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The Development of the Student Belonging Scale: A Measure of School Belonging

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Abstract

Youths' experiences of belonging in the school community are crucial for their academic, social, behavioral, and mental health well-being. This article presents the development of the Student Belonging Scale (SBS), a culturally responsive instrument designed to measure middle and high school students' sense of belonging in schools. The authors administered the SBS to 202 middle and high school students. Results of an exploratory factor analysis yielded a 40-item exploratory model encompassing four domains: (a) Connection with adults; (b) Connection with peers; (c) Identity acceptance by others; and (d) Academic behaviors. The SBS demonstrated promising psychometric properties, including evidence of convergent and discriminant validity, and internal consistency reliability. As a unique contribution to the literature, the SBS is one of the first belonging assessments to include items that specifically consider students' cultural identity as it relates to their sense of belonging. We discuss the development of the SBS along with implications for school counselors and future research.

Keywords

instrument development, school belonging, school counseling, student belonging

Children and adolescents are innately socially driven and continually strive to connect with others and experience a sense of belonging (Chen et al., 2021; Dillman Taylor et al., 2019; Stickl Haugen et al., 2019). The need for belonging is a crucial internal resource for children, as connection promotes their capacities to develop into resilient and psychologically healthy adults (Dickinson & Kottman, 2021; Joe & Jin, 2022). Initially, children establish foundational feelings of belonging through their connections with caregivers and family members (Dillman Taylor et al., 2019). Later, children and pre-adolescents begin spending most of their time within school environments (Eccles & Roeser, 2011); thus, school belonging becomes an imperative dimension of overall child and adolescent wellness.

Across the early lifespan, belonging is understood within person-environmental connections, such as youths' secure relationships with other children, organizations, or the school community where the child feels valued and genuinely cared for (Arslan & Duru, 2017). In school environments, students with a strong sense of belonging experience themselves as integral members of the school community (Arslan, 2021; Osterman, 2000; Stickl Haugen et al., 2019). When students experience belonging, they feel intrinsically valuable and deserving of respect, support, inclusion, and genuine acceptance (Arslan & Duru, 2017; Stickl Haugen et al., 2019). Children with high levels of belonging view themselves as important and likable because of "a perceived experience of consistent interaction and persistent caring from others, usually as a part of a group" (Slaten et al., 2019, p. 2).

Importance of School Belonging

School belonging is strongly associated with multiple indicators of mental health, such as emotional well-being (Arslan, 2018), resilience (Arslan & Coşkun, 2023; Slaten et al., 2019), self-esteem (Chen et al., 2022; Law et al., 2013), and pride in one's cultural identity (Hernández et al., 2017). Arslan (2018) identified a strong, positive correlation between school belonging and emotional well-being, as well as a strong negative relationship between belonging and emotional distress. When students experience themselves as valuable members of the school community, they also place higher value on their own academics and educational success (Gillen-O'Neel & Fuligni, 2013). For example, high school students who experienced greater school belonging viewed school as more intrinsically

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valuable and helpful (Gillen-O'Neel & Fuligni, 2013). Through a meta-analytic review of studies focused on school belonging (N = 82 correlational studies; published between 2000 and 2018), Korpershoek and colleagues (2020) identified positive correlations between student belonging and important school life factors such as school motivation, self-efficacy, behavioral engagement, and academic achievement.

In contrast, when children and adolescents' efforts toward social connectivity are unsuccessful, these unmet interpersonal needs are also known as "thwarted belonging" (Ma et al., 2019). A core component of thwarted belonging (i.e., opposite of belonging) is loneliness, and higher levels of thwarted belonging are associated with suicidal ideation (Ma et al., 2019). Zhou and colleagues (2022) confirmed that high levels of loneliness predicted suicidality and depression; conversely, having a strong sense of belonging in the school setting was a protective factor and significantly buffered the correlation between loneliness, suicidality, and depression. Thus, belonging in school is closely linked to meaningful academic, social, and emotional outcomes for youth. Recognizing the pivotal role of belonging in student success, school counselors are tasked with fostering students' sense of respect, inclusion, and acceptance for self and others, as a core mindset of the American School Counselor Association's (ASCA) Student Standards (ASCA, 2021; Mindset Standard 2).

Cultural Context of School Belonging

Taking into account the influence of belonging on significant outcomes for all students, it is crucial to consider the interplay between students' cultural identities and their sense of belonging in school (Faircloth & Hamm, 2005; Graham et al., 2022). A student's cultural identity includes a unique combination of various social identities (e.g., race/ethnicity, age, religion, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation) that influence how they perceive and understand the world around them (Bula, 2000; Crawford, 2017). As Hopkins and Pain (2007) noted, "the ways in which age is lived out and encountered are likely to vary according to different markers of social difference; everyday experiences of people belonging to particular age groups are diverse and heterogeneous" (p. 290). In other words, students' experiences of belonging can be as unique as their interconnected identities. In this context, it is important to recognize a student's cultural identity as a unique determinant in shaping their perceptions of belonging in the school context.

