young people will access an information sheet and consent form outlining the project. They do not have to participate and can leave the project anytime.

What will happen?

- This project will run for seven sessions over two school terms.
- Sessions will last around one school period (50 minutes)
- Sessions will be in school, but online options will be available if needed.

We want to make sure everyone feels comfortable in the sessions. If you don't like speaking in a group, you can participate in different ways, such as in a pair, writing your thoughts down or through drawings.

What might the sessions look like?

The process may also change along the way. You lead this project, so the group may decide to focus on a certain topic for a shorter or longer time or change how things are done. An idea is outlined next:

Session 1: Getting Started- This session will introduce the project and create ground rules.

Session 2 & 3: Discovering your experiences of belonging- These sessions will explore what belonging means to you and your experiences of belonging.

Session 4: Dreaming big- This session will explore what a school where everyone belongs would look like and how it might differ from how it currently is.

Session 5 & 6: Making it Happen- These sessions will turn your ideas into action. They will explore ways to make your dream a reality and identify steps to make it happen.

Session 7: Reflecting- This session will look back on what has been achieved and consider any next steps needed.

How will we know it is working?

We'll check in before, during, and after the project to see if students feel more connected to school. We'll look at things like:

- Do you have a higher sense of belonging?
- Has attendance improved?
- Did you enjoy the project?
- Was the project meaningful and helpful to you?
- Did everything go as planned or were there challenges?

What happens after the project ends?

This project doesn't end after the last session. We will decide together what other steps need to be taken to make sure your school keeps improving the school belonging of young people.

Appendix X: Themes for the Importance of 'Belonging' for All Participant Data

Themes	Codes	Data (Participant)
Behaviour Changes (Learning) (Relationships)	Working Better	"I, eh, work better." (P1) "I wouldn't get as much done." (P1) "And in class probably get on with their work and probably just get on with it." (P2) "Because if you don't have a good relationship with your teacher it is hard to do your work." (P6)
	Increase class contributions	"So that you can talk in like classes and stuff." (P1) "Like let's say you saw very like a person that's very quiet in class, who probably feel like they didn't belong in that class because, you know, everyone was different. Everyone focuses on this one thing. Whereas this one person focuses on the other thing, they might talk about what they felt like they they focus and like hmm about a lot more they might talk more in general." (P3)
Emotional Wellbeing	Mental Health	"I think like if someone is really extraverted and social I think that if they did not have anyone that they didn't have like anywhere that they believed that they belong then I think that could really affect sortof how they sortof act and how their brain develops and their mental health." (P10)
	Worry/anxiety	"Because, like you know you're like friends with people and then you don't have to worry about anything." (P1) "Because not being part of a group, you can sometimes go off and then you can develop social anxiety and stuff like that." (P2)

“Probably would feel better going into school rather than a lot of folk Probably dreaded in the morning. Just I got to just gotta make it to Friday or something like that.” (P2)

“Just feel like it should be, kids shouldn’t want to be like oh my god it time for school...it’s not something I dread doing like some people would.” (P5)

“Like yeah I feel like safe and that . Like I don’t have to worry about coming into school.” (P5)

Impact on mood “Because well, if you didn't feel as if you belonged anywhere, that could lead to feeling even depressed sadder.” (P2)

“Everyone will probably be more happy to.” (P2)

“You might see people being a little more happier because they actually fit in.” (P3)

“Uh and you might see they might become happy because they can actually talk with people.” (P3)

“Well, it’s just very erm like it can like it feels a lot better to be around people than being by yourself.” (P4)

“Like I feel a lot better to be around other people than I would like be by yourself that you don’t like really feel like that great.” (P4)

“Because like when you are not, when you feel like your not like it can just mess you like you don’t feel good. Like you just feel very away from people. Good to be around good people.” (P4)

“Probably just like people would look happier like I walk around the school sometimes and not everybody looks happy.” (P5)

