



Article

“I Stay Because of My Students”: Urban Lower Secondary School Teachers’ Experiences of Belonging at Work

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Abstract

This study explores urban lower secondary school teachers’ sense of belonging, focusing on their relationships with students and their work experiences. Despite heightened interest in students’ sense of belonging in educational settings, empirical research on teacher belonging – especially in the context of urban lower secondary education – remains sparse. The limited focus on teachers’ experiences of belonging at work is paradoxical, given their crucial role in fostering student belonging and the global challenges regarding the recruitment and retention of teachers. While previous research on belonging has underscored its importance for job satisfaction, professional identity development, and motivation at work, there has been a lack of focus on understanding how student-teacher relationships specifically influence teachers’ experiences of belonging to their school. This study draws from interviews and observational data to gain a deeper understanding of teachers’ day-to-day practice. It gives voice to the reflections and experiences of teachers and leaders. The findings emphasize the critical role of reciprocal student–teacher relationships through three interrelated themes. Relationships of this nature not only foster student development but also enhance teachers’ sense of belonging. The study also highlights the importance of supportive collegial relationships. In particular, teachers report strong experiences of belonging when their identity as teachers and individual contributions resonate with their school’s values and educational goals.

Keywords: sense of belonging, teachers, urban lower secondary schools, student–teacher relationships, value consonance, professional identity



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Introduction

Teachers' sense of belonging matters, not only for their job satisfaction (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2019) and development of professional identity (Skott, 2019) but also because teachers with a strong sense of belonging can help maintain a school climate that supports students' experiences of belonging (Pesonen, 2016; Pesonen et al., 2021). This study explores lower secondary school teachers' sense of belonging and highlights how their experiences of belonging at work are connected to the relationships they share with their students.

Belonging, the subjective feeling of deep connection with social groups, physical places, and individual and collective experiences (Allen et al., 2021a), has been established as a fundamental human need and motivation (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Hagerty et al., 1992). While organizational and workplace belonging (e.g., Belle et al., 2015; Bhatt & Vakkayil, 2023; Filstad et al., 2019) has been studied across professions, the empirical body of literature on how teachers experience belonging is scarce (e.g., Bjorklund Jr., 2023; Pesonen et al., 2021). A neglected focus on teachers' experiences of belonging to their schools is paradoxical, considering their essential role in fostering student belonging (Allen et al., 2018) and the global challenges regarding the recruitment and retention of teachers (e.g., Clandinin et al., 2015; Ingersoll et al., 2019; Kelchtermans, 2017). Discussing teacher retention, Kelchtermans (2017) argues that "one crucial condition for teachers to stay in teaching is a sense of emotional belonging based on a shared view of educational goals and norms in the school" (p. 969).

Despite their role as pivotal forces for equity and their critical role in sustainable global development, immense challenges remain in the recruitment, retention, and working conditions of teachers (UNESCO, 2021). Such challenges also extend to the Nordic educational context. In Norway, there is a downward trend in applicants for teacher education, with early-career teachers leaving the profession (Munthe & See, 2022; Tiplic et al., 2015). In Nordic countries and elsewhere, the focus on experiences of belonging in schools has increased. The OECD (2022) marks belonging and identity as a key trend shaping education, and the Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research (2017) demands that schools facilitate student experiences of belonging in school and society. At the same time, as Norwegian schools grapple with such demands, international literature, such as Allen et al. (2018), argues that while schools understand the importance of belonging, less is known about how to transform the concept into day-to-day practice. This lack of understanding on how school practice can foster belonging is influenced by how most research on belonging (in the context of schools) has focused on students' experiences; teachers' and school leaders' voices have, to a large degree, been missing (Allen et al., 2021b).