Therefore, it is unsurprising that scholars have examined the distinctive role that belonging plays among students across developmental levels, and with varying identities and cultural backgrounds. For example, many scholars have explored belonging during the critical transition from childhood to adolescence, which is marked by the importance of connection, where having a sense of belonging becomes increasingly significant (Graham et al., 2022). During these critical middle and high school years, researchers have identified significant connections between students' sense of belonging and their positive attitudes toward school, motivation, and academic outcomes (see Allen, Gray, et al., 2022; Korpershoek et al., 2020). Moreover, school belonging may be especially critical for students from non-Western cultural backgrounds that emphasize *collectivism.* For children who value collectivism, identity is perceived as an integral part of the group's orientation (Sue et al., 2019). Children who value collectivism thrive through interdependence, and belonging is critical for their development of self-concept (as understood through collectivist perspective). For example, among a sample of first-generation Latinx students in the United States, Dueñas and Gloria (2020) identified that sense of belonging was the strongest predictor of *sense of mattering* (i.e., belief in one's importance and significance in the world). Sánchez et al. (2005) found that Latinx students' levels of school belonging largely predicted their academic motivation, school efforts, and school attendance. Cupito and colleagues (2015) demonstrated that Latinx students who placed higher cultural value on familism (i.e., attachment, loyalty, and dedication to family) and filial obligations (i.e., supporting one's family and serving family before self) were more interpersonally connected with the school community, which increased levels of school belonging.

In examining the ways in which school belonging is experienced through cultural contexts, it is also necessary to consider the importance of belonging in terms of gender identity, including youth with lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, gender expansive, and queer/questioning (LGBTGEQ+) identities. Sense of belonging is a protective factor and source of resiliency for gender expansive students (Hatchel & Marx, 2018). Specifically, Marx et al. (2021) discovered that gender expansive adolescents with higher levels of school belonging reported lower levels of suicidal ideation, suggesting that belonging is a critical condition for the well-being of gender expansive youths. Overall, these cultural considerations add a nuanced layer to the broader discourse on school belonging. Since students' cultural background and intersecting identities are instrumental in shaping their experiences of belonging, there is a need for culturally sensitive approaches when assessing students' levels of belonging within the school environment.

Conceptualization and Assessments of School Belonging

Various conceptual frameworks have been used as the basis for creating assessments to measure students' sense of belonging in schools. Scholars have used the term "school belonging" synonymously with connectedness, bonding, and engagement (Libbey, 2004). However, Slaten et al. (2019) noted that school belonging is a distinct construct because belonging involves "a perceived experience of consistent interaction and persistent caring from others, usually as part of a group" (p. 2). Despite the importance of school belonging, there needs to be more consistency regarding how the construct is defined and

operationalized (Whiting et al., 2018). Previously, scholars primarily offered conceptualizations inclusive of affective and/or behavioral school belonging components (Stickl Haugen et al., 2019). Affective components of belonging involve emotional connections with the school community and experiencing safety, respect, and positive regard in relationships with others (Slaten et al., 2016). Scholars who emphasized affectual mechanisms of school belonging noted the importance of students' connections with peers and adults during the school day (Allen, Slaten, et al., 2022; Cemalcilar, 2010; Kiefer et al., 2015; Slaten et al., 2019). On the other hand, behavior-focused conceptualizations of school belonging highlight students' school engagement, academic involvement, and identification with academics and their school community (Akar-Vural et al., 2013; Green et al., 2016; Stickl Haugen et al., 2019).

Instrument developers have created several assessments to measure belonging in school, with varying emphases on components related to students' affective connections with others and their behavioral engagement. Some current school belonging scales include the *Psychological Sense of School Membership Scale* (PSSM; Goodenow, 1993), the *Simple School Belonging Scale* (SSBS; Whiting et al., 2018), the *Milwaukee Youth Belongness Scale* (MYBS; Slaten et al., 2019), and the *School Belonging Scale* (Direkci et al., 2020). However, after a thorough review of existing instruments, we determined that no measures specifically address students' intersecting cultural identities. Thus, there remains a need for a measure that can effectively capture the complexity of school belonging (Allen, Slaten, et al., 2022). Assessments of belonging should consider and be responsive to the diverse cultural perspectives and experiences that students bring with them into the school building. Since researchers have provided evidence for students' unique, culture-bound, and identity-specific experiences of belonging (i.e., Boston & Warren, 2017; Dueñas & Gloria, 2020; Hatchel & Marx, 2018; Marx et al., 2021), there is a need to develop a culturally responsive measure that directly assesses students' perceptions of respect and acceptance of their identity. The development of a sound and culturally responsive evaluation tool can support school counselors who are tasked with identifying and using appropriate evaluation methods for interventions that support students' social and emotional development (ASCA, 2023).

