

Exploring the School Leaders' Sense of School Belongingness through Systematic Grounded Theory

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore school leaders' sense of school belongingness from the ground. To achieve the study objectives, grounded theory methodology was employed. The research began with purposive sampling and ended with the use of theoretical sampling techniques. Data were analysed according to the mandated norms of the systematic grounded theory. Consequently, a leader's sense of belonging is linked to their management of power dynamics within the school, characterized by their contribution. Work tenacity and proactive behaviours are indicators of a leader's sense of belonging. Subsequently, an (NE)3 framework was developed based on a literature review, which validated the study's results. In conclusion, leaders' sense of belonging is a motivating factor for promoting leadership to improve schools.

Keywords: Experience, grounded theory, relationship, school belongingness, school leader

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INTRODUCTION

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 in India highlights the need for educational institutions to cultivate environments where every student feels welcomed and cared for, where a safe and stimulating learning atmosphere is present, where a diverse array of learning experiences is available, and where adequate physical infrastructure and resources conducive to learning are accessible to all (Ministry of Education, 2020).

The NEP 2020 underscores the importance of fostering a sense of belonging within schools, recognizing that school leadership is crucial to achieving this goal. Given the growing demand for leaders to work effectively, maximize efficiency, and promote a sense of belonging within schools, it is essential to understand the elements of the school experience that contribute to leaders' experience of belongingness in school. Belongingness is conceptualized as active participation and involvement in specific social groups. For instance, when employees feel engaged, they typically exhibit greater enthusiasm for their tasks, participate more fully, and willingly invest additional effort, often resulting in improved performance (Mani, 2011). The significance of school leaders in cultivating a culture of belonging has garnered increasing attention in recent years (Jang & Lee, 2024).

Scholars have acknowledged that fostering a sense of belonging in schools largely depends on the role of school leaders (Allen et al., 2021). These leaders play a pivotal role in orchestrating organizational change, with their leadership styles profoundly influencing followers and reinforcing cohesive and positive school cultures (Crabtree et al., 2023). This dynamic is grounded in the understanding that school belongingness emerges from the interplay of three integrated dimensions: the prevailing school culture, the institution's responsiveness to students' lives beyond the school environment, and the values and practices enacted by school leadership (Riley, 2022).

School leaders play a central role in articulating the school's vision, strategic direction, and priorities, with a focus on inclusivity and the holistic development of each student (Allen & Kern, 2017). Moreover, they facilitate the development of other stakeholders by creating opportunities for teacher leadership, thereby enhancing teacher satisfaction and fostering a sense of belonging in the school community (Levin & Schrum, 2016). Ultimately, school leaders function as crucial mediators who can either facilitate or hinder the cultivation of a sense of belonging in the educational community.

School leaders not only fulfil policy-related and administrative roles but also cultivate an environment that fosters trust, collaboration, and connections among members. Research indicates that when leaders make teachers and other members feel valued, heard, and supported, they act as negotiators of belongingness, thereby facilitating the development of deeper bonds within the

school community (Karnopp & Peter Bjorklund, 2026). Numerous studies on educational leadership have acknowledged "belongingness" as a significant and desirable objective for school leaders, research specifically focused on leadership for belongingness remains relatively scarce (Walls & Louis, 2023). Despite this background, a clear conceptual framework regarding how school leaders understand and experience belongingness has yet to be established in the literature. Addressing this specific research gap, the present study attempts to conceptualize school belongingness from the perspective of school leaders. The primary objective of this study was to explore how school leaders understand and experience school belongingness in their daily lives.

THE EMOTIONAL REALITY OF THE SCHOOL LEADERS

Leadership stands as one of the most significant challenges confronting modern institutions, as it plays a pivotal role in guiding and shaping the future of communities, organizations, and nations (Nacheva, 2026). Broadly speaking, leadership is regarded as the capacity through which an individual inspires, influences, and guides people or groups toward the achievement of collective objectives (Nacheva, 2026). The emotional reality of leadership encompasses leaders' affective experiences (Riley, 2022). These affective experiences are influenced by various factors within the educational environment, including physical, social, and political contexts, and interpersonal dynamics with stakeholders (Riley, 2022). For instance, an increased workload, frequent changes in government policy, and heightened stakeholder demands can adversely affect school leaders' mental health (Bingham & Bubb, 2022). The role of school leaders is emotionally demanding, with the high-pressure nature of their responsibilities significantly impacting their health, well-being and personal relationships. Globally, principals are confronted with an intensifying crisis characterized by heightened emotional strain (McKay et al., 2025).

A scoping review indicates that nearly 90% of school principals experience considerable stress, with 40% suffering from depression or anxiety attributable to their professional responsibilities (Tahir et al., 2025). Furthermore, 25% of principals vacate their positions annually, with half departing within three years (Tahir et al., 2025). Research underscores the profound emotional toll of school leadership, highlighting how principals manage the pressures associated with leading diverse school communities (McKay et al., 2025). To effectively address the emotional challenges faced by school leaders, fostering a sense of belonging within the school is essential. This necessitates an understanding of leaders' perspectives on school belongingness.

RATIONALE OF THE STUDY

School belongingness is not merely a sense of connection but a psychosocial foundation that profoundly influences individuals' behavior, job satisfaction, and mental health (Urrila et al., 2025). When an individual, particularly a school leader, perceives themselves as an integral, accepted, and valued member of the school community, they perform their duties with greater enthusiasm, satisfaction, and commitment (XuKun & Tan, 2026). In such a scenario, the perceived burden of work (workload) feels relatively lighter, as the individual views their work not merely as an obligation but as something intrinsically linked to their identity and purpose. Consequently, belongingness not only enhances job satisfaction but also fortifies employees' mental well-being (Urrila et al., 2025).

