



## **SENSE OF SCHOOL BELONGING AMONG ELEMENTARY SCHOOL STUDENTS**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The main purpose of this study was to investigate elementary school students' sense of school belonging. The Psychological Sense of School Membership Scale was administrated to 364 (174 female and 190 male) students, attending sixth-, seventh- and eighth-grade in Adana, Turkey. To analyze the gathered data, descriptive statistics were investigated and, one-way analysis of variance and t-test were performed. The findings indicated that female students had significantly higher sense of school belonging and a lower feeling of rejection in school and, significant differences were found in favor of the students who have higher academic achievement. It is also found that students who were attending to the schools that have middle and high socio-economic status have higher sense of school membership.

**Keywords:** *Elementary school, sense of school belonging, Psychological Sense of School Membership Scale (PSSM)*

### **INTRODUCTION**

In almost all countries, school is one of the most important learning environments for children and adolescents. Optimizing the learning context in the school depends on the extent to which schools are able to create a positive emotional environment for their students. Positive emotional environment helps students to feel themselves as a part of their school community. A community exists when its members experience a sense of belonging or personal relatedness (Booker, 2004). In a school community, students, teachers, administrators and other members should value their group and feel that their group is valuing them. Students' feeling of being personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others in the school called school belonging, school attachment, school commitment or school connection in the literature (Finn, 1989; Goodenow, 1993a; Goodenow and Grady, 1993). School belonging refers to students' sense of belonging or psychological membership in the school or classroom. The concept of school belonging involves support and respect for personal autonomy and for the student as an individual (Goodenow, 1993b).

Research studies show that sense of school belonging is related to numerous academic and psychological aspects of students' educational experiences (Booker, 2004). According to Osterman (2000) who emphasized the importance of belongingness in the school, students who experience acceptance are more highly motivated and engaged in learning and more committed to school. School engagement is also seen as an antidote to students' alienation from school (Fredericks, Blumenfeld and Paris, 2004). Being accepted, included, or welcomed leads to positive emotions, such as happiness, elation, contentment, and calm, while being rejected, excluded, or ignored leads to often intense negative feelings of anxiety, depression, grief,

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jealousy, and loneliness (Osterman, 2000). According to Goodenow and Grady (1993), Gutman and Midgley (2000), and Booker (2004), although feeling of school membership is important for all students, it may be an important factor in supporting academic achievement especially of disadvantaged students. When students feel themselves as an important part of their school environment, they may become less likely to dropout (Archambault, Janosz, Fallu and Pagani, 2009; Bond, Butler, Thomas, Carlin, Glover, Bowes and Patton, 2007; Finn, 1989). Sense of belonging to and acceptance in school leads students to be more likely to participate in both curricular and extracurricular activities in the classroom (Adelabu, 2007). Students who feel that they are accepted members of the school community feel a stronger social connection and, as a result, performed better academically (Booker, 2004). Sirin and Rogers-Sirin (2004) found that school engagement is one of the factors that have the strongest relation to academic performance. Israelashvili (1997) found a significant relationship between students' school membership and their future expectations. In the related literature it is also emphasized that there are reciprocal relationships between perceptions of school belonging and various educational outcomes. For example, Uwah, McMahon and Forlow (2008) stated that students who feel themselves as valued members of their school community may have more confidence in their ability to succeed in academics and, when students feel more confident and successful, they are more accepted and, subsequently, they have a higher sense of belonging to their school.