Purpose of the Present Study

The purpose of the present study was to develop a culturally responsive assessment tool to measure students' sense of belonging and perceived fit in the school community. We developed the Student Belonging Scale (SBS) based on theory, the extant literature, and instrument development best practices, seeking to answer the following research questions: (1) What is the factor structure of the SBS?; (2) What are the psychometric properties of the SBS scores, including evidence of internal consistency reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity?; and (3) What role does cultural identity play in shaping the factor structure and psychometric properties of the SBS scores?

Method

Development of the Student Belonging Scale

The SBS is a self-report instrument designed to measure middle and high school students' sense of belonging in school. We developed the SBS by adhering to instrument development best practices, including: (a) identifying the construct being measured; (b) developing a structural framework; (c) creating an item pool and determining the type of measurement; (d) having an initial item pool reviewed by an expert panel; (e) administering items to a developmental sample; and (f) evaluating and refining the items (AERA et al., 2014; DeVellis, 2017; Dimitrov, 2012). As an initial step in establishing content-oriented evidence, we defined the construct being measured and developed a structural framework by reviewing existing literature on belonging (e.g., Cemalcilar, 2010; O'Brien & Bowles, 2013; Stickl Haugen et al., 2019), as well as prior assessments of school belonging (e.g., Arslan & Duru, 2017; Whiting et al., 2018). Our theoretical framework guided the development of the content and type of items that encompassed three domains, including: (a) *Affective Belonging*—students' emotional connection with others and sense of safety, respect, and acceptance in school; (b) *Behavioral Engagement*—students' engagement, involvement, and identification with the school community; and (c) *Cultural Belonging*—students' perceived cultural fit in the school community, including perceptions of respect and acceptance of their cultural identity. Next, we developed an initial pool of items considering the precision of items, conciseness, clarity, relevance of content, positive language, and avoidance of double negatives or absolute terms (Kline, 2015). As we developed them, we matched each SBS item to the theorized factors to ensure a comprehensive representation of our theoretical framework. We wrote the items at an appropriate reading level for the youngest age range of students (i.e., 11- to 12-year-old children). We also used a 4-point Likert scale as the response format, ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 4 (*strongly agree*).

We then identified 13 qualified experts to review the initial item pool and further support content-oriented evidence. We selected scholars and practitioners based on their expertise in belonging, youth development, cultural identity, and instrument development. Most experts were female (n = 8) followed by male (n = 5), and they represented nine different universities and two school districts. To ensure cultural responsiveness, six of our experts were chosen specifically due to their cultural expertise, as indicated by their professional publications, research, and/or advanced professional training on diverse aspects of culture among youth, social inequality, inclusion, multiculturalism, collectivist cultures, and social justice. Additionally, one expert was a seasoned professional school counselor who worked primarily with diverse middle and high school students. We provided the expert panel with a clear description of the

items and an outline for each theoretical domain. The experts reviewed the items and provided qualitative feedback on the item pool, including item format, clarity of the wording, the fit of the item to the identified domain, and thoroughness of items. For example, reviewers shared suggestions regarding rewording cultural terms within items, considering various aspects of culture, and including an operational definition of cultural identity in the instructions. In response to reviewer feedback, we revised the items according to their suggestions, which resulted in a final 40-item SBS. Lastly, we developed an assessment manual detailing the theoretical framework, item development, and empirical analysis of the SBS to align with instrument development best practices (AERA et al., 2014).

Participants

To evaluate the factor structure and psychometric properties of the SBS, we administered the 40-item scale to a developmental sample of middle and high school students in one K-12 public school. The sample included 202 students in grades six through twelve. Student ages ranged from 11 to 18, with a mean age of 14.2 (SD = 1.86). Although some students chose not to share their demographic information, of the participants who provided demographics, 45% were in middle school (n = 85), and 55.1% (n = 104) were in high school. Students identified as male (n = 76; 37.6%), female (n = 94; 46.5%), non-binary/third gender (n = 8; 4%), and other (n = 10; 5%). The majority of participants identified as Latino/Latina or Hispanic (n = 122; 60.4%), followed by White (n = 27; 13.4%), Multi-racial (n = 16; 7.9%), Asian American (n = 8; 4%), Native American/American Indian (n = 7; 3.5%), Other (n = 3; 1.5%), and Black or African American (n = 4; 2%). Although the school did not provide information on response rates, the sample was largely representative of the population of the school as a whole. The school included 362 middle school students (57.1%) and 272 high school students (42.9%). Most students were Hispanic (n = 491, 77.4%), followed by White (n = 74; 11.7%), Asian (n = 28, 4.4%), multiracial (n = 16, 2.5), Black (n = 16, 2.5%), and American Indian/Alaskan Native students (n = 9, 1.4%)