School belongingness is not only an individual sentiment but also an organizational and relational process that is largely constructed and nurtured through school leadership (Allen, 2025; Jang & Lee, 2024; Karnopp & Peter Bjorklund, 2026). School leaders serve as key agents who cultivate an environment in which students, teachers, and other stakeholders feel accepted, valued, and connected through policies, practice, and daily interactions. Thus, a sense of belonging does not emerge spontaneously; rather, it is shaped by the conscious actions and decisions of the leaders.

While traditional leadership research has focused on the impact of leadership on academic achievement, recent studies have explored how principals influence students' overall school experience and sense of belonging (Jang & Lee, 2024). Research has examined leaders' influence on belonging among students and teachers (Allen, 2025; Crabtree et al., 2023; Jang & Lee, 2024; Riley, 2022). Other school stakeholders, particularly teachers and students, rely heavily on school leaders for their experience of belongingness. The institutional culture, support systems, nature of communication, and inclusive practices established by the leader determine the extent to which a sense of connection flourishes in schools. In this sense, school leaders act not only as the "architects" of belongingness but also as its "facilitators" and "executors," translating policy objectives into tangible experiences.

Furthermore, the experience of belongingness is of paramount importance to school leaders. When leaders perceive themselves as integral and valued members of the school community, they develop a heightened sense of accountability and agency (Allen, 2025; Riley, K., 2019). Such a belongingness-centered experience inspires leaders to adopt more sensitive, participatory (Rivest & Clément, 2026) and transformative leadership behaviors. Conversely, if leaders lack a sense of connection, their leadership capacity and organizational effectiveness may be compromised. Thus, belongingness is not merely an outcome of leadership; it also serves as a fundamental bedrock for the leadership process and its effectiveness. Additionally, School principals' psychological health is

considered an essential element of the educational mission (Rivest & Clément, 2026).

Therefore, in the context of school belongingness, it is imperative to understand and articulate school leaders' voices. School leaders serve as central agents in this process, and their perceptions and experiences shape the culture of mutual respect, strong relationships, and care within schools. Understanding their perspectives will not only clarify the concept of belongingness in a more holistic manner but also demonstrate how leadership practices contribute to creating a healthy, collaborative and inclusive school environment.

However, there is a lack of research on how school leaders understand and experience the concept of belonging within schools. In this context, the rationale for the present study lies in conceptualizing 'school belongingness' from the perspective of school leaders. This study provides a robust foundation for academics to understand the concept of 'school belongingness' from the perspective of school leaders and for its further theoretical development. This will assist researchers in developing new conceptual models and bridging the existing research gaps in this field.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The primary aim of this study is to conceptualize the sense of belonging from the perspective of school leaders. In this study, school leaders are defined as school heads or principals. Consequently, the following research questions were formulated to achieve the study objectives:

1. How do school principals understand and experience school belongingness?
2. What factors that influence the principals' sense of school belongingness?

METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

Method of the Study

Given that school leaders' own sense of belonging has been largely overlooked in existing research, the aim of this study is not to test pre-existing theories but rather to develop a theoretical understanding of school leaders' sense of school belonging from the ground. To actualize this, the study employs the grounded theory methodology, initially introduced by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and later refined by Strauss and Corbin (1998). As an inductive research strategy, grounded theory is particularly well-suited for generating novel theoretical insights that emerge directly from the data rather than confirming predetermined hypotheses (Cotton Bronk, 2012). Accordingly, the findings of this study should be interpreted within this methodological framework.

Theoretical Sampling

Six school principals, who were officially designated as school leaders, were initially selected for this study through purposive sampling, with a specific focus on criterion-based selection to ensure alignment with the study's objectives. The inclusion criteria were designated school leaders, willingness of participants, working in public schools, and having a minimum of one year's experience in their respective institutions. Based on these criteria, six principals were selected to participate in the study, comprising two female and four male principals.

Data were collected and analyzed following the mandated norms of the systematic grounded theory. In the initial draft of the analysis, several ambiguous and underexplored concepts were identified that may contribute to the development of the theory and address the research gaps and objectives of this study. Samples were selected to investigate these concepts further.

Table 1: Demographic Profiling of samples

Phase 1: Purposive Sampling						
Sample code	Gender	Nature of joining	Experience			School location
			Experience in the specific school	Experience in general	Total Experience	
L1	Male	PD	2y	0	2y	Rural
L2	Male	RD	2.6y	0	2.6y	Rural
L3	Female	RD	4y	2y	6y	Rural
L4	Male	IcP	1.4y	0	1.4y	SU
L5	Female	PD	About 2y	0	2y	SU
L6	Male	RD	7y	3y	10y	Urban
Phase 2: Theoretical sampling						
Data were collected again from L3, L5, and L6 according to theoretical sampling.						
L7	Male	PD	3y	0	3y	Rural
L8	Male	RD	1y	0	1y	SU
L9	Female	RD	4y	2y	6y	Rural
L10	Male	PD	5y	3y	8y	Rural
L11	Male	IcP	2y	1y	3y	Urban

Note. PD = Promoted; RD = Recruited; SU= Semi Urban; IcP= In charge Principal

The sample comprised principals from the first phase and newly selected principals based on thematic and contextual similarities among schools as shown in the Table 1. This method of sample selection is known as theoretical sampling.

For instance, an industrial environment was identified as a negative factor affecting school belongingness. This result was a context-specific response from the school leaders. Consequently, the researcher revisited the principal to obtain detailed information, including the causation and explanation. Simultaneously, the researcher identified a school leader from an industrial area and collected data to gain a deeper understanding of the nuances of this theme. Moreover, in the theoretical sampling phase of data collection, the researcher used observations to understand the nuances of the various themes.

Data Collection

Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were the main data-gathering tool. The interview schedule was developed with broad and direct questions corresponding to the research questions of this study. To address the initial objective, the following questions were asked:

1. What does school belongingness mean to you?
2. When do you think People experience a sense of school belongingness?

Furthermore, the concept of school belongingness was defined as "feelings of being accepted and valued by their peers, and by others at their school" (Willms, 2003, p. 8) to aid in probing participant responses more deeply. During the interviews, iterative questioning was used to explore the emerging themes in greater detail. Furthermore, following theoretical sampling, the researcher collected data. The researcher provided a detailed account of the aforementioned aspects in the theoretical sampling section.

