Loneliness and Belonging in Canadian Schools: A Knowledge Synthesis Study

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Abstract

This article reports on a knowledge synthesis study of three questions around Canadian K-12 students' sense of loneliness and belonging: What are the lived experiences of Canadian students with loneliness and belonging? What factors contribute to students' sense of loneliness and belonging in Canadian school contexts? What school educational practices and policies foster a sense of belonging in students in Canada? Utilizing a scoping review approach, the study synthesizes published knowledge on these three questions from scholarly peer-reviewed publications and documents published by Canadian educational organizations, provincial governments, and school board associations.

Keywords: loneliness, belonging, well-being, students, K-12 schools, Canada

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Over the last twenty years, there has been an increasing interest in, and concern for, student well-being within the Canadian context (Cherkowski & Walker, 2018; Falkenberg, 2024) and around the world (White, 2011). This interest and concern are often focused on the declining mental health of students (Reupert, 2020), but it is also driven by an increasing interest in making student well-being (part of) the central purpose of school education (Brighouse, 2006). For many scholars, this interest is coupled with the additional concern for unequal provisions of opportunities and educational outcomes for students with different demographic characteristics to thrive in school (Krepski, 2024). This article focuses on one important aspect of this interest and concern, namely students' sense of loneliness and belonging.

The World Health Organization (WHO) has recognized that "social isolation and loneliness are important, yet neglected, social determinants for people of all ages" and that "social isolation and loneliness are widespread, with an estimated 1 in 4 older people experiencing social isolation and between 5 and 15 percent of adolescents experiencing loneliness" (World Health Organization, n.d.). Despite an ever-increasing number of opportunities for social connections (e.g., through digitalization and urbanization), citizens in countries of the Global North are more and more "lonely in a social world" (Cacioppo & Patrick, 2008). The situation is no different in Canada, where a recent population survey by Statistics Canada (2021) found that "13% of people aged 15 and older reported always or often feeling lonely" (p. 1). The same survey also showed that almost half of those who said they felt always or often lonely also reported fair or poor mental health (Statistics Canada, 2021). The level of loneliness and lack of belonging, however, is not equally distributed across different Canadian demographic populations: almost 18% of people who identified as Indigenous, over 20% of persons with disabilities, and almost 32% of LGBTQ2+ people have reported that they always or often feel lonely (Statistics Canada, n.d.), compared to the already mentioned 13% average for Canadians 15 years of age and up.

Loneliness is also a serious problem for the approximately 5.5 million school-aged children in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2018). One in four Canadian teenagers say they "often feel lonely" (UNICEF Canada, 2019, p. 23; see also Statistics Canada, 2021), which is often associated with negative peer relations and social anxiety (Coplan et al., 2013; Ooi et al., 2018). For young Canadians as well, a sense of loneliness is not equally distributed across different subgroups. Favotto et al. (2019), for instance, found in their study that while about 25% of a representative sample of 11–15-year-old Canadians said they were lonely, this sense of loneliness was unequally distributed across gender: 30% of girls versus 19% of boys. Also, Patte et al. (2021) found an unequal distribution across race among 60,000 Canadian high school students surveyed on their sense of school connectedness, with the quality of their social relationships reported as being of great importance to them. In another study, with grade four students, researchers found that "the quality of children's social relationships with peers and adults were among the most commonly mentioned criteria considered when rating their LS [life satisfaction]" (Emerson et al., 2018, p. 2604).

Over the length of a year, children spend about a quarter of their awake time in school, and schools are institutions whose purpose is built on social interactions and social connections among students and among students and adults. As such, schools provide opportunities for developing and experiencing a sense of belonging, but also for experiencing loneliness. In addition, as institutions with an educational mandate, schools provide a place of, and opportunity for, addressing children's sense of loneliness and for developing their sense of belonging, knowing

that a sense of belonging in childhood makes it more likely that a child will make meaningful social connections and develop a sense of belonging in adulthood (Allen & Kern, 2017). The question for us, however, is what is known from research about Canadian K-12 students' loneliness and their sense of belonging and about schools' and school divisions' policies and practices in addressing student loneliness and fostering students' sense of belonging? This is the focus of the knowledge synthesis study we report on in this article. Before we introduce the study, however, we will share a few words on the concepts of loneliness and belonging.

Loneliness is "a sad or aching sense of isolation; that is, of being alone, cut off, or distanced from others. This is associated with a felt deprivation of, or longing for, association, contact, or closeness" (Parkhurst & Hopmeyer, 1999, p. 58). Loneliness differs from social isolation in that one can feel lonely without being socially isolated, and one can be socially isolated without feeling lonely. Solitude, for instance, is for some people sometimes a desired and chosen form of social isolation (Svendsen, 2017). Belonging, in turn, is a sense of satisfaction of "a pervasive drive to form and maintain at least a minimum quantity of lasting, positive, and significant interpersonal relationships" (Baumeister & Leary, 1995, p. 497). Thus, belonging is more than the absence of loneliness. Belonging is the sense of having and being able to maintain interpersonal relationships of significant qualities. Some psychological theories that consider human needs as motivational drives for human action (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Ryan & Deci, 2017) consider a sense of belonging to be a fundamental human need. While conceptually related, both loneliness and belonging have generally been researched independently.

Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

The purpose of the knowledge synthesis study that this article reports on was to describe the current state of knowledge on loneliness and belonging of students in Canadian K-12 schools and on existing policies and practices which relate to these concepts. To address this purpose, the study asked the following three research questions:

(1) What is the current knowledge about the lived experiences of Canadian students with loneliness and belonging in school contexts?