In short, a literature review show that, as stated by Anderman (2002), there is a general consensus among researchers in the field that students' sense of belonging is one of the basic psychological needs and that when this need is met, positive educational outcomes occur. However, despite of its value, very few studies about students' sense of school belonging are available in Turkish educational context. Those are Arastaman's (2006) and, Ekşioğlu, Sürücü and Arastaman's (2009) studies at high school level, and Cemalcılar's (2010) and, Özdemir, Sezgin, Şirin, Karip and Erkan's (2010) studies at elementary level. However, despite of many reform initiatives, it is still hard to say that Turkish educational system reached the level of aimed quality. Some international benchmarking studies (PISA and PIRLS) results show that Turkey's means were significantly lower than the average of the OECD countries (Akşit 2007; Alacacı and Erbaş 2010). To meet the challenges of educational settings it is essential to do many research studies in all levels of education and to consider results of these studies to improve outcomes of schooling on students' cognitive, affective, and physical domains. In fact, Turkey has a considerable body of research regarding schooling. However, even though there are many studies, in which outcomes of the schooling related to students' social and emotional developments have been investigated, by focusing mainly on high-level academic achievement and some cognitive variables, most of the research studies appears to neglect the numerous personal and social variables that influence students' learning. In this study, the main purpose is to investigate elementary school students' sense of school membership which is considered as an important predictor of school attainment and academic achievement. In this direction, the mean differences between students' psychological sense of school membership were investigated in terms of gender, grade, perceived academic achievement and schools' socio-economic status.

## **METHOD**

### **Participants**

Participants of the study consisted of 364 students in three elementary schools located in Adana, Turkey. While 127 students (34.9%) were at 6th grade, 101 students (27.7%) were at 7th grade and 136 students (37.4%) were at 8th grade; 174 (47.8%) of them were female and 190 (52.2%) of them were male students. The age range of the students was 11 to 16 years,

with a mean of 13.06 years, and a standard deviation of 1.10. The three schools selected for this study were at high, middle and high socio-economic status (SES) and, while 117 (32.1%) of the students were from the school with low SES, 121 (33.2%) of them were from the school with middle SES and 126 (34.6%) of them were from the school with high SES. After obtaining an official permission from the local Ministry of Education and from the administrators of each school, students were asked for their consent to take part in the study and their questionnaire returns were anonymous.

### **Instruments**

Psychological Sense of School Membership Scale (PSSM) (Goodenow, 1993a) was used as data collection instrument in the study. This scale was developed for use specifically with early- and mid-adolescent students as a measure of their subjective sense of school membership. It assesses the extent to which students feel like an accepted, respected, and valued part of their school context. PSSM consists of 18 items that are answered on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = not at all true to 5 = completely true). Negatively worded five items (items 3, 6, 9, 12, and 16) are reverse scored. The item scores are summed and then divided by 18 to yield an average item score. The PSSM includes items that involve not only perceived liking, personal acceptance, and inclusion (e.g., “Most teachers at this school are interested in me”, “I feel like a real part of this school”) but also respect and encouragement for participation (e.g., “People here notice when I’m good at something”, “Other students in this school take my opinions seriously”) (Goodenow and Grady, 1993). Cronbach’s alpha internal consistency coefficients of the scale were ranging from .77 to .88 for different samples (Goodenow, 1993a). The PSSM scale was found to be reliable for other cultures and languages as much as the original English version. For example alpha values ranged from .71 to .94 for English versions; alpha value was .77 for Spanish version and it was .89 for Chinese version (Cheung, 2004).

The Turkish version of the PSSM scale was also found to be reliable. In adaptation of PSSM to Turkish (Sarı, in pres), similar to Chinese version’s results (Cheung, 2004), while 13 positive items made up a factor (school belonging, with alpha value of .84), five negative items (feelings of rejection, with alpha value of .78) made another factor in the structure. However, these five negative items can be changed to positive and the PSSM can be used as a global factor – subjective sense of belonging in school, with Cronbach alpha value of .84 (Sarı, 2011). These two factors explained 38.49% of the total variance. In the current study Cronbach alpha of the scale was re-examined and it was found to be .81. In the related literature, while few researchers used the PSSM with its multiple-factorial structure (Adelabu, 2007; Hagborg, 1994; Uwah, McMahon and Furlow, 2008), many researchers used it as a single global factor (McMahon, Parnes, Keys and Viola, 2008; Israelashvili, 1997; Booker, 2004; Nichols, 2008; Tao, Iong and Wu, 2008). In this study, both total and sub-scale scores of the PSSM for the students were calculated.