Data Analysis

Data analysis adhered to the coding techniques proposed by Corbin and Strauss (1990). The constant comparative method, a key analytical technique outlined by Corbin and Strauss (1990), was used throughout the analysis. Furthermore, a literature review and data analysis were conducted concurrently, facilitating the memoing process and aiding in the development of generative categories.

Open Coding

Open coding is a fundamental analytical procedure in qualitative research, in which raw data are systematically disentangled to generate concepts (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). This process enables researchers to identify numerous codes and categories associated with the text (Flick, 2018). During open coding, discrete events, actions, and interactions were compared and contrasted to identify patterns of similarity and divergence (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Following the mandated norms, codes were generated from collated data. For instance, natural feeling,

Familial Relationship, Family, perceived home vibe, familiar with place, educate student, own the school, take ownership, school development, positive behavior, perceived positive emotion, financial contribution, dedication, take initiative, Spiritual, Challenge social judgement, and visionary leadership were the exemplary initial codes.

Axial Coding

The subsequent phase following open coding involved refining and differentiating the substantive categories that emerged, an analytical process known as axial coding (Flick, 2018). In axial coding, "categories are related to their subcategories," and these relationships are systematically validated against the data using the "coding paradigm" developed by Corbin and Strauss (1990), as shown in figure 1. Notably, researchers are advised to prioritize categories that most closely align with the research questions, selecting them from a broader set of developed codes and their associated analytical memos (Flick, 2018). Following the mandated norms, codes such as leader as giver, home, identity, work and responsibility, values and personal history, and leadership emerged from the data analysis.

Figure 1: *An illustrative case of coding paradigm*



Selective Coding

Selective coding generally occurs in the later stages. Selective coding is the stage where all categories are integrated around a central "core" category, and

those categories needing more explanation are enriched with comprehensive descriptions (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). The primary purpose of this coding stage was to refine the category to develop the theory. Additionally, diagramming can assist in the integration of categories (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). An example of this is illustrated in Figure 2, which depicts the core category of the perception of school as a home and its influence.

CONCEPT OF LEADER SENSE OF SCHOOL BELONGINGNESS: DRAWING FROM THE GROUND EVIDENCES

Understanding and Experience of Leader Sense of School Belonging

The Sense of Collective Belonging

The interview results indicated that the leaders shared a collective understanding of the concept of school belongingness. They acknowledged the significance of cultivating a sense of belonging within educational institutions, emphasizing that inclusivity is essential to institutional development. This emphasis on collective belonging aligns with the idea of belonging as a social justice issue and a fundamental human right and need, as advocated by Kuttner (2023), Maslow (1954), and Baumeister and Leary (1995). Consequently, leaders prioritized developing and nurturing stakeholders' sense of belonging within the school community. This was achieved by showing mutual respect, fostering a forgiving attitude, exhibiting empathy, engaging in shared decision-making, promoting teacher leadership, instilling trust and confidence, and dismantling hierarchical power structures. For example, leaders engage with students by sharing meals and allocate funds to night watchmen to market vegetables for midday meals, yet refrain from requesting accountability or invoices. Leaders also consider teachers' leave applications, particularly in relation to stakeholders' family issues, and grant staff leave to spend time with their families.

L1: School belongingness means that everyone at the school—students, staff, principals, and authorities—feels like they are part of the school. They should view it as their school. This feeling helps in the holistic development of the school.

Leader as Giver

A leader's sense of belonging entails the manner and extent to which they preserve power dynamics within an educational institution. In this context, the leader, who embodies the hegemonic power structure within the school environment, can influence the sense of belonging by fostering a home-like atmosphere, in line with (Yuval-Davis, 2006) assertion that belongingness is frequently shaped and maintained by hegemonic power structures.

Furthermore, ensuring safety and addressing fundamental needs, such as providing sustenance for night-watchmen, water facilities, and sanitation within schools, are essential responsibilities of leaders. As heads of the institution, they believed in giving rather than receiving things in return. This may be due to the power dynamics in the school environment, as Norte (1999) argued that power dynamics, akin to energy and responsibilities tied to each "position of power," can lead to a mutually beneficial symbiotic relationship. A giving attitude resulted in a sense of contribution to the school by the leaders.

L2: My vision is to enlighten students, a goal also emphasized by NEP 2020. We envision students experiencing holistic growth and development. This growth should be research-oriented and require critical thinking so that they can contribute effectively to the country's economy.

L5: I want to contribute to my school. First of all, this time, we have got to reach the national level. We will now attempt to determine how our vision and activities can be improved. Therefore, it can serve as an inspiration for future research. Our students also participated in an international event that made us proud of them.

This sense of contribution validated by the community and the quest to make history to bring pride to the school often resulted in a higher sense of belongingness. For example, one leader shared that the district education officer praised their efforts to dig borewells in schools and an industrial NGO to fund the school. Such successful contributions motivate them to work more and make them feel included in the school as they can contribute and fulfil their responsibilities in developing a good school, as mentioned in the NEP, 2020. The leader as a giver believes in addressing the needs of others rather than their own and empowering others to contribute to the school's success. Within this framework, school leaders are key contributors, fulfilling their roles, which not only provides them with a sense of accomplishment but also reinforces their sense of belonging and professional identity.

Figure 2: An example of conceptual integration of code to generate theory



Experience “Feeling at Home” in School

Leaders have expressed difficulty in defining school belongingness. However, they expressed that within the familial context, a sense of belonging is seldom questioned, as family members inherently feel it. Even amidst minor disturbances, family members support, protect, and unite with each other during adversity. A sense of belonging naturally develops. In a similar vein, leaders inherently perceive themselves as integral to the school community, and taking care of the school, such as switching the light, watering the garden, ensuring quality construction, and developing a positive narrative of the school, are key attributes of care for the school.