(2) What is the current knowledge about factors that contribute to students' sense of loneliness and belonging in Canadian school contexts?

(3) What is the current knowledge about school educational practices and policies that foster a sense of belonging in students in Canada?

Methodology

Different methods are available for knowledge synthesis studies (Amog et al., 2020; Straus et al., 2016). One of these methods is the scoping literature review (Arksey & O-Mailley, 2005; Pham et al., 2014; Rumrill et al., 2010), which is the method we used for our knowledge synthesis study since we were interested in "focus[ing] on breadth of coverage of the literature conducted on [our] topic rather than depth of coverage" (Rumrill et al., 2010, p. 401) and in identifying broad themes and patterns in research relevant to the identified research questions). In our scoping literature review, we proceeded with the five steps suggested by Arsky and O'Mailley (2005): 1. Identifying the research questions (previous section); 2. Identifying the relevant studies (this section); 3. Study selection (this section); 4. Charting the data (next section); 5. Collating, summarizing, and reporting the results (next section).

In our study, we faced two methodological challenges concerning the selection and inclusion of relevant literature. First, we were aware that the concepts we planned to inquire into have not always been referred to using the terms we are employing, namely *loneliness* and *belonging*. Thus, our first challenge was to identify a range of relevant search terms. To address this challenge, we conducted an initial literature search with both national and international scope to identify how the terms *loneliness* and *belonging* (in the context of schooling) were referred to in the broader literature. This initial search resulted in 31 peer-reviewed articles and books, of which 14 focused on *loneliness* and 17 on *belonging*. This resulted in our identifying relevant search terms for the literature search for the study (for those search terms, see Table 1 in the Appendix).

The second methodological challenge concerning the selection and inclusion of relevant literature concerned the type of document sources. All three knowledge synthesis questions are questions about the state of affairs in Canadian school systems in terms of students' actual experiences, policies in place, and practices used in schools and school divisions. Publications by educational organizations, provincial governments, and school boards are now much more accessible through the availability of online document posting. However, we faced the question of whether to include such documents, even if they were deemed relevant to the three knowledge synthesis questions of the study, because they were not peer-reviewed scholarly publications. In fact, we decided to include them, thus using the following three types of document sources for the knowledge synthesis: scholarly peer-reviewed publications, documents published by educational organizations (by province and territories), and documents published by provincial governments and school board associations. Table 1 in the Appendix outlines the data sources/databases and search terms we used for each of these three types of document sources.

The seven inclusion criteria we used for this search were as follows: (1) referencing at least one of the identified search terms; (2) being about a Canadian context; (3) being focused on K-12 school education; (4) being published in or after 2010; (5) in case of organization and government documents, being published by the organization/government itself, thus excluding press releases or government/organization-external resources; (6) available as a PDF, thus excluding html-exclusive information; and (7) published in English. Using these criteria, we identified 226 documents of potential relevance to our knowledge synthesis study. A second review of these documents for their relevance excluded 23 documents, because, for instance, they were focused solely on fostering a sense of belonging to Canada or on feeling lonely in life more generally. Following this review for relevance, we ended up including 203 published documents in our knowledge synthesis study. (For an overview of how these 203 documents were distributed across the three document sources, across the two foci of loneliness and belonging, and in terms of their consideration of sectionalities relevant to the study, see Tables 2-4 in the Appendix.)

Following Cooper (2017) in our data analysis and integration of our findings, we first clustered the 203 documents into two groups, namely those that focused on loneliness and those that focused on belonging (see Table 2; very few documents addressed both foci). Within each group, we identified the relevance of the respective documents for each of the three knowledge synthesis questions, and this is how we organized our findings in this paper.

Findings

The findings section is divided into three subsections, each presenting the findings for one of the three research questions of the study.

Students' Lived Experiences with Loneliness and Belonging

In the considered publications, we identified four thematic clusters of findings concerning our first question on students' lived experiences with loneliness and belonging: a pervasive and increasing sense of loneliness among students; an impact of loneliness on students' health and well-being; age-related and developmental aspects of loneliness; a sectional-based difference in experience of loneliness and belonging.

Loneliness among Students: Pervasive and Increasing

The reviewed research suggested the following: *Loneliness is widespread and increasing among Canadian adolescent students*. One extensive survey undertaken in 2018 suggested that about a third of Canadian adolescents 15-16 years of age feel lonely at school and that the percentage of students who self-declare a high level of loneliness at school has been increasing steadily over the years from 13% in 2000 to 35% in 2018, an increase of over 160% (Twenge et al., 2021). Using data from 2013-14, Favotto et al. (2019) found in their study that 25% of a representational sample of 11-15-year-old Canadians said that they were lonely.

Canadian students experience loneliness not just in school, but also at home after school, when they are either home alone or with only a sibling or siblings. In an online study, 36% of adolescents (10-17-year-olds) said that they "felt lonely and would rather be with people" (Ruiz-Casares, 2012, p. 139). However, Hipson et al.'s (2021) study suggested that the amount of time Canadian adolescents (15-16 years old) experience time alone in itself is not linearly linked to the level of experiencing loneliness. Loneliness and the amount of time being alone (spending time alone) are linked through a curvilinear association, "suggesting that time alone is only negatively associated with positive affect among adolescents who spend an extreme amount of time alone" (Hipson et al., 2021). Furthermore, Hipson et al. (2021) found that the feeling of loneliness when being alone was associated with certain types of activities during the alone time but not with others. The feeling of loneliness was greater among those engaged in what the authors labelled "thinking", like daydreaming, planning, and negative thinking, than among those engaged in passive media use, like watching TV or browsing the internet, or those actively engaged in some form of activity on their own, like listening to music or engaging in a hobby.

