

Exploring connections between students' psychological sense of school membership and their resilience, self-efficacy, and leadership skills

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There is a general consensus that children's experiences in school have a substantial bearing on various psycho-social outcomes in their lives. However, while much research has explored the impact of children's social experiences in school on their academic performance, there is relatively little empirical evidence that connects these with non-academic consequences. We contend that of the varied experiences that students have in the school context, their sense of belongingness or membership with their school, that is, the degree to which students feel accepted, respected, included, and supported in school, may be of prime importance. With this in the backdrop, this research aims to seek whether a relationship exists between students' psychological sense of school membership and their resilience, self-efficacy, and leadership skills. It was hypothesized that a high sense of school membership will be positively associated with resilience, self-efficacy, and leadership skills. To this end, standardized instruments to measure these four constructs were administered on a large sample of students (N=200) aged between 14 and 17 years, chosen from private English-medium schools in Delhi and NCR. The data was analysed using Pearson's *r*. Results confirmed the hypothesis. Both theoretical and practical implications of the same will be discussed.

Keywords: school membership, resilience, self-efficacy, leadership skills

Throughout the history of psychological research, scholars have investigated the fundamental human want to build and keep social bonds and ties with others and have thus generated a large pool of constructs with different names but essentially analogous meanings. This desire has been variously discussed as the need for belongingness (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Goodenow, 1993b; Maslow, 1954), the affiliative motive (McClelland, 1987), and the need for relatedness (Alderfer, 1969; Deci & Ryan, 1991). While terminology may differ, there are certain undeniable overlaps in the way different theorists have conceptualized this need. McClelland (1987) contended that individuals with a high need for affiliation seek harmonious relationships with people who make them feel accepted. Baumeister and Leary (1995) proposed the 'belongingness hypothesis' pointing out that "human beings have a pervasive drive to form and maintain at least a minimum quantity of lasting, positive, and significant interpersonal relationships" (p. 497).

Belongingness is relevant for almost all aspects of human existence. Taking Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems model (1979) into account, human experiences are embedded within a number of systems ranging from micro-systems (comprising of an individual's immediate environment) to the macro-systems (encompassing the overarching social fabric of a community).

The need for social approval, acceptance, and connectedness within significant social circles is especially strong during adolescence. As it is a developmental phase characterized by a heightened need for the search of personal identity outside of familial boundaries, adolescents tend to engage more in the exploration of social contexts beyond family and family relations. It is a period when a young person's "sense of personal "place" is still largely malleable and susceptible to influence in both positive and negative

directions" (Goodenow, 1993, p. 81). School forms part of a young person's 'microsystem' and is therefore a central social setting exerting influence on their psycho-social development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Students' experiences with and in school, including their relations and interactions with their peers, teachers, and school authorities, may thus serve as a vital link in understanding the development of their psycho-social capacities.

Psychological sense of school membership

In the past few decades, the idea of a 'community' has cropped up in the academic discourse concerning schools. The term community is often used to refer to the same concept that expressions like 'belongingness' or 'connectedness' describe. Belonging in a school community means that the student has friendly interactions with others, perceives being valued and accepted by them, and is engaged in the pursuit of shared institutional goals (Goodenow, 1991).

Of the diverse experiences that children have in school, an encompassing sense of being attached to or being a part of the school is of prime importance. Studies have related the students' sense of belongingness or school membership to positive academic outcomes (Goodenow, 1993; Osterman, 2000; Sanchez, Colon, & Esparaza, 2005; Voelkl, 1995), increased student motivation (Goodenow, 1993), positive attitudes toward learning (Roeser, Midgley, & Urdan, 1996), decreased health-risk behaviors (Bond et al., 2007; McNeely & Falci, 2004), and low social rejection and school problems (Anderman, 2002), among other variables.

Finn (1989), based on his review of the literature on student drop-out behavior from school, proposed the 'participation-identification model'. The model postulates that when students identify with their school, they develop a sense of attachment and belonging toward the school, which facilitates an increased commitment and participation in school activities and larger school goals. This identification-participation may be instrumental in decreased drop-out rates from school through a decrement in the at-risk students' sense of alienation.