L 5: A feeling of belongingness is automatic. This is because we spend more time in these institutions than in other institutions. If we spend more time, we will be more motivated to belong to the groups. The institution has everything, such as students and teachers, just like brothers and sisters in our families. We need to establish a relationship between them.

L3: I love this school. I will do my best to develop it. If I receive more public and student support, it will be beneficial to me. I love this school because I work here. It seems like my home. Because all the staff obey me, except for one or two staff members.

The notion of school belongingness for leaders is fundamentally rooted in the concept of ownership. Leaders often perceive schools as their own, interpreting the term "school belongingness" as synonymous with "my school." It is fundamentally linked to the feeling of being at home in one's workplace. School leaders experienced a homely vibe in the school environment due to the considerable amount of time they dedicated to it, the cooperative and obedient nature of the staff, their familiarity with the surroundings, and the familial relationships they cultivated with stakeholders. These relationships encompass collaborative efforts and responsibilities, such as educating students and managing school environments. Additionally, leaders' headship roles enhance the sense of responsibility and facilitate the cultivation of a familial atmosphere in the school.

Leaders regarded students as their own children and perceived their relationships with staff as fraternal. For example, the researcher observed that the principal addressed others not by their names but by indicating their relationship, such as "Hraish dada" (elder brother), "Shyam bhai" (brother), "Chhua" (a local term used to affectionately address a younger individual regardless of gender), and "Babu" (used to affectionately address a young boy). These forms of address foster familial relationships within the school environment. However, the staff members address the principal as "Sir" or "Madam." Consequently, leaders experience comfort, satisfaction, encouragement, care for the school, and deep engagement in their work in such a homely setting. Familiarity with the community enhances the sense of belonging within a school environment, as reported by Ching et al. (2022). hooks (2009) posited that family is a familiar space that both nurtures and causes pain: experiencing pain is not inherently negative; it may arise from love and care for the school itself. One leader expressed, *if something bad happens in school, it hurts me. For example, if a student failed, if a plant was eaten by a cow, and so forth.*

L6: "Belongingness means having something that is mine; the feeling should be there, this is my institution, because if something happens and it does not hurt me, that is no belongingness; if it touches my heart, that means I feel belong to school, so and I am trying my best.

Geertz (1973) posited that humans are enmeshed in 'webs of significance of his own making. These webs encompass personal relationships and professional engagements, with intersections and divergences that shape individuals' lives in various ways. Individuals adapt their roles daily according to the circumstances

and function as both performers and creators. In a similar vein, leaders cultivate a sense of belonging within educational institutions by taking ownership of the school, exercising agency, fostering a home-like environment, educating students, promoting teamwork, and investing their finances. Conversely, leaders ensure transparency within the team, foster mutual respect, seek assistance from staff, make shared decisions, and dismantle hierarchical power structures.

In breaking the power hierarchy, the politics of belonging act upon, as enacted by a leader, to involve the authority to influence and control the environment, thereby determining who experiences a sense of belonging in school. The leader's approach to collective leadership involves integrating both the community and educators, thereby reinforcing and perpetuating community boundaries. This results in the processes of inclusion and fosters a sense of belonging in the school community. Similarly, belongingness is emphasized as an ongoing process of negotiating and recognizing boundaries (Brown et al., 2025). For instance, the school leader invited members of the School Management Committee (SMC) to an award ceremony, where they publicly acknowledged and credited community members for school development in the presence of higher authorities such as the Collector, Block Education Officer (BEO), and District Education Officer (DEO).

Furthermore, initiatives such as engaging with non-governmental organizations, local industry managers, and alumni to establish connections with the school, alongside visionary leadership, instilled a sense of pride and affiliation with the institution. Additionally, proactive behaviors, such as disregarding social judgment, providing individualized support to students, using personal funds, dedicating extra time, and demonstrating integrity by purchasing original and high-quality school products rather than duplicate products, are behavioral indicators of a leader's sense of school belonging.

Work Tenacity

Leaders' understanding of school belongingness is reflected in their work commitment and dedication. Many leaders allocate additional time to their responsibilities. Despite official school hours being from 9 AM to 4 PM, leaders often extend their work into the evenings. Balancing the dual roles of teaching and school leadership presents significant challenges for school leaders. However, L7, L3, and L1 shared that successfully balancing both roles resulted in a high sense of school belongingness.

Most school leaders leave the school premises after ensuring the completion of daily responsibilities, such as meeting with teachers regarding how the school day was and verifying that classrooms, windows, and school gates were securely locked. Furthermore, leaders committed to social services exhibit greater enthusiasm toward their work. These leaders believe that their dedication to their duties results in significant recognition and awards, such as the "Prakruti Mitro"

award for the best garden, the best school award at the district level, and national-level recognition. Such accolades further motivate school leaders to enhance their efforts to improve school performance. Recognition and acknowledgment from authorities and the community serve to invigorate their energy and willingness to work.

L4: Doing work itself boosts my sense of belonging; if we work well, we get encouragement.

L3: The school was awarded the “Prakruti Mitro” prize. The school was also facilitated as one of the best schools at the district and state levels. This sense of pride (Pratishtha) gradually motivates me to work more.

Furthermore, leaders shared that they worked in a way that boosted others ‘sense of belonging. This is enforced by their understanding that school belongingness is a collective sense. Consequently, leaders promoted teamwork, shared lunch with staff, teacher leadership, transparent finance, showed trust in their staff, built friendships with community members, sought feedback and suggestions from staff for personal and professional problems, mutual respect, shared decision-making, and support, understood their problems, and allowed them to leave.

