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The Need to Belong and Student Grades: Is There a Correlation?

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The Need to Belong and Student Grades: Is There a Correlation?

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Abstract

The research examined whether adolescent's need for belonging is correlated with their first semester grade point averages. This exploratory research will attempt to assess middle school students sense of belongingness through the use of the *Psychological Sense of School Membership Scale* (Goodenow, 1993) against the grade point average. The purpose of this research is to assess if belongingness and academic achievement correspond with one another in a sample of 50 sixth-grade students. Results indicate that there is no relationship between sense of belonging and grade point average $r(48) = .205$, $p < .05$.

The Need to Belong and Students Grades: Is there a Correlation?

As counselors, teachers, and other school personnel spend a large part of their time contributing to the growth of adolescents, the link between relationships and academic achievement should be investigated. Student's academic interest, success or failure is not influenced by only individual intelligences or abilities, but also by situational and contextual factors (Goodenow, 1993). For instance, interpersonal relationships that provide students with a sense of belongingness can contribute to the motivation of children's interest in school (Deci, 1992). Thus, supportive relationships are likely to enhance educational and personal development. They can also have impact on the lifestyle of a child by affecting overall adaptation in later life (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Sharf, 2004). Given that schools are the primary place where most adolescents spend their time, the opportunity to experience connectedness or a sense of belonging should be felt by all students. Unfortunately, this is not the case for some students. Adolescents who do not experience positive peer and adult connectedness are often at risk for academic failure (Goodenow, 1993; Osterman, 2000). According to Baumeister and Leary (1995), "The desire for interpersonal attachment may well be one of the most far-reaching an integrative constructs currently available to understand human nature. If psychology has erred with regard to the need to belong, in our view, the error has not been to deny the existence of such a motive so much as to under-appreciate it" (p.522).

Review of Literature

The following is a review of literature pertaining to the topic of belonging. In examining the variable of "belongingness" it is important to understand how this

construct pertains to the quality of interpersonal interactions among students, teachers, and peers (Goodenow, 1993). Several educational researchers (Goodenow, 1992; Osterman, 2000 & Weiner, 1990) have called for further empirical studies on the association between social-context variables and motivational and educational processes. The following review of literature discusses the importance of the adolescent need to belong, school climate, motivation, student's relationships, variables affecting feelings of belongingness, perception of self, consequences of not having the need to belong met, and benefits of belonging are discussed. Furthermore, variables such as self-concept, socioeconomic status, gender, ethnicity, and learning disabilities are also discussed to help conceptualize individual perceptions and experiences that influence student's need to belong.

Importance of the adolescent need to belong

Researchers have argued that many of our basic social-cognitive processes are likely to have evolved for the specific purpose of developing, facilitating, and maintaining interpersonal relationships (Reis, 2000). Legitimate needs for interpersonal support are especially important to early adolescents. This period of extensive psychosocial growth and development happens to be very significant during the stage of adolescence (Braddock & McPartland, 1992) as it involves growth and exploration, which could easily result in reliance on supportive relationships. For example, when an adolescent is exploring their identity, separate from their family, it would be important to consider how they may rely more heavily on friendships and non-kin relationships for support and development. Therefore, considering the social contexts that influence adolescents psychosocial growth and support are important. Social environments such as

school can influence perceptions and meanings of adolescent development (Braddock & McPartland, 1992). That is, the developments and satisfaction of adolescent needs are influenced by the school environment. This developmental perspective helps researchers and school personnel conceptualize the importance of the school environment and how it affects the emerging needs of adolescents.

School climate

In order for students to develop a sense of belonging as a member of their school community, the structural-functional issues of the school environment should be considered. Recognizing the human need to belong and the importance of supportive environments is a collaborative function of the entire school community. The term “community” defined by Solomon, Battstich, Kim & Watson (1997) is used interchangeably with the concept of belongingness. Belonging in a school community means to experience friendliness from others, feeling a sense of being personally valued, and participating in shared educational goals (Goodenow, 1991). While there are different characteristics of organizations that make up communities, as Furman (1998) explains, a community is not present until the members of the community experience feelings of belongingness, cohesiveness, and security. Communities that provide opportunities to satisfy the need to belong contribute to students being motivated.

When school faculties are operating in supportive manners, such as offering students the opportunity to express personal opinions and learning intelligences, the opportunity to discover that others care for them will foster (Battistich, Solomon, Kim, Watson, & Schaps, 1995). On the other hand, when the faculty's priorities are not congruent with students needs, an unsupportive school community could develop.

Factors of an unsupportive school environment that could impact the changing needs of students during early adolescence are: less variety within the class of learning (e.g. limited instruction for different intelligences), stricter standards, fewer opportunities for student self-efficacy, increased use of ability grouping, more teacher control of classroom assignments, less attention to cognitively challenging activities and more emphasis on memorization and recall (Eccles, Lord, & Midgley, 1991).

A common contributing factor that could result in an unsupportive school environment is the pressures of fulfilling state requirements. Deci, Spiegel, Ryan, Koestner, and Kauffman (1982) identified this issue in a study of pressure and control of administrators or systems in general with two groups of teachers, one that was reminded of the pressures and responsibilities of meeting standards, and another that was not provided with pressures. Results indicated that teachers who were put under pressure demonstrated teaching styles that were less supportive to their students. This study helped conceptualize the systems perspective of curriculum complexity and how a teachers approach can produce different effects on the learning environment and student outcomes. While the pressure from the state and administrators cannot be controlled, all school members (i.e. teachers and support staff) still have an impact on communication and cooperation throughout the school (Hernandez & Seem, 2004).