### **Data Analysis**

To investigate students’ psychological sense of school membership levels, descriptive statistics were used. In addition to that, one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted for multi-comparisons depending on the characteristics of the independent variable. For pair-comparisons, t-test was performed. The comparisons were done on the base of both sub-scales and PSSM-total scores. When the PSSM total scores were calculated, the five negative items of the Feeling of Rejection sub-scale were reversed and the general sense of school membership of the students was calculated. While a higher score meant a higher sense of belonging for the School Belonging sub-scale and for the PSSM-total scores; a higher score meant a higher sense of rejection for the Feeling of Rejection sub-scale.

## RESULTS

### Sense of School Belonging in Terms Students' Gender

The mean points of the 364 students' scores obtained from the PSSM scale was found to be 3.73 (SD=0.65) for School belonging sub-scale; it was found to be 2.18 (SD=0.76) for Feeling of rejection sub-scale; and it was found to be 3.75 (SD=0.58) for the total scores of the PSSM. The t-test was applied in order to determine whether a significant difference exists between the students' sense of school belonging in terms of their genders. The descriptive statistics results obtained from different genders are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Descriptive Statistics and t-test Results of Students' PSSM Scores by Gender

Categories	Total N=364		Female n= 174		Male n= 190		t	p
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD		
School Belonging	3.73	.65	3.83	.67	3.64	.62	2.853	.005
Feeling of Rejection	2.18	.76	2.04	.75	2.31	.74	-3.485	.001
PSSM-Total Scores	3.75	.58	3.87	.59	3.65	.54	3.600	.000

As can be seen in Table 1, there were significant differences between female and male students' scores in both Sense of school belonging (M=3.83, SD=.67; M=3.64, SD=.62 for female and male students respectively) and Feeling of rejection (M=2.04, SD=.75; M=2.31, SD=.74 for female and male students respectively) subscales, and total scores of the PSSM scale (M=3.87, SD=.59; M=3.65, SD=.54 for female and male students respectively). When an independent sample t-test was run between the scores of female and male students, it was found that the female students had significantly higher sense of school belonging in terms of both school belonging subscale [ $t(362) = 2.853, p < .005$ ], and total scores of the PSSM [ $t(362) = 3.600, p < .001$ ]. On the other hand, male students have significantly higher level of feeling of rejection from their school [ $t(362) = -3.485, p < .001$ ].

### Sense of School Belonging in Terms of Students' Grade Levels

One-way analysis of variance (based on a 5% level of significance) was conducted in order to see whether students' PSSM scores differ significantly according to their grades. Table 2 shows the means, the standard deviations of the PSSM scores and one-way analysis of variance results based on students' grade levels.

**Table 2.** Means, Standard Deviations and ANOVA Results for PSSM Scores by Grade Level

Scale	Grade	n	M	SD	df	F	p	Description (Scheffe)
School Belonging	6	127	3.80	.57	2	3.648	.027	6 > 8 7 > 8
	7	101	3.81	.56				
	8	136	3.61	.75				
Feeling of Rejection	6	127	2.16	.75	2	.097	.908	-
	7	101	2.17	.72				
	8	136	2.20	.81				
Total Score of the PSSM	6	127	3.81	.52	2	2.736	.066	-
	7	101	3.81	.48				
	8	136	3.66	.67				

ANOVA results shown that while the means of School Belonging sub-scale were 3.80 for the 6th graders, 3.81 for the 7th graders, and 3.61 for the 8th graders; the means of Feeling of Rejection sub-scale were 2.16 for the 6th graders, 2.17 for the 7th graders, and 2.20 for the 8th graders. Table 2 illustrates that the mean of the total scores of the PSSM for the 6th graders was 3.81; for the 7th graders, it was 3.81, and for the 8th graders, it was 3.66. ANOVA did not reveal any statistical differences between the Feeling of Rejection sub-scale [ $F(2, 361) = .097, p = .908$ ], and PSSM total scores [ $F(2, 361) = 2.736, p = .066$ ] of the students in terms of their grade levels. However, the difference between School Belonging sub-scale's scores of the students was statistically significant at .05 level regarding the students' grade levels. Scheffe test that performed to see the rationale of this difference shown that there were statistically significant differences between the scores of 6th and 8th graders, and between 7th and 8th graders in favor of the 6th and 7th graders.