Leadership in the school environment is characterized by active management and control. For example, L8 reported that he permits teachers to take leave without reducing their salaries, and the classes of the teacher on leave are covered by another teacher, demonstrating a sense of cooperation among staff. Furthermore, the principal encouraged and supported young teachers by not burdening them with administrative tasks, thereby allowing them to pursue their aspirations and further their education, which developed a cooperative and supportive school environment.

Furthermore, principals leveraged their personal influence to engage community members and ensure their active participation in the school. Principals engaged in personal visits to the homes of residents, shared meals with them, inquired about their daily lives, and extended invitations to participate in school activities. These initiatives foster friendly relationships with the community members. As a result of a healthy relationship with the staff and community, the maximum work has been successfully completed despite financial constraints. Friendship with the staff and the community, as well as their willpower and agency, helped delineate the financial issues. In a nutshell, the relationship with staff and the community and their supportive behaviour contribute to the leadership’s experience of belongingness in school.

Positive Experience

Experiencing familial relationships, emotional bonding, support, respect, praise, a sense of satisfaction, and a sense of accomplishment are attributes of leaders' sense of school belongingness, as shown in figure 3. A young promoted principal, L5, expressed that learning new things and acquiring skills motivated them to be part of the school leadership team. The cultivation of competencies, such as the ability to negotiate with staff biases related to age and experience, alongside the enhancement of social skills, significantly contributes to individuals' perceived success in leadership roles. Furthermore, the perception of personal growth fosters a sense of belonging in the school community. Not only their own growth, but also the growth and development of the school, including the construction of buildings, smart classrooms, CCTV installation on campus, opening multiple streams of social science and science in school, special grants in aid, and state recognition, resulted in happiness and pride for the leaders.

L5: I am proud of my school because since I joined the school, I feel that many new things have been established in the school, and we all cooperatively saw many wins in this school.

Furthermore, student achievement at the state, national, and international levels makes leaders proud. For example, L3 shared that when her students got a chance to participate in the BRICS Math Olympiad, she was delighted, felt proud, and was motivated to repeat this experience. This sense of achievement, along with praise from authority, acceptance of voice by authority, community support, familiar and friendly relations with the community, being loved by students, and obedient staff members, make the experience positive. *For example, L7 shared that the community was willing to do daily labor work in school during the construction of the building without daily wages or salary because of their friendship and relationship with the principal.* Another leader shared that if he asked his staff to work on something, they supported him, and most of the time, they never denied working on it. In the context of students, L8 stated that if students freely come to the principal's cabin to share their problems without fear and with trust, it makes her feel loved by them.

L1: I have a good relationship with my superior. During their visit, they complimented me on my work and expressed their gratitude. I received the best principal and best school awards in my block.

Sense of Existence and Identity

Maslow (1998) explored the psychology of the workplace, suggesting that work can possess an intensity akin to "a love relationship, a belongingness, a Zusammenhang (connection)" with "paradoxical qualities of sexual intercourse and

love embracing" (p. 16). Consequently, leaders may devote more time to their professional responsibilities, often prioritizing them over personal interests. Leaders become "in-the-work-persons," experiencing a sense of discovery, as if their work is not only dynamic but also engaging. They develop a passion for their work (McClure & Brown, 2008). The engagement component of belongingness posits that a sense of belonging encompasses not only what an individual feels, but also what they do. For instance, the above-mentioned behavioral approach, leadership practices, and work ethos are crucial elements of a leader's sense of belonging in the workplace.

Fostering a sense of belonging is crucial for workplace integration and retention. Druskat V U & Wolff S B, (2001) identified three fundamental conditions necessary for interactive behavior: trust, identity, and efficacy. Leaders establish their self-identity within their roles, and the absence of identity threats positively influences their sense of belonging to the institution. This is because they have internalized their roles and responsibilities to such an extent that it is evident in their existence.

Furthermore, the school's success is reflected in its high-achieving students, its status as the best school in the district, and its specific funding sources. Consequently, this development has led local people and communities to praise the work ethic and respect the leaders. For example, L9 shared that many people do not even know their name, but they show respect and gratitude because of their leadership practices. Societal status and respect further reinforce their efforts to safeguard their professional identity. The leaders' profession serves as their livelihood, motivating them to engage more meaningfully in their work to justify their salary. Through repetitive engagement in leadership practices, roles, and responsibilities, often associated with specific spaces and school success, both individual and collective identities are constructed and preserved. These ongoing practices play a crucial role in shaping and reinforcing narratives of identity and emotional attachment (Yuval-Davis, 2011).

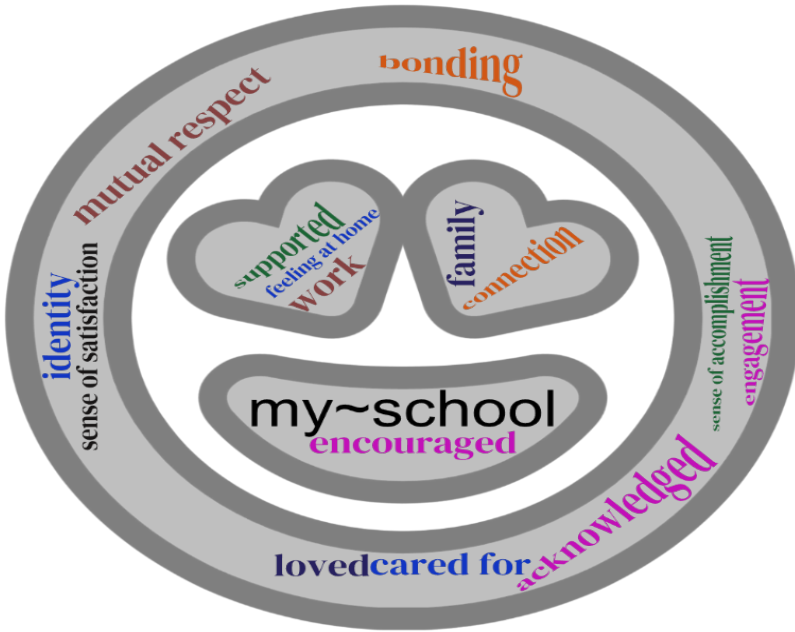
Factors Affecting Leaders' Sense of Belongingness

Even though the leaders had not experienced a lack of belonging, their sense of belonging fluctuated over time. It is a highly sensitive concept that can shift several times throughout the day. For instance, interviews revealed that work pressure from authorities may undermine the sense of belonging, while teacher leadership and dedication to work can simultaneously enhance it. Such collective and shared responsibilities mitigate the adverse effects of work pressure on authority figures. The results revealed that leaders who feel a sense of belonging exhibit traits such as dedication to work, proactive behaviour, honesty, and a caring attitude toward the school.