		"Yeah, but it might just make a few other people feel like happier and more secure in school." (P5) "I think that everyone would be a lot happier." (P9) "I can't answer that question. I don't I don't have that feeling for really for really anywhere. It is a bit depressing." (P10) "I think that it could probably be a leading cause to something like depression. Sort of not having any sense of sort of knowing sort of who you are and where you belong, if you feel like you need to be out there and you like getting along with people that no one likes getting along with you." (P10) "Maybe people would be happier. In some sense. If like someone I suppose if a bit more vague, they don't feel they belong here but they probably feel that they should come in and end up drug addicted homeless man on the side of a road in Aberdeen, whereas, if they felt they belonged in the school that probably would make them happier." (P10)
Behaviour changes	Reduced Conflict	"Like what you'll probably see behavioral changes and you'd definitely notice, probably you'll notice social and behavioral changes probably." (P3) "I don't think they'd like some people might still not get along. If that makes sense like. Still, some people will think this is better than that and. As I said, just because they belong cause we they'll get along." (P3) "And more secure in school because I know that some people are, like, can be quite rude to other people because their appearance and stuff like that. But if, like everybody had to wear the same uniform, then they couldn't, like judge anyone

else because they have to wear the same stuff.”
(P5)

“There wouldn’t be any arguments or gossip
everyone would be friends.” (P6)

“Like people aren’t (unclear), people wouldn’t
argue they would just be nicer to other people in
general when they are interacting with someone
else.” (P9)

Social Changes	Increased quality	“People would probably. And say nicer things Maybe even. some people might well.” (P2) “Everyone would be nice to each other.” (P6) “Like everyone would be a bit more friendly to each other.” (P7) “Probably nicer as well.” (P9) “People wouldn’t argue they would just be nicer to other people.” (P9)
	Increased Interactions	“Some people might well.. probably go and speak to a lot more folk.” (P2) “Well, if you're not really used to speaking to folk in a group and it's just your parents, going and speaking to a random person could be a lot harder than when your friends with someone you can you can just go and speak to someone's. I find that I can just speak to someone and they some how like me.” (P2) “You'll definitely see social changes and I think there's a chance people would talk about more, which goes back to the social.” (P3) “Because since they would feel they belong, they wouldn't felt like they wouldn't feel like they need to be hidden away from people, they they could actually talk to people.” (P3) “They talk. They're talking a lot more. They're being with a lot more people.” (P3)

Appendix Y: Template for the Template Analysis, with Revisions Indicated

Theme/Sub-theme	Definition	Examples
Relationship Factors		
Peer Interactions	Day to day exchanges between young people. These can be verbal or non-verbal.	Supportive or Harmful interactions
Peer Influence	The impact of young people on one another.	Encouraging positive attention in class Encouraging Risk-Taking behaviours
Peer Relationships	The connections and bonds formed between young people. These include close friendships and wider relationships in school or out with school.	Group Membership Friendships Social Fit
Teacher Attitudes and Beliefs	The perceptions and assumptions the teacher holds towards students.	Statements of belief towards the student Implicit bias about student potential
Teacher Relationships	The connection and bonds formed between students and teachers.	Shared interests Favourite/least favourite teachers
Teacher Interactions**	Day to day exchanges between young people and adults in school. These can be verbal or non-verbal.	Talking, humour. Listened too.
School Factors		
Smaller learning environments	Access to classes or groups with few students, allowing more opportunities to foster relationships	Smaller classes Small groups

Flexibility and support from school personnel	Teachers recognising and responding to individual needs through adaptations with the classroom	Targeted support Differentiation
Support	School supports that recognise and respond to individual needs through bespoke supports	Targeted support (e.g. access to interventions and specific programmes) Meetings etc. Small group or individual
Culture	School traditions and values. The atmosphere of the school e.g. climate of safety and inclusiveness, Welcoming, safe school environment. This includes the physical building and the quality of teaching and learning	Experience of Safety Welcoming classroom environments Access to activities week Uniform Approach to discipline
Policies & Procedures	The rules and guidelines established within the school	Disciplinary procedure
Access to a different provision	The ability to engage in alternative education programmes. Note: This specifically arose from research exploring young people who had moved provision.	Moving schools
Opportunities to engage with teachers less formally	Interacting outside of structured lessons	Extra-curricular activity involvement Informal discussions
Opportunities to engage with peers less formally**	Interacting outside of structured lessons	

