

An Exploration of the Sense of Belonging of Students with Special Educational Needs

Sense of school belonging is associated with increased wellbeing and academic progress. It is also seen as central to the experience of inclusion in schools. Employing a mixed methods design, this study compares the level of belonging of students with special educational needs (SEN) with a sample of their non-SEN peers. Semi-structured interviews are used to explore barriers and facilitators associated with school belonging for a sample of students attending a large post-primary school in Ireland. Results indicate that students with SEN presented with a lower level of belonging than their non-SEN peers. They also reported distinctive barriers which impacted on their connection to school. Findings indicate that interventions to promote school belonging need to address the specific challenges experienced by students with SEN. A focus on a sense of belonging in schools is seen to offer an effective means for monitoring the social inclusion of students with SEN.

Keywords: sense of belonging, connectedness, school, special educational needs, inclusion

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INTRODUCTION

Goodenow (1993) defined belonging as “students’ sense of being accepted, valued, included and encouraged by others in the academic classroom setting and feeling oneself to be an important part of the life and activity of the class” (p.25). Baumeister and Leary (1995) argued that the desire to belong is a fundamental human need and when this need is met a range of positive psychological outcomes are realised. Accordingly, the concept of belonging is becoming central when considering adolescents’ sense of wellbeing in schools (Ozer, Wolf and Kong, 2008). This is acknowledged in the Department of Education and Skills’ *Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice* (DES, 2019), where it notes that a

sense of belonging acts a protective factor for wellbeing in the school setting. The centrality of a sense of belonging to the inclusion process in schools is also being increasingly recognised with Warnock (2005) arguing that “The concept of inclusion must embrace a sense of belonging, since such a feeling appears to be necessary both for successful learning and for more general wellbeing” (p. 15).

SENSE OF BELONGING AND ITS IMPACT ON STUDENT OUTCOMES

A sense of school belonging has been shown to be associated with increased motivation and academic achievement (Goodenow, 1993). Furrer and Skinner (2003) concluded that a sense of belonging influences academic achievement through its “energetic function, awakening enthusiasm, interest and willingness to participate in academic activities” (p. 158).

A sense of school belonging has also been shown to be associated with a range of wellbeing indicators, including lower emotional distress, lower suicidal ideation, lower levels of involvement in violence, less frequent use of cigarettes, alcohol and marijuana and late sexual debut (Resnick et al., 1997). This link between belonging and emotional functioning was supported by Shochet, Dadds, Ham and Montague (2006) who found that school connectedness correlated strongly with concurrent and future self-report symptoms of depression and anxiety. Similar findings were reported by McGraw, Moore, Fuller and Bates (2008) who found that for older students, lower levels of belonging to school, family and peers was associated with depressive symptoms.

Sense of Belonging for Children with Special Educational Needs

While there is limited research exploring the sense of belonging of children and young people with SEN, findings show that they experience high levels of rejection (Frederickson and Furnham, 2004); appear to be less popular (Kuhne and Wiener, 2000); are less accepted and enjoy fewer reciprocal friendships (Chamberlain, Kasari and Rotheram-Fuller, 2007); are more vulnerable to feelings of loneliness (Pavri and Luftig, 2000) and bullying (Nic Gabhainn, Kelly and Molcho, 2007), than their typical peers. Those few studies comparing level of belonging across SEN and non-SEN groups reveal equivocal findings, with some reporting no differences between SEN and non-SEN groups (Hagborg, 1998; Frederickson, Simmonds, Evans and Soulsby, 2007) while others found a lower sense of school belonging among students with SEN (Murray and Greenberg, 2001; Nepi, Facondini, Nucci and Peru, 2013). In Ireland, McCoy and Banks (2012) investigating a related concept (liking/not liking school), reported that

while seven per cent of non-SEN children did not like school, twelve per cent of SEN children did not like school.

METHODOLOGY

Participants in this study were drawn from a large-size, co-educational post-primary school which serves a diverse demographic of students in a locality with an increasing population. In phase 1 of the study, 25 students with SEN (e.g. those with a specific learning difficulty, emotional and behavioural difficulty, borderline and mild general learning difficulty, and autism spectrum disorder) and a matched sample of mainstream peers completed a self-report measure of school belonging (Psychological Sense of School Membership Scale: Frederickson and Dunsmuir, 2009). Student scores on the Total Belonging Variable were compared using an independent-samples t-test to examine statistically significant differences between the SEN and non-Sen Groups. In phase 2, 12 students with special educational needs and 11 mainstream peers took part in semi-structured interviews to explore what helped or hindered their connectedness to school. A thematic analysis of the interview data was carried out, using the framework set out by Braun and Clarke (2006). This six-step framework offers a systematic, yet flexible approach which enables researchers to search for and identify themes and patterns when analysing qualitative data.

