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Sense of belonging of students with special educational needs in a post-primary school





Sense of belonging and connection to school

- *Students' sense of being accepted, valued, included and encouraged by others in the academic classroom...and feeling oneself to be an important part of the life and activity of the class*
Goodenow, 1993

- **Belonging hypothesis**

Desire to belong is a fundamental human need ... when such needs are met a range of positive psychological outcomes are realised
Baumeister & Leary, 1995



Why the interest in school belonging?

- *'Mental health and wellbeing are linked to developing a sense of connectedness to schools'*
DES, 2013
- *'Relationships matter...learning is a deeply mutual undertaking'*
McLaughlin, 2015
- Inclusion is about engendering a sense of community and belonging
DfES, 2001

What does the research say about belonging?



Academic progress

A strong association between SOB and academic motivation, effort and participation in learning Goodenow, 1993

'...awakening enthusiasm, interest and willingness to participate in academic activities' Furrer & Skinner, 2003; p.158



Social, emotional and behavioural outcomes

- School connectedness predicted a range of outcomes including lower emotional distress, lower suicidal ideation, lower levels of adolescent involvement in violence, less frequent use of cigarettes, alcohol, marijuana, and late sexual debut.

Resnick et al., 1997

- School connectedness correlates strongly with concurrent and future self-report symptoms of depression and anxiety

Shochet et al., 2006





Belonging and inclusion

- Inclusion is being promoted through legal and policy initiatives in Ireland and elsewhere
- Less likely to be popular, experience higher levels of rejection, loneliness, bullying... less likely to report liking Kuhn and Weiner, 2000; Norwich and Kelly, 2004
- There is a societal imperative to investigate the social dimension of inclusion Koster *et al.*, 2009



SEN and belonging

Little comparative research

- No difference SEN and Non-SEN Groups

Hagborg, 1998; Prince, 2010; Frederickson *et al.*, 2007

- SEN Group scored lower on a measure of belonging

Nepi *et al.*, 2013

- Difference in 'liking school' 12% of SEN group versus 7 % Non-SEN Group

McCoy and Banks, 2012





Current study

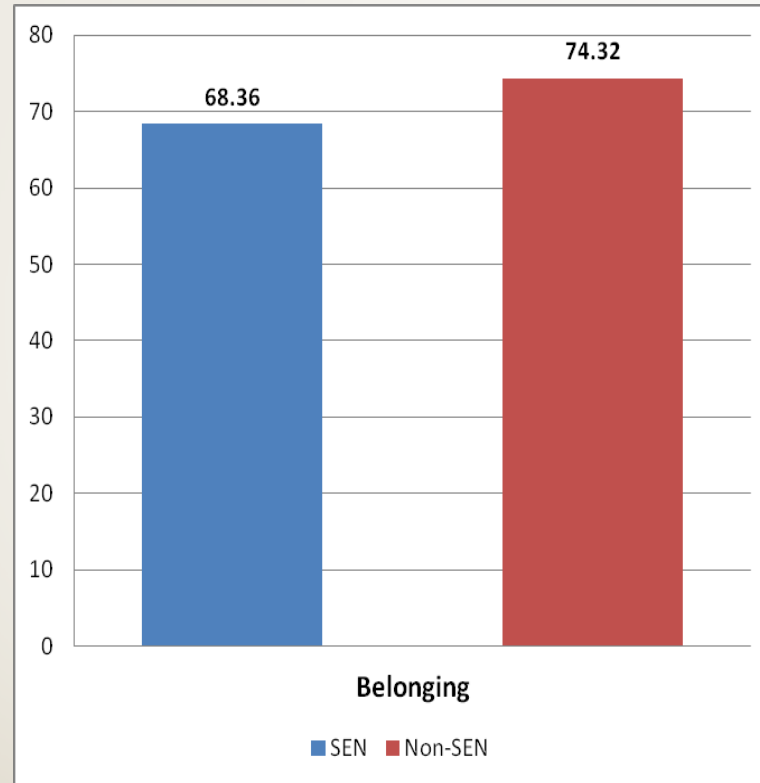
- Mixed method...quantative and qualitative
- 25 students with SEN, 25 non-SEN completed questionnaires
- 12 students with SEN and 11 Non- SEN Students were interviewed to explore barriers and facilitators associated with sense of belonging
- Large, mixed intake post-primary school



Current Study: Hypotheses

- Do students with SEN and their mainstream peers differ in their perceived level of belonging and connectedness to school?
- What barriers and facilitators are associated with students' sense of belonging and connectedness?
- Do students with SEN and their non-SEN peers differ in terms of their perceptions of barriers and facilitators of their sense of belonging?

