Chapter 5
Students' Sense of Belonging in Urban Junior Secondary Schools in Bangladesh: Grades, Academic Achievement and School Satisfaction

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Abstract While much study has focused on external variables such as poverty and child labour to document high dropout, absenteeism and poor academic achievement in the secondary schools of Bangladesh, little research has been undertaken to elucidate these issues from students' psycho-emotional perspectives.The present study explores students' sense of belonging to school and its correlation with student achievement and school satisfaction. Seven schools participated in this study with 869 boys and 574 girls from junior/lower secondary years 6, 7 and 8. The Bangla version of the Psychological Sense of School Membership (PSSM) Scale (Goodenow, Psychol Schools 30(1):79–90, 1993) was used to measure students' sense of belonging to school. The findings indicate positive and significant relationships among school satisfaction, academic achievement and school belonging. The findings have important implications for both pedagogical practice and intervention programmes, emphasising strong social environment in school and illustrating students' psychosocial component as an important aspect of school outcomes.

Keywords Sense of belonging · Academic efficacy · Academic achievement · School satisfaction

Introduction

A growing number of studies have indicated that students' sense of belonging has a substantial influence on their emotional wellbeing and academic outcomes across different academic levels and disciplines (Osterman, 2010; Reilly & Fitzpatrick, 2009). It has a direct and significant effect on students' psychosocial adjustment at

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school, academic engagement and school attendance, academic self-efficacy and perceptions of the value of school (Uwah, McMahon, & Furlow, 2008; Walker & Greene, 2009; Walton & Cohen, 2011). On the other hand, a lack of belonging can lead to social exclusion and a higher 'incidence of disciplinary conflicts, absenteeism, truancy, and dropping out of school' (Margalit, 2010, p. 118). Students who have a strong sense of belonging are motivated, engaged, and participatory and are more likely to learn than those with a lower sense of belonging (Causton-Theoharis & Theoharis, 2008). They may also remain in school longer, and school belonging is thus a critical factor in retaining students in schools (Finn, 1989; Wehlage, Rutter, Smith, Lesko, & Fernandez, 1989).

In this regard, student's school belongingness is a significant factor to be studied, particularly in Bangladesh where high dropout rate has been identified as one of the major problems of the education sector (Sabates, Hossain, & Lewin, 2013). This situation is even worse at the secondary level of education, where about half of the students leave school before completing the secondary education cycle (Bangladesh Bureau of Education and Information Statistics [BANBEIS], 2013). A gradual dropout pattern is seen across the years of secondary schooling (Grades 6–10), particularly between Grades 6 and 8, beginning with a slow pace of approximately 8% at Grade 6 and increasing with a high of approximately 15% at Grade 8 (see also Banu, Roy & Shafiq, Chap. 3, this volume). Afterwards the dropout rate tends to decrease from Grade 9, ending with 7.32% by Grade 10 (BANBEIS, 2013). Next to dropout, disengagement is another problem that affects a large proportion of students' academic performance in Bangladesh (Ahmed, Ahmed, Khan, & Ahmed, 2007; Sabates, Hossain, & Lewin, 2010). Ahmed et al. (2007) further reported that although a large proportion of children physically attended school, they were often psychologically or intellectually absent and not engaged in the learning process which eventually resulted in poor academic performance and low achievement.

In order to reduce the overarching problem of dropout rate, school disengagement and low academic performance, several initiatives have already been taken up by the government. Most of the studies and intervention programmes to date have focused on objective variables such as poverty, child labour and lack of training and resources in schools (Chowdhury, Chowdhury, Hoque, Ahmad, & Sultana, 2009; Sabates et al., 2013). Intervention programmes were often initiated to mitigate socio-economic aspects of students' parents and household through various cash or food transfer programmes. For instance, cash rewarding interventions, such as the Female Secondary School Stipend Program (FSSSP), which has been used in Bangladesh for decades (since 1993), provide free tuition and a monthly stipend with the expectation that such cash will ease the burden of household poverty, enhance enrolment and reduce the likelihood of dropout (Schurmann, 2009). Several studies (Baulch, 2011; Hossain, 2010; World Bank, 2013) showed that the aforementioned intervention programmes initially increased enrolment but eventually failed to retain and enhance attendance, retention and academic attainment.