Another structural source that has been identified as an influence a teacher's classroom mannerisms is the impact of tracking (assigning students to classes' based on their achievement levels). Many researchers have attempted to understand tracking or "ability grouping" throughout the years. Most reviewers of the research on tracking have concluded tracking typically enhances achievement in the upper tracks at the expense of

the academic growth of students in the lower tracks (Braddock, 1990b; Hoffer, 1992; Oakes, 1985, 1989, 1992a). Lucas (1999) reported evidence suggesting that students in low-track classes received poor quality teaching (e.g. less experienced or able teachers) in unsupportive learning climates, and experienced serious inequality on factors that are less ambiguous measures of opportunities to learn (e.g. different course content; Gamoran, 1992). He also explained that tracking impacts student's self-concepts, interests, and overall perceptions of their school experience. According to Schweiker-Marra and Pula (2005), more than ninety-five percent of middle school and high school in North America employ some form of academic tracking.

One group of researches (Trautwein, Ludtke, Marsh, Koller, & Baumert, 2006) researched the effects of tracking in a German school system by testing two settings in which the track levels differed. The variables used for this project were math achievement, math self-concept, math interest, and math school grade. Results indicated the student's math concept and math interests differed as a result of the achievement of their reference group, their own achievement, and their teacher-assigned grades. Thus, student's understanding of his/her own status in the system of tracking affects how they experience his/her classrooms, and how teachers perceive and interact with them.

Perception of self

The experience of belonging has been associated with more positive attitudes towards self (i.e. self-concept) and others (Lerner & Kruger, 1997). Self-concept is defined as how a person perceives themselves through experiences and how they interpret their environment (Shavelson Hubner, & Stanton, 1976). For example, when students recognize support and respect in their classroom, they may tend to feel confident about

their academic skills. The development of self-concept has been conceptually linked to academic motivation and self-efficacy (Learner & Kruger, 1997). Feeling good about one's self and willing to accept and satisfy one's own needs while being aware and concerned about surroundings are characteristics of personal and social development also known as "self-concept" (Deci et. al. 1991). That is, if a student's need to feel belong is satisfied, they are more likely to have a positive perception of their surroundings and relationships.

One dimension of self-concept is perceived social competence, which is a person's perception of their ability to build relationships (Van Lieshout, Aken, & Seyen, 1991). One would think if a student is socially competent (has good social skills), they are far more likely than students with poor social skills to (accurately) perceive themselves as belonging, and as being accepted and respected in school or in other social contexts. Although, according to Goodenow's (1991) perspective, belonging is not only a result of competency, it is also a result of the fit between the person and the group. In some environments, a child will not feel accepted or part of the community, regardless of the levels of their "social competence" (Goodenow, 1991). Unlike social competency, belonging focuses on the individual-in context rather than the individual's skills alone.

One other dimension of self-concept is academic self-efficacy. Academic self-efficacy is a self-perception of confidence to effectively complete school work and accomplish challenging academic tasks (Bandura, 1977). Clearly, students with a positive perception of academic self-efficacy are far more likely to have better grades than students with poor academic self-efficacy. According to Vallerand, Fortier, and Guay (1997), two factors that contribute to student's academic motivation are 1) support

from teachers and parents for autonomous learning and 2) academic self-efficacy. Examples of support for autonomous learning is when a teacher provides encouragement rather than discouragement, helps students overcome learning challenges, and provides relationships to foster academic motivation and engagement.

Although there may be an association between self-concept and academic achievement, Ray and Elliott (2006) found that self-concept may not be directly related to academic achievement. According to teacher ratings, the students in their study with relatively undeveloped academic competence did not differ significantly in their levels of self-concept in comparison to students with relatively proficient academic and behavior competence as judged by their teachers. These findings suggest instead of considering academic achievement to affect general self-concept, perhaps academic-related self-perceptions have more of a direct effect on achievement. For instance, academic self-concept refers to specific areas of study which focuses on a person's ability to accomplish and achieve goals allowing them to succeed in a classroom environment (Rogers & Gottlieb, 1999). Other studies (Byrne, 1986; Bachman & O'Malley, 1986; Muruyama, Rubin & Kingsbury, 1981) have concluded no causal predominance between self-concept and academic achievement. Although self-perceptions and academic achievement are not suggested to be directly related to each other, a person's overall self-concept could be effected by their academic self-concept. For example, in a recent study of academic motivation (Scheel & Gonzalez, 2007), researchers purposed students who have higher self-efficacy (a belief in their ability to succeed academically) tend to be more motivated in school. Even though individuals maintain self-efficacy beliefs, with respect to different domains, such as academics, social relationships, and extracurricular activities

(Bandura et al., 1977), it appears as though student's beliefs about their perceived support (e.g. belongingness) strongly influence their own confidence in being successful in school.

Belonging and motivation

The theory of motivation results from complex dynamics that include both individual and contextual variables (Pintrich & Schunk, 1996). One important individual element of motivation is belonging. According to Weiner (1990), belonging may be a key influence of motivation. Motivational constructs such as belongingness must be brought into play when examining school motivation (Weiner, 1995). In an extensive review of literature, Baumeister and Leary (1995) determined the need to belong is a fundamental human motivation. They have theorized that over evolutionary time, human beings are fundamentally and innately motivated by a need to belong. This need to feel belonged is defined as “a pervasive drive to form and maintain at least a minimum quantity of lasting, positive, and significant interpersonal relationships” (p. 497). In order to satisfy this need, relationships need should be positive and consistent within in a safe and supportive environment Baumeister and Leary (1995). Thus, the term human “motivation”, when applied to relationships, could be stimulated by the need to belong.