Results



Students with SEN reported lower levels of belonging
 $t(48) = -2.52, p = .015$ (2 tailed)

Medium to large effect size (Cohen's $d=0.71$)



Facilitators and barriers of school belonging

5 Themes

Theme 1: Teacher Support/relationships



Facilitators

- Caring relationships, sensitive to individual needs
- Teacher support and follow up
- Positive feedback
- Greater equity and respect in relationships ... 'more like people than teachers'
- When teachers believe in them, nurture them
- Experienced more in senior cycle

Numerous examples

Barriers

- Teachers holding poor evaluations of their learning
- Conflictual relationships
- Treated unfairly or over reactive disciplinary procedures
- Variability in disciplinary response
- Being put on suspension

Few examples

Theme 2: Academic progress and engagement



Facilitators

- In those subjects where they are experiencing success
- When teachers are interested in their learning and provide additional support
- Recounted numerous examples of academic support: extra classes, lunch time support
- More project work...thinking for ourselves
- More hands on work
- Some referred to teachers having a transformative effect on their learning

'I love English now, It is my favourite subject'

Barriers

- Difficulty with homework and examinations
- Disheartened and discouraged by poor results
- Effort not recognised
- Teaching not effective
- Being bored in class, not being engaged

Theme 3: Peer Support and Friendships



Facilitators

- Experiences of friendship, feeling accepted, and included central to sense of belonging

'I don't feel like on my own'

- Enjoying one another's company, sharing a joke
- Participation in group activities, projects, PE, horticulture, musical
- Extra SPHE Classes
- School trips
- Transition year

Barriers

- Excluded
- Bullied
- Attitude of peers in the Junior Cycle

Theme 4: Participation in extra-curricular activities



Facilitators

- Heightened sense of esteem, joy, and connection
- Sport
- Musical
- Trips
- Nights out

Barriers

- Disappointment in not getting picked for a team
- Lack of opportunities to partake in games
- Lack of activities, clubs for those who are not sporty
- Lack of opportunities for girls

Theme 5: Experience of agency and inclusion



Facilitators

- Opportunities to raise issues in school: form tutor
- Able to talk to their teachers
- Role of school council
- Role of school monitors
- Can talk to school counsellor

Barriers

- Little opportunity to affect decisions
- More consultation re type and nature of support
- More consultation re uniform, jewellery, disciplinary code
- Not judged solely on academic abilities
- Fellow students...can be unaccepting of difference



**Difference between SEN and Non-SEN
Groups
in reported
facilitators and barriers
of school belonging**

Academic



SEN Group

- Satisfied with progress in some subjects, practical subjects
- Difficulties across subjects, with pacing, number of subjects, with teaching approaches
- Disheartened around progress...low expectations
- Less satisfied with level of support and progress
- Impact of special class placement

Joy of passing JC 'cause I had to try harder than anybody else'..you done it on your own...like I didn't have somebody at my side...like an SNA' Emily

Emily: *'I used to think like is school for me'*

Examinations...*'They just scare you like'*

Nora ...*'I came up to read and then I was as slow as hell...like you feel like everyone in getting annoyed with you'... I mightn't stay in school'...*



Academic experiences

Non-SEN Group

- Generally satisfied with progress and supports
- Issues around some specific subject areas, subject choice, essay writing
- Enjoyed interactive teaching approaches, project work

Brendan: 'I am good at all subjects. I am good at sport and examinations'

Colin: 'More kind of individual learning ... thinking for ourselves'

Brendan: 'More opportunities to study the subjects you like'

Peer relations : SEN Group



'You don't' feel as connected to everyone else as you hoped' Emily

Some referenced good friends that helped

Many referenced instances of rejection, exclusion, bullying

Sometimes recipients of peer support

'I have a great bunch of friends ... that has helped me be accepted in the school ...helped me settle in' Peter

Emily: *'Everyone made fun of the group ... like the retards...like we felt what was wrong with us...made me feel a bit thick'*

Regarding 4th year... 'Are people going to think I am thick...I was scared of what people might think of me....People aren't actually as judgemental as I thought'

'I feel excluded from most of the other groups in the school'
Sean



Peer relations

Non-SEN Group

- Many friends
- Reciprocal relationships
- Witnessed bullying
- Some difficulty at transition time and Junior Cycle

