

Fostering a sense of belonging at an international school in France: An experimental study

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Aim(s): *The sense of belonging is considered one of the basic human needs, supporting engagement in education and increasing wellbeing. Yet few studies have attempted to enhance levels of student belonging in school, which is what the current study aimed to do. The aim of this study was to examine the impact of a classroom-based, peer intervention to enhance students' sense of belonging*

Method/rationale: *An experimental study was carried out with 55 fourth and fifth grade students, aged nine to eleven, at an international school in France. Two measures were used: The Psychological Sense of School Membership (PSSM), which measured students' sense of belonging, and the Multidimensional Students' Life Satisfaction Scale (MSLSS) evaluating their life satisfaction. Data were collected from the experimental and wait/control group before, immediately post intervention and a month later.*

Findings: *Results of the full-scale tests demonstrate statistically significant growth in mean values in both the PSSM school belonging measure and the MSLSS student life satisfaction measure. Statistically significant growth was also found when the peer group questions were separated from the overall scale, but not in the friendships' subsection of the MSLSS.*

Limitations: *Future studies should consider a larger sample and an experiment with students from at least two schools.*

Conclusions: *Results provided evidence for the effectiveness of an intervention to enhance school belonging and student life satisfaction.*

Keywords: *sense of belonging; wellbeing; positive education; international school; identity; values and experiences.*

YOUNG STUDENTS that become disconnected present many challenges for society, ranging from engaging in poor behaviour (Battistich & Hom, 1997), early withdrawal from school (Finn, 1989), to being disconnected from societal norms in favour of an alternative cause to meet their sense of belonging (Wilczynska et al., 2015). Considering that a sense of belonging helps students connect with societal and educational values (Lambert et al., 2013), it is important to develop school interventions that aim to enhance it.

According to a systematic review relating to a qualitative exploration of the definition of a sense of belonging, it is a multi-faceted construct that incorporates: (i) subjectivity;

(ii) groundedness; (iii) reciprocity; (iv) dynamism; and (v) self-determination (Maher et al., 2013). Subjectivity refers to an individual's perception of fitting into a group, as well as feeling valued and respected by their members. A sense of belonging needs to be grounded within a specific group, to which the individual feels they belong. This group, be it a community or a school class, becomes their reference point for experiencing feelings of belonging. This feeling is reciprocal where an individual receives feedback from the group that makes them feel they are part of it. The authors stress the fluidity and dynamism of one's sense of belonging, whereby social environments may contribute to the changes in an individual's level of

belonging. Finally, they mention the importance of choice and the need for group members to continuously have the right to self-determine, aligning their values with those of the group. Taking all into consideration, a sense of belonging is a complex and fluid process influenced by many internal and external factors.

A sense of belonging is considered one of the basic human needs that allows people to thrive psychologically (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Glasser, 1998; Maslow, 1943). Maslow (1943) proposed that to reach self-actualisation and higher level functioning, a sense of belonging – being one of the basic needs – must be met. This need to belong is regarded as innate and universal, as all individuals are born with a need to connect and this is evident across all cultures and societies (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Research with adults shows that individuals' sense of belonging influences their life satisfaction (Amit & Bar-Lev, 2015; Rajman & Geffen, 2018) and lack of life satisfaction, in turn is associated with depression (Stankov, 2013).

School belonging

School belonging is 'the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included and supported by others in the school social environment' (Goodenow, 1983, p.80). High levels of school belonging are associated with enhanced wellbeing (Sebokova et al., 2018), positive emotions (Reschly et al., 2008) and meaning in life, which has an impact on both students' self-identity and their life purpose (Lambert et al., 2013). Considering the systematic decrease in adolescents' wellbeing, as they progress through their post-primary school (Burke & Minton, 2019), developing students' sense of school belonging may help them sustain or increase it accordingly.

School belonging also builds a shared identity that lends itself to motivation and positive goal pursuit (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Lambert et al., 2013). A student whose values are aligned with the values of the

school and like-minded, pro-social peers develop a self-identity narrative that encompasses school success as part of who they are (Sanders & Munford, 2016). Building confidence and a learner identity along with supportive peer relations are among the recommended interventions suggested by Thomas (2012) to improve students' retention, which needs to be established at a young age and reinforced throughout the students' lives.

Creating a sense of belonging is associated with students aligning themselves with other, like-minded people, who they recognise as having similar social, rather than academic values (Goodenow & Grady, 1993). While it may lead to negative consequences of belonging to a group displaying poor behaviour and weak bonds to the school (Faircloth & Hamm, 2011), a well-developed sense of school belonging is usually associated with fewer behavioural and emotional problems, as well as greater pro-social skills (Newman et al., 2007; Waters et al., 2010). Therefore, regardless of whether belonging is congruent with the school or peer group values, it offers individuals psychological and educational benefits.