Motivation is among the most powerful determinates of student's achievement in school (Hardre, Crowson, Debacker, & White, 2007). Student motivation can be conceptualized as a process that is stimulated if the individual human need for belonging is met. When considering an adolescents need to belong within the context of a school, it would be reasonable to state that until this need is satisfied, the motivation for learning may be difficult. Perhaps one of the most well-known categorizations of this idea is

Maslow's (1970) hierarchy of basic needs. This hierarchy illustrates belongingness as being one of the five basic needs that human beings have. Maslow's theory argued that our need to belong or to be part of a social network is universal, and provides humans the ability to satisfy other needs (i.e. self-actualization). In this perspective, everyone has an innate need to belong, so until basic social needs for belonging are met, higher motives (e.g. learning) will not be satisfied. Other factors that contribute to student's motivation are 1) opportunities for success (e.g. extra help from teachers or peer tutors), 2) relevance of school work to current interests and future goals (e. g. curriculum that is associated to real-world situations and a wide-range of career alternatives, 3) a caring and supportive environment (e.g. positive and supportive relationships between teachers and students), 4) help with personal problems (e.g. availability of support systems and integration social services with social learning teams) Braddock and McPartland (1994). When a school environment stimulates motivation in its students, the production of broad learning, adjustment, and personal developmental occurs (Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier & Ryan, 1991). For example, students are more intrinsically motivated when they are connected to their school (Deci et al., 1991), which is positively correlated with achievement (Connell & Wellborn, 1990; Gottfried, 1985, 1990; Haywood & Burke, 1977; Lloyd & Barenblatt, 1984). Therefore, students who perceive the interpersonal context of the school to be supportive will display more intrinsic motivation and perceived competence.

Research by Goodenow (1990) has shown that "belonging" effects student's motivation of involvement and academic achievement. Her research, on the sense of belonging and its relationship to academic motivation involved data from 612 fifth through eight-grade middle school students. The data provided from Goodenow (1990)

suggests that psychological membership (as represented by belongingness) is significantly related to motivation and academic achievement. More recent research on this theory was supported by Osterman (2000). His extensive review of the literature determined there is sufficient evidence to conclude that students who experience a sense of belonging are more highly motivated and committed to school. He adopted his theory by examining the motivational perspective between the organizational practices of the school and performance of students within the school environment. He defined the motivational perspective as “the need for relatedness, the need to experience belongingness or the sense of community”. Research by Hardre, Crowson, Debacker, and White (2007) supports Osterman’s (2000) theory. Hardre’s (2007) results investigated variables influencing academic achievement among eighteen public high schools and found that supportive school climates contributed to engagement and academic motivation. The research suggests the need to belong is an important factor to consider when measuring student’s academic motivation.

Student relationships

Given that student’s identification with peers dramatically increases during adolescence (Goodenow, 1994), it is likely that peer relationships have an impact on academic performance. Austin and Draper (1984) have contributed to the understanding of the relationship among peer acceptance and academic achievement in middle childhood. After gathering data on peer acceptance and rejection from 145 elementary school children, they found that children who were above average in achievement were significantly more often considered sociable than rejected or isolated students. Perceived social support from peers seems to have been associated with motivational outcomes such

as the pursuit of academic goals, and school and classroom interest (Wentzel, 1997). Green et al. (1980) also supported this idea when they conducted a study of 116 third graders in five rural classrooms. The results of students self-report, peer-reports, and teacher's reports indicate that there was a high correlation between academic achievement and positive peer and teacher relationships. These studies among others (DeRosie, Kupersmidt, & Patterson 1994; Muma, 1965; Wentzel & Caldwell, 1997; Wetzel, 1997) indicate that academic achievement is highly correlated with peer acceptance or belongingness. While many students care about the quality or quantity of their peer relationships at school, many do not consider themselves to belong to the school community. In Wentzel and Asher's (1995) research, they examined the relation between sociometric status (determined by peer nominations) and academic adjustment and found that students who were perceived as "rejected" did not have a positive academic reputation, were less interested in school, and more likely to display undesirable forms of classroom behavior more often than "average" students.

Parental involvement

The effects of supportive relationships, such as parental involvement have been of interest to researchers. A recent meta- analysis of 41 studies found a significant relationship between parental school involvement and academic achievement for African-American students, Urban students, and White students (Jeynes, 2005). Four hundred and eighty parent-rated interviews on autonomy, support, involvement and structure revealed significant relationships between parental involvement and student's academic achievement (Grolnick, 1991; Grolnick, Ryan, & Deci, 1989, Grolnick). Other examples of parental involvement could include but not be limited to; advocating for their children

(e.g. attending parent teacher conference), voting for school budget, being part of the Parent Teacher Association (P.T.A.), attending extra-curricular activities, interacting with their child at home, offering guidance on educational or personal decisions, encouraging consistency (e.g. homework time), and attending school events.

Another study (Vallerand, 1997) with high school students also reflected Grolnick's et al. (1989) results. Vallerand's found that the more supportive the students perceived their parents to be, the more self-determined were their motivational profiles. Parental involvement is associated with student improvement in a variety of facets such as; academic performance, attitude and behavior, school adjustment and engagement, and attendance (Simons-Morton, 2003). It appears that parents who have commitment to their children, set high standards, and consistently monitor their progress will have children with higher achievement. Thus, the effects of perceived support from the parents parallel their child's success in school.