Learning Relevance **	Connection between learning and young people's interests/future goals	Practical applications Career goals
School Spaces **	Physical environment	Access to spaces at lunch Access to library etc..
Motivation	The internal and external drives that encourage students to engage with their learning.	Value Challenge Monetary
Engagement with school offer	The extent to which young people participate in the opportunities available in school.	Extra-curricular activities Learning
Past adversity and coping strategies	Challenges young people have faced and strategies they have employed.	Self-defeating behaviours e.g. substance misuse. Trauma Positive self-talk.
Attitude towards school	Young peoples feelings, beliefs and perceptions about school influence their participation and effort.	Interest in school Valuing school
Perception as learner	How young people view their own abilities and potential as a learner	Behind Difference
Experiences of marginalisation	Situations where a student has been excluded or disadvantaged due to factors such a race, disability etc	Isolation Racism
Learning Enjoyment **	Young people's response to the process of learning	Enjoyment of specific lessons Having fun

Interesting content		
Home Context		
Family Influence	The way young people's family values and expectations shape their attitudes and behaviours in school.	Family valuing education. Family experience of education.
Family Culture	Young people's experiences at home, including home stability, routines, safety.	Poverty Reliable transport to school.
Note. **= Additional codes added following initial coding		

Appendix Z: Sample Interview Transcript

The following is an excerpt from a semi-structured interview with Participant 6 (P6). It was randomly selected for illustrative purposes in order to ensure transparency and avoid the selective presentation of data. Names of individuals, schools, and places have been anonymised or removed. The interviewer is referred to as FS.

FS: How would you describe your attendance at school?

P6: I don't like it.

FS: Can you tell me more?

P6: I don't like seeing all the people. I would rather just see my friends, being in class with my friends. A few of them are in my year, and the rest of them are in S3. They aren't in my classes. Like today, none of them were in my classes.

FS: Does that make it harder?

P6: It makes it harder to concentrate. Like I like my classes, and I'll go in my classes and I will do my work, but the people in my class are the reason I am failing classes, because they distract me, and they always go [calling her name]. I have dealt with it my entire life, at my old school I was abused by this boy, I come home with a brick imprint on my back, two black eyes and scratches down my back, so I moved here. It is better but the people aren't.

FS: Can you tell me more?

P6: I don't get abused here. The campus is a lot bigger, which is better as there are more spots where you can talk to your friends and you don't have to be around everybody, like at lunch and break we will go and sit up in science because they let us, instead of sitting down in the canteen around everyone.

FS: Tell me more - what helps when you are coming to school a lot?

P6: I want to be with my friends. I am also going to see Mrs S. She is a South African teacher, and because I am from SA she gets me and I go and sit with her sometimes. Like on Mondays. And the rest of the week.

FS: Tell me more.

P6: We can just talk about SA, and my friends don't because none of them have been to SA, so they don't know. It's funny because like they just go huh? It's really funny.

FS: Do you think coming to school is important?

P6: Mhmm, it is important for what I want to do when I am older, with cooking. Because I need maths, I need English and I need business. And then the other two are my choice, but I need those so I have to come to school.

FS: I am going to ask you about belonging now - when I say that word, what does it mean to you?

P6: To belong somewhere, to belong in a group to do something with your group, like activities and stuff. It is not something I think about a lot.

FS: Can you tell me more?

P6: I would say the only belonging I have is with my friends, that is it. At my old school I had one friend, and she betrayed me.

FS: That sounds hard. Can you tell me more?

P6: I would sit by the bins by myself and eat my food. Here I have friends, only a couple but a small group is better than nothing.

FS: Do you think that belonging is important for attendance?

P6: Yes. But my parents still make me come to school, they are SA.

FS: Tell me a little bit about what it feels like to be part of your school. Are there different spaces or places where you feel it more or less?

P6: In classes when everyone is there - no. But when it is just my friends or teachers that I trust, yes. Because I grew up with adults and only adults, I joke like adults, so like it will sound rude but in a funny way, and my friends understand that and Mrs S understands that. I can be more myself.

FS: Are there other teachers where you feel that?

P6: Miss S and Mrs B. I talk to her sometimes, I used to be in her classes.

FS: What is it about these teachers?

P6: They are just funny, she is nice to me.

FS: Do you feel people care about you in school?

P6: No. Teachers maybe, other people no. Teachers will come and sit with me and help me, because I struggle in school. Teachers think I am dyslexic because I write words how they sound. Because like in tests I struggle a lot because I also read incredibly slowly - I never learnt how to read properly. So they will put me on a laptop as that is meant to help me, but it doesn't. So my mum tried to talk to the school to get extra time for tests, because she had that as well. But they won't give it to me, because I should be at the same level as other people but I am not.