L3: My feelings never increased or decreased because of any incident. Patience is help me to not be demotivate at any context.

L6: It is an industrial area. Students are working in the industry instead of studying because of their economic conditions, which makes me feel bad.

Figure 3: The lexicon of school belonging: How did school leaders understand and experience it.



Institutional factors, such as a school's location, aesthetic appeal, and institutional development during their tenure, can impact their sense of belonging. Despite leaders implementing initiatives such as personalized support, financial aid, free admission policies, and providing meals to students, regular class attendance was not achieved. Students often work in local industries to financially support their families. Field observations indicated that students enjoyed financial independence from a young age, leading them to prefer entering the workforce over attending college.

Additionally, a marginalized environment prevents parents from forming positive expectations regarding education and their children's future job prospects. Consequently, parents may send their children to work for daily wages. These challenging conditions, especially in marginalized areas, can result in low student attendance in industrial settings, which sometimes demotivates leaders.

Furthermore, the absence of potential high-achieving students who could bring pride in the final board examinations and contribute to the school's success is another factor contributing to the diminished sense of school leadership.

The accumulation of industrial dust negatively impacts the cleanliness of the school environment, which, in turn, reduces leaders' sense of school belonging. This problem is worsened by the health history of the leaders' and the lack of cleaning staff. Conversely, a well-kept garden and participation in gardening activities can boost leaders' sense of belonging, as workplace belonging is deeply connected to social interactions, physical settings, emotions, and aesthetics (Filstad et al., 2019). Furthermore, school achievements, students' success at the national or international levels, receiving best school awards, and infrastructure development foster a sense of pride and accomplishment that enhances the feeling of belonging.

Moreover, the perception of having limited time for school involvement is an obstacle to leaders' sense of school belonging. Due to the lack of support staff, leaders found themselves handling a considerable amount of work independently. This resulted in a workload that was much heavier than that in schools with adequate support. Leaders have less time to teach and engage students in classrooms. Although a large portion of their time was spent on administrative tasks, the principal discovered that interacting with children during lunch, "special time," playground hours, or the midday meal was an effective way to make them feel loved and accepted at school. These interactions contributed to creating a safe and secure learning environment (Arora & Awasthi, 2021).

Consequently, the desire to teach and communicate with students sometimes leads to feelings of dissatisfaction among the school leaders. The leaders believe that having a residential arrangement at the school will facilitate spending more time with both students and the institution. Nevertheless, the leaders interacted with students as part of their supervisory role. Students shared personal issues, food, and showed obedience to their leader. This perceived affection and respect contributed to their satisfaction with the school environment. The leaders' sense of belonging increased over time.

Building relationships with local residents, developing school infrastructure, fostering trust, and establishing familial ties among stakeholders are gradual processes that require considerable time and sustained effort. Over time, these experiences cultivate a strong sense of belonging, resulting in greater job satisfaction and a stronger professional identity. Principals reported that the local community recognized and respected them primarily as the heads of the institution rather than as private individuals. Effective communication with the community and their support enables principals to cultivate a sense of security in the school's environment. However, political influences such as taking undue credit, threatening transfers, and obstructing school funding can adversely affect leaders.

However, political influences, such as taking undue credit, threatening transfers, and obstructing school funding, can adversely affect leaders.

LITERATURE REVIEW

(NE)3: A Lexicon Framework of Belongingness

Belongingness has been conceptualized in various ways across disciplines. In the field of education, scholars have predominantly employed a psychological perspective to develop a formal theory of belongingness in the school context, often referred to as school belongingness. However, belongingness is a multifaceted process that encompasses not only psychological dimensions but also political, social, cultural, contextual, and subjective experiences of individuals.

Moreover, belongingness is a fundamental human need that is frequently shaped and mediated by hegemonic power structures, within which individuals actively negotiate to authentically experience, internalize, and engage with their communities or institutions. Considering this complexity, I propose the (NE)³ framework—comprising Need, Naturalized, Negotiate, and Experience, Emotion, Engagement—which builds upon the lexicon of belongingness by integrating multiple perspectives to better understand its nuanced and dynamic nature.

N3 (Need, Naturalized, Negotiate): A Social Perspective of Belongingness

Maslow (1954) and Baumeister & Leary, (1995) conceptualized belongingness as a fundamental human need. The "need to belong" reflects an intrinsic drive to establish and maintain social relationships, including friendships, intimate connections, and sociable communication (Baumeister, 2012; Pardede & Kovač, 2025). The concept of "need to belong," grounded in theoretical and empirical evidence, has become foundational in contemporary scholarship (Baumeister, 2012; Pardede & Kovač, 2025). Belongingness is an essential need for individuals in social settings. This understanding has evolved to encompass "belonging-as-social-justice," which frames belonging as a fundamental human right rooted in cultural citizenship (Kuttner, 2023).

Yuval-Davis (2006) argues that belongingness is often perceived as natural but becomes explicitly articulated when it is perceived to be under threat. Politicization begins with the manipulation of people's needs and choices. Wilk (2002) identifies naturalization as a mechanism of social control that manipulates individual needs through two forms of social control. Submersive naturalization sustains power structures by embedding needs within the social habitus, rendering them partially visible and framing social order as natural. Repressive naturalization legitimizes desires by framing them as necessities or delegitimizing alternatives (Wilk, 2002). This process manifests through practices such as displays of authority, social surveillance, and reinforcement of dominant norms (Wilk, 2002).