Teacher-student relations

Teachers serve as significant role models to students during their academic careers. They interact with and work alongside students serving as influential facilitators of perceived support. Teacher support refers to student's perceptions that their teacher cares for them and is supportive of them (Trickett & Moss, 1973). Students who reported a strong sense of belonging in their classrooms experienced greater warmth and supportiveness from their teachers. This support is demonstrated by spending more time talking and listening about the student's personal issues (Pianta & Walsh, 1996; Solomon, Battstich, Kim, & Watson 1997). When students feel attached to their school environment on a personal level, with the perception that their teachers genuinely care

about them, they are more likely to engage more fully in socializing and academic work (Braddock & McPartland, 1992). This includes a higher sense of motivation (Goodenow, 1993), likeliness to have higher achievement (Trickett & Moss, 1973), and a tendency to develop a higher sense of confidence (Ryan & Grolnick, 1986). A growing body of research (Goodenow, 1993; Turner, Meyer, Midgley & Patrick, 2003; Wentzel, 1997) indicates that teacher's support plays a significant role in student achievement. A recent study (Patrick, Kaplan, & Ryan, 2007) added to the growing evidence that student's perception of the quality of their student-teacher relationship is strongly associated with their adaptive motivation and engagement in academics. Their study examined six-hundred and two fifth grade students' perceptions of the classroom social environment (e.g. teacher's emotional support, interaction, mutual respect, and academic support) and found that when students feel that these variables are satisfied, they are more likely to engage in task-related interactions. Another study found that perceived teacher support and feelings of school belonging significantly increased academic achievement for a sample of low socio-economic African American students during middle school (Guttman & Midgley, 2000). Therefore, perceptions of the teachers support influences student's beliefs about themselves and their schoolwork, and these beliefs, in turn, affect the nature and extent of their engagement. These associations are likely because feelings of belongingness by the teacher encourage student's investment in school which helps the child feel supported and resilient to school challenges.

In an exploratory study (Jones & Gerig, 1994) of student-teacher interactions, results indicated that being in a safe and accepting environment where the students don't feel "singled out" by the teachers helps with the students comfort level within the school.

According to Rogers (1994), when students were asked about teacher qualities that are most influential for student's success, teacher's concern and support was mentioned.

Unfortunately, not all students have the opportunity to develop bonds with their teachers. Delpit (1988) discussed the other end of the spectrum for those students who are at-risk for feeling socially estranged by their teachers. He explained that disadvantaged students are at-risk for not feeling satisfied with their relationships while in school and are less likely to develop a positive relationship with their teachers. Furthermore, Delpit (1988) added that teacher-student relations with differences in social class, ethnicity, communication patterns and child-rearing practices were factors that contributed to misunderstandings and dissatisfied relationships (Delpit, 1988). In these studies, it has been clear that teacher's relationships with students have an important effect on student's motivation and academic success.

Variables affecting feelings of belongingness

Being part of a supportive network reduces stress, whereas being deprived of constant and supportive relationships have far-reaching negative consequences. Particularly, when we think of adolescents facing the challenge of acquiring resources to fulfill their needs for belonging, sometimes they face individual differences that inhibit fulfillment of their needs. Difference, according to Hernandez and Seem (2004) refers to individual characteristics of a person that contributes and impacts how one perceives and experiences life and how one is perceived and treated by society. Thus, the ability to acquire a persons' need to belong is impacted by individual and situational factors.

Gender

Studies have shown there is difference between gender perceptions of belongingness; females tend to have a more positive view on school than males (Nichols & Good, 1998). This finding could be a function of the socialization process of females having more relational practice in school than males. According to Galambos (2004), adolescent girls have a stronger interest with maintaining meaningful and nurturing relationships, resulting in a higher number of relationships than their male counterparts (Galambos, 2004). Even though research suggests adolescent girls are more likely to outwardly express a desire to have meaningful relationships, gender differences should not overshadow the fact that belongingness is important to the mental health of boys and girls (Newman, Newman, & Lohman, 2007).

Socio-economic status

Another variable that may impinge on child's ability to acquire their need to feel belongingness is one of a homeless child. Children from homeless families often do not have the opportunity to establish supportive networks because of the frequent geographical moves (Daniels, 1992). The tremendous level of stress and personal frustration felt by the parents day-to-day stressors results in the children to feel a lack of support and belonging with their parents (Eddowes, 1993). Consequently, they are unable to satisfy personal connections that are vital to satisfy the needs associated with adolescent developmental level. With regard to satisfying needs of a child, Maslow's (1970) hierarchy of basic needs explains if the most proponent needs group, psychological needs (e.g. body's need for food, sleep, water, and oxygen) and safety needs (e.g. security, and protection) are not being met, a persons conscious will be

occupied by the efforts of striving towards satisfaction of these needs, while the less proponent needs (i.e. belongingness) are suppressed. Thus, a child struggling to have his/her basic needs met will probably feel deprived of belongingness to a supportive environment. Although, according to research, the school environment may provide a sense of hope in restoring a sense of purpose for a low-income family. Timberlake and Sabatino (1994) explored the impact of attendance on self-esteem and loneliness for homeless children, and reported that school attendance is a critical variable in improving homeless children's low self-esteem and sense of loneliness. The researchers commented that a homeless child's school attendance and a connection to the school environment provides structure, stability, relationships, and normalization of everyday life, which results in the development of social support, increased self-esteem, and feelings of belongingness (Timberlake & Sabatino, 1994).

