

School Belonging

Consequences of Feeling a Sense of Belonging

Factors That Contribute to the Sense of Belonging

Implications for Teachers

The term *school belonging* refers to students' subjective perception of being accepted and respected in their particular school setting. Some researchers have also examined the parallel perception in relation to specific classes; typically using the term *class belonging*. Baumeister and Leary (1995) have proposed that all people have an innate need to belong to social groups and to form positive interpersonal relationships with others. Given the amount of time children and adolescents spend in educational settings and the societal importance attached to school-related activities, students' sense of belonging in those settings is particularly important for their healthy development. Carol Goodenow (1993) defined students' sense of belonging as the sense of "psychological membership in the school or classroom, that is, the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others in the school environment" (p. 80). Other researchers have studied similar perceptions using terms such as *school connectedness* or *bonding to school*; however, these terms are less common (see Ander-man & Freeman, 2004, for a review).

The fact that different researchers have examined similar psychological constructs using different terms can make it difficult to synthesize the findings of studies related to students' sense of belonging. Furthermore, this difficulty extends beyond simply the terminology that is used to include differences in both the psychological theories or models that researchers use and the specific ways in which they measure individuals' perceptions of belonging. Because the sense of belonging or connectedness is a subjective perception, it is best measured using students' self-reports. This is done, most commonly, through the use of questionnaire measures, although interviews with students can also be used (e.g., Kester, 1994). Even within the use of questionnaire measures, however, considerable differences exist in the specific measures available. Perhaps the most widely known measure of school or classroom belonging is the Psychological Sense of School Membership Scale (PSSM; Good-enow & Grady, 1993). This measure includes 18 items and was originally developed for use with students in middle school, focusing on students' sense of being liked, included, and respected in their school. More recently, several researchers have adapted the PSSM to develop shorter versions and for use with college-age students. In contrast to the PSSM, other researchers have used measures that include somewhat broader constructs that include the sense of belonging in conjunction with other perceptions and attitudes (such as valuing academic activities or holding shared group norms). These differences contribute to the sometimes mixed findings from research, which are described in more detail below.

Consequences of Feeling a Sense of Belonging

Researchers interested in students' sense of belonging have examined the perception of subjective membership and acceptance at both the classroom and more general school level, although the latter is more common. Regardless of this distinction, and across a range of grade levels, students' sense of belonging has been associated consistently with a variety of positive academic and affective variables. Furthermore, there is growing evidence that the positive consequences of feeling a sense of belonging transcend ethnic and cultural differences in students (e.g., Sanchez, Colon, & Esparza, 2005).

In terms of academic variables, one of the most common findings is that students' sense of school belonging is associated with a range of adaptive motivational beliefs. For example, students' sense of belonging in a particular class has been associated with higher expectancies for success in that class; higher perceptions of class tasks as being interesting, important and useful; and intrinsic and mastery goal orientations related to the class. Sense of belonging at the school level has also been associated with more general measures of school-related motivation, self-reported effort, and reduced absenteeism. In contrast to the research on students' academic motivation, the literature is much less clear with regard to associations between students' sense of belonging and their academic achievement. In this area, findings are very mixed. Furthermore, the design of many studies does not allow for clear statements of the direction of effects. That is, although some researchers have reported a positive association between sense of belonging and achievement, it may be that students with a stronger record of prior achievement are more likely to feel as though they are accepted and respected in school, compared to their lower-achieving peers. It is not clear whether promoting a sense of belonging can help a student to achieve at higher levels in the future. Nevertheless, many researchers believe that students' sense of belonging and academic achievement may be reciprocally related over time, with each positive outcome reinforcing the other. Of course, for some students, low levels of perceived belonging and poor academic performance may similarly reinforce one another.

Finn (1989) proposed an Identification-Participation model to describe the process by which some students become alienated from, and eventually drop out of, school. In this model, Finn suggests that a sense of belonging combined with valuing of school-relevant goals (called "identification with school") leads to an increase in the quality, as well as the quantity, of students' participation in school activities. Such increased participation, when met with quality instruction, then leads to successful performances and achievement which, in turn, contribute to a greater sense of identification. In other words, Finn proposes that academic achievement can be both a precursor to and an outcome of the sense of belonging. An important point of Finn's model, however, is recognizing that the sense of belonging is necessary but not sufficient for students' achievement. Simply feeling accepted and respected, without accompanying valuing of school-related goals and appropriate instruction, will not lead to successful performance on academic tasks.