In the intervention programmes, there is a need to look beyond the objective variables and include subjective variables like students' school belongingness in

relation to positive school outcomes such as high retention rates and academic achievement. However, in spite of its direct and significant effect on increasing school retention, the concept of school belonging largely remains neglected both in educational research and intervention programmes in Bangladesh. The present study aims to measure secondary school students' belongingness to school in Bangladesh and its association with three distinct factors: grade, academic achievement and school satisfaction.

Operational Definition of Terms

The operational definition of terms including school belonging, school satisfaction and academic achievement is given below.

School belonging is 'the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included and supported by the others in the school social environment' (Goodenow, 1993, p. 80). As Wehlage et al. (1989) explained, having a sense of belonging at school means developing a social bond with peers and teachers and adhering to school norms.

School satisfaction is defined as 'the subjective, cognitive appraisal of the perceived quality of school life' (Baker, Dilly, Aupperlee, & Patil, 2003, p. 210). It is a student's own judgement of their school experience.

The term academic achievement refers to students' academic scores in the last school exam. In addition to academic scores, students' academic self-efficacy, which denotes student perceptions of competency on academic tasks (Midgley et al., 2000), has also been used as a measure of academic achievement.

Methodology

The present study recruited participants only from junior secondary schools in Dhaka. The secondary education system in Bangladesh follows a 3-2-2 pattern, consisting of 3 years (Grades 6–8) of junior secondary school, 2 years (Grades 9 and 10) of secondary school and 2 years (Grades 11 and 12) of higher secondary or college education. The study utilised a purposive sampling, and the participants included 1443 students (boys = 869; girls = 574) in Grades 6 (boys = 471; girls = 311), 7 (boys = 246; girls = 166) and 8 (boys = 152; girls = 97) from 7 urban secondary schools in Dhaka. Schools were chosen irrespective of their administrative categories (i.e. government or non-government schools, single-sex or co-education schools) and socio-economic status. The number of participants from each school ranged from 97 to 357, with a mean of 206 students per school. The students ranged in age from 11 to 14, with a mean (M) of 12.50 and a standard deviation (SD) of 0.909 years.

Measures

The study used four distinct measures that included one demographic information input and three scales.

Students' Demographic Information

A self-reported demographic information sheet was used to collect student information. The demographic information included students' age, gender, school grade level, last examination score and the length of time in the respective school. The participants were given multiple choices from which they could select their answers.

Psychological Sense of School Membership (PSSM) Scale

The PSSM is a psychometric scale developed by Goodenow (1993), to measure school belonging. The scale has been widely used as a reliable and valid measure of students' school belonging across different cultural contexts, such as the USA (Hagborg, 1994; Booker, 2007), China (Cheung & Hui, 2003) and Australia (You, Ritchey, Furlong, Shochet, & Boman, 2011). The original 18-item scale assesses students' feelings of being an important part of their school; feelings of acceptance, value and inclusion; and connections with school, teachers and peers. A sample item reads as follows: 'I feel like a real part of my school'. Responses were given on a 5-point Likert scale from '1' (not at all true) to '5' (completely true). In this study, a Bangla version of the PSSM scale was used as a measure of student's school belonging in Bangladesh. The internal consistency reliability ($\alpha = 0.824$) of the Bangla version of PSSM (Habib & Hossain, 2013) is close to the original English version ($\alpha = 0.80$) and Spanish version ($\alpha = 0.771$) (Goodenow, 1993), which confirms the reliability of the scale.

The Academic Efficacy Scale

The academic efficacy subscale from the Patterns of Adaptive Learning Scales (PALS) (Midgley et al., 2000) measures student perceptions of competency on academic tasks. It consists of five items evaluated on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from '1' (not at all true) to '5' (completely true). A sample item reads as follows: 'Even if the work is hard, I can learn it'. The academic efficacy subscale of PALS was translated and adapted in Bangla to measure the academic efficacy of the study

sample. To measure the reliability of the scale, Cronbach's alpha was calculated; a value ($\alpha = 0.72$) close to the original English version ($\alpha = 0.78$) (Midgley et al., 2000) was found, confirming the scale reliability.

