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Part I: Research focus and theoretical framework

Part I of the book addresses the sense of belonging, or the state of student belonging, described as a positive feeling due to emotional-cognitive processes in the human brain. The outline of the research problem, aims and questions will follow.

The school context is introduced with the description of social work in Austria and Australia featured as multi-professional student support services. School social work's triple mandate highlights the distinction between student belonging and children's rights and how they necessitate each other. What I mean by "triple mandate" is the extension of social work's mission to mediate between the interests of the social service providers and clients of social work through the addition of two core components: 1) the scientific foundation for practice and 2) the profession's code of ethics based on the commitment to human rights, reflected in social workers' value-judgements (Staub-Bernasconi, 2009, 2016).

A comprehensive review of the research literature generates assertions that drive this empirical investigation into student belonging. The conceptual framework developed for the current study – associated with four distinct need theories – is explained. It culminates in three synopses, drawn about the commonalities, the satisfaction of needs and belonging across all four approaches. Part I concludes with the realisation that students require access to resources to meet their "need to belong" and feel a state of belonging.

1   Introduction

Human need fulfilment is fundamental to human life. It is a complex undertaking that requires access to resources, referred to as satisfiers. If human beings are hindered in their need fulfilment, whether due to social or other constraints, this can negatively affect their wellbeing. The access to satisfiers for needs fulfilment is context dependent. This book features one such context that dominates children and adolescents' lives – the school social system. As young people spend a considerable amount of their time at school, their actions are shaped by it, and school, in turn, is shaped by their actions – as individuals and members of the school social system.

From this theoretical standpoint, school is a "social system" – the term used in this book in the tradition of Mario Bunge (1977b, 1977a, 1983, 1985, 1989). According to Bunge, a social system is defined as a concrete or material system that comprises social actors – human beings – in a shared environment, interacting through cooperation with the other members of the system. My professional background in social work is based on this understanding of social systems as tangible things that consist of individual actors as system components or members.

The definition of social systems as concrete things with individuals as its members is the basis of the social work systems theory paradigm *Systemtheoretische Paradigma der Sozialen Arbeit* (SPSA), developed by Werner Obrecht (1996, 2000, 2005a) and Silvia Staub-Bernasconi (1991, 1999; 2018) which has shaped the German tradition of social work science for the past 30 years. My thinking as a social work scientist evolved through using the SPSA as a framework in three domains – as an educator in bachelor's and master's programs, in the research for the current study, and over a decade in practice as a school social worker. In the latter role, I was concerned with developing remedies for the practical and social problems that confronted the students in a school social system. It came to my attention that dealing with the school meant navigating a complex social system. Such complexity is a given because of its different system members: students, teachers, school management and other school staff, such as school social workers. The crux of the matter is that individuals – with biological, psychic, and social needs – are simultaneously members of one or more social system/s (Bunge, 1977b, 2000; Obrecht, 2005a).

To understand the relations between the members of the school social system, it is necessary to understand a system's mechanisms and processes. In conjunction with the definition of "social system", the term "mechanism" concerns the regularities and patterns in the behaviour of the different "macro-micro-micro-macro social relations" among the system members, i.e., how the

social system "ticks" when it comes to the members of its different social levels (Bunge, 1997, p. 410). Given the complexity of the school social system, this warrants a close study of its mechanisms and processes – because they are integral to understanding the way it works. Likewise, it contributes towards identifying and explaining the factors in the school social system that facilitate or hinder student access to resources for their need fulfilment.

In contrast to the definition of social systems used in this book (Bunge, 2000, p. 3; 2004a, p. 373), a second theoretical position, based on the anti-ontological systems theory of the German sociologist Niklas Luhmann (1988), warrants particular mention. Luhmann's understanding of social systems is the dominant theoretical position in the German and Austrian school education discourses. Extensive education research focuses on developing school theory that views school as a social system of communication (Lang-Wojtasik, 2008b, 2021). The difference here is that Luhmann perceives social systems in their functionality – meaning economy, politics, education, and so on – marked by system-own regulation of its parts or autopoiesis, which is driven through processes of inclusion and exclusion (1988, p. 230). Hence, social systems focus on their existence, distinct from the environment they interact with. Social systems consist of communication, which opposes Bunge's definition of social systems – that they comprise individuals as their components or members. Luhmann's understanding of social systems is a distinct perspective on school as a social system that serves as the foundational underpinning of education research and development. The impetus of education research based on Luhmann's perspective of school as a social system is to develop education that prepares students for life in a diverse and changing local environment shaped by global factors. This combination of local and global is referred to as "glocal" and is centred around transformation (Robertson, 1994, pp. 33–34). It is used to study the role of school in the education of students with a focus on global citizenship – an approach to education that recognises education as a critical element of transformation.