Procedure

Following institutional and school district Research Review Board approval, the researchers collaborated with the school counselors in one public K-12 magnet school located in the Western region of the United States to engage in data collection. As a convenience sample, the school was chosen based on access to the school site. After sending out an explanation of the research to parents/guardians and obtaining passive parental consent, the school counselors electronically administered a questionnaire via Qualtrics to students in grades 6–12 who agreed to participate. The counselors integrated the survey into their classroom counseling lessons to obtain a representative sample of the school. They also integrated the survey into their make-up lessons for students who were not in attendance on those days. Participants reviewed an explanation of the research study, provided assent, and completed the online questionnaire via school devices during the school day. Further, considering the challenge of understanding cultural identity, we defined "identity" for students by inviting them to consider their own identity in the way that was most meaningful for them. Scale instructions included the following guidance, "When you are completing these questions, think about all parts of who you are. Your *identity* can mean your race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, culture, how much money your family makes, gender identity, religion, or other parts of who you are."

Instrumentation

Participants completed an electronic survey consisting of: (a) a demographic questionnaire; (b) the Simple School Belonging Scale (10 items; Whiting et al., 2018); (c) the Student Belonging Scale developed in this study (40 items); and (d) the UCLA Loneliness Scale (4 items; Roberts et al., 1993).

Simple School Belonging Scale. The Simple School Belonging Scale (SSBS; Whiting et al., 2018) is a 10-item scale that measures a student's sense of belonging in school. The item response format uses a Likert scale ranging from 1 to 4 (*NO!, no, yes, YES!*). The SSBS is a unidimensional scale that included items from the Psychological Sense of School Membership Scale (PPSM; Goodenow, 1993) along with additional items the researchers developed. Sample items from the SSBS include, "I feel like I matter to people at (school name)" and "People at this school are friendly to me." The authors found adequate evidence of internal consistency reliability for SSBS scores (α = .91), and evidence of construct validity by correlating the SSBS with a measure of social support (r = .64). In the current study, the SSBS demonstrated adequate evidence of internal consistency reliability (α = .90).

Student Belonging Scale. The Student Belonging Scale (SBS) is the instrument we developed in this study. The initial SBS included 40 items to measure students' sense of belonging in school. Participants self-reported their level of agreement with each item on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). We describe the psychometric properties of the SBS in the results section below.

UCLA Loneliness Scale. The four-item UCLA Loneliness Scale (Roberts et al., 1993) is a subscale of an eight-item instrument designed to measure loneliness among adolescents. The eight-item overarching scale yielded a two-factor solution that distinguished positively and negatively worded items. As a result, Roberts et al. (1993) suggested that researchers can use the four-item subscale of negatively worded items as a brief scale version when response burden is a concern. The item response format includes a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 0 (*Never*) to 3 (*Often*), and sample items include "I feel left out" and "I feel isolated from others." The four-item subscale demonstrated

solid psychometric properties including adequate internal consistency reliability (α = .77) correlation with the total scale score (r = .89), and evidence of construct validity as demonstrated through significant correlations with related external variables (e.g., prior loneliness scales, number of close friends; Roberts et al., 1993). In the current study, the four-item UCLA Loneliness Scale also demonstrated adequate evidence of reliability (α = .82).

Data Cleaning and Statistical Assumptions. We engaged in data cleaning and screening before beginning our analysis. To address missing data, we explored the patterns of missingness using Little's (1988) missing variable analysis. Little's MCAR test was not significant (p > .05) for the SBS (χ^2 (958) = 1026.689), SSBS (χ^2 (63) = 78.984), nor the UCLA Loneliness scale (χ^2 (3) = 1.283), thus inferring data was Missing Completely at Random. We replaced missing values using Expectation Maximization for each scale, with the percentage of missing values ranging from 0 to 3%. Next, we determined sampling adequacy for the SBS. We identified the participant-to-item ratio (N:p) of 5:1, which falls within the recommended ratio ranges that can vary from 3 to 20 (see Mvududu & Sink, 2013). Additionally, our sample size of approximately 200 is considered adequate when working with high-quality data as evidenced by communalities higher than .50 and well-defined factor loadings (Worthington & Wittaker, 2006). We then explored the distribution of data and found the data to be non-normal based on examining skewness and kurtosis values, along with Histograms, PP Plots, and QQ Plots. In addition, Shapiro-Wilks and Komogorov-Smirnov tests were significant, violating assumptions of normality. Thus, we accounted for non-normality in the analytic methods we employed, including the use of Principal Axis Factoring and Spearman's rank-order correlation. Finally, we examined evidence of multicollinearity indicating the correlation matrix was factorable. Specifically, the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) value was .927, and KMO values close to .90 suggest that the intercorrelation matrix is ideal for factor analysis (Mvududu & Sink, 2013). Furthermore, Bartlett's test of sphericity was significant (p < .05). Therefore, we considered the data appropriate for Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA).