School Satisfaction Scale

The School Satisfaction Scale is a subscale of the Multidimensional Students' Life Satisfaction Scale (MSLSS) developed by Huebner (2001). This scale assesses students' life satisfaction based on multiple satisfaction judgements including family, friends, school, living environment and self. The School Satisfaction Subscale consists of eight items including positively and negatively worded items regarding school experiences (e.g. 'I look forward to going school' or 'I wish I didn't have to go to school'). Students rate their satisfaction on a 4-point Likert-type response scale ranging from '1' (never) to '4' (almost always). For the purpose of the present study, like the other metrics, the school satisfaction subscale was translated and adapted in Bangla to measure students' satisfaction with school. The Bangla version of the scale has an internal consistency reliability of ($\alpha = 0.77$) which falls within the estimated range of Cronbach's alpha (0.70–0.90) of the original scale (Huebner, 2001) and confirms the reliability of the scale.

Results

In the present study, the average PSSM score of students was 3.8 *(SD = 0.65*, range = 1–5). Compared with boys (84%), girls (88%) reported a stronger sense of school belonging and were more likely to score above the scale midpoint (3.00). On average, girls had a stronger sense of belonging (*M = 3.8, SD = 0.619*) than boys did (*M = 3.7, SD = 0.672*). However, according to the result of independent *t*-test analysis [*t* (1443) = −1.591, *p* = 0.112], the difference between boys and girls was not statistically significant – that is, the sense of belonging of the sampled students was not characterised by gender.

A gradual decrease in PSSM scores was observed from Grade 6 (*M* = 3.9, *SD* = 0.62) to Grade 8 (*M* = 3.7, *SD* = 0.68) (Table 5.1). The data further indicated that for both boys and girls, the sense of belonging decreased with grades. A two-way ANOVA was used to investigate whether there was a significant effect of

Table 5.1 PSSM scores by grades

	Grade 6	Grade 7	Grade 8	Total
Boys	3.8	3.7	3.6	3.7
Girls	3.9	3.8	3.8	3.8
Total	3.9	3.8	3.7	3.8

Grades (6, 7 and 8) and sex (boy, girl) on students' sense of belonging. The overall F-ratio was significant ($F = 4.741$, $p < 0.001$), and there was a main effect of grades on belonging ($F = 7.482$, $p < 0.001$) such that students in lower grades had a stronger sense of school belonging than students in higher grades.

An interesting pattern was revealed when comparing students' PSSM scores and the length of time in school. Newly enrolled students who had spent less than one academic year at school reported a mean of 3.71 ($SD = 0.632$) on the PSSM scale. On the other hand, students who had spent the minimum time a year at their school demonstrated a greater sense of belonging, with a mean PSSM score of 4.0 ($SD = 0.598$). Though the sense of belonging was found to have decreased over time, an ANOVA confirmed that the length of time in school did not have a significant effect on school belonging ($F = 1.480$; $p = 0.218$).

Sense of Belonging and Academic Achievement

The positive association between a stronger sense of school belonging and higher levels of academic achievement was clearly evidenced in the data. The present study used both objective (academic score) and subjective (academic self-efficacy) indicators to measure students' academic achievement. Sense of belonging was found to be positively associated with both academic score and academic self-efficacy. For academic scores, the difference in the degree of belonging was noticeable in the group that scored above 70% in their last school exam. The mean PSSM score ($M = 4.1$; $SD = 0.666$) of those students exceeded the average mean score ($M = 3.8$) for the study sample. Students' academic achievement had a moderate rise in PSSM scores (from $M = 3.71$ to $M = 4.1$) associated with academic outcomes (below 50% to above 70%). The results also revealed that students who scored below 50% on their exams reported a sense of belonging ($M = 3.71$; $SD = 0.598$) above the mid-point (3.00) of the PSSM scale. Furthermore, students who had a 50–70% average reported a slightly greater sense of school belonging ($M = 3.87$; $SD = 0.645$). An ANOVA also confirmed that these differences in PSSM scores among the three groups had significant contribution to the main effect of academic scores ($F = 9.876$, $p < 0.001$).