The purpose of this study is to provide the voices of teachers and to inductively explore how they

experience their sense of belonging at work in a Norwegian urban lower secondary school context. The study contributes to the literature in two distinct ways: First, it qualitatively examines experiences of belonging by gathering data from teachers' daily lives. In discussion with Allen et al. (2022a), who are prominent belonging researchers, Leary and Baumeister shared how most research over the past 25 years has involved questionnaire studies or lab experiments, with too little attention given to how people experience belonging in their daily lives (e.g., at work or school). Second, while later studies have investigated experiences of belonging among early-career teachers (Bjorklund Jr., 2023; Skott, 2019) and in co-teaching relationships (Pesonen et al., 2021), less is known about how teachers experience belonging in an urban lower secondary school setting. Further, in Norwegian education, there is a need to promote experiences of belonging in culturally diverse school systems (Burner & Osler, 2021; Hancock et al., 2021). By gathering data from two schools located within the same urban setting but in distinct sociodemographic districts within the municipality, this study examines belonging in a culturally diverse school system, thereby expanding the literature. The study addressed the following research questions:

What do urban lower secondary school teachers experience as important for their sense of belonging at work, and how do student–teacher relationships influence these experiences?

Literature review

Various fields, such as psychology, sociology, education, medicine, and economics, are concerned with the concept of belonging. Psychological research on belonging can be traced to seminal pieces such as the work of Abraham Maslow (1954) and Carl Rogers (1951). In their influential paper, social psychologists Baumeister and Leary (1995) explained that belonging is a powerful and fundamental motivation that appears to have multiple substantial effects on emotional patterns and cognitive processes. In their systematic review of belonging research, Allen et al. (2021b) demonstrated inconsistencies in the literature and that definitions across disciplines have not been uniformly concordant. In a later study, Allen et al. (2022a) clarified how conceptualizing belonging has evolved from an understanding centered on human motivation and interpersonal attachment (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Maslow, 1954; Rogers, 1951) to more complex and broader interpretations that “consider the intrapersonal, temporal, cultural, environmental, and geographical contexts and experiences related to belonging” (Allen et al., 2022a, p. 2805).

Belonging at work has been studied across contexts (e.g., McClure & Brown, 2008; Waller, 2020) and in a range of different professions, such as teleworkers (Belle et al., 2015), consultants (Bhatt & Vakkayil, 2023), and police (Filstad, 2022). Experiences of belonging at work are related to engagement, productivity, and performance (Belle et al., 2015). Therefore, it is unsurprising that belonging also has been studied in relation to other concepts, such as trust (e.g., Ghamwari, 2011), leadership (e.g., Parry et al., 2019), and work engagement (e.g., Singh & Ramdeo, 2023). Furthermore, employees' sense of belonging is a central

element in the growing body of literature on inclusion and diversity in the workplace (e.g., Byrd, 2022; Randel et al., 2018).

Notions of identity fulfillment as central to belonging at work are supported by both Belle et al. (2015) and McClure and Brown (2008), who, in their phenomenological research on belonging at work, argue that the strongest sense of belonging relates to the discovery of self within a job. In the Nordic context, studies on the Norwegian police force have demonstrated a relationship between belonging and identity among leaders and employees (Filstad, 2022; Filstad et al., 2019). Authors have focused on how belonging is the foundation of social identity and how belonging at work is about more than the dichotomous classification of “I belong” or “I do not belong.” The collective aspect of belonging represents believing that one is among equals in an organization. The questions of “Who am I?” and “Who do I want to be?” are therefore central to understanding employees’ experiences of belonging at work (Filstad et al., 2019).

A growing body of knowledge on belonging in the context of schools has been used to deepen understanding of students’ experiences (e.g., Allen et al., 2018; Goodenow & Grady, 1993) and to understand how teachers can enhance students’ sense of belonging (e.g., Greenwood & Kelly, 2019). In comparison, there has been less focus on understanding teachers’ sense of belonging at work. While the body of literature on teachers’ belonging remains small, as noted by Bjorklund Jr. (2023) and Pesonen et al. (2021), there are examples of studies on this topic.

