



AN IMPORTANT ANTECEDENT OF CLASSROOM ENGAGEMENT: SCHOOL BELONGING

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to examine the relationships between high school students' school belonging and classroom engagement. Dependent variable of the study is school belonging and independent variable of the study is behavioral, cognitive and emotional engagement. The study was conducted in cross sectional research design. In the study quantitative method was used. Purposive sampling method was utilized in the study. 236 high school students who received education at 9th and 10th grades, were between 15-17 years old were included in the study. Data were collected via School Belonging Scale and Classroom Engagement Scale. In the analysis of the data, simple regression analysis technique was applied in the study. According to the results of the study, as long as school belonging feeling increases, behavioral, emotional and cognitive engagement of the students in the classroom increases. At this point, school psychologists, psychological counselors, teachers and school managers can produce preventive and constructive intervention programs that will increase students' school belonging feelings in school context.

Keywords: School belonging, engagement, high school, classroom engagement.

INTRODUCTION

With positive psychology movement, elements of a good life have been examined (Veenhoven, 2000). A lot of studies have been conducted about the elements composing a good life both at society level and individual level (Veenhoven & Hagerty, 2006). According to Seligman (2002), one of the indicators of a good and happy life is engaged life. One of the points that engagement is in life is school and classroom (Arslan, 2021; Renick & Reich, 2021; Başıal & Eryılmaz, 2021).

Engagement is described as the connection between an action and the individual (Finn, 1993). According to Skinner, Furrer, Marchand, and Kindermann (2008), it is seen that engagement occurs at society level, school level and classroom level. Additionally, regardless of where engagement occurs, it has emotional, behavioral and cognitive dimensions (Fredericks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004). Emotional engagement at classroom level means being interested in the lesson, being happy while the course is being lectured and feeling integrated with the course; behavioral engagement means asking questions, sharing their feelings and opinions about the topic in the lesson and attending the lesson in a prepared way; cognitive engagement means following the topics lectured in the lesson cognitively, associating the topic with the daily life and integrating the topic with the previous information (Eryılmaz, 2014; Fredericks, Blumenfeld & Paris, 2004; Skinner et al., 2008). There are a lot of factors that affect the classroom engagement of the students. One of these may be school belonging feeling.



Human is a social being. He wants to feel relaxed in the environment he is in. One of the feelings that provide the individual to feel relaxed in the society is the sense of belonging (Allen, Kern, Rozek, McInerney, & Slavich, 2021; Appleton, Christenson, & Furlong, 2008). Sense of belonging is described as the state in which the members will be supported, loved and will satisfy their needs (Osterman, 2000). School belonging, on the other hand, is described as the subjective mood about to what extent the student is approved, respected, supported and included in the school by the other individuals at school (Goodenow, 1992; Sari, 2013).

In literature, engagement is taken into hand mostly as school engagement (Appleton, Christenson & Furlong, 2008; Finn, 1989). The number of studies conducted at classroom level is very little (Eryilmaz, 2014; Eryilmaz & Altinsoy, 2016; Li, Chen & Li, 2020; Skinner et al., 2008). It has been seen that new studies are conducted at classroom level on this subject (Wang, Bergin & Bergin, 2014). There are lots of positive results of classroom engagement and school engagement. As school engagement increases, academic success of the students increases, too (Appleton, Christenson, Furlong, 2008; Eryilmaz & Altinsoy, 2016), moreover, attendance to school increases, too (Finn, 1989; Fredericks, Blumenfeld & Paris, 2004). Additionally, increasing the engagement of students; it increases students' motivation for a long time (Reeve & Lee, 2014); It positively affects the reading success of adolescents (Froiland & Oros, 2014), increases the academic success of students (Olivier, et al., 2019), and facilitates students' learning (Lancaster & Lundberg, 2019).

On the other hand, sense of school belonging is a metaconcept affecting positive and negative academic results. In a lot of studies conducted in literature, it was found out that as sense of school belonging increases, students produce positive academic results. For instance it was found out that, as students' sense of school belonging increases, their academic success increases (Arslan, 2021; Goodenow & Grady, 1993; Neel & Fuligni, 2013) and their academic motivations increase (Furrer & Skinner, 2003). These findings and information demonstrate that both school belonging and engagement are important. On the other hand, sense of school belonging act as a buffer for students' negative psychological and risky behaviors and sense of belonging in a high level decreases the possibility of depression, social exclusion and showing problematic behaviors (Altinsoy & Özyer, 2018; Saraví, Bayón, & Azaola, 2020; Ashford, 1997). Furthermore, it was found that, in parallel with the decrease in the students' sense of school belonging, their academic success decreases and thus the possibility of displaying risky behaviors for students increases (Arslan, 2021; Kostecky, 2005).

One of the important factors affecting students' engagement is the school. At school, as the support that students receive from their peers and teachers increases, students' engagement in class increases (Kiefer, Alley, & Ellerbrock, 2015; Moreira, et al, 2018). When the teacher-student relationship occurs in a positive way in the school environment, thus the engagement of students in the lesson increases (Archambault, Vandenbossche-Makombo & Fraser, 2017). It has been concluded that there are important relationships between perceived school climate and engagement (Fatou & Kubiszewski, 2018). In parallel with the increase in the quality of teaching in the school, it was found that the level of engagement in the lessons also increased (Quin, Hemphill, & Heerde, 2017). These studies show that school is an important factor in class engagement. However, it is seen that there are very few studies examining the relationship between class engagement and school belonging.