School membership is “more than simple technical enrollment in the school. It means that students have established a social bond between themselves, the adults in the school, and the norms governing the institution” (Wehlage, 1989, p. 10).

While Baumeister and Leary (1995) have suggested that a wide array of psychological and behavioral problems could be accounted for by the absence of belongingness, Allen and Bowles (2012) have called for a focus on a strengths based approach of looking at belongingness, emphasizing on “finding and nurturing positive aspects of human psychological functioning” (p. 113). There is strong empirical evidence in educational psychology research to support the idea that “the promotion of developmentally and psychologically appropriate learning environments (e.g., environments that foster a sense of belonging among students) lead to adaptive psychological and mental health outcomes” (Anderman, 2002, p. 808) [sic.].

Resilience

There are multiple ways in which scholars approach resilience and the variables associated with it. There is an increasing emphasis on identifying resources and positive factors that assist adolescents in coping with and overcoming threatening possibilities and stimulating positive outcomes. These positive factors may exist inside (e.g., self-esteem, self-efficacy, and aptitude) or outside (e.g., attentive caregivers, social support networks, and comfortable living conditions) the individual. Specifically, a perceived sense of belongingness has been shown to have important consequences for physical and psycho-social wellbeing. Studies have highlighted the health benefits of belongingness with respect to lower mortality rates (Forster & Stoller, 1992; Kawachi et al., 1996), improved recovery rates and better prognosis from illnesses (Berkman, 1995; Cohen & Janicki-Deverts, 2009), and also for providing a buffer from depression (Anderman, 2002). In the Indian context, Sharma and Malhotra (2010) studied 500 adolescents and found that belongingness and social support have a positive impact on perceived happiness.

These implications of social belongingness for fostering resilience in individuals are equally relevant in the context of schools. Research has shown that possessing a positive orientation and sense of connectedness toward one's school can help offset the risks of peer substance abuse (Costa, Jessor, & Turbin, 1999), unsafe sexual behaviors (McNeely & Falci, 2004; Paul et al., 2000), physical and psychological distress (Resnick et al., 1997), and engaging in delinquency (Battistich, Solomon, Watson, & Schaps, 1997).

According to a study conducted by the World Health Organization (2006), a higher sense of school connectedness reveals a greater sense of psychological wellbeing and experience of positive emotions.

Self-efficacy

Research indicates that experiencing a sense of belongingness is important for cultivating a higher level of self-esteem, self-efficacy, and life satisfaction (Daley & Buchanan, 1999; Haslam, Jetten, Postmes, & Haslam, 2009). With respect to experiences in school, a feeling of connectedness can help in promoting students' motivation (Goodenow, 1993b) and academic self-efficacy in particular (Battistich, et al., 1995; Roeser, Midgley, & Urdan, 1996). Students who experience a sense of connectedness with their learning environments develop more confidence and belief in their own success; they are also more likely to engage in classroom activities

(Osterman, 2000) and academic help-seeking behavior (Newman, 1991).

Apart from influencing academic outcomes, school connectedness also promotes students' self-efficacy with respect to psycho-social avenues. Being surrounded by supportive peers and nurturing adults provides a safeguard against feelings of social isolation, while promoting fulfilling relationships, social competence as well as emotional wellbeing.

Leadership skills

Youth leadership, as a desirable trait in adolescents, has consistently been gaining attention and importance over the last few decades. Along with the regular leadership positions that have long existed in schools (e.g., prefects and heads of various scholastic and extracurricular clubs), educational institutions have lately been introducing other leadership opportunities for students, such as Model United Nations, international student exchanges, etc.