In a Finnish study, Pesonen et al. (2021) examined the sense of belonging in co-teaching. They found that a teacher’s sense of belonging increases when they see themselves as a part of the school and its values and feel accepted by, respected in, and proud of the school. The authors suggest that teachers’ sense of belonging evolves through joint practices and sharing of pedagogical ideas. Furthermore, the study suggests that collegial support, trust, and respect among colleagues predict teachers’ sense of belonging. Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2011) examined Norwegian teachers’ job satisfaction, belonging, and motivation to leave their teaching profession. The authors reported that the experience of belonging to their school was associated with higher levels of job satisfaction and lower levels of emotional exhaustion. They also found that teachers’ experiences of belonging were positively moderated by value consonance, supervisory support, and relationships with parents and colleagues. With value consonance, Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2011) are not concerned with which goals, what context, or which educational methods are used but whether the teacher feels that their values are congruent with the ones emphasized in their school. They define value consonance as “the degree to which teachers feel that they share the prevailing norms and values at the school where they are teaching” (p. 1031). In a later study, Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2019) supported their previous findings, stating that supportive social relations and a shared understanding of goals and values positively influence teachers’ belonging, as sharing values signals acceptance and respect.

International support for findings from the Nordic context can be found in Bjorklund Jr.'s (2023) study investigating first-year teachers' experiences of belonging in the United States. Through a multiple-case study approach, he found that feelings of belonging were related to shared teaching values and experiences of individual contributions. His findings also suggest that teachers' feelings of belonging are bolstered by positive relationships with students, community participation outside the classroom, and support from colleagues. Furthermore, his study found that first-year teachers' feelings of belonging shifted over time. Skott (2019) discovered findings similar to those of Bjorklund Jr. (2023) regarding changes in teachers' experiences of professional identity and belonging. In a longitudinal case study of a novice teacher in Denmark, Skott (2019) defined professional identity as individuals shifting experiences of being, becoming, and belonging to a profession. He found that over time, the teacher's identity shifted from being closely associated with her subject to being more closely associated with the school itself.

Previous research on teachers and broader organizational theory has demonstrated that experiences of belonging in the workplace are essential. However, research on teachers' experiences of belonging has not focused considerably on the roles of students and student–teacher relationships when discussing teachers' sense of belonging to their school. The absence of this focus seems puzzling, as student–teacher relationships are an element unique to the teaching profession.

Ethical considerations and researcher's position

This study is approved by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data. Written consent forms and information about the study was provided to the participants in advance, and their participation was voluntary. The confidentiality of the participants is ensured by using pseudonyms.

This study was funded by the Research Council of Norway and the municipality where the case schools are located. As such projects offer a dual perspective of being a researcher and a practitioner, ethical considerations concerning positions and reflexivity become integral. Reflexivity can be understood as turning the researcher's lens back onto oneself, the responsibility for one's situation, and its effect on the entire research process (Berger, 2015). Even if I share similar professional experiences with the participants in this study, I recognize the distinctiveness of individuals' experiences of belonging, especially considering the challenges faced by minority educators, as highlighted by Burner and Osler (2021). My researcher's position in this project offered the advantage of more accessibility to the field, knowledge about the topic, and a unique perspective from which to understand the nuanced reactions of the participants (Berger, 2015; Kacen & Chaitin, 2006). However, prior knowledge can keep researchers from looking at a context with fresh eyes (Kacen & Chaitin, 2006), and such a position carries the risk of blurring boundaries and imposing values, beliefs, and perceptions (Berger, 2015). In this study, through ongoing reflexivity,

subjectivity is seen as a valuable resource, not a hindrance, which aligns with Braun and Clarke's (2022) perspective on data analysis.

Method

I used an inductive approach to explore participants' own interpretations, emphasizing the co-creation of meaning with the participants through a social constructivist lens (Gergen, 2015). Constructivist techniques are especially helpful in inductive research because constructivism entails an openness to elicit meanings from participants in their own terms (Denicolo et al., 2016). To give voice to the participants, I aimed to remain receptive to what they perceived as important for their sense of belonging in their specific environment. The considerable amount of time I spent in the context of school employees' day-to-day practices, as well as a dataset comprising extensive observations and interview data (Table 1), was valuable for understanding their reflections and practices.