**Sense of School Belonging in Terms of Students' Academic Achievement Level**

One-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted in order to see whether students' PSSM scale scores differ significantly according to their perceived grade point average (GPA). Table 3 shows the means and the standard deviations of the PSSM scores and one-way analysis of variance results based on students' perceived GPA.

**Table 3.** Means, Standard Deviations and ANOVA Results for PSSM Scores by GPA

Scale	Achievement	n	M	SD	df	F	p	Description (Scheffe)
School Belonging	Low	37	3.53	.60	3	12.931	.000	High > Low
	Average	79	3.49	.62				High > Average
	Upper Average	160	3.73	.60				High > Upper average
	High	88	4.05	.65				
Feeling of Rejection	Low	37	2.25	.78	3	2.766	.042	Average > High
	Average	79	2.29	.83				Upper average > High
	Upper Average	160	2.22	.69				
Total Score of the PSSM	High	88	1.98	.78	3	12.398	.000	High > Low
	Low	37	3.58	.57				High > Average
	Average	79	3.55	.55				High > Upper average
	Upper Average	160	3.74	.52				
	High	88	4.04	.60				

Table 3 reveals that the mean of School Belonging sub-scale for the students who have low GPA was 3.53; for the students who have average GPA, it was 3.49; for the students who have upper average GPA, it was 3.73; and for the students who have a high GPA, it was 4.05. In addition, Table 3 illustrates that the mean of Feeling of Rejection sub-scale for the low-achievers was 2.25; for the average-achievers, it was 2.29; for the upper-average-achievers, it was 2.22 and finally, for the high-achievers, it was 1.98. In terms of the self-reported GPAs, the mean of the PSSM total scores for the low-achievers was 3.58; for the average-achievers, it was 3.55, for upper-average-achievers, it was 3.74 and for the high-achievers, it was 4.04.

According to the results of the ANOVA, the differences between students' scores were statistically significant for both sub-scales and total scores of the PSSM regarding the participants' self-reported grade point average. In order to see the rationale of these differences Scheffe test was performed. For both School Belonging sub-scale and PSSM total scores, this analysis indicated a statistically significant difference between the scores of high-level achiever students and the low-, average- and upper-average-achiever students' scores in favor of the high-achiever students [for School Belonging sub-scale  $F(3, 360) = 12.931, p < .001$ ; for the total scores  $F(3, 360) = 12.398, p < .001$ ]. Scheffe test also shown that, students who had

average- and upper-average level of academic achievement also had significantly higher level of feeling of rejection from their school compared with high achiever-students [F(3, 360) =2.766,  $p < .05$ ].

#### Students' Sense of School Belonging in Terms of Their Schools' Socio-economic Status

Table 4 illustrates the means, the standard deviations, and one-way analysis of variance results of students' PSSM Scores based on their school's socio-economic status (SES).

**Table 4.** Means, Standard Deviations and ANOVA Results for Students' PSSM Scores by Schools' SES

Scale	SES	n	M	SD	df	F	p	Description (Scheffe)
School Belonging	Low	117	3.55	.50	2	7.173	.001	Middle > Low High > Low
	Middle	121	3.78	.67				
	High	126	3.85	.71				
Feeling of Rejection	Low	117	2.31	.67	2	2.496	.084	--
	Middle	121	2.14	.79				
	High	126	2.10	.80				
Total Score of the PSSM	Low	117	3.59	.44	2	7.599	.001	Middle > Low High > Low
	Middle	121	3.80	.60				
	High	126	3.86	.63				

According to Table 4, the lowest mean (3.55) of School Belonging sub-scale belongs to students whose school has low SES; whereas, the highest mean (3.85) belongs to students whose school has high SES. As for Feeling of Rejection sub-scale, the lowest mean (2.10) belongs to students who attend to the high SES school; whereas, the highest mean (2.31) belongs to students who attend to the low SES school. Next, for the total scores of the PSSM, the lowest mean (3.59) pertains to students who were at low SES school while the the highest mean (3.86) pertains to students who were attend to the high SES school.