Lizzio et al. (2011) have posited leadership capacity building to be “a key factor in sustainable school improvement” (p. 85). They argue that while formal leadership roles only involve a small proportion of the entire student body, informal leadership, which can be understood as an evolving attribute of a group, has the potential to engage much greater numbers of students in leadership activities. Institutions tend to advance student leadership development through formal leadership roles or participation in non-scholastic activities (Brady, 2005). Although these strategies are beneficial in the absolute sense, they have been criticized for being relatively exclusive (Holland & Andre, 1999) and having narrow prospects for harnessing the leadership potential of the entire student population (Mitra, 2005; Whitehead, 2009).

The leadership motivation of students may be activated by the environmental factors in the school setting (Hopkins and Jackson, 2002). School culture has also been documented to have a significant impact on student involvement and identification with their school (Osterman, 2000).

Lizzio et al. (2011) proposed that various community-related factors have a bearing on the students' tendency to engage in civic activities, which may be seen as a precursor to the emergence of leadership qualities. These include: peer relationships, teacher-student interaction, school identification, extracurricular participation, and citizenship behavior. The results of their research involving a self-report survey measuring students' perceptions and motivations indicated that students' perceptions of their relationships with their peers and teachers determined their sense of membership or belongingness with the school, which in turn predicted their likelihood of engaging in leadership in their school.

Objective of the study

With this in the backdrop, this research aims to seek whether a relationship exists between students' psychological sense of school membership and their resilience, self-efficacy, and leadership skills. Keeping the above objectives in mind, it was hypothesized that a high sense of school membership will be positively associated with resilience, self-efficacy, and leadership skills.

Method

Participants

The sample consisted of 200 students (male=109; female=91), drawn

from Grades 10 and 11 of two private English-medium schools in Delhi and NCR. Participants were aged between 14 and 17 years, with a mean age of 15.71 years ($SD = .71$). In terms of socioeconomic status, participants mainly came from middle-class families. The method of purposive sampling was employed to identify the sample. The demographic characteristics of the sample are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Table showing demographic characteristics of the sample ($N=200$)

Demographic Variable	Frequency	Percentage
Sex		
Male	109	54.5
Female	91	45.5
Age 14 Years	3	1.5
15 Years	79	39.5
16 Years	92	46.0
17 Years	26	13.0
Grade		
Tenth Grade	101	50.5
Eleventh Grade	99	49.5

Instruments

This research investigated the relationship between students' sense of school belongingness and their resilience, self-efficacy, and leadership skills. To this end, the following standardized self-report measures were administered on a large sample of students.

Psychological Sense of School Membership: The PSSM (Goodenow, 1993) comprises of 18 self-report items designed to measure students' perceptions of belonging and psychological engagement with their school. The responses to each item are rated on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (Not at all true) to 5 (Completely true). Items 3, 6, 9, 12, and 16 are reverse coded. The scale can be used with participants between the ages of 12 and 18 years and Grades 6 to 12. The Cronbach's Alpha score for PSSM is .88.

The Child and Youth Resilience Measure (CYRM)-28: The CYRM-28 is a selection device used to assess resources available to youth (ages 9 to 23 years), that may help in strengthening their resilience. It includes 28 items given as a 5-point Likert scale; the options range from 1 (Not at all) to 5 (A lot). The measure can be administered both individually and in groups. It has three sub-scales: Individual, relationships with primary care-givers, and contextual factors that facilitate a sense of belonging. Each sub-scale contains further clusters of questions that offer detailed insight into these dimensions.

Self-Efficacy Questionnaire for Children: The SEQ-C (Muris, 2001) consists of 24 items presented as a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (Not at all) to 5 (Very well). It covers three aspects of self-efficacy, with 8 items for each sub-scale. These include: Academic self-efficacy (dealing with academic requirements); social self-efficacy (engaging with the social world and its challenges); and emotional self-efficacy (capacity for emotional regulation). The questionnaire can be used with youth between the ages of 14 and 18 years (Grades 8-12). The Cronbach's Alpha is reported to be .88 for the total self-efficacy scale and between .85 and .88 for the subscale scores.