Impact of Loneliness on Students' Health and Well-Being

The reviewed research suggested the following: *Loneliness and a lack of a sense of belonging are associated with problems in students' health, well-being, and success in school*. A number of studies found that a lack of a sense of belonging among Canadian high school students contributed to substance use, bullying/victimization, and psychiatric symptoms, such as depression and anxiety (Coyne-Foresi & Nowicki, 2021; Katapally et al., 2018; Williams et al., 2020; Zuckermann et al., 2020). An impact of loneliness on school success was found for students as early as grade 1; for instance, Arbeau et al. (2010) found in their study that loneliness among grade 1 students was significantly correlated with school avoidance.

Age-Related and Developmental Aspects of Loneliness

The reviewed research suggested the following: *There is an age-related and developmental aspect to students' understanding of and experience with loneliness and with being alone*. Older adolescents understand "being alone" more as loneliness than younger adolescents do, who understand "being alone" more as physical separation from others (Borg & Willoughby, 2022). It

was found that some students have an affinity for aloneness without being socially anxious; this affinity seems to increase from late childhood to early adolescence (Daly & Willoughby, 2020).

Sectional-Based Difference in Experience of Loneliness and Belonging

The reviewed research suggested the following: *Loneliness and belonging are differently experienced by students across sectionalities*. The research considered in this knowledge synthesis suggests that, in general, significantly more adolescents who identified as female experienced loneliness compared to those who identified as male (Favotto et al., 2019; Hipson et al., 2021). Similarly, the number of those who experienced loneliness at home after school was higher among those adolescents who identified as female (Ruiz-Casares, 2012). Gender also seems to play a role in the understanding of "being alone" as it related to loneliness: Adolescents who identify as female understood "being alone" more as loneliness than do adolescents who identified as male, who understand "being alone" more as physical separation from others (Borg & Willoughby, 2022). Oliver et al. (2018) found in their study with adolescent students that "by the end of elementary school, boys and girls display similar, but also distinct patterns of adjustment" (p. 38); for instance, "in our sample, boys displaying internalizing behaviors [e.g., anxious and depressive thoughts] were more likely to also have externalizing and social problems with peers and teachers. This tendency was not observed in girls" (p. 38).

Canadian schools have very diverse student populations, but not everyone feels welcome in their school (CASSA, 2016a, 2021b; MASS, 2013a; Whitley & Hollweck, 2020). While some jurisdictions have noticed an improvement in the sense of belonging among students from marginalized and discriminated-against groups (Korotkov, 2021), in general, our review of research literature suggests that these students, especially LGBTQ2S+, Indigenous, Black students, and students with disabilities continue to be the most common targets of (cyber)bullying, segregation, discrimination, and stigma (Commission on Inclusive Education, 2018; Government of New Brunswick, 2014, 2016b; MASS, 2012; Shewchuk & Cooper, 2018; Whitley & Hollweck, 2020). While recess has been suggested as a great opportunity for (early years) students to foster positive relationships and thus their sense of belonging (McNamara, 2021; McNamara et al., 2015), many students, especially students with disabilities and LGBTQ2S+ students, suffered bullying and exclusion during this time (McNamara, 2021; McNamara et al., 2015).

Racialized students also have different experiences with belonging in schools. In a survey of about 60,000 Canadian high school students on their sense of school connectedness, "Asian and White students demonstrated the highest rates of connectedness, Black and 'other' students had the lowest scores, and the school connectedness scores of students identifying as Latin American/Hispanic fell in the middle" (Patte et al., 2021, p. 70). In their study involving Latinx youth, Parada et al. (2021) found that the youth felt "disconnected or excluded from their educational environments" (p. 7). They felt "that their Latinx identity was often misunderstood or completely ignored by educators and peers", and that this "lack of understanding contributed to Latinx youth's feelings of exclusion" (p. 7). Racially diverse students did not feel safe in school given the high rates of harassment and assault they experience (Gallagher et al., 2021). As a consequence, many embrace "positive" stereotypes attributed to them (e.g., athleticism) so as to try to feel included (Jean-Paul, 2013). Generally, according to Jean-Paul (2013), schools do not give enough attention to the racial experiences of students. Racism and lack of respect hinder Indigenous students' sense of belonging in schools (Directions Evidence and Policy Research Group, 2016). In addition, there is a high rate of Indigenous high school students dropping out of

and disengaging from school (Davison & Hawe, 2012; MacIver, 2012). Contributing to this situation is the low expectation held by educators of Indigenous students (Preston et al., 2017).

Refugee and newcomer students are particularly vulnerable to experiencing isolation and increased mental health issues due to their complex needs (Arar, 2020; Hadfield et al., 2017; Kurdi & Archambault, 2020; Marshall et al., 2016; Manitoba Education, 2012). Mbabaali (2012), for instance, observed that war-affected refugee students "found themselves faced with isolation, loneliness, acculturation stress, identity crisis, and discrimination after immigrating to Canada" (p. 96). Although refugee and newcomer students strived to make friends, they suffered bullying, marginalization, and racism by peers (Buccitelli & Denov, 2019; Burton & Van Viegen, 2021; Guo et al., 2021; Hamm et al., 2021; Miled, 2020; Poteet & Simmons, 2014). Lacking a sense of belonging further hindered their academic achievement (Manitoba Education, 2012). The results of Nakhaie's (2022) study involving 14 to 24-year-old refugee students in schools showed that "experiences of discrimination and psychological isolation are significant predictors of truancy" (p. 1515).