FINDINGS

Results of Quantitative Analysis

T-test analysis indicated a significant difference on the Total Belonging score between the SEN and non-SEN groups: $t(48) = -2.52$, $p = .015$ (2-tailed). This signifies a medium to large effect size (Cohen's $d = 0.71$), indicating that students with SEN experienced a lower level of belonging than their non-SEN peers.

Results of Qualitative Analysis

Themes were initially coded and recorded according to interview questions and then combined to form five over-arching themes, common to both SEN and non-SEN Groups:

- Teacher Support and Relationship with Students
- Academic Progress and Curricular Engagement
- Peer Support and Friendships
- Participation in Extra-curricular Activities
- Experience of Inclusion and Participation

Notwithstanding this commonality, there were also some notable differences between the two groups when reporting on those factors that promote or impinge on their sense of belonging and connectedness to school.

Teacher Support and Relationships with Students

Responses relating to this theme were broadly similar for the SEN and non-SEN Groups. When describing times when they felt well connected to school, both groups of students referred to numerous examples of positive, caring relationships with teachers, through which they felt valued, supported and affirmed. Some noted that this is more likely to happen at the senior end of the school and especially during transition year, where they are more involved in projects, group work, and excursions. Students reported experiencing greater belonging when teachers were sensitive to their individual needs and circumstance; when they believed in them and nurtured them, even when they were not high achievers. Some reported that their connection to school is impacted when they experience poor relationships with teachers and a lack of support. They referred to examples of conflictual relationships, often disciplinary related, or pertaining to low expectations around academic potential.

Academic Progress and Curricular Engagement

Many students reported that their connection to school is enhanced when they experience academic progress and support. Both groups of students recounted numerous examples of teachers giving them extra assistance, staying after class, working during their lunch break, coming back to the school in the afternoon etc. Some referred to teachers as having a transformative impact on their learning, leading them to achieve higher grades and engendering a greater love of certain subjects.

While some non-SEN pupils highlighted problems relating to subject choice, or the challenge of coping with higher level subjects, students with SEN referred to more pervasive and significant academic issues that impacted on their connection to school. For some students with SEN, their academic difficulties were experienced across a range of subject areas and were sometimes so severe that some questioned how sustainable school was for them. Some reported feeling disheartened and dejected by their lack of progress. This was highlighted by Nora who stated that “I mightn’t stay in school ... I’d get my results back and it’d be you failed”. Some referred to the negative effects of placement in a type of special class, noting that this limited their opportunities for social interaction with their peer group and led to name calling and bullying. This was captured by Emily who outlined how her initial excitement about coming to a new school turned to disappointment when

placed in a special class “Where everyone made fun of us ... like the retards ... like we felt what was wrong with us”.

Peer Support and Friendships

Both groups of students reported that friendships and peer support were central to their sense of belonging and connectedness to school. Students reported how being accepted, and included by their friends helped them settle into post-primary school. Many referred to the strong sense of belonging they experienced when participating in group activities, such as class projects, PE and practical subjects.

Friendship difficulties and social interaction problems with peers were frequently highlighted as a barrier to belonging by the SEN group. They referenced occasions where they felt excluded and bullied, especially at junior cycle level.

Participation in Extra-curricular Activities

Many students referred to a heightened sense of belonging, joy and connection that they experienced when they participated in extra-curricular activities with their peers, including when they represented their school (e.g. sporting activities, school musical). The majority of non-SEN students reported that they participated in a diverse range of extra-curricular activities, often in a leadership role. This contrasted with the SEN group where a minority reported involvement in extra-curricular activities.

Experience of Inclusion and Participation

Most students in this study reported that they had very good relationships with their teachers and had opportunities to decide about things that affected them in school. Many non-SEN students referenced the student council as being very effective in raising student issues in the school. A number of female students outlined their dislike of the school uniform, where they were not allowed wear trousers, even in the cold weather. Rules around wearing jewellery and make up were sometimes resented. Some students articulated a need for a broader appreciation of skills and attributes related to personality, social competence and organisational ability rather than focusing solely on academic issues.

Students with SEN were less likely to report opportunities to decide about things that affect them in school. Some called for greater consultation around the nature and level of support that they received and highlighted a need for increased access to individualised support, placement in mixed ability classes, fewer subjects and less homework.

DISCUSSION

Results of quantitative analysis indicated that students with SEN experience a lower level of belonging than their non-SEN peers. Findings from qualitative analysis supported this finding. While there was significant commonality in experience, (e.g. both groups recounted positive, supportive relationships with their teachers) the SEN group reported a number of distinct differences in how they experience a sense of school belonging. In particular, they referenced academic difficulties that greatly impacted on their connection to school. They were more inclined to report negative peer relations and bullying. Fewer students with SEN reported involvement in extra-curricular activities. This may reflect a lack of availability of preferred activities. Alternatively, it may point to functional difficulties (e.g. communication and/or social difficulties) that impacted on their participation. Students with SEN also noted that they enjoyed fewer opportunities to decide about things in school. This may indicate barriers to their engagement in participatory structures, such as the student council. It may also signify a need for greater consultation with students on their needs and what supports they require.