Table 1. Data overview

Data Collection Method	Description of Data	Volume of Data
Field observation days	Activities conducted in the field: interviews, observations, informal conversations	57 days (340 hours)
Semistructured interviews	Principals, assistant principals, team leaders, teachers	21 interviews (21 hours)
Group interviews	Principals, assistant principals, team leaders, teachers	4 interviews (4 hours)
Participant observations	Observations at staff, teachers' team, and leader group meetings	50 observations (55 hours)

Data from two schools was gathered to provide variation and to capture some of the diversity of sociodemographic factors within the urban municipality. The choice of schools was not to compare them but to enrich the data and allow for a greater diversity of experiences. Lower secondary schools were seen as a relevant context for this study, as teachers in such schools work closely together in teams, based on their subjects and the grade they teach in. Furthermore, a sense of belonging is particularly critical during adolescence (Anderman, 2000), making the context of lower secondary school an important environment

for belonging research. Two schools were selected as information-rich sites through purposeful sampling based on sociodemographic areas, similar organizational structure and organization of teams, and size. Schools A and B were approximately the same size, with 30–40 employees. I selected schools of this size instead of larger ones because it allowed for the possibility of developing trusting relationships with participants within the time limitations of the data-gathering. Located in a different district, School B had a more culturally diverse environment than School A, with more students and employees from minority backgrounds. The participants were teachers and leaders from the two schools. Leaders were significant participants in understanding teachers' experiences. Leaders usually have a teacher's education and work experience. Therefore, teachers and leaders in schools share similar professional knowledge (Helstad & Mausestagen, 2019). It was essential to gather data with participants in various roles within each school to encapsulate nuances and diversity in the dataset. The participants' teaching experience ranged from 1 to 35 years.

I gathered data from one school at a time (School A: September to December 2022, School B: January to March 2023). This choice allowed for an immersive process that aided in developing a deeper understanding of employees' daily, mundane practices. However, alternating time between the two schools would have led to a more longitudinal dataset. Each day, I wrote notes in a reflexive field diary as suggested by Braun and Clarke (2022).

I conducted both individual semistructured interviews and group interviews with two or three participants. Interviews were conducted to gather a nuanced understanding of opinions and experiences, as recommended by Brinkmann and Kvale (2018). Interviews were conducted face-to-face and lasted from 35 to 80 minutes. All interviews were conducted in a quiet area, based on the participants' choice. I facilitated, tape-recorded, and transcribed all the interviews verbatim. Facilitating group interviews encouraged open conversations and enhanced my understanding of the arguments and reasons behind the practice in each school. King et al. (2019) reasoned that group interviews aid data collection by helping highlight language, attitudes, and priorities. With aspirations similar to those of Grevle (2023), I facilitated group interview in more unstructured and informal ways that encouraged collaboration in knowledge creation through dialogue between participants. Conducting interviews throughout the data-gathering process made it possible to adjust different follow-up questions to the participants, as I conducted observations, became familiar with participants, and built trust through daily interactions.

I conducted observations to understand participants' experiences and their practices more intimately. I observed meetings and day-to-day interactions and engaged in informal conversations with participants. I observed meetings of school leader groups, teachers' teams, and staff. Sandler and Thedvall (2017) stated that meetings are the most essential and under-theorized phenomenon encountered by ethnographic

researchers. For each meeting, notes were written using an observational protocol (Creswell & Poth, 2017). The protocol contains a descriptive section that chronologically details meeting activities. This section also includes direct citations of relevant quotations. In addition, the corresponding reflective column details my reflections on these activities. Utilizing both interviews and observations throughout the data-gathering not only enriched the dataset but also served as a means of calibration between what people said and how they acted, as suggested by Carroll (2016).