Students identifying as LBGTQ2+ experienced extremely high rates of bullying, harassment, rejection, and discrimination (Blaikie, 2020; Burke et al., 2018; ETFO, 2022; Grace, 2017; Herriot et al., 2018; Taylor et al., 2015, 2016a) and a perceived lack of teacher/staff support (Grace, 2017). Gender binary washrooms were also reported as a particular source of distress and violence to students' sense of belonging (Herriot et al., 2018). The rate of suicidal ideation among LGBTQ2S+ students is also disproportionally higher (Burk et al., 2018), and they also experience poorer academic achievement (Alberta Education, 2016b; Manitoba Education and Training, 2017b; Taylor & Peter, 2011).

According to CASSA (2017a), students with disabilities have unique needs. They experience inequities and marginalization in schools, for instance, because of assumptions about what they cannot do (Specht, 2013) and expectations linked to specific social norms (Lodewyk, 2020; McNamara et al., 2018). In mainstream schools, students with disabilities encounter negative peer relationships (e.g., bullying) and a lack of positive ones (Beristain & Wiener, 2020). For instance, while recess is for many students an opportunity to connect with other students and build a sense of belonging, in a study by McNamara et al. (2018), children (grades 4-8) with disabilities "described feelings of isolation. For example, a girl in grade four states what she doesn't like about recess is 'there's no one to play with'" (p. 640). The responses by students with disabilities to open-ended questions in that study "highlight the lack of friendships and loneliness and suggest that isolation and victimization during recess are common experiences for them" (p. 641). More generally, "chronic peer rejection, loneliness, and conflictual relationships with friends in childhood and early adolescence" (p. 280) was one major theme in Beristain and Wiener's (2020) study on the experiences of children with ADD/ADHD. However, "although many participants reported becoming resigned to being friendless in adolescence …, the transition to high school where they could find peers who were similar to them helped them develop close friendships" (p. 280).

Factors Contributing to Students' Sense of Loneliness and Belonging

In this section, we present findings related to our second question, and identify some common factors that, according to the reviewed literature, are contributing to students' sense of loneliness and belonging. We have grouped these factors under the following four headers: structural factors, relationship factors, personality and preferential factors, and contingent factors.

Structural Factors

We identified four structural factors that the analyzed research suggested are contributing to students' sense of loneliness and belonging. First, *racism, bullying, and other forms of victimization* were linked to students' sense of loneliness and to undermining their efforts to develop a sense of belonging (see also the section above on "Sectional-Based Difference in Experience of Loneliness and Belonging"). In a study involving adolescent Latinx students, Parada et al. (2021) report:

> Latinx students often navigate discrimination experiences in isolation. Youth were hesitant to label their experiences as discrimination and racism, despite noting that often, these encounters were ethnically motivated" and that these "feelings of disconnect and instances of discrimination often led youth to feel as if they did not belong anywhere. (p. 11)

Gallagher et al. (2021) found that racially diverse students did not feel safe in school given the high rates of harassment and assault they experience. Social isolation (e.g., through peer rejection) was identified in provincial government documents as a form of social bullying (Government of Saskatchewan, 2013, p. 11) and racism in schools (Directions Evidence and Policy Research Group, 2016, p. 6) as a form of victimization that Beristain and Wiener (2020) and McNamara et al. (2018) report on for Canadian students with disabilities.

A second contributing structural factor to students' low sense of belonging was found to be *not seeing themselves represented in the school (composition and ethos) and in the curriculum*. In turn, students had a greater sense of belonging when they saw themselves represented in the curriculum and in the school at large (Government of New Brunswick, 2016a; Government of Ontario, 2013b, 2013c; Government of Saskatchewan, 2019). Seeing oneself represented in the school and the curriculum was particularly important for racialized students (Parada et al., 2021). Seeing oneself represented in the school is linked to the findings that parental and community involvement with the school contributed to students' sense of belonging (Emerson et al., 2018; Kim et al., 2021; Vargas-Madriz & Konishi, 2021), which, again, is particularly relevant for marginalized and racialized students (Parada et al., 2021). Not seeing oneself represented in school and the curriculum has also been linked to competing cultural identities, particularly for 1.5 to second-generation students with immigrant backgrounds: "Both 1.5 and second-generation youth tended to identify the feeling as if they were positioned between two cultures. … Unable to fully embrace either culture, youth described feelings of 'hybridity' and uncertainty surrounding their Latinx and Canadian identities" (Parada et al., 2021, p. 11).

The third structural factor, *acceptance, inclusion, and accommodation of differences* (e.g., racial, cultural, religious, gender differences), was important to students' sense of belonging (CASSA, 2017a; Government of New Brunswick, 2014, 2016a, 2016b; MASS, 2012), and particularly pivotal for marginalized students (Government of Alberta, 2021b; Government of Saskatchewan, 2013, 2021). The use of inclusionary language was also deemed very important to them (Shewchuk & Cooper, 2018). For students' sense of belonging, an inclusive school climate and school environment that provided students with a sense of safety was crucial for them to authentically participate in school life (Cassidy, 2019; Government of Saskatchewan, 2019), which included *cultural* safety (Government of Alberta, 2021b). For instance, students' religious beliefs and practices could serve as protective factors and could promote their sense of belonging in school (Azagba et al., 2014). Another aspect of this factor that contributed to students' sense of belonging

in schools was a sense of being treated equitably and fairly (CASSA, 2021b; Katapally et al., 2018; Zuckermann et al., 2020).