FS: Is there anything the school does to increase pupils' feelings of connection?

P6: I think they have tried but I don't think it is working? Because in primary you create enemies, but then you are enemies - there is no changing that. So I think the school is trying its best to change that but they are not going to.

FS: Is there anything that the school does that decreases the sense of belonging?

P6: In general, I would say it's the uniform. I understand that the school wants us to wear school uniforms, but people want to express themselves with clothes. Not letting us wear what we want, forcing us to wear all black, makes us not want to come to school - it just builds up and people go off on tangents. I do stand by that.

FS: Is there anything from the top of your head about designing an intervention to increase belonging or attendance?

P6: I think the school should make a group for people that are in S2 and going up right now - my year group. Because I think my year group is struggling with friends and social times and all that. Mostly the girls, because a lot of the girls are starting fights. I would like to go to the group to make more friends, but the school won't let me. It is only the people that have been threatened or jumped, or people that struggle to make friends. I struggle to make

friends but I don't think the school notices that. Because I either walk around the school by myself or I go and hide away somewhere, and then the bell rings I go to class or I will just go outside. The school doesn't notice.

P6: I know that I want to do something about cooking and school can't change my mind. People should get a choice and I think they should go and talk to their guidance teachers about what they want to do - because I know what I want to do, and I know that school can't change that, but I don't get to say anything.

Appendix AA: Sample Coding Trail

The coding trail below demonstrates the deductive process applied to the interview transcript for participant 6. Each extract is anchored to the definition of the relevant sub-theme from the preliminary conceptual framework, and an initial descriptive code is generated from the data.

This trail is illustrative rather than exhaustive. Full coding was conducted across all ten participant transcripts and involved iterative review to ensure consistency of application. Valence notation: (+) indicates the experience supports belonging and/or attendance; (-) indicates it undermines it; (-/+) indicates a mixed experience.

Transcript Extract (P6)	Applied Deductive Theme	Descriptive Code	Valence
"the people in my class are the reason I am failing classes, because they distract me"	Peer Influence: The impact of students on one another.	Negative peer distraction impacts academic performance	(-)
"I was abused by this boy... I come home with a brick imprint on my back, two black eyes and scratches down my back, so I moved here"	Peer Interactions: Exchanges between students. These can be verbal or non-verbal.	Physical peer-on-peer abuse; school move as a protective response to bullying	(-)
"I don't get abused here. The campus is a lot bigger, which is better as there are more spots where you can talk to your friends"	Culture and Climate: The atmosphere of the school e.g. climate of safety and inclusiveness. Welcoming, safe school environment including the physical building.	Physical campus experienced as safer and more protective; Bigger campus allows more space to interact with friends.	(+)
"at lunch and break we will go and sit up in science because they let us, instead of sitting down in the canteen around everyone"	Flexibility and Support from School Personnel: Teachers recognising and responding to individual needs through adaptations within the classroom.	Informal staff flexibility providing a space from other peer environments	(+)
"I am also going to see Mrs xx. She is a	Teacher Relationships: The connections and bonds	Shared cultural identity as the	(+)

South African teacher, and because I am from South Africa she gets me"	formed between students and teachers. Shared interests.	foundation of a meaningful teacher relationship	
"We can just talk about South Africa, and my friends don't because none of them have been to South Africa"	Opportunities to Engage with Teachers Less Formally: Interacting outside of structured lessons. Informal discussions.	Informal teacher dialogue is culturally affirming and validating	(+)
"I want to be with my friends"	Peer Relationships: The connections and bonds formed between students. These include close friendships and wider relationships in school or out with school.	Peer connection named as the primary motivator for school attendance	(+)
"I need maths, I need English and I need business... so I have to come to school"	Motivation: The internal and external drive that encourages students to engage with their learning. Enjoyment. Monetary.	Future-oriented motivation sustaining attendance; school valued for career goals	(+)
"I would say the only belonging I have is with my friends, that is it"	A Sense of Belonging: The feeling of being accepted, valued, and connected within the school community.	Belonging experienced as narrow and peer-dependent; the wider school community not felt as a site of belonging	(-)
"I would sit by the bins by myself and eat my food. Here I have friends, only a couple but a small group is better than nothing"	Experiences of Marginalisation: Situations where a student has been excluded or disadvantaged. Isolation.	Past social isolation contrasted with present fragile connection	(-/+)
"I struggle to make friends but I don't think the school notice that... the school doesn't notice"	Support: School supports that recognise and respond to individual needs through bespoke supports. Targeted support.	Perceived invisibility to school support systems	(-)