Minorities

Given the rapidly increase of diverse students in schools; it is important to consider the nature of minority students' perceptions of belonging. For some minority students, personal and ethnic identity can conflict with the majority culture, which subsequently affects their academic performance. Nichol's (2006) contributed to the conceptualization of minority perception of belongingness. Her study in a middle school found that the majority culture (Hispanic students) reported a higher sense of belongingness than the minority culture of White, African-American, or Native-American students. This study suggests that a student's perception of belongingness is influenced by the culture of the school and if they feel a part of the majority culture. These findings were supported in prior research by Goodenow (1993) when she

discovered members of the majority group in the predominantly Hispanic school showed significant higher levels of belonging than members of the other ethnic minority groups. Consequently the “minority cultures”, such as the ones described in these studies, may be in danger of a more negative view of the school community and subsequently lack a sense of belonging.

A recent study (Capps, 2004) complimented the work of Goodenow (1993) which revealed students of minority decent who attended a low-performing school tended to have an even lower sense of belonging than their counterparts at high performing schools. Osborne (1999) discovered some African American adolescents who felt part of the minority culture compensated by “disowning” the characteristics of the dominant group in an effort to preserve their own sense of ethnic identity. This denial or disapproval of majority norms and values could result in a weaker sense of belonging to the larger community, and thus result in lower academic performance. Also, consistent with prior studies of minorities, Griffith (1999) argued if a student is a part of the majority culture of the school they are more likely to feel connected to the school culture than “minority” students, regardless of their status outside of school.

Students' with learning disabilities are another group of individuals that may be confronted with the challenge of feeling a sense of belongingness. Some research indicates that inclusion and support may have particular importance for students with learning disabilities. Sabornie, (1994) found middle school-aged students with learning disabilities received elevated self-reported levels of loneliness, anonymity, victimization, and lower levels of school participation. Extending beyond their personal challenges, Lorsbach and Frymier (1992) reported students with learning disabilities are more likely

to experience socio-economic challenges, greater instability, and more frequent tragedies. Consequently, it appears that the “fit” between the social, developmental, and educational needs of students with learning disabilities needs special attention. Silva and Morgado (2004) showed that factors including school climate and curriculum design contribute significantly to the academic success of students with special education needs. These findings suggest that supported school climates function as a substantive element for a successful learning environment, especially to those students with higher needs. Moreover, students with learning disabilities are found to possess less developed social skills, which would seem to be crucial to achieving adequate social support.

Consequences of not having needs met

During the adolescent years, students acquire behavior competencies that influence and shape their future social and academic outcomes for school. An outcome of considerable importance is the child's ability to foster and maintain meaningful relationships. Unfortunately, the need for human connections are often ignored or even consciously avoided by at-risk adolescents (Parker & Asher, 1987). Instead, it is often the human physiological flight response that gains control and drives adolescents to seek isolation during challenging times (Taylor, 1989). When the support is missing, the isolation from others increases the probability of progression from typical youth dissonance toward more dangerous consequences that can include lifelong social and emotional disturbances (Dahlberg, 1998). On the basis of Baumeister and Leary's (1995) analysis, they believe “the weight of evidence suggests that the lack of belongingness is a primary cause of a wide range of psychological and behavioral problems” (p.511). If the child's ability to establish positive interpersonal relationships is compromised, or they

feel as though they are not apart of the school, it has been found that there are social adjustment difficulties. Such difficulties include juvenile delinquency, school dropout, and poor mental health (Parker & Asher, 1987). The result is lowered achievement levels (Nelson, Covin, & Smith, 1996).

Researchers of school membership have supported the notion that a supportive school is an essential ingredient in the school life of the successful at-risk student. Wehlage, Rutter, Smith, Lesko and Fernandez's (1989) study of drop-outs purported when school membership combines with engagement, the at-risk students' academic achievement and personal development increases. This research supports Finn's (1989) participation-identification model that related the concept of belonging to drop-out behavior. Finn's model explains that when students feel connected or can identify with their school, they are more likely to develop a sense of belongingness and commitment to school. When a sense of belonging is not fulfilled in students, they are more likely to drop out (Finn, 1989). Researchers have identified other social adjustment difficulties within students who feel disconnected from school. Hunt (2002) found that school violence and drop out is significantly associated with school connectedness (defined as peer and teacher relationships). That is, when a student does not feel welcomed or personally valued at school, they are more likely to have difficulty sustaining commitment and interest with the tasks and/or relationships associated with the environment. Rejected adolescents appear to be at a greater risk for dropping out of school, which may represent the ultimate form of behavioral disengagement from school (Hymel, Comfort, Schonert-Reichel, & McDougall, 1996). Consequently, human behavior and development is affected by relationship contexts, which identifies the

school environment as a key component of belongingness. Educators, who do not recognize the importance of building connections with students, refuse to acknowledge that individual differences in achievement potential could contribute to the academic and social failure of students.

The identification of school-wide prevention programs that promote school engagement seems imperative due to the drop-out rates. Recent estimates of school drop-out rates ranged from 11.2 percent (US Department of Education, 2000) to as high as one-third of all students who start high school (Vallerand, Fortier, & Guay, 1997). Based on these statistics, it appears that traditional academic interventions are not addressing broader contexts of the school such as personal, social, and emotional development; which could help curb rates of students at-risk. In a study (Aspy, Oman, Vesely, McLeroy, Rodin, & Marshall, 2004) that investigated risk behaviors, youth who possessed assets of connectedness with peers and teacher were less likely to be involved in risky behavior (e.g. dropping-out, skipping school). Thus, if rejection is associated with deviant attitudes and behavior in adolescents, then the student's adjustment difficulties may more appropriately be interpreted as failure of the school climate not satisfying the need of the student.