Data analysis

Analysis and coding were guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006; 2022) phases for reflexive thematic analysis (TA). In reflexive TA, meaning is contextual and situated. Coding is an open, organic, and evolving process in which themes do not emerge but are produced through systematic engagement with data. Using a relativist method of conducting reflexive TA, I saw myself as part of the data production process and viewed themes as shared patterns of meaning across the dataset. Following the phases for reflexive TA means an iterative process with six phases: familiarization; coding; generating initial themes; reviewing and developing themes; refining, defining and naming themes; and writing up (Braun & Clarke, 2022). As I conducted and transcribed all interviews and rewrote observational notes from the protocol into digital documents, I familiarized myself with the data. By reading and rereading the data during the immersion process, I made notes on analytical ideas. In the first round of coding, I coded the entire dataset line-by-line, aiming to capture single meanings related to the research questions. Subsequently, the process of generating themes was initiated. Here, I compiled codes that share the core idea of the concept with the potential to answer the research questions. Phase four involved further development and review of themes. Here, themes came together, changed, or were disregarded in order to develop central organizational concepts. In writing up, relevant quotations were translated from Norwegian into English with assistance from the AI-powered language model ChatGPT-4 to ensure quality.

Findings

The influence, opportunities, and challenges of student-teacher relationships

In examining the data, it became clear that student-teacher relationships were central to the teachers' experience of belonging. Observational notes suggest that these relationships, and the challenges of developing them, were a frequent topic in the lunchroom and in teacher team meetings. The influence of these relationships was supported, for instance, in one group interview, where two teachers stated the following:

Participant A: I would undoubtedly say that my sense of belonging is linked to my relationship with the

students, as I see that my loyalty lies first and foremost with them.

Participant B: I agree. There is no doubt that my belonging is connected to students.

Participant A: Through tough times as a teacher, my answer has always been that I stay because of my students.

The dialogue between these participants sheds light on their relationships with students, as Participant A emphasizes loyalty to students as a fundamental driver of belonging – a notion that Participant B echoes. Moreover, Participant A's reflection on how these relationships are essential to maintaining their employment underscores how they are not just part of the job but are essential to the teacher's belonging and commitment. When answering questions concerning their experience of belonging, several participants focused on why they became teachers. One leader expressed:

The whole reason I wanted to go into teaching was to make a difference for students. Student–teacher relationships that are strengthened in the classroom, in recess, or in other arenas at school are what give me a sense of belonging. When I can help students, it energizes me.

This statement illustrates how teachers' motivations to become educators were tied to developing relationships with students to support their learning. Furthermore, it highlights the reciprocal nature of student–teacher relationships providing teachers with energy and motivation, suggesting that the ability to positively impact students is a critical aspect of teachers' work in lower secondary schools. Together, the examples from the two teachers and the leader suggest that the relationships teachers experience with their students are a reason for both becoming and staying a teacher.

For some participants, it was not only the connections themselves but also the opportunity to demonstrate their ability in developing such relationships that served as a driver for belonging. One teacher stated: "My greatest sense of belonging to the teaching profession is how I see myself as a teacher who builds great relationships with students." The teacher here recognized that this ability is essential for student development, and he directly tied his experience of belonging to how he saw himself as a teacher, illustrating the connection between professional identity and belonging. The formation of student relationships and the ability to develop such relationships can be transformational in nature. A first-year teacher explained: "I wasn't sure if I wanted to become a teacher, but when I experienced that relational aspect with the students, when I kind of cracked that code, the teaching became more meaningful." When teachers felt like they had the ability to develop meaningful relationships with students, their reflections indicate how that confirmed their choice of becoming a teacher. However, participants experienced barriers and challenges that inhibited their opportunities to develop relationships. Observational notes from teacher team meetings showed participants discussing how time pressure, conflicting interests, and discipline problems create challenges in building relationships with students. Further, one leader reflected on how they (in the school collegium) lacked a common understanding of what constitutes good student–

teacher relationships:

We talk about how important student and teacher relationships are all the time, however, we're not conscious enough about what that really means. You need to be active in developing relationships with your students, and we need a bigger understanding of what having a good relationship with students truly means.

While teachers face potential challenges for building relationships with students, the excerpt from the leader indicates how the school collegium has the potential to build a greater common understanding of what constitutes meaningful student–teacher relationships in their specific school environment. The data predominately highlight student and teacher relationships as important for teachers' experience of belonging; however, there is also diversity in the data. One teacher diverged from the common pattern:

I've never really found the aspect of dealing with students that interesting. It was the subject of social science that drew me into teaching. Now, I feel that my connection with the leader group and how I feel we are running an organization are important for my experience of belonging.