The above findings suggest that interventions to promote belonging should target the specific needs of students with SEN, otherwise they may be denied the benefits associated with having a strong sense of belonging.

A strong finding from this study is that the exploration of belonging through the use of semi-structured interviews (students were asked what helped or impeded their sense of connection to school, teachers and peers) yielded many meaningful and insightful suggestions to guide the promotion of wellbeing and social inclusion in the school context. This is an important conclusion in light of accounts from Ireland and elsewhere indicating slow progress in promoting inclusion (Kinsella and Senior, 2009).

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

The concept of belonging that emerged from this study is multi-faceted and suggests that efforts to promote belonging need to take a whole-school approach and operate across different aspects of school practice (Rowe, Stewart and Patterson, 2006). This study provides a number of practical suggestions to guide the promotion of belonging and connection to school for all students, and more specifically for those with special educational needs. These include:

- Academic engagement and progress was seen as a critical factor influencing sense of school belonging for all students, including for students with SEN. Thus, effective teaching and learning is seen as central to the promotion of connectedness to school. This is supported through interactive teaching approaches; the use of co-operative learning techniques; the adoption of strengths-based approaches and having high academic expectations. Subject teachers, supported by well-trained special education teachers, need to be able to differentiate their teaching approaches and draw on evidence-informed interventions to meet the diverse needs of students. The location of academic supports also needs careful consideration, as findings in this study and elsewhere indicate that placement in separate SEN settings can negatively impact on sense of school belonging (Bunch and Valeo, 2004).
- Belonging is enhanced when students experience caring adult relationships, and when they perceive that their teachers are interested in them, not just as learners, but also as individuals. This is achieved when teachers have the confidence and skills to engage and relate with young people as individuals, and support their social, emotional and academic development.
- Positive peer relations become ever more important to students' sense of belonging as they progress through adolescence. Students in this study highlighted the benefits of group-work and project work as this helps strengthen bonds and build shared experiences. The need for stronger actions to reduce bullying for students with SEN is emphasised. Students called for enhanced measures to support transition and emphasised the need for additional Social Personal and Health Education (SPHE) classes; more school trips and group activities to help build a greater level of acceptance, cohesiveness and connection amongst students, especially at junior cycle level.
- Participation in extra-curricular activities provides a powerful means for enhancing connection to schools. Schools should support broad participation in school activities (i.e. school musical, sports, debating etc) and provide diverse opportunities for those students with additional needs. Students with SEN may need additional support to enable them to actively engage in extra-curricular activities.
- Having a say and being involved in decisions that affect them helps build students' sense of belonging to school. Teachers can support this through active listening and engagement with students, and by taking a collaborative, participatory approach when dealing with disciplinary issues. Additional measures at school level (e.g. advocacy and peer support) are needed to

enable students with SEN to communicate their views and opinions on matters that affect them, for example on how bullying is dealt with, or around the provision of supports to address their special educational needs. The use of person-centred planning approaches provides insightful and imaginative approaches which put students' perspectives and views at the heart of educational planning.

Key to the above recommendations is the need to provide a developmentally and psychologically appropriate environment in order to meet the changing needs of adolescents (Waters, Cross and Runions, 2009). This requires concerted action at a whole-school level, drawing on an educational framework which emphasises relationships, connection, control and meaning if schools are to engage successfully with the complexity of young people's lives (McLaughlin and Gray, 2015). For school leaders, this requires an appreciation of the impact of school processes on student wellbeing; a recognition that what is enacted in schools on a daily basis through policies and practices has a direct effect on student welfare.

The recommendations above must be considered in light of methodological limitations inherent in this study. These include the use of a relatively small sample size, and the focus on one school setting. Future research into sense of school belonging of students with SEN would be enhanced through use of a larger sample across multiple sites, with a focus on the views of teachers, including school management, as well as those of students themselves. Research might also examine whether the level of belonging varies according to category of SEN and consider whether the nature of provision to support the inclusion of students with SEN impacts on their connection to school.

CONCLUSION

This study found that students with SEN are not experiencing the academic, social and relational context of school in as positive a manner as their mainstream peers. They presented with lower levels of belonging and experienced a range of barriers that impacted on their sense of connection to school. This in turn can have an ongoing negative impact on their wellbeing and academic development. The findings indicate that the wellbeing and social inclusion of students with SEN cannot be left to chance and requires careful monitoring and support. In this context, the exploration of students' sense of belonging offers an effective means for identifying and responding to their wellbeing and the social inclusion needs in school.

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