Data Analysis. We employed EFA using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (version 28.01) to explore the factor structure of the SBS. Due to the non-normal distribution of the data and the expected correlation between variables, we used Principal Axis Factoring with Oblique Promax Rotation for the factor extraction method (Costello & Osborne, 2005). To determine the initial number of factors to extract, we used multiple strategies including the Minimum Average Partial (MAP) correlation analysis (Velicer, 1976) and an examination of the scree plot (Cattell, 1966).

Next, we evaluated factor retention and item performance. Specifically, we ran EFA in an iterative process and removed items that met the following criteria: (a) communality values below .40 (Watson, 2017); and (b) non-significant factor loadings (<.32; Tabachnick & Fidell, 2019). In addition, we reviewed items that cross-loaded (i.e., loaded significantly onto more than one factor) by examining the factor loading difference and the theorized factor structure to determine if the item should be removed, retained on the higher loading, or placed with the factor it was most closely related to conceptually (Pett et al., 2003; Watson, 2017). Lastly, we assessed each derived factor by considering the number of items, amount of explained variance, and internal consistency reliability, aiming to capture the highest possible variance with the fewest items and factors (Blount & Lambie, 2018; Hair et al., 2017). Following EFA, we evaluated the psychometric properties of the SBS. Specifically, we explored evidence of internal consistency reliability by analyzing Cronbach's alpha (α). Further, we evaluated correlations between the SBS and SSBS (Whiting et al., 2018) scores to determine evidence of convergent validity and correlations between the UCLA Loneliness Scale (Roberts et al., 1993) scores and the SBS scores to determine evidence of discriminant validity. We employed Spearman's rank-order correlation analysis due to the non-normality of the data distribution.

Results

Factor Structure and Evidence of Reliability

We started our analysis by examining the scree plot to determine the initial number of factors to extract (Cattell, 1966). We discovered a slight bend between factors two and three, suggesting we could retain three factors. However, we also examined the MAP correlation analysis (Velicer, 1976) indicating the MAP function was at a minimum at four factors, supporting a four-factor solution. As a result, we began by extracting four factors, with the knowledge that we could refine the final factor solution following the EFA process. To examine the most parsimonious factor structure, we engaged in an iterative process of retaining and removing items based on the criteria noted above (i.e., factor loadings and communality values). This EFA process resulted in a 22-item, four-factor model accounting for 68.46% of the total variance explained, representing a robust factor solution. In the final model, all items loaded onto a factor (>.4), no items cross-loaded, and all communalities were greater than .5. Factor loadings ranged from .544 to .904 (see Table 1).

Factor 1, Connection with Adults, consisted of eight items representing students' connection with teachers and adults at school related to the way adults encourage them to participate in school activities, respect their ideas, listen to them, care about them, are fair to them, and respect them. Item loadings ranged from .570 to .849, with 49.8% of the variance explained in this factor. *Factor 2, Connection with Peers,* included seven items representing students' relationship with peers as they relate to aspects such as their sense of connection to peers, ability to be their authentic selves around others, feeling good about themselves, feeling like they fit in, and enjoying being at school. Loadings ranged from .544 to .904 with 7.3% of the variance

explained by this factor. *Factor 3, Identity Acceptance by Others*, consisted of four items representing students' perception that their identity is welcomed at school, they are accepted for their identity, others respect their identity, and they are encouraged to be proud of their identity. Loadings ranged from .565 to .797, with 5.9% of the variance explained by this factor. Finally, *Factor 4, Academic Behaviors,* included three items representing students' actions related to academics, like working hard, trying their best, and trying to get good grades. Item loadings ranged from .716 to .845 and represented 5.4% of the variance explained. The overall internal consistency reliability of the 22-item SBS was strong (α = .95), along with each individual factor including Factor 1 (α = .907), Factor 2 (α = .910), Factor 3 (α = .867), and Factor 4 (α = .831). As shown in Table 2, post-hoc analysis using a Mann-Whitney U test yielded no significant middle-school/high school mean differences on any of the four factors. We used non-parametric statistics, given the non-normality of the data. Additional post-hoc tests for gender and ethnicity were not conducted due to small subsamples in these categories.