For academic efficacy, the correlation analysis indicated that a higher level of academic efficacy is positively related to a stronger sense of school belonging ($r = 0.43$, $p < 0.05$). A linear regression analysis was calculated to find whether academic efficacy (a dependent variable) could be predicted from sense of belonging (an independent variable). The result of the regression suggested that sense of belonging significantly predicted the academic efficacy scores ($\beta = 0.37$, $p < 0.001$). The regression coefficient (β) indicates that if the score of sense of belonging scale increases by 1 standard deviation, the academic efficacy score increases by 0.37 standard deviation. Further, a fair portion (i.e. 14%) of the variance of academic efficacy was accounted for by the sense of belonging ($R^2 = 0.137$, $p < 0.001$) alone.

This means that 86% of the variance of academic efficacy scores could not be explained by sense of belonging alone; there might be other predictor variables not included in the present model. However, the large value of F-ratio (F (1, 1441) = 229.37, $p < 0.001$) further indicated that there was a significant effect of sense of belonging on academic efficacy and the present model is a dependable predictor of academic efficacy.

Sense of Belonging and School Satisfaction

A strong positive correlation was found between students' sense of belonging to school and school satisfaction (Pearson correlation $r = 0.53$, $p < 0.001$). A linear regression analysis was conducted to find if students' sense of belonging to school (independent variable) could predict their school satisfaction (a dependent variable). The regression results suggested that sense of belonging to school could significantly predict the school satisfaction scores ($\beta = 0.460$, $p < 0.001$). The regression coefficient (β) indicates that if the score of the sense of belonging scale increases by 1 standard deviation, the school satisfaction score increases by 0.46 standard deviation. Further, a fair portion (i.e. 21%) of the variance of school satisfaction was accounted for by sense of belonging alone ($R^2 = 0.211$, $p < 0.001$). This means that 79% of the variance of school satisfaction scores could not be explained by sense of belonging alone – there might be other predictor variables not included in the present model. However, the large value of F-ratio (F (1, 1441) = 387.689, $p < 0.001$) further indicated that there was a significant effect of sense of belonging on school satisfaction and the present model is a better predictor of outcome school satisfaction.

Discussion

This study generated three significant results. Firstly, sense of belonging to school decreases with progression through school grades. Secondly, sense of belonging to school makes a significant contribution to students' academic achievements. Finally, students' sense of belonging to school significantly contributed to their school satisfaction.

This study revealed that students in the lower grades have a higher sense of school belonging than students in the higher grades and the extent of belongingness decreased with grade promotion. This finding is consistent with previous studies on middle and high school students in the USA, which demonstrated that students' belongingness to school decreases over the course of high school years, especially during the transition period into middle school (Grades 6–8) (Anderman, 2003; Benner & Graham, 2007; Ding & Hall, 2007; Whitlock, 2006).

As students move to upper grades, they face an increasingly complex and challenging curriculum, and an increased pressure to get good academic grades and meet the upcoming demands for graduation (Benner & Graham, 2007). Students may find it challenging to face and adjust to the transition into middle school and possibly tend to feel a lack of school belongingness. A decline in belongingness during the transition period into high school year is also true in Bangladesh.

The present study found that the sense of belonging gradually decreased from Grade 6 and fell to its lowest level at Grade 8. In Bangladesh, Grade 8 is marked as the transition from junior secondary to secondary level, which is characterised by a high-stakes public examination (the Junior School Certificate [JSC]) and an increased sense of academic pressure. This is the time when students prepare themselves to earn entry into their desired stream of courses for continuing studies (i.e. Humanities, Science and Business). In other words, students' academic performance at Grade 8 plays a significant role in determining their subject stream at Grade 9. Getting entrance into the desired subject stream is considered very important in deciding the future career and further education path for most students. For example, if a student aspires to become a doctor, then they must achieve a high academic score at Grade 8 to enter the Science stream in Grade 9 in order to pursue the medical profession in future.