This perspective is critical, as it shows how participants diverged in how they value student and teacher relationships, where belonging is derived less from interactions with students and is more connected to a subject and the teacher's role in the school. However, in sum, this theme shows how student–teacher relationships are central reasons for becoming and remaining in the profession and are thus a foundational element in urban lower secondary school teachers' experiences of belonging.

Harmonizing value consonance with individual contribution and identity

A recurring theme in the dataset was the importance of value consonance – sharing values, goals, and norms in the school environment. The findings suggest that when teachers experience their professional identity and individual contributions as resonating with the school's values, their belonging can be amplified. Diversity in how teachers experienced value consonance was most evident when contrasting the experiences of participants at School A with those at School B. Participants in School A articulated a clear set of values and school identity anchored in the school's pedagogical philosophy, which fostered a sense of belonging:

Our pedagogical thinking concerns the whole school as a unit. Each year, we spend the first few weeks focusing on our identity and having ceremonies with new students. Here, we discuss our values. I believe that this creates both ownership and identity. I think that this also influences the teachers' sense of belonging and experience of fitting in. – Leader

I appreciate the balance between us having a common direction but at the same time great freedom to be the best teacher we can be. I truly value that. I feel that I'm part of a collective project, but I can also do my job in a way that works best for me and my students. – Teacher

These reflections highlight a work environment valuing both unity and individuality. The findings suggest that when teachers experience freedom and trust in their roles, simultaneously as they feel aligned with school values, their sense of belonging is strengthened. In contrast, the narrative shared by several

participants from School B painted a different picture, in which the absence of a clear identity and shared values posed challenges. Observational notes from a leader group meeting focused on leaders discussing how in that school year they had been without a clear identity, which was confirmed by a senior teacher: "I believe there's a need for a shared vision going forward. What are we working towards? Do we have a paradigm? I feel we're going in different directions."

This sentiment, shared by a leader and a teacher, underscored how struggle can arise when unifying school values are not clearly articulated. The aspiration to develop this to foster teachers' experiences of belonging is evident in the statement of another leader at School B:

We're struggling because I feel we could be any school. To create a sense of belonging and identity, I would push to create a school for the local community. There can be employees in various positions and roles; this doesn't matter, but we've chosen to work here because we experience a common purpose. This means that everyone feels a connection here and that the school, in collaboration with those around it, creates a village that raises these youths.

The sentiment here proposes that teachers' experience of belonging at work can be enhanced by a shared mission in which they experience alignment between their identity as teachers and the school's values. Furthermore, the statement proposes that a sense of belonging can be strengthened by experiences of individual contribution, regardless of the role or tenure of teachers.

How schools can work to harmonize value consonance with individual contribution and identity was exemplified in observations of a staff meeting at School A. During a strategic planning session, the principal encouraged teachers to answer an anonymous online survey to offer feedback on the school's values and pedagogical direction. The principal underscored the importance of aligning strategic initiatives with school values to further develop their practice and asked the teachers to provide feedback on how to improve their practice as a school and what challenges they faced when working toward these goals. This approach illustrates how teachers can be invited to share challenges and influence school practice. Furthermore, it has the potential to strengthen teachers' experience of belonging by using their voices to adjust how they move together toward common goals. Ultimately, this theme suggests that when participants experienced that their contribution was important and felt that their identities as teachers aligned with school values, their experience of belonging was strengthened.

The value of teams and supportive collegial relationships

The teachers spent a significant portion of time engaged with their respective teacher teams, which was pivotal to their experience of belonging. Observations at team meetings underscored how they were about more than discussing students or planning future events. They also served as a forum for mutual support in the challenges teachers face in their day-to-day practices. Given how teacher teams in lower secondary

schools often change annually, immediate collegial connections – those “here and now” relationships – are especially important for fostering teachers’ experiences of belonging. A teacher encapsulated this: “My strongest sense of belonging is probably to my team and those I work most closely with.” This perspective emphasizes how belonging can be anchored in present interactions and strengthened through collaborative relationships rather than the overarching school environment or student interactions alone. Reflections on the team’s role were reinforced by another teacher:

We recently discussed why we value being part of this team. This is because we are incredibly different people with different backgrounds. Nonetheless, we experience that we can truly be ourselves. In the team, we trust each other and obtain the opportunity to share challenges and ventilate frustrations when necessary.