Belongingness is shaped by hegemonic power structures that have naturalized a particular social order (Yuval-Davis, 2006).

Furthermore, a sense of belonging intertwines with the mechanisms of social control that govern inclusion and exclusion, foregrounding the politics of belonging. The politics of belonging and sense of belonging reinforce each other (Kuttner, 2023). A sense of belonging is inherently political (Kuttner, 2023). The politics of belonging encompasses the enforcement of community boundaries by dominant power structures and their contestation (Yuval-Davis, 2006). These boundaries are shaped by the intersecting structures of class, race, gender, and ability. Dominant norms define who belongs and who is excluded, reinforcing the binary of 'us' versus 'them' (Yuval-Davis, 2006).

Moreover, belongingness as a negotiation highlight that opting not to belong can represent a deliberate and empowering act (May, 2011). Likewise, Brown et al. (2025) argue that belongingness is an ongoing process of negotiating boundaries. Belongingness involves needs and negotiation while being embedded within social and cultural norms—both consciously and unconsciously enacted—and practices that shape identity and emotional bonds. Building on Butler's (1990) theory of performativity, Bell (1999) argued that belonging is constituted through performative acts. That is, identities are constructed through the repetition of social and cultural practices associated with particular spaces. These practices shape narratives of identity and emotional attachment (Yuval-Davis, 2011).

E3 (Experience, Emotion, Engagement): A Psycho Logical Perspective

The need to belong fundamentally differs from the sense of belonging. Although the need to belong is universal, a sense of belongingness is a subjective experience shaped by cultural, social and emotional contexts. Belongingness can be understood as the experience of social acceptance, group membership, meaningful work, support, and connection to one's role within a group (McClure & Brown, 2008; Pardede & Kovač, 2025). Individuals invest effort in sustaining social bonds because belongingness fosters attachment, security, and identity, all of which are foundational to personal growth and well-being (Pardede & Kovač, 2025). Experiences of competition, fear, and rejection may contribute to feelings of alienation and non-belonging (McClure & Brown, 2008). Belongingness is characterized by positive experiences, including autonomous choice, voluntary participation, and becoming part of a group.

A sense of belonging encompasses a person's need to develop emotional connections, feel accepted as a group member, and both give and receive love within that group (Li et al., 2024). Drawing on Walker and Avant (2011), positive emotions include feelings of support, usefulness, attachment, and pride (St-Amand et al., 2017). The reciprocal link between emotions and belonging needs shapes a person's sense of belonging, contributing to their development (Allen et al., 2021).

Experiencing negative emotions adversely affects an individual's well-being and health (Allen & Kern, 2017).

Engagement encompasses behavioral, emotional, and cognitive dimensions. Behavioral engagement refers to participation in school activities, cognitive engagement involves self-regulation and investment in learning, and emotional engagement relates to feeling valued within the school community (Davies et al., 2025). Research has shown strong associations between school belonging and behavioral engagement, highlighting the interconnectedness of engagement, belongingness, and connectedness (Allen & Boyle, 2022). Although discussions continue about whether engagement stems from belongingness or the other way around, it remains a crucial element of belongingness. Consistent with behavioral engagement, belongingness should be understood as an active practice, something that people does (Kuttner, 2023). From this perspective, belongingness can be conceptualized as an individual's active participation in a group. When employees feel engaged, they demonstrate greater enthusiasm, participate more fully, and invest additional effort, often leading to enhanced performance (Mani, 2011).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

A central finding of this study indicates that school leaders understood "school belongingness" not merely as an individual sentiment held by a single person but rather as a shared, collective experience, a "collective sense." This perspective frames belongingness as a socially constructed and relational process forged through the interactions of all school stakeholders, such as students, teachers, principals, non-teaching staff, and the wider community at large. Such understanding may have developed because of India's collectivist culture. Individuals with a collectivist culture orientation see themselves as fundamentally related to others and define themselves in terms of their relationships with others and their social obligations (Briley et al., 2026).

A school is conceptualized as a shared cultural entity in which beliefs, values, and practices are collectively constructed and perpetuated (Čamber T et al., 2023). This approach enhances the institution's sense of collective belonging. Furthermore, school leaders underscore the conceptual framework discussed in the literature review, which posits that it is essential for all individuals to experience a sense of belonging in school.

International research has also established that school belonging is a multi-layered and collectively constructed process (Allen et al., 2021; Osterman, 2000). In the Indian context, NCERT (2021) reports similarly indicate that a positive school environment is predicated on collective participation and relationships. This not only reflects the depth of relationships but also indicates that positive leadership through its moral dimension (Päätaalo & Saarnio, 2026)

possesses the capacity to transform individual experiences into a collective identity.

Furthermore, this study reveals that school leaders experience belongingness not through the act of receiving but rather through the act of contributing (giving). This perspective aligns with Kutter, (2023) conceptualization of belongingness, which states that belongingness is not only about what a person feels but also about what a person does. Belongingness is understood here as an agentic and relational process actively constructed through the act of giving.

This leader-giver approach represents an integrated theme of belongingness. As previously discussed, Butler's (1990) theory of performativity informs Bell, (1999) that belonging is constituted through performative acts. Leaders engage in daily performances to effectively fulfil their roles and responsibilities, often translating these actions into institutionalization, which fosters a sense of identity and belonging.

Additionally, the results indicate that leaders who provide personalized support, guidance, and advice tailored to individual needs demonstrate that transformational leadership is attuned to understanding the unique requirements of each individual, thereby fostering their overall development (Moloto et al., 2026). Such contributions may be facilitated by the hegemonic power dynamics between leaders and subordinates. Here, school leaders used their personal power to build connections, feel valued, trusted, respected, and decentralize their power by promoting teacher leadership, seeking help, and sharing decision-making, in alignment with Moloto et al., (2026). The level of personal support, such as (financial support and ensuring the basic needs of stakeholders) given by the principal has a major influence on the school's culture.