Overall, a sense of community and being involved in the school was important for students' sense of belonging (Katapally et al., 2018; Montt & Borgonovi, 2017). However, in some research, scholars warned that a sense of belonging (to a particular school sub-community) might cover up the reproduction of structural inequalities, for instance, when specialized programs like an arts-focused program lead to factual streaming by socio-economic status and a homogeneous grouping that provided a sense of belonging (Gaztambide-Fernández & Parekh, 2017).

Finally, the fourth of the structural factors that contribute to students' sense of loneliness and belonging is *providing students with voice and agency*, i.e., for students to be heard and to have a say in their education and in school life, which has been identified as contributing to students' sense of belonging (Emerson et al., 2018; Government of Ontario, 2013b; Kim et al., 2021; MASS, 2013a; Saskatchewan School Boards Association, 2012; Vargas-Madriz & Konishi, 2021). According to Cassidy (2019), students expressed a clear sense of what a school that fosters belonging looks like: "The analysis of 410 student-created essays and posters suggested five attributes that are present when individuals feel they belong: Support for Others, Respect and Care, Dialogue, Healthy Conflict, and Safety" (p. 154).

Relationship Factors

In this section, we report on three relationship-linked factors that the research literature suggested impact students' sense of loneliness and belonging in school. First, *peer relationships* characterized by mutual support, respect, trust, care, dialogue, healthy conflict, and safety contributed to students' sense of belonging (Arbeau et al., 2010; Government of New Brunswick, 2016b; MASS, 2020; Oberle et al., 2011). Different studies found that structurally based circumstantial opportunities were a factor for some, especially marginalized, students in being able to form positive peer relationships. For instance, some studies found recess and extra-curricular activities to be especially helpful for students to develop positive relationships with peers (Bouchard & Berg, 2017; McNamara, 2021; McNamara et al., 2015). In Beristain and Wiener's (2020) study involving 16-18-year-old students living with ADD/ADHD, participants reported "chronic peer rejection, loneliness, and conflictual relationships with friends in childhood and early adolescence …", while on the other hand, "the transition to high school where they could find peers who were similar to them helped them develop close friendships" (p. 280).

Second, *teacher-student relationships* that were caring, meaningful, and based on trust, acceptance, and interdependence were one of the central factors contributing to students' sense of belonging (Bouchard & Berg, 2017; CASSA, 2017a, 2020a; Government of Alberta, 2021b; Government of New Brunswick, 2016b; Government of Saskatchewan, 2019, 2021; MASS, 2012, 2020; Vaillancourt et al., 2021). Some research found that a positive teacher-student relationship was a factor in students' sense of belonging, and this research identified certain teaching practices that resulted in students' learning experiences, which in turn contributed to the quality of the student-teacher relationship. A few of these identified practices were teachers emphasizing students' strengths (Guay et al., 2019); teachers providing for student voice and for student choice (Emerson et al., 2018); teachers using authoritative disciplinary practices to protect youth involved in bullying at school (Kim et al., 2021); and teachers using collaborative learning activities (Government of Alberta, 2021b; Government of Ontario, 2013b; Government of Saskatchewan, 2019).

The third and final relationship-linked factor was *supportive family-school relationships,* which was identified as a factor contributing to students' sense of belonging (British Columbia Education, 2012; MASS, 2010b, 2013a; MacIver, 2012; Preston et al., 2017). This factor was found to be particularly relevant for racialized students. For instance, in Preston et al.'s (2017) study, principals of Canadian schools with Indigenous populations between 5 and 98% "indicated that fostering positive experiences for Aboriginal students was about prioritizing relationships with students, family and communities" (p. 336). MacIver's (2012) study identified the importance of family and community relationships for the provision of "learning in a culturally affirming environment" (p. 160).

Personality and Preferential Factors

In reviewing the considered literature, we also identified two factors that impacted students' sense of loneliness and belonging that we cluster here under the label "personality and preferential factors" to indicate that those are factors "located" in the bodily-cognitive-affective structures of the students themselves rather than social structures. This categorization is not to prejudge the question of whether and how the former is influenced by the later, but it is rather a recognition that the student as a person plays a much greater role in any approach to address these factors than they would in addressing the social structures that were the focus of the factors in the preceding section.

First, *shyness and preference for solitude* were identified as risk factors. The findings of Morneau-Vaillancourt et al.'s (2021b) study involving 6, 7, and 10-year-old children suggested "that preference for solitude, rather than social wariness, is a risk factor for peer difficulties [in terms of peer victimization and peer rejection]. They underscore the relevance of distinguishing these dimensions of social withdrawal [i.e., preference for solitude and social wariness]" (p. 410). According to Daly and Willoughby (2020), some students have an affinity for aloneness without being socially anxious; these students "reported that they enjoyed being alone" (p. 2013). This affinity for aloneness in these students seems to increase from late childhood to early adolescence (Daly & Willoughby, 2020). The authors suggested "that time spent alone may become more enjoyable and important in early adolescence" and "time spent alone may provide adolescents with the opportunity to pursue their own interests (e.g., reading books, playing instruments or video games; …)" (p. 2013).