In addition to academic outcomes, researchers also have investigated associations between students' sense of belonging and a range of affective and well-being related outcomes. One highly influential study published by Resnick and his colleagues (1997) reported that the sense of school connectedness (another term for school belonging) was associated with lower levels of emotional distress, lower suicidal ideation, lower levels of involvement in violence, and less frequent use of tobacco, alcohol, and marijuana in adolescents. Subsequently, other researchers have found perceived school belonging to be associated with lower levels of depression and general negative school-related affect, along with avoidance of behavioral problems in school. In addition, belonging is associated with increased positive school-related affect, empathy, self-esteem, and higher levels of general optimism (E. Anderman, 2002; L. Anderman, 1999; Battistich, Solomon, Kim, Watson, & Schaps, 1995).

Factors that Contribute to the Sense of Belonging

Given the range of positive academic and affective outcomes associated with students' sense of belonging, it is important to understand those factors that support this perception. Unfortunately, the research in this area is less extensive than that described in the previous section (see Anderman & Freeman, 2004, for a review of this research). Some researchers have reported differences in the sense of belonging in terms of characteristics of the students themselves. For example, there is some evidence that, among adolescents, girls tend to report higher levels of school belonging than do boys.

Similarly, as noted earlier, adolescents with lower levels of academic achievement may be less likely to report a sense of belonging than their higher-achieving peers.

Some researchers have also reported differences in reported school belonging related to students' ethnicity; however, the findings in this regard are quite mixed. Although some data suggest that minority students feel less sense of belonging in their schools than do White students, it may be that students' representation within the school population is a critical factor. That is, when African American or Hispanic students make up the majority of a school's population, and particularly when the teaching faculty is ethnically mixed, those minority students have been found to report higher levels of belonging than their White classmates. In other words, minority status in relation to the population of the school, rather than in the more usual sense of the term, may be the more important determinant of students' sense of belonging. Finally, in terms of individual characteristics, students' beliefs about the academic work presented in their classes and their self-concepts also are related to their sense of belonging. A strong global self-concept and high perceived task values (that is, the perception that tasks are interesting, important, and useful; see Eccles & Wigfield, 1995) are strongly associated with higher levels of belonging.

Beyond individual and group differences in students' sense of belonging, there also is evidence that several characteristics of schools and classrooms themselves can help to foster the sense of belonging for all students. There is clear evidence that average levels of students' sense of belonging vary significantly across schools and classrooms (see Anderman & Freeman, 2004, for a review). Interestingly, these differences do not appear to be systematically related to school or class size, or school type (e.g., public, private, or parochial). In contrast, there is some evidence that students may report higher levels of belonging in rural schools compared to urban schools, and in K-8 or K-12 structured schools compared to traditional middle and high school structures. Finally, average levels of school belonging in adolescents may tend to be higher in schools in which larger numbers of students participate in extra-curricular activities.

Beyond characteristics of the school in general, the instructional and interpersonal characteristics of specific classes also contribute to students' perceptions of belonging at both the class and general school level. In fact, these more proximal influences may be more important in shaping students' day-to-day experiences than are school-level factors. Furthermore, the variables that have been associated with higher levels of belonging are quite consistent across students of different ages, ranging from elementary school to undergraduate students in college.

Battistich, Solomon and their colleagues conducted a long-term intervention in elementary schools, known as the Child Development Project (CDP), aimed at creating a greater sense of community in students. In this work, a sense of community included students' sense of belonging, along with the development of shared values and having a role in decision-making. Schools in the CDP program adopted a range of policies and practices, including the use of cooperative learning activities, developmental discipline strategies, emphasizing interpersonal helping and prosocial behavior, and promoting non-exclusionary attitudes in their students. Direct observation of teachers' classroom behaviors demonstrated that warmth and supportiveness, emphasis on prosocial values, encouragement of cooperation, and elicitation of student thinking all were associated with an increased sense of community among students.

Research conducted in middle-school settings also supports the importance of a classroom social environment characterized by mutual interpersonal respect. L. Anderman (2003) examined change in middle school students' sense of belonging over time and found that, in spite of an overall decline in belonging between sixth and seventh grades, this decline was partially corrected when students

perceived their teachers as requiring students to treat one another respectfully. In addition, that study showed strong support for the importance of a classroom context that focused on individual mastery and learning as the purpose for academic tasks (that is, a mastery goal focus, Ames, 1992). Across the sixth and seventh grades, a perceived focus on meaning and understanding in academic tasks was the single strongest predictor of students' sense of belonging in school, even after other characteristics were taken into account. Finally, preliminary research conducted in college classrooms suggests that very similar characteristics may help promote a sense of class belonging for undergraduate students. Not only is a sense of belonging still important for students at the college level, but their sense of belonging is higher in classes where instructors encourage student participation, are perceived as warm, friendly, and helpful, and as being well organized and prepared for classes (Freeman, Anderman, & Jensen, 2007). Less research has been conducted on promoting a sense of belonging in high schools. This remains an important area to be developed.