Furthermore, the principal's ability to recognize and address the needs of both teachers and students is crucial to enhancing the school's overall success (Moloto et al., 2026). Leaders engage in daily performances to effectively fulfil their roles and responsibilities, such as providing accommodation for staff from outside the local area, ensuring access to food and sanitation, offering advance salaries to guest faculty from their own resources, and providing financial assistance. They often have a psychological sense of ownership or belonging (Avey et al., 2009). Experiencing support from staff, a sense of togetherness, recognition from authority, and praise from the community motivates leaders to persist in their giving approach and enhances their sense of belongingness.

Leaders have perceived schools as emotional places, aligning with the notion of an “emotional home” (Sharifonnasabi et al., 2025). For example, the culture of fictive kinship (Craft-Rosenberg & Pehler, 2011) based terms such as *dada* (elder brother), *Bhai* (brother), “*chhua*” (a local term used to affectionately address a younger individual regardless of gender), and “*babu*” (used to affectionately address a young boy). This observed trend suggests that the

institution (such as a school) is perceived not merely as a formal organizational structure but rather as a family like social space. Another reason that spending more time in the workplace can be attributed to emotional home, consistent with (Sharifonnasabi et al., 2025). A feeling of home develops psychological ownership among leaders (Sharifonnasabi et al., 2025). Subsequently, leaders take responsibility for greater work commitment and bear the responsibilities. In addition, sharing lunch together develops relationships and shows togetherness, consistent with Moloto et al. (2026). In a nutshell, such a feeling of emotional home safeguards the well-being of the person (Sharifonnasabi et al., 2025).

As discussed, leaders view schools as their emotional home, which fosters a sense of psychological ownership. Because of psychological ownership, they may have more responsibility, work commitment, and dedication (Avey et al., 2009). For example, working until evening and personal time show their work dedication and behavioral indicators of a leader's sense of school belongingness. Successfully completing work and receiving recognition from the community adds to their sense of belonging. This finding is also consistent with the context of teachers' sense of belongingness (Karnopp & Peter Bjorklund, 2026).

The study revealed that school leaders' sense of school belongingness is influenced by multifaceted factors, including institutional, personal, and social elements. This shows that leaders' sense of belongingness is dynamic and conceptual (Allen et al., 2021). The results show that the school's location, appearance, and physical state, including the buildup of industrial dust, were highlighted as significant negative factors influencing the sense of belongingness. Additionally, there were constraints on institutional growth during their time, a lack of consistent classroom interaction, and a shortage of time for teaching. Furthermore, the inability to fully fulfil their desire to engage in teaching and interact with students impacts their sense of connection.

Conversely, positive factors such as shared and collective responsibility, dedication to work, proactiveness, integrity, and a sense of care for the school play significant roles. Additionally, acknowledgement, respect, appreciation, and a sense of achievement and pride serve to strengthen school leaders' sense of belonging. These findings align with a study by Lampinen et al. (2018) on managers' sense of organizational belongingness.

The overall trend indicates that school leaders are deeply committed to their leadership roles and practices to experience school belongingness. Additionally, the holistic development of students and schools is important. Their sense of belonging is further reinforced when they receive recognition from the community, earn the respect of teachers, and receive cooperation from both teaching and non-teaching staff.

Being part of a school not only denotes experiencing belonging but also performing and negotiating identity. Additionally, belongingness is characterized by the energy and willingness to meaningfully engage with a group (St-Amand et

al., 2017). They negotiated with political figures and community members and managed their time effectively. Employees who feel engaged generally show greater enthusiasm for their tasks, participate more fully, and willingly invest extra effort, often leading to improved performance (Mani, 2011). A leader's sense of belonging is primarily determined by their contributions and actions within an institution. This sense of belonging is less about personal emotions and more closely linked to their roles as contributors, performers and negotiators. Thus, school leaders' sense of belonging emerges as a reciprocal process shaped by the combined influence of personal commitment, institutional circumstances, and social recognition.

LIMITATION OF THE STUDY

This study had several significant limitations that must be considered when interpreting its findings. First, the study's sample size was limited ($n = 11$), and most participants had less than 10 years of experience in school leadership. The sample selection was based on the theoretical sampling method, and the sample was finalized only after data saturation was achieved; thus, the generalizability of the findings remains limited.

Second, there is a significant gap in the literature regarding school leaders' own "sense of belonging." Despite thorough searches by researchers across major databases such as Scopus, ERIC, and Google Scholar, studies specifically addressing this topic are rare. Consequently, comparing the findings of this study with those of previous research, particularly in the discussion section, was challenging.

Third, this study was exploratory in nature. Therefore, the theoretical framework presented in this study should be viewed as a preliminary or "seed" model rather than a fully established theory. Further empirical validation is required in future studies.

Finally, the context and geographical scope of the study are limited; therefore, the transferability of the findings to other contexts may be restricted. Future research should strengthen this field by incorporating diverse contexts and more experienced school leaders.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest. This study was part of my PhD work. This study was conducted independently and did not receive financial support from any external organizations or institutions. However, the author had a Paperpal Prime Plan subscription for language-editing purposes.

Ethical Statement

This study adhered to ethical guidelines, ensuring permission and compliance with the relevant regulations. The study received approval from both the DEO and the principals of the schools. The research was structured to prevent any interference with the principal's official work, thereby upholding ethical research standards.

Each participant verbally agreed to provide informed consent, with assurances that their personal data would remain anonymous and handled with strict confidentiality. Participation was entirely voluntary, and no individual was forced to participate in the study.

Data Availability Statement

The datasets generated and analysed in this study will not be available due to ethical concerns.

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