These accounts highlight the potential of a team’s role in developing supportive collegial relationships. If a team can cultivate environments that support individuality, embrace diversity, and encourage discussion, this can enhance teachers’ experience of belonging. The teacher reported freedom to express herself, underpinning a culture of collegial loyalty and trust. Experiences of trust and support from leaders were also important aspects of participants’ experiences of belonging. One teacher said, “I think the leaders drive school identity, and I think my own sense of belonging here is tied to the trust and freedom I experience from them.” The teacher reflected on how supportive collegial relationships with school leaders were important for his experience of belonging, as they were also primary drivers in creating a sense of shared school identity. When leaders themselves reflected on what they believed enhances teachers’ experiences of belonging, they recognized the importance of inclusion and support across the multiple collegial relationships that teachers form. In a group interview, one leader shared the following:

To experience belonging, I believe that one must feel included. That one has a sense of community with colleagues within the team, as well as with the broader collegium. From my experience, teachers are concerned with having colleagues they can talk to and who are close.

The leader’s perspective affirmed the dual nature of the support valued by teachers – professional collaboration to meet work-related challenges and interactions that foster approachability and trust. This underscores that a teacher’s sense of belonging is influenced by the experiences of collegial support in multiple arenas in their day-to-day practice. Thus, supportive collegial relationships are essential for fostering teachers’ experience of belonging.

In this section, I presented three interrelated themes that contribute to urban lower secondary school teachers’ experience of belonging at work. The reciprocal relationship between teachers and students is not only foundational for student growth but also a core component of teachers’ sense of belonging. Teachers’ perceptions of their individual contributions, especially when these contributions were recognized as aligning with the school’s values, significantly influenced their sense of belonging. Moreover, supportive collegial relationships, whether within their immediate teams, with school leaders, or across

broader school faculties, played a critical role. In an environment where individual efforts are valued and collective support is evident, the findings suggest that teachers are likely to report strong experiences of belonging at work.

Discussion

In teachers' experiences of belonging at work in two urban lower secondary schools, the findings converge in several ways with existing Nordic and international research on teachers' experiences and with the broader organizational literature on belonging at work. However, the findings shed light on the mutual benefits of student–teacher relationships, a theme that extends beyond the previously recognized importance of student well-being and academic achievement (e.g., Allen et al., 2018). Although they have been mentioned in international literature (Bjorklund Jr., 2023; Clandinin et al., 2015), the current study emphasizes the reciprocal influence of such relationships, establishing them as a foundational element of teachers' sense of belonging in the context of urban lower secondary schools.

When participants reflected on their sense of belonging, they put a strong emphasis on their relationships in two distinct ways. First, they highlighted the importance of the relationships themselves. Second, participants connected their ability to develop student–teacher relationships with their sense of belonging. This finding resonates with broader educational literature that emphasizes the relational aspects of teaching and student–teacher relationships (e.g., Corbin et al., 2019; Split et al., 2011) but extends it by suggesting that connections teachers forge with students are essential for their experiences of belonging at work. This contrasts with previous Nordic studies where student–teacher relationships are not a feature in models of teacher belonging (e.g., Pesonen et al., 2021). The experiences of the participating school leaders suggest that discussions in school collegiums about what constitutes good student–teacher relationships in their specific local environment, beyond agreeing that they are essential, are necessary for a shared understanding. One implication for strengthening these relationships is how teachers and leaders should engage in discussions about what a good student–teacher relationship means in their contexts. Further, as student–teacher relationships are expected to occur naturally, there exist few empirically tested interventions specifically addressing belonging through these relationships (Allen et al., 2021b). Teachers reported how everyday practices involve competing interests and time pressure, which do not always allow for opportunities to develop these relationships. Another suggestion is that schools should reflect on how they can utilize the possibilities and constraints of their specific day-to-day practices. Relevant questions then become: How can the school provide opportunities for developing student–teacher relationships both in and outside the classroom? What possibilities and constraints exist in teachers' schedules and day-to-day practice?