In the face of such increasing academic demands and competition for future career prospects, students may feel a lack of belongingness, since it is known that when students find school more enjoyable and feel less pressure for academic achievement, they tend to feel a higher sense of belonging (O'Neel & Fuligni, 2013). With grade promotion, students also approach the transition phase of the early adolescence stage when their socio-emotional needs are salient (Eccles et al., 1993). At this stage, they are in need of more positive social relationships outside of the family environment (Anderman, 2003). In this regard, a positive and enriching relationship with teachers is even more crucial. Students' relationships with teachers not only influence their relation with other members of the school community (e.g. peers) but also play an unequivocal role in promoting belongingness (Cemalcilar, 2010; Nichols, 2008; Tillery, Varjasa, Roachb, Kuperminc, & Mayers, 2013). Research suggests that teachers' warmth, positive support, empathy and peer affiliations act as social resources at school and promote a sense of belonging among students (Booker, 2007; Goodenow, 1993; Hallinan, 2008).

In contrast, reverse effects are expected when there is little occasion to develop enriching relationships with teachers in the school social context. Young people who experience difficulties and feel disconnected from their teachers, peers and school staff are likely to experience a lower sense of belonging (McMahon, Parnes, Keys, & Viola, 2008). However, in Bangladesh, amidst the large class size and high emphasis on academic achievement, secondary school teachers hardly ever have the opportunity to pay individual attention and form close bonds with their students. It is therefore possible that teachers mainly focus on students' academic needs as they move to higher grade levels, whereas students' socio-emotional needs (e.g. social relationship, need to belong) might remain (or feel) neglected, which in turn possibly decreases their sense of school belongingness.

One other possible explanation of the decrease in students' belongingness during middle school can be found in the stage-environment fit theory which accounts for the mismatch between a student's developmental needs and the school environment (Eccles & Roeser, 2009; Eccles et al., 1993). As per the theory, during the transition stage of early adolescence, students' socio-emotional needs are as important as their academic needs. When school provides students with an environment which emphasises only academic needs and neglects their socio-emotional needs, schools fail to match the development needs of the students. Consequently, they start to feel 'uncomfortable' in that environment and a sense of avoidance develops, which further results in lack of belongingness to school. This notion can help explain the gradual decrease in students' sense of school belonging with their school grade level. However, the study did not intend to confirm the reason behind the negative association between school grade level and students' belonging. The finding only suggests that students begin to experience lack of belongingness as they approach upper grades, especially when they encounter both the developmental and the school level transition phase.

Positive association between sense of belonging and academic achievement was another significant finding of this study. It was found that students' sense of belonging made a significant contribution to both objective (academic achievement) and subjective (academic efficacy) measures of their academic outcomes, indicating that a higher sense of school belonging influences higher academic achievement and academic efficacy. This finding is in accordance with a number of previous studies where school belongingness has been found to be positively associated with different measures of academic outcomes such as academic grades (Anderman, 2003; Walton & Cohen, 2007), academic persistence (Moallem, 2013), academic motivation (Aerts, Van Houtte, Dewaele, Cox, & Vincke, 2012) as well as academic self-efficacy (Uwah et al., 2008).

However, although previous studies concur regarding the positive association between academic achievement and sense of belongingness, there are some discrepancies in the nature and direction of this relationship. Some studies found a linear and direct influence of sense of belonging on academic achievement (see, e.g. Anderman, 2003; Walton & Cohen, 2007). When students feel accepted as a valued member of the school community, they can easily identify themselves with the school environment and feel motivated to learn (Aerts et al., 2012; Anderman, 2003). Nevertheless, in some studies, the effect of sense of belonging on achievement is not direct; rather they found the effect of sense of belonging to be moderated by other factors such as engagement in school activities which in turn results in high academic achievement (Walker & Greene, 2009). Students with a higher level of school belongingness tend to be highly engaged in learning activities, which further results in higher academic achievement (Uwah et al., 2008; Walker & Greene, 2009).

The findings of the present study are consistent with both of these explanations as it found the sense of belonging to directly contribute to the objective indicator of students' academic achievement, namely, academic scores. On the other hand, the study also further extends this relationship with a subjective measure of academic

achievement – academic efficacy. The study revealed that sense of belonging can predict academic efficacy – students who have higher academic efficacy feel more confident about their ability and tend to perform better (Uwah et al., 2008). This suggests the possibility of an indirect effect of sense of belonging on the objective variable of academic achievement – the academic score – which can be moderated by the subjective variable of academic achievement, academic efficacy.