In their studies with preschoolers and first graders, Coplan and collaborators (Coplan et al., 2012, 2013, 2014; Coplan & Weeks, 2010) found shyness to be a risk factor for loneliness. Coplan et al. (2014) found in preschool and grade 1 students a significant association between shyness and preference for solitary play. Also, the researchers provided evidence for the need to conceptually distinguish between shyness and what they called "unsociable" children. Shy children reported the most loneliness and least school liking, and they were rated by parents and teachers as having the highest levels of internalizing difficulties and peer problems. In contrast, unsociable children did not differ from comparison children on any of the indices of socioemotional functioning (Coplan et al., 2013). While loneliness was not significantly correlated with shyness in the overall sample in Arbeau et al.'s (2010) study involving Canadian grade 1 students, there was a gender difference:

> Shyness in boys (but not girls) in grade 1 was related to feelings of loneliness … Previous research has also found that shy boys tend to have more difficulties than shy girls … Indeed, gender differences in the implications of shyness have been found to persist into adulthood. (p. 263)

Second, *the type of activity while alone* seemed to be a factor in students' sense of loneliness. Among adolescents, the feeling of loneliness was found in one study to be associated with engagement in certain types of activities compared to other type of activities. The feeling of loneliness was greater when adolescents were engaged in "thinking" activities like daydreaming, planning, and negative thinking than when engaged in activities such as passive media use (e.g., listening to music) or a hobby (Hipson et al., 2021).

Contingent Factors

The fourth and final group of factors found in responding to the second research question on what contributes to students' sense of loneliness and belonging consisted of what we call *contingent factors*. We identified one such contingent factor from the literature: *compounded transition experiences*. Dupere et al.'s (2015) study involving elementary school children found that the contingency of family (e.g., separation) and school transition were highly correlated with higher levels of social isolation/withdrawal, while experiencing only one of the two was not.

School Educational Policies and Practices that Foster Students' Sense of Belonging

To respond to our third research question, we reviewed documents that provided evidence for policies and practices intended to foster students' sense of belonging and that were in place at the provincial or divisional level. The evidence was generally, but not exclusively, provided by provincial, divisional, and organizational publications. We have grouped the findings into five thematic clusters: creating supportive and inclusive environments, building supportive relationships, expanding the curriculum, utilizing certain types of pedagogies, and monitoring through data collection.

Creating Supportive and Inclusive Environments

School educational policies (Alberta Education, 2012a, 2017; Government of Nova Scotia, 2019; Manitoba Education and Training, 2017a; Whitley & Hollweck, 2020) and practices (CASSA, 2017a, 2020a; Commission on Inclusive Education, 2018; Government of Alberta, 2021b; Government of New Brunswick, 2013, 2016b; MASS, 2012, 2014; Porter & AuCoin, 2012) were in place to create a school and classroom environment which would make students feel welcome, safe, and included. Practices were reported to be in place to promote spaces and moments in which students could interact in ways that helped reduce social isolation (Commission on Inclusive Education, 2018; Government of New Brunswick, 2013; Social Planning Council of Winnipeg, 2016). For instance, Mbaballi (2012) reported that "lunch clubs for newcomers [to Manitoba] where they ate together with their Canadian born peers in a small group with teacher supervision, was regarded [by war-affected refugee youth] as genuine care by their teachers" (p. 93) and the youth "shared that having an organized lunch with a few peers during the first few months of school reduced their feeling of loneliness" (p. 94; see also Faubert & Tucker, 2019).

Four main approaches to creating supportive and inclusive environments were reported on in the documents reviewed. One approach was the use of a multitiered system of support based on a collaborative team approach that included all school staff, families, and community members. This type of support system was documented at the policy level (Alberta Education, 2012a; Government of Nova Scotia, 2019; Manitoba Education and Training, 2017a) and at the practice level (CASSA, 2017a, 2018a; Government of New Brunswick, 2016b; MASS, 2012; Porter & AuCoin, 2012; Saskatchewan School Boards Association, 2014a). A second approach consisted of anti-violence and anti-bullying policies (Alberta Education, 2012a) and practices (Government of New Brunswick, 2013, 2014, 2016b; Nova Scotia Teachers' Union, 2014; Social Planning

Council of Winnipeg, 2016). The third approach to creating supportive and inclusive environments consisted of equity policies (Shewchuk & Cooper, 2018) and practices (CASSA, 2015; Social Planning Council of Winnipeg, 2016). Some examples of the latter included having an Elder-in-residence (Government of Alberta, 2021b; Saskatchewan School Boards Association, 2014a) and the provision of alternative schools/schooling structures, such as an off-campus school/outreach experience where a smaller setting allowed teachers to better connect with students (CASSA, 2010a) and to provide creativity-focused programs (Manitoba Teachers' Society, 2019a). Unfortunately, some of the reviewed publications that studied equity policies and practices in Canadian schools suggested that the implementation of these policies and practices reified oppression. For instance, implementation processes served to reproduce systemic inequalities by favoring the enrolment of already advantaged students (Gaztambide-Fernández & Parekh, 2017), or they were not responsive to students' uniqueness within their specific contexts (CASSA, 2015; Whitley & Hollweck, 2020). An example of the latter was what could be considered a reinforced and reinforcing "downward spiral" as the case when a student's behavior is perceived as problematic, leading to the student being suspended, which in turn serves to further isolate the student, and this then impinges on their academic achievement and sense of belonging (Government of Saskatchewan, 2013, 2021; Whitley & Hollweck, 2020).

The fourth approach to creating supportive and inclusive environments consisted of policies (Alberta Education, 2017; Government of Nova Scotia, 2019) and practices (Government of New Brunswick, 2014) linked to the promotion of social justice and equity and an appreciation of diversity; practices linked to restorative justice approaches (CASSA, 2013; MASS, 2012; Nova Scotia Teachers' Union, 2018); and practices linked to the inclusion of Indigenous Elders (Elders-in-residence) (Government of Alberta, 2021b; Saskatchewan School Boards Association, 2014a).

Building Supportive Relationships

The considered publications suggested that certain school educational practices were seen to develop students' sense of belonging by focusing on building different types of supportive relationships for students with others. This was the case for practices that foster healthy teacher-student relationships, for example by offering regular meeting opportunities for students, by teachers spending quality time with each student, and by being responsive during non-contact hours (MASS, 2012; Social Planning Council of Winnipeg, 2016).