"I know that I want to do something about cooking and school can't change my mind... but I don't get to say anything"	Motivation: The internal and external drive that encourages students to engage with their learning. Perception as Learner: How students view their own abilities and potential as a learner.	Strong vocational identity in tension with perceived lack of agency over curriculum; school experience felt as irrelevant	(-)
"my parents still make me come to school, they are South African"	Family Influence: The way students' family values and expectations shape their attitudes and behaviours in school.	Family values functioning as an external driver sustaining attendance	(+)
"my past experiences have made me very wary of people, like I don't trust people until maybe a year after we are still friends"	Past Adversity and Coping Strategies: Challenges students have faced and strategies they have employed.	Sustained history of adversity shaping interpersonal approach; delayed trust as a protective coping strategy	(-)

Appendix BB: Example of Abductive Theme Peer Influence and Further Analysis

Abductive Theme Peer Influence

Valence	Theme	Codes	Data
Positive	Internal Influence	Enjoyment	"Yes, when I have friends in the class I think it goes by a lot faster, cause erm I will be talking to them or I will be enjoying, it makes me enjoy the lesson more." (P9) "The class itself making that class more enjoyable." (P10)
		Reducing worry	"Because, like you know you're like friends with people and then you don't have to worry about anything." (P1)
		Confidence	"Because I know, I hear from R that a lot of folk in my class really like me when some of them I don't really speak to. I have spoken to them once or twice. Yeah, it gives me more confidence I would say." (P2) "Some other people like lift you on you feet and help you get on with it." (P2)
	External Influence	Focus	"And because I'm surrounded by other people who enjoy art who, don't you know? Don't don't mess around it. It seriously actually stick and do it, cause not many people it might my age tend to actually stick and like art. It was really quiet obviously. It was really nice." (P3) "Focused everybody focused." (P3) "If my friends are not in class then there is not really anything for me to do except do my work, which I do anyway." (P9)

			"Or maybe we will just help each other with work. That is probably how I started talking to them actually." (P9)
		School Attendance	"Knowing that like if my friends are there and like oh come to school because like we want to see you in the morning, and I will be like oh find, I will go if they are." (P7)
Negative	Disruptive Influence	Distraction	"But one problem is we have I have a very, very disruptive class." (P3) "There was a lot of shouting in my class which never helped me to focus, which is why I got my headphones. So I always just sat and listened to my music and focused on there." (P3) "Because of the subject, you can just end up talking to people and forgetting." (P3) "In classrooms, like it would only really be like when you are moved away from people. If you are sitting beside someone." (P4) "Yeah, but the only thing is I feel like that's good because then I actually don't get distracted and I do my work." (P4) "That's why I feel like its better for not a lot of people to be in my class because then I don't. I can't talk so I have to get all my work." (P5) "Yeah, because otherwise I just get distracted." (P5) "Yeah, but the only thing is I feel like that's good because then I actually don't get distracted and I do my work." (P5) "It makes it harder to concentrate." (P6)

		"Like I like my classes, and I'll go in my classes and I will do my work, but the people in my class are the reason I am failing classes, because they distract me, and they always go (calling participant name)." (P6) "But I think it is much better when my friends are there, I have something else to do." (P9)
	Influencing Teacher Perceptions	"Like like some of the teachers don't really like me because I talk too much in some of my classes because I am with my friends." (P7)
	Regulation	"So if I ever get put in a class with her I will kick off." (P6) "I am not saying I would hurt them, I am saying there would be yelling all the time." (P6) "But then if it is just like no one is there then it is like just kindof hard to deal with the school." (P7)
Disempowerment	Withdrawal	"Because like you they don't like you don't include yourself because they don't want you to be included." (P8) "I wouldn't be learning, probably me leaving the class." (P6) "So I just don't want to confront that, so I am like right I will miss a few days and I hope that they have forgotten about it." (P10) "Yes, both, I can also avoid people I don't like in those two places. A lot of the people that I do not want to see do not go into either of those places." (P10)
	Social Discomfort	"Like with certain people maybe it is not so good to be around them." (P2)

and Limited Choice	"Identify when it's a good or bad situation place to be." (P2)
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"No, I had 2 friends and they wouldn't
say they were nice they were just
friends. I had to be friends with them as
I didn't have anyone else." (P5)