According to the results of the ANOVA, the difference between students' scores at Feeling of rejection sub-scale was not statistically significant [F(2, 361) =2.496,  $p > .05$ ]. However, the differences between School Belonging sub-scale's scores and PSSM total scores were statistically significant at .001 level regarding the schools' SES. Scheffe test performed to see the rationale of these differences indicated that there were statistically significant differences between the students' scores in favor of students who were attending to the schools that have middle and high SES [for School Belonging sub-scale F(2, 361) =7.171,  $p < .001$ ; for the total scores F(2, 361) =7.599,  $p < .001$ ].

## DISCUSSION

Results demonstrated that students had an upper-average sense of school belonging (mean=3.75). This result is consistent with the results found by other researcher in different countries. For example in a study on Israeli students (Israelashvili, 1997), the mean of the PSSM found to be 3.74 for five-seven graders and 3.45 for eight-nine graders. While Hagborg (1994) found a 3.54 mean for middle and high school students in New York; Adelabu (2007) found the PSSM sub-scales means as 3.80 for School Belonging and as 3.52 for School Acceptance in a study done on African American Adolescents. However the Turkish students' mean was slightly lower than the Hong Kong and Mainland students' means (ranged from 3.99 to 4.36) found in Cheung and Hui's study (2003), and it was lower than the means found in

Cheung's (2004) study (the mean for Hong Kong students was 4.21 and for Shanghai Students it was 5.39). Considering that in the Chinese version of the PSSM, each item was rated on a six-point agreement scale, it can be said that the Turkish students' PSSM scores were similar to the scores of their counterparts in other countries. Interestingly, Turkish students' sense of rejection was also found to be lower than the means of students in other countries. For example, a comparison of Turkish students' Feeling of Rejection means (2.18) with Hong Kong, Mainland and Shanghai students' means which found by Cheung and Hui (2003) and Cheung (2004), showed that Turkish students' have a lower sense of rejection in school than the students in Hong Kong. In addition, Adelabu (2007) found the mean of School rejection sub-scale as 2.52 for African American Adolescents. These results may be considered as evidence of that; Turkish students have positive feelings toward their school in general. Even though, it is obvious that Turkish students do not have a high sense of school membership.

In this study, statistically significant differences were found across gender. The differences between two groups' scores were found to be significant in favor of girls in both sub-scales of the PSSM and the total scores. This result is consistent with what others have reported in that girls felt more as they belonged to school than did boys (Adelabu, 2007; Arastaman, 2006; Cheung, 2004; Cheung and Hui, 2003; Goodenow, 1992; Goodenow and Grady, 1993; Hagborg, 1994; Nichols, 2006). Also, according to literature, girls' perceptions of quality of life in their schools are more positive than the boys. For example, Majeed, Fraser and Aldridge (2002) found that, girls perceive the quality of life of their schools more positively than boys do. In addition, Uwah, McMahon and Forlow (2008) stated that, general feelings of belonging may have greater importance for females, who tend to be more interpersonally oriented. In addition, the results found in this study may also be influenced by the traditional structure of Turkish culture. According to Sakalli and Beydogan (2002), Turkish society is accepted as highly patriarchal with clear-cut gender role differences. Therefore, the continuing perception among traditional Turkish people of education as a privilege for girls also may increase its perceived value for girls. In many areas in Turkey, education is seen as the unique opportunity to have better lives for women.

Results showed that despite of the differences between students' scores obtained from the school belonging sub-scale, there were no statistically significant differences in the total scores of the PSSM among students in terms of their grade-level. This result is also consistent with results of the studies in other countries (Anderman, 2002; Cheung, 2004; Cheung and Hui, 2003; Goodenow, 1992; Goodenow, 1993b; Hagborg, 1994; Israelashvili, 1997). Elementary education is compulsory in Turkey and most of the students attend to a single school for their eight-year elementary education. Thus, most of the students in the sample of this study had been in their school for at least six years. The result that there was no difference in students' sense of school membership in terms of grade-level might be arising from their similar long history in the school.