Benefits of belonging

A sense of belonging leads to increased motivation, positive social behavior and academic achievement (Wentzel, Barry, & Caldwell, 2004), and prevents students from dropping out of school (Anderman, 2000). Feelings belongingness or acceptance helps foster healthy emotional patterns, such as, happiness, motivation, fulfillment, and serenity (Osterman, 2000). Some examples of how educators could help foster a sense of

belongingness with their students are; taking the time to know students names, recognize their accomplishments, and provide academic and social-emotional support. Moreover, experiencing a sense of belongingness to the school's community can build student's well-being as a learner. Schutz (1966) further hypothesized that issues of "inclusion" must be addressed before full attention can be devoted to the task at hand.

Adolescent's sense of acceptance by peers and engagement with positive relationships is significantly associated with higher academic achievement than children who were less on task and engaged in less positive peer interaction (Green, Forehanf, Beck, & Vosk, 1980). For example, interview and questionnaire methods on relationships and students competence in school have indicated that parents and teachers who are more involved with their children results in higher motivation, and self-determination in school (Grolnick & Ryan, 1989). In other words, interpersonal relationships that provide students with a sense of belongingness can be powerful motivators to children's interest in school. In fact, valued participation in the community, fulfilling the needs for interpersonal support and sense of belonging are often stronger than other motives of adolescence (Goodenow, 1991). Valued participation in the school community is also associated with a high sense of belonging and results in higher motivation and academic engagement (Goodenow & Grady, 1994).

Purpose of current study

The purpose of this study is to determine if adolescents need to belong is correlated with their academic success. This study focuses on sixth grade students. Middle school students were selected because research has previously found that school climate and instructional practices are poorly matched to the developmental needs of this

age group (Eccles & Midgley, 1990). Corresponding to Wehlage et. al.'s (1989) theory of school membership, it was predicted that students who scored high on the PSSM scale would have higher grade point averages.

Method

Participants

A total of fifty sixth-grade students volunteered (22 males, 28 females) to participate in this research study. The participants made up 19% of the total sixth grade population. Individuals participating in this study ranged from 11 to 12 years of age. Students were asked to read and comprehend the PSSM scale individually, thus learning-disabled students were excluded from the study. The ethnic breakdown of the participants was as follows: 2 Asian, 4 Hispanic, 1 Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander, 33 Caucasian, 4 African American and 6 "Other" participants.

School District

The research took place in a suburban middle school located in Western New York. The racial composition of the school is .4% American Indian or Alaskan Native, 9% African American, 11 % Asian, 1.4 % Hispanic, 58%, Caucasian, 82%. The total enrollment for the 2007 school year was 810. The gender composition of the school was 140 boys and 126 girls. The school serves students from predominantly lower-and middle-class families. According to district records, approximately 34% of the students are eligible for free or reduced lunches. The community is considered multicultural, however, the population is predominately white. The surrounding community is relatively large with the population of approximately 95,000. There are thirteen elementary schools, four middle schools, and four high schools within the district. A household in this

community is estimated to have a median income of approximately \$52,000 per year.

Procedures

The participants were each given a consent form (see Appendix A) to take home and return, signed by a parent or guardian, to allow them to participate in the study. Of one hundred and fifty permission forms distributed, fifty were signed and returned. The administration of the PSSM scale (see Appendix B) took place during participant's study hall. The validity of the PSSM scale ranges from .71 to .88, the reliability is .78 (Hagborg, W., 1998) and the Chronbach's alpha was .922. This implies that the items on the PSSM scales were highly correlated with each other. In addition to scale reliability, criterion validity was examined by the student's first quarter grades. Students were given directions along with some example items before responding to the PSSM scale. After participants completed the PSSM scale, they detached their consent forms (see Appendix C) from the PSSM scale and placed them in two separate piles. This ensured student's names were not attached to their responses. A number was placed in the top right corner of each page for data collection purposes. The participant's grade point average for the first quarter was obtained using their student identification numbers. Student identification numbers were given to a secretary who then researched the student's grade point average. Grade point averages were given to the researcher in order of student identification number, not name.

Results

A Pearson correlation was calculated in order to determine if a relationship exists between the sum of the items on the belongingness scale (PSSM) and student's grade

point average. Results indicated that participant's responses to the belongingness scale were not related to their grade point average $r(48) = .205$ $p < .05$.

Correlations

		belong	GPA
belong	Pearson Correlation	1	.205
	Sig. (1-tailed)		.077
	N	50	50
GPA	Pearson Correlation	.205	1
	Sig. (1-tailed)	.077	
	N	50	50

Discussion

The present study examined sixth grade student responses to the PSSM scale and their first semester grade point average to determine if a relationship exists. This study examined if student sense of belonging was related to their first semester grades. It was hypothesized that sense of belongingness and grades are related concepts. Results, however, indicated that sense of belonging and first semester grades do not correspond with each other.

Belongingness has been studied in reference to academic achievement, perceived social support (parents, peers, and teachers), school climate (classroom and overall school structure), motivation, autonomy, extracurricular participation, goal orientation, feelings of alienation, and perceptions of self (Anderman, L., 2003; Anderman & Freeman, 2004; Battistich, Solomon, Watson, & Schaps, 1995; Booker, 2004; Buote, 2001; Eccles & Midgley, 1989; Finn, 1989; Flynn, 1997; Goodenow, 1993; Griffith, 1999; Hagborg, W.