In addition to the school and peer group belonging, developing a sense of belonging in a relationship with one adult enhances psychological resilience (Werner, 1993). This one-to-one relationship fuels students' sense of belonging in so far as they feel accepted, connected and their values are mirrored, which results in their ability to cope with stressful events. Mirrored values within relationships are important for the intervention used in this study.

Whilst there are many benefits of developing a sense of school belonging, it is not yet a common practice. In a study in Australia, more than 50 per cent of schools surveyed referenced sense of belonging in their school values or mission statements (Allen et al., 2017), meaning that the other schools either have not considered it, or did not value it enough to note it in their mission statements. A few of the schools that

mentioned belonging in their guidelines and mission statements followed through with fostering belonging within their curriculum or community, highlighting the need for schools to engage in a dialogue about a sense of belonging.

International schools

In an international school environment, students do not experience cultural homogeneity (Hayden & Thompson, 1995), yet they often align themselves with students of similar values and experiences (Druart, 2015). Since they live in a culture different to their parents', they are referred to as third culture kids (TCK: Pollock & Van Reken, 2009). Developing a sense of school belonging among TCK is particularly difficult, given that they often move countries and schools (Hayden et al., 2000). While it helps them become more adaptable and tolerant, it also causes a feeling of rootlessness and disconnection, which affects their sense of belonging (Pollock & Van Reken, 2009).

Fostering belonging

There are limited studies exploring the effectiveness of interventions that foster belonging (Allen & Bowles, 2012; Osterman, 2000) and many are not suitable for the current study. For example, writing a gratitude journal enhanced a sense of belonging in young people in the UK (Diebel et al., 2016), the results of a gratitude intervention are inconsistent across cultures (Watkins et al., 2006; Kashdan et al., 2009), so therefore cannot be used in an international school setting. Also, some interventions (e.g. Prujean et al., 2016; Sanders & Munford, 2016) focus on improving an adult–adolescent mentoring relationship to enhance students' sense of belonging. However as students grow older, the influence of adults on students' identity is reduced and that of their peers is increased (Crosnoe & McNeely, 2008), which is why the current study focuses on alternative interventions. Other interventions included wearing a T-shirt that identified students'

interests (Thomas, 2012), or participating in extra-curricular activities such as sports and drama, which helped students to be noticed in a way that complimented them among their peers and mediated sense of belonging in schools with pro-social peers (Fredricks & Eccles, 2005).

The intervention for the current study was created following from a review of 40 papers, which demonstrated that shared feelings, values and experiences were more important in establishing a sense of connection with others than similar behaviours, intellectual or physical abilities (Maher et al., 2013). It adapted the quality world pictures activity (experiences, people, places and things that they value) from the choice theory (Glasser, 1998) to help students share their feelings, values and experiences. Given that individuals with similar quality world pictures tend to understand each other and retain a more sustainable relationship (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Glasser, 2010), the authors hoped that the activity will improve students' sense of belonging.

Methods

Participants

A total of 55 students aged 9–11 ($M = 9.78$, $SD = .76$) participated in the study. Half of them ($n = 28$) were allocated to the experimental group (16 males and 12 females), and the remaining students ($n = 27$) to the wait/control group (12 males and 15 females). The study was carried out at an international school in France and the group represented students from 30 nationalities.

Procedures

The experimental group participated in four classes designed to enhance belonging, whereas the wait/control group took part in their usual morning meetings, which involve school announcements, preparing for upcoming events or a topical discussion. The four intervention classes included three activities: (i) 'Someone Like Me'; (i) 'Find Me Out'; and (i) 'Values Bingo'.

'Someone like me' was an activity similar to 'apples, oranges and pears'. The person in the middle rhymes: 'I'm looking for someone like me who... speaks four languages or once lived in Hong Kong.' The student revealed something about themselves and other participants in the game who had had a similar experience changed their seats accordingly.

In 'Find Me Out', students needed to find someone with a named similarity (e.g. height) and then ask them a pre-set question about themselves, such as if they play a musical instrument, or have a pet. The objective of both activities was to facilitate an awareness of students' own values and learning preferences, as well as those of others in their class and to facilitate bonding of like-minded individuals.