Implications for Teachers

As described in the preceding section, empirical research has demonstrated the importance of a number of school-and classroom-level policies and practices for fostering and maintaining students' subjective sense of belonging. What is particularly notable about these findings is, first, the remarkable consistency in findings across widely varying age groups and, second, that many of the characteristics identified are able to be modified. In other words, students' sense of belonging seems to be shaped less by fixed and objective characteristics of their schooling (such as school size) and more by those attitudes and practices that are within educators' power to control.

Perhaps the first and most important implication of this body of research for teachers is that they need to recognize the value of students' sense of belonging, both in their classes and in the school as a whole. Being aware of students' subjective sense of acceptance, respect and inclusion, as distinct from their objective membership of the school community, may be an important first step in sustaining students' academic and affective development and well-being. Beyond this initial awareness, the research literature also points to a number of specific characteristics of classes that are likely to foster students' sense of belonging at all levels.

In terms of instructional practices and pedagogy, teachers who encourage high levels of student participation in activities, particularly those who ensure equal participation from all students, are likely to foster a sense of class belonging. Importantly, this benefit is most likely to occur when participation is designed as cooperative and focused on the individual pursuit of understanding and mastery, rather than as demonstrating one's knowledge before classmates or competing. Students' sense of belonging can also be fostered through participation in decision-making within class, such as helping to develop class rules for behavior, or having some limited choices in terms of academic tasks. Teachers who are perceived as committed to their students' learning, holding high expectations for student success and providing assistance when it is needed, also are likely to promote a sense of belonging. Beyond the strictly pedagogical aspects of classes, the interpersonal and affective tone of classes also will support students' sense of belonging. Teachers need to communicate their own warmth and availability to students but they also play a critical role in setting the climate for interactions among students in class. Teachers can communicate the importance of prosocial and cooperative attitudes, active participation and mutual respect among class participants. Taken together, this research suggests that teachers will be most likely to promote and maintain students' sense of belonging when they are able to balance a strong focus on students' learning and academic progress with a climate of warm and supportive interpersonal relationships in class.

See also: Classroom Environment, School Climate

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Anderman, E. M. (2002). School effects on psychological outcomes during adolescence. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 94*, 795–809.

Anderman, L. H. (1999). Classroom goal orientation, school belonging and social goals as predictors of students' positive and negative affect following the transition to middle school. *Journal of Research and Development in Education, 32*, 89–103.

Anderman, L. H. (2003). Academic and social perceptions as predictors of change in middle school students' sense of school belonging. *Journal of Experimental Education, 72*, 5–22.

Anderman, L. H., & Freeman, T. M. (2004). Students' sense of belonging in school. In M. Maehr & P. Pintrich (Eds.), *Advances in motivation and achievement: Vol. 13. Motivating students, improving schools: The legacy of Carol Midgley* (pp. 27–63). Oxford: Elsevier, JAI.

Battistich, V., Solomon, D., Kim, D., Watson, M., & Schaps, E. (1995). Schools as communities, poverty levels of student populations, and students' attitudes, motives, and performance: A multilevel analysis. *American Educational Research Journal, 32*, 627–658.

Battistich, V., Solomon, D., Watson, M., & Schaps, E. (1997). Caring school communities. *Educational Psychologist, 32*, 137–151.

Baumeister, R. F. & Leary, M. R. (1995). The need to belong: desire for interpersonal attachments as a fundamental human motivation. *Psychological Bulletin, 117*, 497–529.

Eccles, J. S., & Wigfield, A. (1995). In the mind of the actor: The structure of adolescents' achievement task values and expectancy-related beliefs. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 21*, 215–225.

Finn, J. D. (1989). Withdrawing from school. *Review of Educational Research 59*, 117–142.

Freeman, T. M., Anderman, L. H., & Jensen, J. M. (2007). Sense of belonging in college freshmen at the classroom and campus levels. *Journal of Experimental Education, 75*, 203–220.

Sanchez, B., Colon, Y., & Esparza, P. (2005). The role of sense of school belonging and gender in the academic achievement of Latino adolescents. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence, 34*, 619–628.

Copyright 2003-2009 The Gale Group, Inc. All rights reserved.