J., 1998; Karcher, 2004; Learner & Kruger, 1997; Marsh, 1992; Nichols, S. 2003, 2006; Osterman, K., 2000, Pintrich, 1992; Roeser, R., Midgley, C., & Urdan, T., 1996; Wehlage, 1989; Wetzel, K., 1998). All of these studies have related student's sense of belonging to numerous academic and psychological aspects of student's educational experiences. For example, belongingness has been linked to children having stronger inner sources, such as, self-esteem (Battistich et al., 1995), intrinsic-motivation (Deci et al., 1991), and autonomy (Gronlneck et al., 1991). These inner sources in turn predict engagement and academic performance (Connell & Wellborn, 1991). Therefore, it is important to consider belongingness and academic achievement together. Exploring the concept of belonging and its relationship and contribution to a broad range of motivational, behavioral, and performance outcomes will help us understand how this independent variable is linked to dependent variables such as personal traits, and situational and contextual factors.

Two recent studies (Booker, 2004; Nichols, 2006) have utilized the PSSM scale to find if there was a relation between academic achievement and belongingness. Both results had indicated that there is no relationship, just as the present study indicated. Though not directly tested in this study, variables such as motivation, participation, and specific interpersonal relationships are likely to have an effect on belonging and academic achievement. However, results from Anderman (2002), Battistich (1995), and Goodenow (1993) have indicated a relationship between academic achievement and belongingness. With respect to belongingness, these studies examined larger populations and included different perceptions of belonging, which provided more insight to how belongingness correlated to academic success. The experience of belongingness is

important at all ages and at all grade levels (Osterman, 2000). However, there could be differences in the strength of the correlation, suggesting that the need for belongingness may vary depending on gender (Nichols & Good, 1998), socio-economic status (Eddowes, 1993), context (Furman, 1998), and ethnicity (Nichols, 2006). Unfortunately, the participants in this study only included a small sample of sixth graders, which limited the possibility of the diverse perceptions that could have been included. Research has also indicated that organizational strategies influence student's sense of belonging (Braddock, 1990b; Deci et al., 1982; Hoffer, 1992; Oakes, 1985, 1989, 1992a) This present research did not address the organizational practices or policies that could have impacted the development of the student's sense of belonging or community in their school.

Perceived support from parents (Grolnick, 1991; Grolnick, Ryan, & Deci, 1989, Grolnick) and teachers (Goodenow, 1993; Turner, Meyer, Midgley & Patrick, 2003; Wentzel, 1997) are important factors to consider when measuring academic achievement. Educators, who do not recognize the importance of building connections with students, refuse to acknowledge that individual differences in achievement potential could contribute to the academic and social failure of students. While peer and family support have an important influence on students academic achievement, teacher support has the most impact on student engagement (Goodenow, 1993; Osterman, 2000; Turner, Meyer, Midgley & Patrick, 2003; Wentzel, 1997). Thus, future studies should examine classroom practices such as, methods of instruction, teacher support, and authority relationships between teachers and students to help researchers understand student's sense of belonging through classroom interactions.

Limitations of the Research

The PSSM scale data and grade point averages were used to quantify belonging and achievement in this study. Although the PSSM scale is psychometrically sound, there are some general problems with survey research. For example, some students may have had difficulty interpreting the contents of the PSSM scale. The vocabulary may have created some confusion for students trying to determine what the statements meant. Additionally, the format of this particular Likert-type scale may have created some perceptual problems. Some statements, primarily short sentences that were close together, did not include student responses. This may imply that student's accidentally skipped these questions because of reading error.

Furthermore, despite the attempt to uphold confidentiality and anonymity, participants in this study may have felt uncomfortable truly expressing their perceptions and feelings about their school. The presence of the researcher may also have contributed to the participant's hesitation in responding genuinely to the statements. This discomfort may have resulted in students responses being more socially desirable than honest.

Although the PSSM scale provided an opportunity for students to rate their perceptions of belonging, the opportunity to elaborate on these perceptions could have been more helpful. An example of this would be to provide a comment section for each statement. However, interpreting the meaning and assessing the complexity of these comments could be challenging.

Variables such as motivation, participation, specific interpersonal relationships, and participation in extra-curricular activities are likely to have an effect on belonging and achievement. However, the present study did not specifically test the relationship

among these variables and student achievement. This study could have benefited from measures other than grade point average since student achievement also includes student's effort, different learning types, personal issues, and/or social/emotional variables.

The students participating in the present study were a very small sample of a large school community. More specifically, these results are limited to first-year middle school students, which may generalize the function and value of social supports. Whereas supportive relationships for first-year middle school students have a particularly strong association with student achievement during this critical year of transition into middle school, the function of social supports may be of significantly different for an adolescent who has progressed through the transition of the new school environment. Therefore, it would be important to consider a larger sample of participants from different grade levels.

Future Research

More studies are needed to explore how students define and perceive belonging. As the review of literature indicated, most students define their perceptions of belonging in terms of their perceived support, academic guidance, relationships with peers and teachers, and their self-concept. However, students may vary on the emphasis they place on these factors. Some may define belonging in relation to their relationships with peers, whereas others may associate feelings of belongingness with their relationships to teachers. Future studies are needed to explore teacher's perceptions about belonging which could be used as a comparison to student perceptions of belonging as a way to further our knowledge about teacher-student relationships.