After playing games that allow for recognition of others' experiences, the students reflected further through the development of their bingo cards. In 'Values Bingo' they needed to fill in their quality world pictures based on the choice theory's (Glasser, 1998) needs of love and belonging, power, fun and freedom (one per row on their bingo card). The last row of their bingo card reflected on students' own preferred learning environment. This helped them to consider their behavioural motivations, as well as reflecting on themselves as learners and then find others who felt the same.

Once they had created their bingo card, a sharing game of 'Values Bingo' began, milling around, looking for other like-minded individuals in the classroom. Through recognising mirrored values or experiences in others, this task facilitated shared identification of values. The final class of the intervention, built a conglomeration of shared class values, experiences and preferred learning environments on a wallchart of concentric circles, aiming to extend that recognition and acceptance of each other's values and experiences.

The study followed the University of East London's ethical guidelines (UEL, 2018). Students and parents were given information

about the experiment in advance in writing and were informed about their right to withdraw at any stage throughout the process. The head of school agreed to act in loco parentis, in cases where parents did not respond to the information. Of 64 students, four parents opted out. Another five test cases were excluded due to students being absent on days of testing or during the intervention.

Measures

Two instruments were used in the current study. The Psychological Sense of School Membership (PSSM; Goodenow, 1993) measured students' sense of belonging, whereas the Multidimensional Students' Life Satisfaction Scale (MSLSS; Huebner, 2001) evaluated their life satisfaction.

The PSSM is an 18-item measure with responses on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 'not at all' to 'completely true'. Items in the scale cover areas such as relationships, learner attitude and connectedness to the school. An example of an item is: 'It is hard for people like me to be accepted here' or 'I can really be myself at this school'. The PSSM or an adapted version, has been used in many studies (Nichols, 2006) on belonging and is generally reported to have a Cronbach's alpha internal consistency $\leq .80$ (Goodenow, 1993b). In the current study, reliability was equally high at $\leq .82$.

The MSLSS is 40-item measure with responses on a four-item Likert scale ranging from 'never' to 'almost always'. Examples of the questions are 'My friends are nice to me' and 'I like being at school'. The MSLSS is divided into five dimensions including family, friends, school, living environment and self. The internal reliability for this test has been reported as being $\leq .7$ to $.9$ using Cronbach's alpha (Huebner, 2001). In the current study, reliability was high at $\leq .88$.

Results

PSSM school belonging

A one-way repeated measures ANOVA test was used separately on the experimental

Table 1: Mean pre-test, post-test and follow up tests for PSSM

Test and Group	Pre test		Post test		Follow up test		Wilks' lambda	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	F	p
PSSM Experimental	81.96	14.18	85.32	11.18	85.57	10.39	(2,26)= 8.71	0.001
PSSM Control	81.59	13.10	81.44	12.09	80.93	10.77	(2,25)= 0.29	0.749

Note: PSSM values are mean scores on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (not at all true) to 5 (completely true).

Table 2: PSSM belonging post hoc tests between paired test sessions using Bonferroni

Group	Test session (I)	Test session (J)	Mean difference (I-J)	Standard error	Significance
Experimental	1	2	-3.357	0.791	0.001
Experimental	1	3	-3.607	0.933	0.002
Experimental	2	3	-0.250	0.444	1.000
Control	1	2	0.148	0.562	1.000
Control	1	3	0.667	0.961	1.000
Control	2	3	0.519	0.672	1.000

Note: Pre-test = test session 1. Post-test = test session 2. Follow up test = test session 3.

group and the control group in order to compare the scores from the PSSM belonging test across the three test periods. The means, standard deviations, F scores and significance values are presented in Table 1. They show growth in the experimental group from pre-experiment results ($M = 81.96, SD = 14.18$) to post-experiment ($M = 85.32, SD = 11.18$), which increased only very marginally in the follow-up results ($M = 85.57, SD = 10.39$). This is compared to the control group which stayed almost consistent from pre-experiment ($M = 81.59, SD = 13.10$) to post-experiment ($M = 81.44, SD = 12.09$), dropping very marginally in the follow-up results, ($M = 80.93, SD = 10.77$). The results show that there was a statistically significant effect between testing times in the experimental group, Wilks' lambda = .60,

$F(2,26) = 8.71, p = .001$, multivariate partial eta squared = .40. There was not however any statistically significant effect in sense of belonging in the control group between testing times, Wilks' lambda = .98, $F(2,25) = .29, p = .749$. Table 1 displays the growth in the experimental group compared to the control group from pre-test to post-test, as well as sustainability from post-test to follow up test, one month after the intervention.