Excluded from place of belonging	"Sadly though, people kept on vandalising it, so we were forced to leave." (P3)
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Appendix CC: Sensitivity Analysis of Participants' 'Belonging' Scores

Comparison and Sensitivity Analysis of Overall Sense of 'Belonging', Domain Factors, and Participant-Reported Sense of 'Belonging'

Participant	Connection to Teacher	Identification & Participation	Perception of Fit	Overall 'Belonging'	Reported 'Belonging'	Sensitivity Note	Alignment
1	High	High	High	High	Yes	Consistent	Yes
2	Average	High	Average	Average	Mostly	Upward skew	Yes
3	High	Average	Average	Average	No	Upward skew	No
4	Low	Average	Average	Average	Yes	Downward skew	No
5	Average	Average	Average	Average	Mostly	Consistent	Yes
6	High	Average	Average	Average	No	Upward skew	No
7	Average	Low	Low	Low	No	Downward skew	Yes
8	Average	Average	Average	Average	No	Consistent	No
9	Average	Average	Average	Average	Yes	Consistent	Yes
10	Average	Low	Low	Low	No	Downward skew	Yes

Note. High, Average, and Low indicate relative domain scores. "Sensitivity Note" identifies skew between domain scores and overall score. "Alignment" indicates whether calculated scores matched participant-reported sense of 'belonging'.

Thoughts

Consistency and alignment were found between participants with high scores and qualitative responses (P1) and participants with lower scores (P7 and P10). However, remaining participants illustrated inconsistency between calculated and perceived 'belonging'. For example, participant 6 had a high connection to teacher (4.75) and average scores in other domains (overall 3.19), but reported not feeling 'belonging', showing that collapsing across domains may misrepresent individual experiences.

Appendix DD: Example of All Codes for Member-Checking Summary of Findings in Confirmability Phase

Participant Number	General Thoughts (Researcher Assigned)	Accuracy (Coded Quotes)	Additional (Coded Quotes)	Removal (Coded Quotes)
1	Mostly positive	"I agree with most of it, but the thing about the like not feeling belonging in the peers I don't really agree with that." "Just that bit. the thing about many of you feel like you don't fit with your peers."	"No, I don't think so."	"No"
2	Mostly Positive	"Erm, yeah a lot of it I would say is quite accurate. Some bits not as much but erm yeah." "Yeah this bit here not feeling like it was important to go to school even in second year, which I find it is because it is building up each year ... yeah"	"Ehh no not really no."	"Err, just that bit." (Referring to importance of going to school)

		you shouldn't be skipping just because of what year it is I find."		
3	Positive	"yeah, it does. I can actually kindof remember saying them. Like the being included: just feels like being included. Laughing." "I would say it works. Ermm, eh I would say it is all just accurate personally." "I would say that that is fairly accurate too... connection with your teachers is one of the biggest bits..."	"No"	"No"
5	Positive	"yeah it does make sense." "hmm the bit where it said some of you though your attendance was good even if attendance met ... How much days is 10 %?... okay, just that's not actually that much school."	"erm, no probably not."	"No I think it all makes sense."

"I really agree with that."				
6	Mostly Positive	"Yes." "Yes, that's accurate."	"I think if the teachers want to know ... School attendance should be based on how you are doing in school, not if you are coming to school."	"I don't know. No"
7	Positive	"Erm, yeah. I think it is pretty good." "Yeah, I like the eh quotes and stuff ... because like most people said that about belonging at school."	"maybe like a little bit it says a lot about belonging as stuff, but maybe about how to belong and stuff."	"No"
9	Positive	"Yea, I think it is right. Erm, understood. Does that make sense?" "Yes, I do. (See self in summary)" "It included other people's thoughts aswell . It make me feel better."	"No I don't think so."	"No"

10

Positive

"erm, yup it is cool. It is a bit weird reading something I said of of like a ehh proper formal bit of paper."

"There are definitely things that I could be convinced are just plucked straight out of my head."

"I erm don't think so."

"I think it is the person that... says attendance doesn't matter. That that is the only one that I just directly disagree with."