'I have good friends in second year, third year ... all years'

'All my friends are here'

Kate: 'When I am with my friends ... I'm part of something'

Carl: 'I tried to fit in ... and I just got pushed aside'

Lily, speaking about Junior year 'They are more you know stereotyped'

Extra-curricular involvement SEN Group



A minority referred to
participation in
extracurricular activities

Some referenced school
musical and sports

Dillon: 'I play games
Others don't play'

'I fit in a bit ... in sports'

Nora: '*We all just got closer
... everyone kind of felt they
belonged*'

Extra-curricular involvement



Non-SEN Group

- High level of involvement
- Leadership role

'We were playing a match for the school ... I just scored ... just felt like the place I wanted to be' Colin

'Well, I am the lead in the musical' Carl

'I was voted class president' Brendan

'I help run the super sevens' Aidan

'We were playing a match for the school and I just scored' Colin

'Lads wanted me on the team' Brendan

'It is one of the things that brings us together... we are all really close now' Lily

'I feel part of something, something big' Kate referencing the school musical

Experience of agency and inclusion



SEN Group

- Fewer opportunities to have a say in matters that affect them
- Requested greater consultation around the type and nature of support

' Being allowed wear ear rings ... being able to wear track suits on PE day... I think it is stupid that you are not allowed wear trousers' Aine

Emily: narrow academic focus...*'if you are smart you are respected.....people to be judged personality wise...who they are as a person'*

'I don't think there should be a wall put up in front of them...if a student wanted to do honours'.
Nora

Experience of agency and inclusion



Colin: 'Student Council ... is very good at getting things done'

Non-SEN Group

Majority reported they had an opportunity to have a say in things that affected them in schools

Referenced accessibility of teachers, work of student council, school monitors

Ross: 'School monitors ... if you have a difficulty you could talk to them'

Kevin: 'Teachers ... they are always there for you'

Good 'to be treated like a person rather than a student'

'Students themselves need to be more respectful and kind'
Brendan

Discussion and implications



- Students with SEN reported lower level of belonging compared to their Non- SEN peers
- Both groups highlighted key barriers and facilitators that impacted on their sense of belonging
- Qualitative differences between SEN and Non- SEN Group were reported in perceptions around facilitators and barriers of sense of belonging
- Students with SEN do not experience the academic, social and relational context of school in as positive manner as their peers
- Students reported many and varied positive experiences of support from teachers and peers

Discussion and Implications



- Students with SEN need targeted interventions to help build their sense of belonging to school otherwise they may be denied the benefits associated with having a strong sense of connectedness to school
- Qualitative approach - facilitators and barriers approach- provides an effective means for monitoring sense of belonging and how inclusion is experienced
- School policies, practices, relationships impact on sense of belonging which in turn affect student welfare

Promoting sense of school belonging: A whole-school approach



Teacher support and positive relationships

Caring relationship ... interested in them as individuals as well as learners; interested in their welfare; positive, participatory discipline; positive classroom management

Academic support and curricular engagement

Interactive, experiential student-centred teaching approaches; high expectations; individualised support for learning; location of learning support; acknowledge effort and small steps; meaningful curriculum

Promoting sense of school belonging: A whole-school approach



Peer support and friendships

Enhanced opportunities to promote peer relationships; small group work; more SPHE; better support for transition; opportunities to develop social and emotional skills; more trips; monitor and deal with bullying, especially in Junior Cycle

Participation in extra-curricular activities

Availability of diverse activities and clubs, supported activities, peer support, use special interests

Promoting sense of school belonging: A whole-school approach



Experience of agency and inclusion

Opportunities to have a greater say in decisions; feel listened to; engagement in student council; focus on strengths, interests, preferences; consulted on school policies and activities; consulted in relation to support needs, involvement in support plan; person-centred planning; provide support and advocacy

Conclusion



- Sense of school belonging with its emphasis on engagement in learning and in the life of the school; on relationships and connections with teachers and peers locates the promotion of well-being as a core activity of school
- Focus on belonging offers an effective means for evaluating the social inclusion experiences of children and young people



Limitations

- Small sample size
- Focus on one school setting
- Other data gathering approaches might have helped – draw and write-pictures- vignettes
- A more participatory approach
- Perspective of teachers and parents

Strengths

- Adds to the limited literature
- Insights into how social inclusion is experienced in schools
- Highlighted facilitators and barriers to sense of school belonging
- Seen to offer a useful approach to monitoring how inclusion is experienced