Further analysis using the Bonferroni post hoc tests reveal statistically significant growth, $p = .001$ in the experimental group, between the pre-test and post-test as well as statistically significant growth between the pre-test and follow up test scores, $p = .002$ (Table 2). The growth between post intervention and follow up tests, separated out,

does not show a statistically significant increase, $p = 1$. The results show sustainability rather than further growth in the experimental group from post-test to follow up tests. In contrast, there is no statistically significant effect between tests in the control group (Table 2).

Results of MSLSS Life Satisfaction

A similar one-way repeated measures ANOVA test was used to assess the impact of the intervention on the scores for students’ life satisfaction (MSLSS). The results show growth in the experimental group from pre-experiment ($M = 124.29$, $SD = 13.60$) to post-experiment ($M = 126.61$, $SD = 16.41$) and still further growth at the follow up stage ($M = 128.71$, $SD = 11.64$). This is compared with a slight drop in the

pre-experiment results in the control group ($M = 131.37$, $SD = 13.89$) to post-experiment results ($M = 128.07$, $SD = 10.30$), which stabilised at follow-up tests ($M = 130.96$, $SD = 9.48$). The test showed statistically significant growth for the experimental group between testing periods, Wilks’ lambda = .10, $F = (2,26) = .29$, $p = .000$, partial eta squared = .900. Table 3 presents the mean growth for the experimental group compared with the control group. The control group showed statistically significant change between testing periods, Wilks’ lambda = .43, $F = (2,25) = 16.67$, $p = .000$, multivariate partial eta squared = .572.

A further breakdown of these results using Bonferroni post-hoc tests reveal statistically significant growth in the experimental group from pre-test to post-test

Table 3: Mean pre-test, post-test and follow up tests for MSLSS

Test and group	Pre test		Post test		Follow up test		Wilks' lambda	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	F	p
MSLSS experimental	124.29	13.60	126.61	16.41	128.71	11.64	(2,26)= 0.10	0.000
MSLSS control	131.37	13.89	128.07	10.30	130.96	9.48	(2,25)= 16.67	0.000

Note: MSLSS values are mean scores on a four-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (never) to 4 (almost always).

Table 4: MSLSS life satisfaction post hoc tests between paired test sessions using Bonferroni

Group	Test session (I)	Test session (J)	Mean difference (I-J)	Standard error	Significance
Experimental	1	2	-2.321	0.760	0.015
Experimental	1	3	-4.429	0.528	0.000
Experimental	2	3	-2.107	1.198	0.270
Control	1	2	3.296	1.077	0.015
Control	1	3	0.407	1.203	1.000
Control	2	3	-2.889	0.566	0.000

Note: Pre-test = test session 1. Post-test = test session 2. Follow up test = test session 3.

scores $p = .015$, as well as from pre-test to follow-up test, $p = .000$ (Table 4). The results from the control group display a statistically significant drop between pre-test and post-test before re-gaining ground on the base-level mean score in the follow up tests (Table 4).

The overall full scale results display growth in school belonging and wellbeing that is statistically significant ($p < .05$) over the three testing periods. The post con results break down this information, revealing that there was a statistically significant effect on belonging and wellbeing post intervention ($p < .05$). They also show that although there wasn't further statistically significant growth in the month after the intervention, but the growth gained was sustained for this period after the classes had ended.

Discussion

Using the PSSM (Goodenow, 1993b) and MSLSS (Huebner, 2001) measures, students' sense of school belonging and life satisfaction were seen to increase statistically significantly in this study,

The results confirm that a class-based intervention to develop sense of belonging and overall well-being amongst peers at an international school, can be facilitated by a teacher during advisory time, as part of the overall curriculum. They also verify the effectiveness of peer value identification and recognition of aligned values in others as a tool to increase school belonging and student wellbeing.

Past research shows that gratitude, shared activities and interests enhance a sense of belonging (Diebel et al., 2016; Thomas, 2012). The current study adds to it by providing evidence that value-sharing also has a positive effect on students' sense of school belonging. Further research is required to identify the differences between the effect of various interventions.

These results reinforce previous studies showing that a sense of belonging at school increases wellbeing (Diebel et al., 2016; Wilczynska et al., 2015) and a group discus-

sion of beliefs and attitudes enhances happiness (Lichter et al., 1980). The previous authors were cautious about attributing causation, offering possible alternative reasoning for their results as non-specific placebo, group support effect or perhaps circumstantial reasoning. However, the current study offers additional evidence for the impact of belonging on wellbeing. Further research needs to examine the intervention in a larger sample and more schools.

The reason as to why the study showed increased levels of a sense of belonging and wellbeing may be due to the positive emotions participants experienced when engaging in playing, which may have influenced the results (Fredrickson, 2013). Also, students' strong desire to connect may have led them to wittingly or unwittingly find partners to connect with (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), rather than the value-sharing experience. Future research needs to consider an alternative value-sharing intervention that eliminates the effect of these confounding variables.