Youth Leadership Assessment: The YLA (Berry, 2010) includes 35 items for self-assessment of one's leadership behaviors. It is

presented as a 10-point Likert scale and involves 5 sub-scales: Supports others, self-management, awareness, excellence, and motivates others. Responses are scored separately for each category by adding the scores within each section and then dividing it by 7 to provide a category score. The instrument can be used with diverse populations and from ages 12 to 18.

Procedure

Participation in the study was voluntary and anonymous. The participants were instructed that the instruments they were completing assessed their perception of their experiences at school, their relations with their peers and teachers, and their beliefs about school work and activities. They were assured that their responses will remain completely anonymous and would have no bearing upon their academic grade. The tenth and eleventh standard cohorts were assembled separately during a homeroom period where they completed the questionnaires in approximately twenty minutes. Of the two hundred and forty-nine response sheets that were filled and returned to the investigators, forty-nine were excluded from analysis due to missing responses or ostensible response sets

Results

Frequencies were calculated for the demographic variables of age, sex, and grade. Descriptive statistics (M and SD) were computed for participants' scores on all study variables (refer to Table 2).

To identify the relationship between participants' scores on school membership (PSSM) with resilience (CYRM-28), self-efficacy (SEQ-C), and leadership skills (YLA), the data was analysed using Pearson Product Moment correlation. The correlation coefficients thus obtained indicate significant positive associations between the variables under study.

Table 2 : Summary of Inter-correlations, Means, and Standard Deviations for Scores on the PSSM, CYRM-28, SEQ-C, and YLA ($N=200$).

Measures	1	2	3	4	Mean	SD
1. PSSM	1	.605**	.568**	.341**	66.78	12.038
2. CYRM-28		1	.663**	.427**	110.60	14.485
3. SEQ-C			1	.492**	85.80	12.531
4. YLA				1	39.20	6.724

Note. PSSM = Psychological Sense of School Membership? CYRM-28 = Child and Youth Resilience Measure 28; SEQ-C = Self-Efficacy Questionnaire for Children; YLA = Youth Leadership Assessment. ** $p < .01$.

As presented in Table 2, there exists a high positive correlation between participants' scores on school membership and resilience ($r = .605$; $p < .01$) and school membership and self-efficacy ($r = .568$; $p < .01$); and a moderate positive correlation between school membership and leadership skills ($r = .341$; $p < .01$).

More specifically, correlation coefficients were also computed between participants' scores on PSSM and the sub-scales under CYRM-28, SEQ-C, and YLA (see Table 3). With respect to the relationship between school membership and resilience, there exists a positive association between scores on PSSM and all the sub-scales under CYRM-28. The scores on PSSM are most strongly associated with the sub-scale of individual variables ($r = .577$; $p < .01$), followed by context variables ($r = .563$; $p < .01$) and relationships with caregivers ($r = .35$; $p < .01$), respectively.

Table 3: Relationship between Scores on PSSM and the Subscales under CYRM-28, SEQ-C, & YLA.

Scale	PSSM
Child and Youth Resilience Measure (CYRM-28)	
Individual Variables	.557**
Relationships with Caregivers	.350**
Context Variables	.563**
Self-Efficacy Questionnaire for Children (SEQ-C)	
Academic Self-Efficacy	.515**
Social Self-Efficacy	.475**
Emotional Self-Efficacy	.347**
Youth Leadership Assessment (YLA)	
Supports Others	.187**
Self-Management	.285**
Awareness	.320**
Excellence	.289**
Motivates Others	.346**

** $p < .01$.

Results also suggest statistically significant relationships between PSSM and academic self-efficacy ($r = .515$; $p < .01$); PSSM and social self-efficacy ($r = .475$; $p < .01$); as well as between PSSM and emotional self-efficacy ($r = .347$; $p < .01$).

Similarly, the relationships between PSSM scores and the subscales within YLA were also analysed. As expected, results indicate positive correlations between participants' scores on PSSM with respect to all the sub-categories under YLA. These include: Supports others ($r = .187$; $p < .01$); self-management ($r = .285$; $p < .01$); awareness ($r = .32$; $p < .01$); excellence ($r = .289$; $p < .01$); and motivates others ($r = .346$; $p < .01$).