Evidence of Validity

We found evidence of convergent validity supported by the significant positive correlation between the SBS and SSBS scores (Whiting et al., 2018). The Spearman correlation between the SBS total score and the SSBS total score was a strong positive correlation (ρ = .822, $p < .01$; 67.57% of the variance explained). Additionally, all four factor scores of the SBS correlated with the SSBS score, including Factor 1 (ρ = .730, $p < .01$; 53.29% variance explained), Factor 2 (ρ = .814, $p < .01$; 66.26% variance explained), Factor 3 (ρ = .690, $p < .01$; 47.61%

Table 1. Factor Loadings for the 22-Item Student Belonging Scale.

Item	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Factor 4
32. Adults at my school encourage me to be a part of school related activities.	.849			
37. My ideas matter at my school.	.709			
31. Adults at my school listen to me.	.702			
26. Teachers encourage me to participate in my classes.	.677			
36. Adults at my school care about what is going on with me.	.643			
19. Adults at my school respect me as much as they do other students..	.611			
35. Teachers treat students like me the same way they treat other students.	.610			
17. Adults at school encourage me to do my best in school.	.570			
39. I feel connected with other students at my school.		.904		
33. I feel comfortable sharing who I am with others at my school.		.736		
40. I feel good about myself when I'm in my school.		.619		
28. I feel comfortable when I am at school.		.606		
34. Other students at my school want me around.		.603		
38. I feel like I fit in at my school.		.602		
16. I enjoy being at my school.		.544		
18. My identity is welcomed at my school.			.797	
24. I am accepted at my school no matter what my identity is.			.744	
12. People at my school respect my identity.			.661	
27. I am encouraged to be proud of my identity at my school.			.565	
14. I work hard in school.				.845
29. I try my best when I am in school.				.729
11. I try to get good grades in my school.				.716

Note: Factor 1 is Connection with Adults, Factor 2 is Connection with Peers, Factor 3 is Acceptance of Identity by Others, and Factor 4 is Academic Behaviors.

Table 2. Mean Scores and Standard Deviations for Total Sample and School Level.

	Factor 1 (*SD*)	Factor 2 (*SD*)	Factor 3 (*SD*)	Factor 4 (*SD*)
Total sample	25.24 (3.87)	20.87 (4.17)	12.99 (2.14)	9.98 (1.59)
Middle school	25.62 (4.37)	21.18 (4.79)	13.13 (2.27)	10.23 (1.53)
High school	25.10 (3.63)	20.67 (3.84)	12.97 (2.13)	9.87 (1.68)

Note: Total sample *N* = 202, middle school *n* = 85, high school *n* = 104; Factor 1 is Connection with Adults, Factor 2 is Connection with Peers, Factor 3 is Identity Acceptance by Others, and Factor 4 is Academic Behaviors.

variance explained), and Factor 4 (ρ = .470, $p < .01$; 22.09% variance explained).

The Spearman correlations between the SBS total scores and the UCLA Loneliness Scale (Roberts et al., 1993) scores were significantly negatively correlated (ρ = −.411, $p < .01$; 16.89% of the variance explained), supporting evidence of discriminant validity. Additionally, three factor scores negatively correlated with the UCLA Loneliness scale scores, including Factor 1 (ρ = −.353, $p < .01$; 12.46% variance explained), Factor 2 (ρ = −.482, $p < .01$; 23.23% variance explained), and Factor 3 (ρ = −.364, $p < .01$; 13.25% variance explained). Factor 4 was not significantly correlated.

Discussion

We sought to develop the Student Belonging Scale as an assessment to measure middle and high school students' sense of belonging in school settings. We created the SBS based on instrument development guidelines (AERA et al., 2014; DeVellis, 2017) and the extant research on student belonging. In examining the factor structure of the SBS (Research Question 1), the EFA resulted in a 22-item instrument accounting for 68.46% of the total variance inclusive of the following four factors: *Connection with Adults, Connection with Peers, Identity Acceptance by Others*, and *Academic Behaviors*. The SBS aligns with conceptualizations of belonging as a multidimensional and complex construct, including behavioral and emotional components (Green et al., 2016; Stickl Haugen et al., 2019). The final SBS four-factor exploratory model demonstrated promising psychometric properties with adequate internal consistency reliability (Research Question 2). The SBS scores demonstrated initial evidence of convergent validity as evidenced by significant positive correlations with the SSBS scores (Whiting et al., 2018), a previously developed measure of school belonging. Further, since loneliness is a core component of thwarted belonging (Ma et al., 2019), we also found initial evidence of discriminant validity supported by significant negative correlations between the SBS scores and the UCLA Loneliness Scale scores (Roberts et al., 1993). Therefore, the SBS is a promising instrument for school counselors and researchers working with youth.