Implications for practice

Sense of belonging at school is the psychological part of a double construct- engagement, in which participation is the active part (Willms & OECD, 2003). Previous efforts to increase engagement have involved building sense of belonging to the school; PARTH (Sanders & Munford, 2016), participation-identification model (Finn, 1989), Check and Connect (Anderson et al., 2004; Christenson et al., 2008). The intervention in this study showed growth in students' sense of belonging. It makes sense then that teachers and schools who wish to increase student participation should incorporate a class curriculum that offers students the opportunity to examine and share their values, experiences and learner preferences, which builds sense of belonging and wellbeing at school. International schools that have more movement in the class population from year to year

are encouraged to examine their advisory programmes, in order to establish time, early in the year, to encourage student connectedness and school belonging.

Educational psychologists interested in helping disaffected youth to reconnect, may choose to use value awareness and recognition as a tool to establish relationships and ignite motivation to engage. The absence of positive engagement may create a vacuum filled by more extreme group membership. In addition to this, educational psychologists may also use the findings to help families and youth who relocate, to deal more effectively with their transition, thus prevent any future problems associated with their move. Finally, educational psychologists might be able to use the findings of the current study when giving talks about inclusion in schools and ways in which it can be increased.

An established outcome of this study is that sense of school belonging relating to peer relationships can be fostered within a classroom setting through sharing values

and experiences during advisory time. Interventions that build belonging in peer groups within a classroom situation is an area that has been largely neglected by researchers (Crosnoe & McNeely, 2008). Similar classroom activities that endorse alignment of peer belonging and allow students to develop their identity, promoting recognition of positive values and differences in learning styles is an addition to be considered in future research and practice. Such classes offer teachers an opportunity to help guide the students' development of their self-identity narrative (Sanders & Munford, 2016), and an opportunity to reflect on and promote school engagement and participation as part of this narrative.

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Appendix 1

Questions that make up questionnaire including demographic, PSSM and MSLSS.

1. What's your unique ID number?
2. Are you male or female?
3. What age are you today?
4. What's your homeroom class?
5. What's nationalities do you have?
6. When did you arrive at 'school name'?
7. Are you leaving the school before, or at the end of this school year?
8. PSSM using Likert scale (five choices) ranging from 'Not at all true' to 'Completely true'.
9. I feel like a real 'school name' International School, Paris student.
10. People here notice when I am good at something.
11. It is hard for people like me to be accepted here.
12. Other students at this school take my opinions seriously.
13. Most teachers at 'school name' are interested in me.
14. Sometimes I feel like I don't belong here.
15. There's at least one teacher or other adult in this school I can talk to if I've got a problem.
16. People at this school are friendly to me.
17. Teachers here are not interested in people like me.
18. I am included in lots of activities at 'school name'.
19. I am treated with as much respect as other students.
20. I feel very different from most other students here.
21. I can really be myself at this school.
22. The teachers here respect me.
23. People here know I can do good work.
24. I wish I were in a different school.
25. I feel proud of belonging to 'school name'.
26. Other students here like me the way I am.
27. MSLSS 4 point Likert type scale: (1 = never), (2 = sometimes), (3 = often), (4 = almost).
28. I enjoy being at home with my family.
29. My family gets along well together.
30. I like spending time with my parents.
31. My parents and I do fun things together.
32. My family is better than most.
33. Members of my family talk nicely to one another.
34. My parents treat me fairly.
35. My friends treat me well.
36. My friends are nice to me.
37. I wish I had different friends.
38. My friends are mean to me.
39. My friends are great.
40. I have a bad time with my friends.
41. I have a lot of fun with my friends.
42. I have enough friends.
43. My friends will help me if I need it.
44. I look forward to going to school.
45. I like being in school.
46. School is interesting.
47. I wish I didn't have to go to school.

48. There are many things about school I don't like.
49. I enjoy school activities.
50. I learn a lot at school.
51. I feel bad at school.
52. I like where I live.
53. I wish there were different people in my neighbourhood.
54. I wish I lived in a different house.
55. I wish I lived somewhere else.
56. I like my neighbourhood.
57. I like my neighbours.
58. This town is filled with mean people.
59. My family's house is nice.
60. There are lots of fun things to do where I live.
61. I think I am good looking.
62. I am fun to be around.
63. I am a nice person.
64. Most people like me.
65. There are lots of things I can do well.
66. I like to try new things.
67. I like myself.

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