In line with existing research, this study reaffirms that teachers' sense of belonging is strengthened by supportive collegial relationships and experiences of acceptance and respect for their individual contributions (e.g., Bhatt & Vakkayil, 2023; Bjorklund et al., 2023; Pesonen et al., 2021; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2011; 2019). The concept of value consonance emerges as especially salient for urban lower secondary school teachers' experiences: the degree to which their personal values resonate with school values, goals, and norms. This accord is echoed in international and Nordic literature and is considered critical in discussions of teacher attrition and retention (Kelchtermans, 2017). In light of these findings, where it becomes evident that fostering value consonance within a school strengthens belonging, one implication is that school leaders need to consider how to facilitate it in their school.

Finally, the findings highlight the connection between belonging and identity at work. Participants organically reflected on their identity when sharing and discussing their sense of belonging, a sentiment supported in the broader organizational literature by McClure and Brown (2008) and further explored by Filstad (2022). Implications based on these findings include how schools should consider the interplay between individual identity and collective value consonance. In shaping and sustaining such alignment, the reflective inquiries "Who am I?" and "Who do I want to be?" proposed by Filstad et al. (2019) is critical. Both teachers and leaders are thus encouraged to engage in this dialogue, contemplating the collective identity of "What kind of school are we?" and "What kind of school do we aim to be?" This collective orientation toward creating experiences of belonging and identity is vital, as a deep sense of belonging in an organization reflects a blending of organizational and personal identity (Belle et al., 2015).

The scale of this study was limited to teachers and leaders from two schools, and it could be extended to other school contexts and more significant numbers of participants. There is also a need for a range of methods to further investigate the connection between teachers' sense of belonging and student-teacher relationships.

One clear limitation of this study is that it portrays urban lower secondary school teachers as one unison group and does not consider how belonging can be more challenging for individual teachers. For example, struggling to belong is particularly evident in minority and other historically marginalized groups (Allen et al., 2021a). Studies such as that of Burner and Osler (2021), who share the perspectives of a minority teacher, demonstrate important distinctions that different individuals may experience concerning belonging. Furthermore, Filstad et al. (2019) highlight that the literature on belonging does not account for materiality, which is problematic. This is also the case in the current study, and future research should explore how materiality influences teachers' experiences of belonging.

Including multiple perspectives in the school environment will provide a greater understanding of how to

facilitate experiences of belonging in the school context. When exploring the connection between belonging and student–teacher relationships, future studies could develop a larger understanding by including both student and teacher perspectives, as exemplified by Jones and Bubb (2021). The voices of school leaders should also be further explored. A central question regards what leadership practices can enhance employees' and students' experience of belonging. A second is how school leaders experience their own sense of belonging at work, which would answer the call made by Earley (2020) to pay greater attention to individual leaders' well-being under the demanding conditions of educational leadership.

Conclusion

This study explored the research questions of what urban lower secondary school teachers experience as important for their sense of belonging at work and how their relationships with students influence these experiences. Although previous research has demonstrated the importance of experiencing belonging in the workplace and despite the essential role teachers play in fostering students' sense of belonging, teachers' own experiences have received limited attention in the existing literature. By engaging both teachers and leaders (with a teaching background), from two lower secondary schools, this study enriches the existing discourse with fresh insights into understanding teachers' sense of belonging at work in a culturally diverse urban school system. Significantly, this study makes a distinct contribution to the belonging literature by underlining the influential role that student–teacher relationships play in teachers' sense of belonging. The main findings also suggest that teachers need to feel included and supported in their teams, by leaders, and by the overall school collegium. Furthermore, when teachers experience harmony between their own sense of identity as teachers and when their individual contribution at work aligns with the values and goals of their schools, they are likely to report strong experiences of belonging at work. As the international focus on the importance of belonging in the context of schools is growing, and because curriculums in Nordic countries demand that schools work to develop students' sense of belonging, the voices of teachers and leaders responsible for developing schools where experiences of belonging can blossom needs to be heard.

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