The first factor, *Connection with Adults* (8 items, 49.8% of the variance explained), focuses on students' relationships with trusted adults at school. Congruent with the literature and prior assessments measuring belonging, caring relationships with adults who intentionally support and respect students are essential to helping youth feel a sense of belonging in school (Slaten et al., 2016; Slaten et al., 2019; Tillery et al., 2013). This factor highlights adult behaviors that demonstrate mutual respect and care to help students feel connected and supported. Specifically, the items in this factor evaluate the extent to which students feel that adults and teachers show them respect and encouragement, listen to them, treat them fairly, and foster their engagement at school. As represented by these items, this factor encompasses the importance of adults providing both emotional support (e.g., positive relationships, respect) and academic support (e.g., encouraging students' engagement and learning). Scholars have identified that emotional and academic support from adults are essential in facilitating a student's sense of belonging in school (Allen, Slaten, et al., 2022). Moreover, in a meta-analysis of factors that impact belonging, Allen et al. (2016) identified teacher support as one of the strongest influences on belonging. Thus, this factor represents a core aspect of belonging related to students' interpersonal connection and affective relationships with adults at school.

The second factor, *Connection with Peers* (7 items, 7.3% of the variance explained), measures students' sense of belonging related to their peer relationships. Items in this factor evaluate how the student perceives peer acceptance, feels good about themselves at school, feels connected to other students, and feels comfortable being themselves. This factor aligns with literature highlighting the role that relationships with peers play in students' sense of belonging in school (Green et al., 2016; Kiefer et al., 2015; Stickl Haugen et al., 2019). Moreover, recognizing the importance of students' experiences of acceptance and inclusion with their peers, Slaten et al. (2019) noted that peer belonging may be a facet of belongingness that is important to explore uniquely as a subfactor of general belonging. Having a factor in the SBS inclusive of items specifically focusing on interpersonal connections with other students is thus congruent with the discourse regarding the critical role peers play in shaping youth perceptions of school belonging.

Through examining the role that cultural identity plays in the factor structure and psychometric properties of the SBS scores (Research Question 3), we identified the emergence of the third factor, *Identity Acceptance by Others* (4 items, 5.9% of the variance explained). This factor assesses students' perceptions that their cultural identity is accepted, welcomed, valued, and supported. The items in this factor align with highlighting how students' intersecting cultural identities influence their sense of belonging in school (Boston & Warren, 2017; Cupito et al., 2015; Stickl Haugen et al., 2019). For example, in a study exploring students' subjective perspectives of belonging, students who identified as Hispanic/Latino emerged as a unique profile of students who espoused the need to be respected for their unique cultural identities in order to feel a sense of belonging in school (Stickl Haugen et al., 2019). Thus, this factor represents a distinct contribution to the literature as it includes items specifically designed to measure how a student feels respected and accepted for their individual identities.

Since a student's cultural identity is composed of multiple and intersecting components that frames their experience (e.g., culture, ethnicity, gender, class; Crawford, 2017), the items in this factor are worded to broadly encompass multiple aspects of a student's identity. In this way, students are encouraged to personalize their experience and respond in a way that aligns with the aspects of identity that are most salient to them. Therefore, the SBS considers a student's cultural identity as a critical aspect of their experience of belonging in school, and the

Identity Acceptance by Others subscale can provide valuable insight into students' unique experiences from a culturally sustaining perspective, which is currently lacking in existing measures.

Finally, the fourth factor, *Academic Behaviors* (3 items, 5.4% of variance explained), assesses the aspects of belonging that relate to students' academic experiences in school. Rather than focusing on academic success, items in this factor relate to academic-related behaviors and the effort students make in the school environment, such as working hard, trying their best, and trying to succeed. Since schools place a heavy emphasis on academic learning, a student's perception of their alignment with the academic culture is a crucial facet of belonging that is unique to school settings (Green et al., 2016; Nasir et al., 2011; Stickl Haugen et al., 2019).

Implications

The results of this study have several practical implications for professional school counselors. Counselors can calculate SBS total scores to evaluate students' overall levels of belonging in school, along with evaluating individual subscale scores to gain a better understanding of students' sense of belonging across each domain. Also, school counselors can obtain total scores by calculating the sums of all 22 items in the assessment; totals will range from 22 to 88, where higher scores indicate greater levels of belonging. Subscale scores can also be calculated by computing the sum of items within each domain. Scores can be computed for: *Connection with Adults* (8 items) ranging from 8 to 32; *Connection with Peers* (7 items) ranging from 7 to 28; *Identity Acceptance by Others* (4 items) ranging from 4 to 16; and *Academic Behaviors* (3 items) ranging from 3 to 12.