Other practices in place focused on building supportive relationships among students. The most often mentioned practice in this category was the use of peer-mentoring (CASSA, 2010b; Coyne-Foresi, 2015; Coyne-Foresi & Nowicki, 2021; Government of Alberta, 2021b; Saskatchewan School Boards Association, 2014a). Other practices included assigning "buddies" (Manitoba Education, 2010) and adopting "family" groupings through multi-age or multi-level structures (Manitoba Education, 2010). It was suggested that the practice of welcoming new students to a school (MASS, 2012) could support the building of supportive student-to-student as well as student-to-teacher relationships.

Finally, a third type of practice for building relationships which support students' sense of belonging was the building of relationships with students' families (NWT Teachers' Association, 2019) and students' socio-cultural communities (Emerson et al., 2018; Kim et al., 2021).

Expanding the Curriculum

The considered publications documented policies and practices that expanded the prescriptive and subject-based curricula in ways that supported students' sense of belonging. We identified policies

(Government of Nova Scotia, 2019) and practices (CASSA, 2017a; Government of New Brunswick, 2014) that speak to the incorporation of self-regulation initiatives and social-emotional learning, as well as practices that include extra-curricular activities to support students' sense of belonging (Bouchard & Berg, 2017; CASSA, 2010b; Wray et al., 2020).

Utilizing Certain Types of Pedagogies

The documents we considered for this knowledge synthesis also suggested that particular pedagogical practices have been utilized in Canadian schools and classrooms to purposefully help students develop and sustain a sense of belonging:

- providing for students' voices and giving students choice, for instance through student forums (Government of New Brunswick, 2013; MASS, 2020; Saskatchewan School Boards Association, 2012; Social Planning Council of Winnipeg, 2016);
- engaging students directly and explicitly in the question of their sense of belonging, for example, by providing opportunities for students to say what "belonging" means for them (OSSTF, 2011) and how they perceive their quality of life and sense of belonging (Emerson et al., 2018);
- using inclusive pedagogies, such as differentiated instruction, individualized, holistic, strength-based approaches that focus on each student's potential (Government of New Brunswick, 2013; MASS, 2014; Njie et al., 2018; Porter & AuCoin, 2012);
- using practices that build relationships, such as beginning and wrapping up the week with classroom circles (Government of Alberta, 2021b), the teacher taking extra time to help those who are struggling while motivating those who need motivating (Nova Scotia Teachers' Union, 2016b), getting to know students' interests, highlighting their strengths, giving them opportunities to contribute, and integrating students' interests and stories into classroom teachings (NWT Teachers' Association, 2019, 2021);
- connecting students with others and the school more broadly by, for example, displaying students' work in the school (Social Planning Council of Winnipeg, 2016); and
- using project-based, service and cooperative learning to create authentic opportunities for students to learn about positive interdependence and develop positive relationships (Government of New Brunswick, 2013).

Monitoring through Data Collection

Finally, we found the use of one meta-practice reported in the reviewed documents that had the intent of supporting students to develop and maintain a sense of belonging in school: monitoring students' sense of belonging by mapping classroom relationships (Government of Alberta, 2021b). One such mapping activity described consists of the teacher asking students to confidentially "create a web, with their name in the centre, and then list three to five students in the classroom with whom they would like to work on a specific learning activity" (Government of Alberta, 2021b, p. 18). These mapping data can then be analyzed by the teacher to create a sociogram for the class, which would identify "isolated individuals who were not chosen by their peers" as well as specific groups of students who "were less likely to be connected to a wide range of individuals" (p. 18). A regular mapping of such classroom relationships allows the teacher to monitor the evolution of student relationships.

Discussion

In this section, we discuss the findings on current knowledge on loneliness and belonging of Canadian students in terms of the three knowledge synthesis questions that guided our study. Before we move into discussing the questions, however, we note that there truly is a productive and ongoing line of research and knowledge generation when it comes to research on students' sense of loneliness and belonging in Canadian K-12 schools. We further note that for the 203 documents we considered, the focus on belonging outnumbered the focus on loneliness about 4:1 (see Table 2). Table 2 also illustrates that while this ratio is less when considering only the scholarly peer-reviewed publications (about 2.5:1), it is higher (about 20:1) for documents published by provincial governments and school board associations, and even *much* higher (about 30:1) for documents published by educational organizations. That the ratio is so much higher for documents published by educational organizations might reflect a principle that we see often enacted – especially at the school and school divisional level, from which educational organizations take their membership – namely, the principle of focusing on students' strengths (sense of belonging) rather than on deficits (sense of loneliness). There is, however, a shortcoming associated with this approach in the context of a concern for student loneliness and belonging: loneliness is domain specific and, as such, is not absent in the presence of a sense of belonging (Enav et al., 2015). For instance, while a student with a disability might feel a sense of belonging in a classroom –due to, for instance, integrative practices used by the teacher – the same student might feel lonely when outside of the classroom, for example when on the playground during recess (McNamara et al., 2015).

Turning to the research synthesis questions that guided the study reported on in this article, the *first question* asked about the lived experience of Canadian students with loneliness and belonging in school context and whether those experiences are different for racialized or other marginalized students and for students with different demographic characteristics. The published documents we considered suggest that loneliness among Canadian students is widespread, increasing, and negatively impacting students' health and well-being. The Canadian public and the school systems supporting it need to understand and address loneliness among students as a serious threat to the very mandate of public schooling.