Discussion

This study sought out to explore whether there exist meaningful relationships between students' Psychological Sense of School Membership (PSSM) and their resilience, self-efficacy, and leadership skills. Correlational analyses revealed statistically significant relationships between PSSM and each of the criterion variables, confirming the hypothesis.

School is the second most important social context in a child's life (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). While individual factors (e.g., intelligence, aptitude, personality characteristics, etc.) are strong predictors of psycho-social outcomes, children's experiences in school also exert a significant influence in determining future consequences. Schools provide a variety of opportunities for students to develop their competencies and expand their social networks.

Goodenow (1993) suggested that psychological membership in the school is the degree to which students feel "accepted, respected, included, and supported" in school (p.80). Keeping this in mind, we hypothesized that a perceived sense of school membership would be positively correlated with resilience. With a correlation coefficient of .605 ($p < .01$), the results confirmed the hypothesis. It can be assumed that children and youth who experience a strong identification with their school, have at their disposal a potent social support network which may provide them with a buffer from threatening factors. It may also assist in capacity building, thereby enhancing their ability to deal more effectively and efficiently with both possible as well as real stressors. There exists a significant amount of research evidence supporting the

idea that high levels of connectedness with the school shield adolescents from a range of life stressors (Loukas, Roalson, & Herrera, 2010; Monahan, Oesterle, & Hawkins, 2010). Also, as Catalano et al., (2004) suggested, a feeling of belongingness with the school is especially helpful for protecting youth in high risk environments.

Moreover, a holistic school environment can create a space for inclusion, encouragement and respect among pupils and teachers. We proposed that having a strong sense of identification with their school might allow adolescents to develop healthier attitudes not just toward others, but also toward themselves. As depicted by the results, there is a strong positive relationship ($r = .568$) between perceived belongingness with one's school and the three components of self-efficacy, viz. academic, social, and emotional. Since a strong sense of belongingness entails that students have healthy relations with others in school, the positive psycho-social prospects that these connections allow may be conducive for changing students' self-perceptions and instilling in them a sense of self-confidence and self-efficacy, wherein they might feel more equipped to handle responsibilities and challenges. Similar findings have been reported by Daley & Buchanan (1999) and Haslam, Jetten, Postmes, & Haslam (2009).

Finally, school engagement was also found to be positively correlated ($r = .341$) with leadership skills. We postulated that a sense of warmth and acceptance, which comes with the feeling of belonging to a certain group or community, such as the school, may bolster leadership capacity building in students through a two-step process: first, it may increase students' accountability and thus the desire to contribute to the community they feel they are a part of, and second, the sense of belonging may provide them with sufficient confidence to explore and exploit their leadership potential in a safe space. In a similar vein, Starratt (2007) contended that for schools to be successful at providing student leadership opportunities calls for incorporation of social and cultural experiences.

In the Indian school scenario, of late there has been a shift in traditional pedagogical practices, with special emphasis on alternative mechanisms of instruction. The introduction of newer educational models such as, Continuous and Comprehensive Evaluation (CCE) and the use of electronic media for imparting information have led to an unprecedented rise in the use of technology in classrooms. Even though this shift has facilitated the development of hard skills like critical thinking and problem solving, there is a relative lack of emphasis on interpersonal variables which may pave the way for a more holistic development among adolescents. This research has attempted to narrow this gap by highlighting the relevance of students' sense of school membership for positive psycho-social outcomes, viz., resilience, self-efficacy, and leadership skills.

The results of this research could promote a more encompassing understanding of the contributions that school experiences have in the students' lives. Policy makers and school authorities could thus focus on shaping school environment and operations in a manner so as to enhance the students' feelings of connectedness within the school system. Further research could investigate these variables in more detail and with an emphasis on the mechanisms that might underlie these relationships. Focus could also be on developing a comprehensive model which may account for an over-arching understanding of school connectedness and its various correlates.

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