Since school counselors use data to inform their practice (ASCA, 2019; Hays, 2010), the SBS is a valuable measure to support data-driven interventions across school contexts, including public, private, charter, and other educational settings. School counselors specifically are called upon to implement a comprehensive program that serves all students (ASCA, 2019). Thus, they can enhance belonging from a whole-school perspective. Moreover, one of the core mindsets of the ASCA Student Standards (2021) is to support students' sense of acceptance, respect, and inclusion (Mindset 2). Therefore, the SBS scale and subscales can be used as a needs assessment to identify the unique strengths and needs of students' belongingness within individual school contexts, and subsequently inform intentional interventions to enhance belonging. For example, suppose students report a low sense of belonging regarding their connection with adults. School counselors can then seek to enhance students' connection with adults in the building through evidence-based interventions such as student-adult mentorship programs (Raposa et al., 2019). Similarly, if the SBS scores indicate that students have a low sense of connection with peers, school counselors can provide interventions to support students' connection with other students. School counselors can also provide interventions across the three tiers of the Multitiered System of Supports (MTSS), including whole school classroom lessons teaching students social skills and providing opportunities for social and emotional connections (Tier 1); targeted small groups to enhance connectedness with others and empower a sense of self (Tier 2); and individual counseling or outside referrals for students who may need more intensive mental health support (Tier 3).

The SBS can also be useful in examining differences in students' sense of belonging across demographic subgroups within the school (i.e., gender, race/ethnicity, grade level) to identify any areas of inequities that may need to be addressed. A unique contribution of the SBS is the inclusion of items that consider the role of a student's cultural identity in their experience of belonging (Factor 3). This subfactor provides a valuable opportunity to explore how students feel accepted based on their intersectional identities. For example, if students who identify as Hispanic/Latino report a lower sense of belonging as they relate to their perception of acceptance for their identity compared to their White counterparts, counselors can implement whole school programs seeking to enhance students' understanding and respect for identities and cultures that are different from their own.

Furthermore, school counselors are tasked with implementing evidenced-based practices and collecting data to evaluate their impact on student outcomes (ASCA, 2019; ASCA, 2023). Therefore, they can use the SBS as an evaluation tool to identify the effectiveness of interventions that enhance students' sense of belonging and connection to the school. For example, as an outcome measure, the SBS can be used as a pre/post survey to assess students' level of belonging before and after interventions such as small groups, evidenced-based school-wide programs, or classroom team-building activities to identify the impact of the selected interventions on students' sense of belonging.

Limitations and Implications for Future Research

Our research provides initial evidence supporting the SBS as a psychometrically sound assessment; however, several limitations need to be kept in mind when interpreting the results. First, the sample is limited in some ways in that it was a convenience sample drawn from one school, and response rates were unavailable. Therefore, students who had a stronger sense of belonging to their school may have been more likely to participate in the study. Additionally, most of the sample identified as Hispanic or Latino/a (60.4%), which was representative of the overall school population. Thus, the results need to be considered within the context of this specific school community. Although this study is similar to previous research where scholars have used convenience samples at one school to develop belonging scales (e.g., Whiting et al., 2018), there is a need to explore the psychometric properties and factor structure with diverse samples across schools and school districts.

Specifically, further validating the SBS with a more ethnically balanced sample would enhance generalizability of our findings.

Our data analysis was also exploratory; therefore, additional research is necessary to further develop the SBS. EFA is, by nature, an approach that is designed for initial stages of exploring data (Osborne, 2014). Thus, an important next step in developing the SBS is to examine the four-factor model with a separate validation sample through Confirmatory Factor Analysis. Additionally, it would be beneficial to explore additional psychometric properties, such as test-retest reliability, to see if scores remain stable over time. Further, researchers could employ modern test theory approaches such as Item Response Theory and/or Rasch analysis to enhance the precision of the SBS, monitor the quality of the instrument, and improve our understanding of the latent trait of belonging through explorations of item and person functioning (Boone, 2016). Finally, scholars can use the SBS to enhance the empirical research on students' sense of belonging in schools. Since the SBS is a unique instrument that includes items related to students' perception of respect and acceptance for their identities, researchers should continue to explore the utility of the SBS with diverse samples of middle and high school students.

Conclusion

The need for individuals to feel a sense of belonging is universal, and students are no exception. Students spend a significant amount of time in school, which makes it essential that youth experience a sense of belonging in the school environment. We developed the Student Belonging Scale as an assessment to measure middle and high school students' sense of belonging in school. The SBS is a multidimensional measure that integrates essential components of students' sense of belonging across four domains including *Connection with Adults, Connection with Peers, Identity Acceptance by Others*, and *Academic Behaviors*. Overall, the SBS scale and individual subscales are congruent with the literature on belonging that conceptualizes the importance of students' relationships with adults and peers, sense of acceptance for various cultural identities, and engagement in academic related behaviors (Slaten et al., 2019; Whiting et al., 2018). Moreover, as an empirically developed assessment tool, the SBS fills a gap in existing belonging instruments due to the inclusion of items that evaluate a student's perceived acceptance of their cultural identities, making the SBS a unique contribution to the existing literature. Therefore, the SBS is a promising instrument that school counselors and researchers can use to evaluate belonging in schools.

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Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

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