Another finding of our study with regard to students' lived experiences with loneliness and belonging is that students belonging to discriminated-against populations (e.g., students with disabilities and racialized students) experience higher levels of bullying, segregation and discrimination, which are experiences linked to increased sense of loneliness.

For the *second question,* we inquired into the current knowledge about factors that contribute to students' sense of loneliness and belonging in Canadian school contexts. For this question, we build on the justice issue raised in connection with the first question findings; that is, the structural factors at play that particularly disadvantage the groups of students identified above. The considered research documents demonstrated how belonging to an already disadvantaged (minoritized) stratification of students (e.g., racialized students, students with disabilities) makes students particularly vulnerable to loneliness. On the other hand, several documents, especially (although not exclusively) documents from educational organizations, provincial governments, and school boards reported on policies and practices in provinces, school divisions, and schools (see Tables 3 and 4) that are directed specifically at providing students from these disadvantaged stratified groups a sense of belonging. We take this finding as a positive sign of concern by researchers, educational organizations, provincial governments, and school board associations for the belonging of students, *particularly* those from disadvantaged stratified groups. Nevertheless,

policies and practices for providing students from disadvantaged stratified groups with a sense of belonging in schools need to result in these students *actually developing* such a sense of belonging.

For students to develop a sense of belonging, the Canadian public, and the school systems supporting it, must acknowledge and address the identified systemic and structural barriers within the school system that hinder these groups of students from developing a sense of belonging. Furthermore, our study's findings also suggest that many of these barriers are derivatives of the structural state of affairs of Canadian society at large, such as structural poverty (Silver, 2014), structural racism (Este et al., 2018), and the stratification of Canadian society at large (Olsen, 2011). These society-wide structural barriers need to be part of the understanding and concern for addressing the identified factors. But it is here where school education has the potential to impact social structures at large, through its impact on students, who are future structural decision makers, and through its impact on attitudes and expectations of Canadian society at large.

For the *third question*, we focused on the current knowledge about school educational practices and policies that foster a sense of belonging in students in Canada. Here, we note that our findings demonstrate that student belonging is a major concern in school educational policies and practices in Canada, as found especially in the published documents by educational organizations, provincial governments, and school board associations. However, the research published in the considered scholarly peer-reviewed publications involving students from marginalized groups suggested to us that the educational vision expressed in the former is yet to be implemented in Canadian schools, toward *all* students developing and sustaining a sense of belonging in their schools. Educational success in this regard can only be measured in terms of students who face systemic and structural barriers to developing a sense of belonging in their respective schools. We reiterate the point previously made in connection with the second question, namely that good intentions can only be the beginning.

Finally, it is important to emphasize a limitation of our study, namely that our third question was about *already existing* policies and practices. It would be beneficial if our knowledge synthesis study could be complemented by the many recommendations of researchers for how policies and practices need to be changed to support all students' sense of belonging. A meaningful integration of these recommendations into the findings of our study presents an important future project.

Conclusion

This knowledge synthesis study has identified the current knowledge reported in a diverse range of published documents on the experience of, factors implicated in, and policies and practices to address the loneliness and belonging of students in Canadian K-12 schools. The study provides a basis upon which further research on Canadian students' sense of loneliness and belonging can build. Furthermore, belonging is an important aspect of human well-being. Loneliness – as distinct from solitude – undermines such well-being. With greater concern given to students' mental health and well-being in Canadian schools, the findings of this study also contribute to a richer understanding of how to address student well-being in Canadian schools.

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APPENDIX

Table 1

Document and Data Sources and Search Terms Used for the Study

Type of Document Source	Databases/Data Sources	Search Terms (in different combinations)
Scholarly peer-reviewed publications	UM Library Scopus ERIC PsycINFO Child Development & Adolescent Studies	loneliness; lonely; lone*; isolation; solitude; belong*; relationship*; connect*; social; attach*; feeling; bond*; student; child K-12; "elementary school"; "high school"; "middle school"; "junior high"; school; policy; "policy making"; "school practice", "educational policy"; practice; routine; procedure; K-12; Canada
Documents published by educational organizations	For each province and territory, the websites of: the teacher and superintendents associations, the Canadian Association of School System Administrators, the Canadian Association of Principals, and the Canadian Teachers' Federation	belong*; lone*; relationship*; connect*; social; attach*; feeling; bond*; isolation; solit*

| Documents published by provincial governments and school board associations | For each province and territory, the websites of: ministry of education and school board association | belong*; lone*; relationship*; connect*; social; attach*; feeling; bond*; isolation; solit* |

Table 2

Distribution of Included Documents by Document Source and Focus

Type of Document Source	Number of Documents Included	Focus on Loneliness	Focus on Belonging
Scholarly peer-reviewed publications	87	31	70
Documents published by educational organizations	56	2	55
Documents published by Provincial Governments and School Board Associations	60	13	59
TOTAL	**203**	**46**	**184**

Note: Some documents addressed both foci.

Table 3

Distribution of Included Documents by Document Source and Sectionality on Students' Sense of Loneliness

	Document Source Type			Total
	Scholarly Peer-reviewed	Educational organizations	Provincial governments and school board associations	
No sectionality considered	19	0	7	26
One or more sectionalities considered	11	2	6	19
TOTAL	**30**	**2**	**13**	**45**

Table 4

Distribution of Included Documents by Document Source and Sectionality on Students' Sense of Belonging

	Document Source Type			
	Scholarly Peer-reviewed	Educational organizations	Provincial governments and school board associations	**Total**
No sectionality considered	24	25	30	79
One or more sectionalities considered	45	29	34	108
TOTAL	**69**	**54**	**64**	**187**