The third relevant finding was the positive and significant relationship between students' sense of belonging and school satisfaction. This association can be explained by the positive effect of relatedness with teachers and peers. A caring relationship and acceptance in the school environment, particularly positive relationships with peers and teachers, act as major contributors to students' sense of school belongingness. Teacher and peer relationships are also important factors in promoting students' sense of school satisfaction. Studies have shown that student-teacher relationships and peer support account for the highest amount of variance in school satisfaction (Jiang, Huebner, & Siddall, 2013; Zullig, Huebner, & Patton, 2011). 'Dislike of school' is pervasive among students in Bangladesh and is considered one of the major reasons for dropout (Ahmed et al., 2007, p. 34). Therefore, this finding is particularly important in the context of Bangladesh, as it indicates the important role of school belonging in promoting school satisfaction and reducing dropout.

From the discussion above, it is seen that despite the cultural and contextual differences, the nature of Bangladeshi students' school belongingness in relation to grade level, academic achievement and school satisfaction is quite consistent with studies conducted in the western context. As need to belong is an innate and universal motivation of human being (Baumeister, 2012; Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Maslow, 1943), such similarities of findings irrespective of cultural context are not surprising. However, students' need to belong is required to be nurtured and gratified by the school social environment composed of parents, teachers and peers (Habib, 2015; Maslow, 1943; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Given that Bangladesh particularly possesses a collectivistic cultural context where social interdependence and achieving social belongingness are considered very important (see Diener, Diener, & Diener, 1995; Sapyta, 1997), the wider social and cultural context of Bangladesh might have an influence in shaping the perception of students' feeling of school belongingness.

Conclusion

The study findings reveal that junior secondary school students begin to experience lack of belongingness with school as they approach higher grades. This trend is seen in terms of the dropout rate in Bangladesh which tends to increase with school grade level (BANBEIS, 2013). The study did not confirm that the lack of a sense of

belonging is the sole reason for school dropout in Bangladesh. However, it underscores the importance to consider the rather neglected phenomenon of school belonging in the educational endeavour to reduce dropout.

The present study confirmed that students' sense of belonging is positively linked to their academic achievement and positive feelings about school in Bangladesh. These findings have practical implications for enhancing attendance, attainment, and classroom engagement and for reducing dropout rates in Bangladeshi secondary schools. The core components of Bangladeshi students' sense of belonging are similar to those found in other places and can thus be enhanced through similar measures, such as improving school social environments and implementing programmes for building peer and student-teacher relationships.

The study findings recommend schools to focus on the social climate and create a culture of positive interaction and interdependence within the school community, especially during junior secondary level when students encounter different types of transitions at both the developmental (e.g. pubertal onset) and school levels (e.g. intense academic competition). In order to help students to successfully overcome these significant transitions, their sense of belonging to school has to be nurtured. This culture of school belonging can be developed by acknowledging every student as a valued member of the school community, providing individual attention to those who are in need of it, and fostering warmth and care towards students. Schools can create social bonds among classmates by creating a culture of academic cooperation instead of competition. Teachers can also nurture students' belongingness through classroom learning activities (e.g. cooperative group work), a range of co-curricular activities (e.g. sociodramatic play) and observing different events important for students (e.g. birthdays). To facilitate the students' school belongingness, teacher training programmes could also include the topic of students' psycho-emotional issues such as belongingness.

The present findings have implications for future research. The study underscores the importance of understanding the issue of school satisfaction and academic achievement from a psychosocial perspective such as school belongingness. It opens a way to explore schooling experience from students' perspective in the south Asian cultural context including Bangladesh. Future researchers might examine if there any specific cultural components is related to sense of school belonging. Researchers might also investigate the issues of absenteeism and dropout in relation to students' sense of belonging to school.

The present study has a number of limitations. First, it did not identify students whose attendance was irregular. Thus, the level of school belongingness experienced by students with irregular attendance has not been observed. Second, the study did not include children who had special needs, students from rural, other urban cities, ethnic backgrounds and those from marginalised community groups, thus limiting the study's representation of adolescent groups in Bangladesh. Third, although the internal consistency, item-total correlation and factors were highly consistent with those found in previous research, we believe that narratives of school belonging experiences from students might provide a better understanding of school belonging in the Bangladeshi socio-economic and cultural context.

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