Longitudinal research is also needed to examine how perceptions of belongingness develop and change over time. It would be interesting to see if belongingness is affected as student's increase in age, change grade level, are exposed to different classroom environments and school structure and have continuous relationships with others. Each of these variables may significantly change over time.

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Appendix A

**Greece Arcadia Middle School
130 Island Cottage Road
Rochester, NY 14612
Statement of Parental Informed Consent**

Dear Parent/Guardian:

My name is Heidi Thompson and I am a counseling intern at Greece Arcadia Middle School and a graduate student pursuing a Master's Degree in Counselor Education at SUNY Brockport. I am completing a research project as a graduate requirement for a degree in Counselor Education from the State University of New York College at Brockport.

The purpose of this research study is to attempt to assess if sixth grade students' sense of belongingness and first quarter grades correspond with each other. Belongingness can be described as a need to develop and maintain satisfying relationships and supportive surroundings while in school. I will be administering a school membership scale to 150 sixth grade students that were chosen at random. This scale consists of 18 items. The results of this instrument will be compared to all of the student's first quarter grades for the 2007-2008 school year.

In order for your child to participate in this study, your informed consent is required. If you want your child to participate in this project, and agree with the statements below, please sign below. You may change your mind at any time and withdraw your child from the study without penalty, even after the study has begun.

I understand that:

1. My child's participation is voluntary and my child has the right to refuse to answer any questions.
2. My child's confidentiality is assured. My child's name will not be written on any documents. If any publication results from this research my child will not be mentioned by name.
3. There are no risks anticipated.
4. My child's participation involves taking a school membership scale.
5. Up to 150 sixth grade students will take part in this study. The results will be used for the completion of a thesis at SUNY Brockport.
6. Data will be kept in a secured, locked filing cabinet in a locked office in the Counseling Office at Greece Arcadia Middle School. All consent forms and documents will be shredded at the end of the fall 2007 semester.
7. This research is not a part of any regular school program and is not being conducted by the school, and my child's participation will not affect her grades.

I am the parent/guardian of _____. I have read and understand the above statements. All my questions about child's participation in this study have been answered to my satisfaction. I agree to my child's participation in this study, realizing my child may withdraw without penalty at any time during the process. Completion of this form indicates my consent to my child's participation.

If you have any questions you may contact:

Student Researcher: Heidi Thompson (585)727-2372

Dr. Thomas Hernandez (585)395-9498

On Site Supervisor: Gary Beikirch (585) 966-3403

Signature of Consent

Date

Appendix B

Demographic Information

What is your gender? (circle one) female male

What is your race or ethnicity? (check one)

- American Indian or Alaska Native
- Asian
- Black or African American
- Hispanic
- Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander
- White
- Other (please specify) _____

Sense of Belonging at School

Directions: Each statement below is one that you could make about your school. For each statement below, please mark one box to indicate how true you believe the statement to be.

	Not True at All	Rarely True	Somewhat True	Mostly True	Completely True
1. I feel like a real part of Arcadia Middle School.					
2. People here notice when I am good at something.					
3. It is hard for people like me to be accepted here.					
4. Other students in the school take my opinions seriously.					
5. Most teachers at Arcadia Middle School are interested in me.					
6. Sometimes I feel as if I don't belong here.					
7. There's at least one teacher or other adult in this school I can talk to if I have a problem.					
8. People at this school are friendly to me.					
9. Teachers here are not interested in people like me.					
10. I am included in lots of activities at Arcadia Middle School					
11. I am treated with as much respect as other students					
12. I feel very different from most other students here.					
13. I can really be myself at this school.					
14. The teachers here respect me.					
15. People here know I can do good work.					
16. I wish I were in a different school.					
17. I feel proud of belonging to Arcadia Middle School.					
18. Other students here like me the way I am.					

The above items are from the Psychological Sense of School Membership Scale (Goodenow, 1993). The scale was originally published in *Psychology in the Schools*, 16, 79-90.

Appendix C

**Greece Arcadia Middle School
130 Island Cottage Road
Rochester, NY 14612
Student Participants Statement of Informed Consent**

Dear Student:

My name is Heidi Thompson and I am a graduate student pursuing a Master's Degree in Counselor Education at SUNY Brockport. The reason I am meeting with you is because I am doing a project for my class.

The purpose of my research project is to help me learn about the need to belong and how it relates to students grades. Belonging is about feeling good about your relationships and surroundings while in school. I want to give you an 18-item scale that will help me understand your idea of belonging in the school environment. All items were written with five choices, with choices ranging from "not all true" (1) to "completely true" (5). The intended benefits of your participation are (1) helping school counselors understand what contributes to a students' sense of belongingness (2) it will help determine if the need to belong within school settings should be a focus of counseling programs (3) counselors will be able to determine what is needed to create a more supportive and successful social-emotional environment for students.

In order for you to be a part of my project, you will need to sign this form. If you change your mind at any time, or decide later on that you do not want me to use your results, it is okay. If this is the case, please let me know and I will shred what you have already completed.

I understand that:

1. I have decided to take part in this research project and I understand that I may withdraw anytime.
2. Nothing will be shared with other teachers or adults, unless it is a safety issue such as information suggesting the harm of self or others.
3. Up to 150 other students may participate in this study.
4. Information used and gathered will be kept in a secured, locked filing cabinet in a locked office in the Counseling Office at Arcadia Middle School.

My name is _____. I have read and understand the above statements. All my questions about my participation in this study have been answered to my satisfaction. I agree to my participation in this study, realizing that I may withdraw without penalty at any time during the process.

Signature of Consent

Date