In this study, significant differences were found in favor of the students who have higher academic achievement. While this result was inconsistent with some result in the literature (Adelabu 2007; Booker 2004; Nichols 2008; Uwah et al., 2008), it was consistent with what others have reported (Goodenow, 1992; Hagborg, 1998a; Tao, Iong and Wu, 2008). For example, Booker (2004) found that while relationships with peers, teachers, and involvement in extracurricular activities tended to influence students' belongingness; a hierarchical linear regression analysis results showed that there was no statistically significant relationship between the sense of school belonging and academic achievement. In addition, according to Adelabu (2007), the absence of a significant relationship between school membership and academic achievement suggests a disconnection between doing well academically and feeling a

sense of belonging in the school community. On the other hand, in Hagborg's study (1998), students who have higher sense of school membership reported higher grades, more time spent on homework, and greater school motivation than did the students who have low sense of school membership. According to Uwah, McMahon and Forlow (2008), as students feel themselves to be valued members of the school environment, they may have more confidence in their ability to succeed in academics and vice versa. As stated by Cheung and Hui (2003), it may be expected that when students find themselves to be full and valued members of their school, they will put more effort and commitment into the aims and goals of the school. In addition, findings in the literature have shown that students who like school have higher academic achievement and a lower incidence of disciplinary problems, absenteeism, truancy, and dropping out of school than do those who dislike school (Hallinan, 2008). However, Osterman (2000) stated that there is little evidence demonstrating that the sense of belonging is directly related to achievement, but there is substantial evidence showing or suggesting that the sense of belonging influences achievement through its effects on engagement. She concluded the importance of the students' sense of belonging by emphasized that students who experience acceptance are more highly motivated and engaged in learning. Thus, it is quite consistent with those explanations in the field that Turkish students who have higher sense of school belonging also found to be having higher academic achievement, even with a direct or indirect relationship between these two variables. However further investigations are needed to examine more closely the nature of the relationships between students' sense of school membership and their academic achievement and related variables such as engagement, motivation, involvement in extracurricular activities, etc.

Results of the study showed that students in the school with high SES have the highest scores for school belonging sub-scale and total scores of the PSSM while they have the lowest scores for feeling of rejection sub-scale. According to Anderman (2002), although belonging is affected by school characteristics; there is a lack of studies that have examined school-level differences in perceived belonging among students. Results in Anderman's (2002) study indicated that students' perceived sense of belonging was lower in urban schools than in suburban schools where school size and student-teacher ratios are relatively low and the student population is more homogenous. According to results of a study done by Cemalçılar (2010) on Turkish students, although there were no significant differences in students' sense of school belonging by their school's SES, the analysis revealed that perceived quality of the physical environment in the school was strongly associated with the students' positive feelings towards their school. In addition, students in schools with better conditions perceive the quality of life in their school more positively (Bilgiç, 2009; Durmaz, 2008; Sarı, 2007). Thus, it can be said that, better educational conditions and resources in high SES schools may lead students to feel more positive toward their schools and to feel more satisfied with the provided opportunities. Because of these positive feelings, students may have a higher sense of school belonging than students in low SES schools do.

To conclude, elementary school students' sense of school belonging was investigated, and it was found that students' sense of school membership was upper average. In addition, it was found that female students had significantly higher sense of school belonging and a lower feeling of rejection in school and also significant differences were found in favor of students who have higher academic achievement. Based on these results of the study, it is recommended some precautions to increase the sense of school belonging in adolescent term, which is a critical period for young students should be taken. Also, it would be beneficial to carry out a series of research in which the psychological sense of school belonging is widely investigated for students in all levels of education. In addition, since this study shown that students in high SES school have higher sense of school belonging, it is recommended that school facilities

should be developed, and educational and social activities should be planned to help students feel as a valued member of and more attached to their schools. A literature review shown that, students' sense of school membership has been widely investigated in other countries. However, although school belonging appears to play a critical role in academic and psychosocial outcomes of schooling, few studies are done in the Turkish educational landscape. Therefore, it is clear that further studies in which students' sense of school belonging and related variables such as academic achievement, motivation, engagement in – and out – of class activities, provided resources in school, students' demographic and individual characteristics, and hidden curriculum of the school, etc. are deeply investigated are urgently needed in Turkish educational context.

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