Do I belong in this school? Examining the role of school connectedness in student motivation and engagement

Keywords: school belonging, school connectedness, motivation, engagement, self-determination theory

Background:

When students perceive their schools to be caring and safe and when they feel a sense of belonging, they are more likely to learn better. Empirical studies have shown that school connectedness is associated with a wide range of adaptive outcomes such as higher levels of motivation, engagement, achievement, and adjustment. However, research on school connectedness has often confounded it with related variables such as social support and sense relatedness with parents, teachers, and peers. Although undoubtedly closely related to each other, school connectedness may have incremental predictive validity over and above other measures of social support. Moreover, additional research is needed to understand the theoretical mechanism that links school connectedness to optimal learning outcomes.

Research issue

The aim of this study therefore is to examine how school connectedness is associated with students’ motivation (amotivation, controlled motivation, and autonomous motivation) and engagement even after taking into account the effects of relatedness with parents, teachers, and peers.

We used self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) to understand the potential theoretical mechanisms that link school connectedness to optimal learning (operationalized as higher levels of autonomous motivation and academic engagement and lower levels of amotivation). In particular, we posited that school connectedness would facilitate the fulfillment of the basic psychological need for relatedness. The fulfillment of this need could account for why and how school connectedness is associated with optimal learning.

Overview of the methods

We recruited secondary school students from the Philippines (n=1109) to answer surveys that tapped into school connectedness, sense of relatedness (with parents, teachers, and peers), basic psychological need fulfilment, motivation (autonomous motivation, controlled motivation, and amotivation) and engagement (cognitive, emotional, and behavioral).

Path analysis was conducted. A model which posited school connectedness as the predictor variable, motivation and engagement as outcomes, and the fulfillment of the basic psychological need for relatedness as the mediator was posited. We looked at several indices of fit to examine
the suitability of the model. We also controlled for the effects of relatedness with parents, teachers, and peers in order to determine the unique association of school connectedness with motivation and engagement.

**Results and Implications**

Results indicated that school connectedness positively predicted the fulfillment of the basic psychological need for relatedness ($\beta=.58, p<.001$) students’ autonomous motivation ($\beta=.43, p<.001$), controlled motivation ($\beta=.31, p<.001$), and academic engagement ($\beta=.13, p<.001$). These results were partially mediated by the fulfillment of the basic psychological need for relatedness. The mediation effect was further tested by 1000 bootstraps and we found the indirect effect to be statistically significant. These results were robust even after taking into account the effects of relatedness with parents, teachers, and peers which were also found to be important predictors of motivation and engagement.

A surprising finding was that school connectedness was also positively related to controlled motivation. Controlled motivation is usually regarded as a maladaptive outcome in the Western context. However, in Asian collectivist cultures, autonomous motivation and controlled motivation are more closely related to each other. This was supported by the correlation of $r=.82 (p<.001)$ which we found in this study.

Self-determination theory’s emphasis on need fulfillment as a key mechanism in promoting optimal outcomes was supported. Students who felt they belong in school were more likely to have their need for relatedness fulfilled. This need fulfillment, in turn, was positively associated with optimal motivation and engagement.

**Relevance to the conference theme**

This paper is aligned with the strand “growing innovative culture for school change.” It emphasizes the importance of school connectedness. This is distinct from just having good relationships with parents, teachers and peers suggesting that school connectedness may an important socio-cultural factor in its own right. It also has implications for school leaders and policy makers whose mandate is to promote optimal student learning. Schools cannot just focus on promoting the cognitive skills and competence in core academic subjects. They also need to promote cultures that make students feel that they belong.