Gregor Lang-Wojtasik (2008b, 2013, 2021) is a proponent of Luhmann's theoretical approach. He bases the cornerstone of educational transformation from the perspective of Luhmann's understanding of social systems on four dimensions: *Räumlich* spatial, *Zeitlich* temporal, *Sachlich* factual and *Sozial* social [original in italics, translation by the author] (2019, p. 35). The four dimensions aid development in education policies and practices for global citizenship complementary to the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (United Nations General Assembly, 2015). It is about the interplay between environmental and social justice, both on the community level and globally, because the global level and vice versa impact the local level. Thus, the entrenchment of the school social system in past developments needs to move forwards to develop contemporary education fit for children and adolescents today. The term "school development" is a central topic related to the

school as a social system (Lang-Wojtasik, 2008a). As people are connected and interested in their social exchange relationships – locally and globally, in a positive and negative sense – environmental disasters in one country affect the lives and livelihoods of social citizens in that country and beyond. The boundaries and borders separating countries are human-made, i.e., socially constructed – although they can overlap with physical boundaries such as rivers, valleys, mountains or other natural topographies – the same applies to the economic and social policies. In addition, Lang-Wojtasik (2021) contends that education needs to be geared towards the individual student and their brain development. This concerns the process of learning while at the same time focusing on social equity and justice, locally and globally, to strive towards transformative education for world peace. Compared with Germany and Austria, there is less familiarity with Luhmann's sociological systems perspective in Australian education discourse, which focuses on school policy and practices embedded in the marketisation of education.

The difference between Bunge's and Luhmann's conceptualising of social systems is that Luhmann does not advocate for a theory of the individual whereby Bunge does (Luhmann, 1988; Bunge, 2000, 2004a; Klassen, 2004). Lang-Wojtasik has developed a position on this through the previously mentioned differentiation of spatial, temporal, factual and social dimensions (2019, p. 35). As students navigate the different social levels of school in their interactions and social exchange relations, their actions to maintain or reinstate their bio values are marked by cooperation and competition. Cooperative action tends to be reciprocal because it is mutually beneficial for goal attainment, i.e., for need fulfilment. Competitive interaction would suggest that to meet their needs, students require access to naturally or artificially restricted resources, such as peers being open to new friendships, which can strain classroom interactions as the students jostle to make friends. Ideally, access to resources should be obtained through morally legitimate and legal means. The student adheres to social norms and rules in the social-exchange relationships with their peers, teachers, school management, and staff. Hence, a mismatch in how needs are met, or a lack of access to resources, can result in struggle and conflict among the social actors on the different social levels of the school.

As we saw earlier, young people spend a substantial part of their lives at school, a social system that shapes how they interact, form and sustain social relationships with peers and teachers. In this sense, student need fulfilment is regulated and legitimated through social norms and behavioural rules. Although classroom dynamics play a significant part in facilitating or hindering a person's access to resources for need satisfaction that underlies deviant and rebellious student behaviour, the findings on school suspension show that the dynamics and interplay between the student, classmates and teachers are rarely taken into account as explanations for harmful and destructive behaviour (Du Plessis-Schneider, 2020b, p. 44).

The current study sought to identify, describe and explain the mechanisms and processes associated with student belonging and factors that facilitate their access to satisfiers to relieve their "need to belong" tensions. Likewise, it sought to establish which factors can impede the student's need fulfilment. The core thesis is that school plays a leading role in student wellbeing by determining their access to satisfiers. Theories of human need were the basis – the theoretical vantage point – for analysing the empirical data generated from student statements that addressed "need to belong" fulfilment at school. Student belonging is associated with positive human emotions and wellbeing, an essential requirement of all human beings. Wellbeing is the expression of adequate need regulation. It is synonymous with the term "needs fulfilment" and "satisfaction" (Obrecht, 2009, p. 19). It expresses the pleasurable feelings derived from social bonds that recognise a person's worth whilst acknowledging their independence as a subject (Goodenow, 1993, p. 25).

Similarly, Baumeister and Leary propose that belonging is the need to "form and maintain strong, stable interpersonal relationships" intrinsic to the human condition (1995, p. 497). The difference is that the latter theorists position belonging as a psychological need. There is little reference to the relationship between the feeling of belonging and the social needs for the student to feel that they belong to the social systems they are members of. Student belonging requires stable and long-lasting relationships with others that satisfy the minimum intensity of close and strong feelings of emotional attachment. To achieve this, duties specific to a social-exchange relationship with another person, or the group members, are performed, such as actions of support. Through such activities, rights specific to that affiliation can be acquired.

Consequently, in this book, "belonging" is a feeling about a strong need. It is a state that could be achieved through, for example, the satisfaction of the social need for socio-cultural belonging. It can emerge through establishing and maintaining reciprocal social ties to another person or group, along with the rights and duties specific to that bond or group membership (Obrecht, 2009, p. 27). Belonging is evident by mutual support and interest in each other's wellbeing through caring, affection, cooperation, and significance in the interactions and social exchange relationships. It concerns the human biopsychic and social needs that drive individuals to establish and maintain strong emotional bonds with other individuals and members of smaller and larger social systems. Student belonging requires "need to belong" fulfilment along a continuum of different intensities or nuances. This depends on individual preferences and not a mutually exclusive dichotomy of belonging versus not belonging or the belonging/not-belonging continua (Baumeister and Leary, 1995, p. 499).

Correspondingly, belonging is about the state of need satisfaction and not equilibrium. If a state of needs equilibrium were to be achieved, the human needs range, which signifies the extent of need tensions, would remain in a

constantly stable state. However, in reality, there is no such state. Human be-
ings are subject to change; thus, "to become" is "to be" (Obrecht, 2000, p. 211).
Hence, all things are constantly in a state of change and are thus more or less
dynamic. The duration of a state in which something can remain stable can
extend for a shorter or longer period but not indefinitely (Bunge, 1981, p. 5).

Public school is a state-or government-run and funded institution man-
dated to organise and administer education to children and adolescents. It is
embedded in specific geographical, political, economic and social contexts to
educate young people to be(come) active members participating in that society.
The role of the school is pivotal in supporting students' learning and navigating
the complexities of the world and their place in it. It provides the structural
framework for socialisation. In the early 20th century, American pragmatist
philosopher John Dewey addressed this in his writings on education and de-
mocracy. Education was emphasised as the

> "[…] method of transmission which forms the dispositions of the immature; […]"
> (1916, p. 4).

However, the transmission alone is insufficient because a more profound and
substantial form of instruction is essential for humans to form and sustain com-
munities. This emphasises the significance of school education which is part
of the common good: to guide students in gaining the knowledge to understand,
share and participate in working towards the "aims, beliefs and knowledge" of
the community. In this sense, school plays a significant role in the socialisation
of young people because here they learn about the ways and means to access
resources as requirements for their human need satisfaction.

Because the "need to belong" concerns universal needs, human beings are
intrinsically motivated or driven into action to relieve their need tension. This
is done through interaction and social relationships with others, directed to-
wards restoring the preferred internal state or bio value, an intrinsic regulatory
and socially integrative function of the human brain and nervous system
(Obrecht, 2009, pp. 15–16). These processes encompass affective and cogni-
tive mechanisms that detect deviations from the organism's desired state of
satisfaction. Need tensions do not occur in a vacuum but can be simultaneous,
in a dynamic, unstructured and chaotic way, with different need tensions alert-
ing the organism to action for need fulfilment. This means that the human or-
ganism seeks to satisfy needs beyond the biopsychic to include social needs.
Much the same as group membership is a resource to meet the social needs for
acceptance and recognition, it is a resource for the biopsychic need for essential
skills, rules, and social norms to manage new and repetitive situations specific
to an affiliation. The individual develops a social bond with other individuals
or the members of social groups. It signifies the person's primary groups, such
as the elementary family, friendship group, class cohort and school commu-

nity. These social relationships can influence or even determine a student's access to material and immaterial resources for their need fulfilment.

Similarly, school policies and practices alongside the national legislation and international human rights treaties provide students with access to the resources required to meet their needs. Woodhead and Brooker (2008, pp. 3–6) contend that while belonging is not explicitly defined as a right in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC),[1] it is a central thread that runs through the UNCRC Articles that focus on the provision, protection and participation of children in all walks of life. For example, an excerpt from UNCRC Article 28, the right to education, under section (e), specifies that "measures to encourage regular attendance at schools and the reduction of drop-out rates" must be taken. UNCRC Article 29, the goals of education, under section (e), states that education must develop the child's personality, talents, mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential. Likewise, Article 2 states that children have the right not to be discriminated against, and Article 12 specifies that children have the right to participate in matters concerning themselves (United Nations General Assembly, 1989). In other words, young people are guaranteed the provision and support of the state to access the resources required to meet their biopsychic and social needs at school.

1.1 Defining "belonging" and "need to belong"

According to the definitions of different studies, the word "belong" comes from the Old English "gelang" and Middle English "belangian", with its roots in the German language (Dekeyser et al., 1999, p. 146). The Oxford English dictionary (2012, p. 59) lists "to belong" as a verb that indicates togetherness with a group or "category". In this sense, it is used to express affiliation with someone or something external to the self. It is associated with feelings of familiarity. Group association can be self-selected or external, i.e., when a person is assigned to a group, they can "be rightly put into a particular position or category". The word "belong" can indicate ownership of a thing. Overall, to belong is challenging to pinpoint because of the fluidity of its use to show the association with a group or the ownership of a thing.

In this book, the feeling of belonging as a psychic state of positive feeling and the "need to belong" are distinguished. The "need to belong" is conceptu-

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1   The Austrian government signed the UNCRC on the 26th of August 1990 and ratified it on the 6th of August 1992. The Australian government signed UNCRC on the 22nd of August 1990 and ratified it on the 17th of December 1990. Through ratification, the governments of both countries committed to complying with the Articles within the Convention (United Nations General Assembly, 1989).