Learning at school and in the classroom, fulfilling academic duties helps students to realize themselves, to feel the sense of competence and to get near to a job that will make them continue their lives (Eryilmaz, 2015). One of the factors affecting the students to learn in the classroom is classroom engagement (Fredericks, Blumenfeld & Paris, 2004). Presenting the factors that will increase the students' classroom engagement may provide both individual and social gains (Appleton, Christenson, Furlong, 2008; Finn, 1989; Fredericks, Blumenfeld & Paris, 2004; Skinner, Furrer, Marchand & Kindermann, 2008). Sense of belonging which affects a lot of variables academically may also affect classroom engagement. However, the number of empirical studies on that topic is very little. In conclusion, in this study it is aimed to examine the relation between the sense of school



belonging and cognitive, emotional and behavioral engagement which are some of the dimensions of classroom engagement.

In line with this purpose, the research questions of the study are as follows:

- Does the sense of school belonging in high school students predict significantly and positively, cognitive engagement, one of the sub-dimensions of classroom engagement?
- Does the sense of school belonging in high school students predict behavioral engagement, which is one of the sub-dimensions of classroom engagement, significantly and positively?
- Does the sense of school belonging in high school students predict emotional engagement, which is one of the sub-dimensions of classroom engagement, significantly and positively?

METHOD

Research Design

The aim of this study is to examine the relations between high school students' school belongings and classroom engagement. Dependent variable of the study is school belonging and independent variable of the study is behavioral, cognitive and emotional engagement. The study was conducted in cross sectional research design. In the study quantitative method was used (Büyüköztürk, Çakmak, Akgün, Karadeniz, & Demirel, 2014).

Research Group

Purposive sampling method was utilized in the study (Büyüköztürk et al., 2014). Students having education in two state high schools in Bilecik constituted the sampling of the study in accordance with the aim of the study. In the determination of the students who would join the research group, 2 9th grade and 2 10th grades were selected from both schools randomly. Students getting education in these classrooms were included in the study. In conclusion, 114 female (50.4%) and 112 male (49.6%) high school students between 15-17 years took part in the study. 96 of the students were 9th grade (42.5%) and 130 of them were 10th grade students (57.5%).

Data Collection Tools

In the study, School Belonging Scale and Classroom Engagement Scale were used. Information about the psychometric features of the scales is given below:

Personal Information Form: Data on demographic features of the participants such as age, gender and education status were obtained through personal information form.

Classroom Engagement Scale (CES): CES was developed by Eryılmaz (2014). The scale is composed of 15 items about the cases of the university students' classroom engagement. In CES there are three subsections. These are named as emotional engagement, cognitive engagement and behavioral engagement. The variance explained by these three sections is 64.04. It is stated that alpha reliability coefficient of the scale is .92. High grades taken from CES mean that classroom engagement levels of the individuals are high. Furthermore, reliability study was also made for the adolescents in this study. It was found out that Cronbach Alpha coefficients took place between .84 and .91.

School Belonging Scale (SBS): School Belonging Scale (SBS) will be collected through The Psychological Sense of School Membership Scale. This scale was developed by Goodenow (1993). It was a tool in 5 point likert scale (1. Strongly incorrect, 5. Strongly correct) with 15 items and it was developed with the aim of measuring the levels of students' feeling as an important part of their schools, their feelings about being accepted, being valued, being included in a group, their connections with the school, teachers and peers. The items taking part in the scale were expressions measuring the subjective, personal perspectives of the students about the school rather than an objective evaluation (I am treated respectfully as much as the other students in that school, I am proud



of belonging to that school. etc.). 5 items in the scale (3, 6, 9, 12 and 16th items) contained negative expressions. For grading the scale, when the negative items were graded adversely, scale grades could be measured by averaging all items for each student. Moreover, the students' grades could be measured on the basis of sub-scales. High grades taken from the scale meant that the sense of belonging to school was high. Adaptation of the scale to Turkish was realized by Sarı (2015) on students at 2nd level in elementary school. In the study in which high school sampling was made by Sarı (2015), Cronbah Alpha internal consistency coefficient was .84. In this study, the evaluation of the scale will be made according to the total grade.

Application of the Research

The applications of the scales took about 30-35 minutes. They were applied by receiving the necessary permissions from the relevant institutions before the research. Data were collected as group application in the study. Data were collected from the participants during school hours with the help of the teacher of the course. Data were collected on voluntary basis. First, participants were informed about the aim of the study shortly and then scales were given to the participants who volunteered to join to the study. Furthermore, additional explanations were made to the participants when necessary. Credentials were not asked from the participants.

Analysis of Data

In this study, it was aimed to examine the relationships between cognitive, emotional and behavioral engagement, which are the dimensions of classroom engagement, and the sense of school belonging. Data were collected via School Belonging Scale and Classroom Engagement Scale. For this purpose, Simple Linear Regression Analysis technique has been used. In addition, descriptive analyzes of the relevant variables were carried out.

RESULTS

In this study, the relationships between school belonging and classroom engagement (cognitive, emotional and behavioral) were examined. For this purpose, Simple Linear Regression Analysis technique was used. The relationships between the school belonging variable and cognitive engagement, behavioral engagement, and finally emotional engagement, respectively, were discussed. Descriptive statistics of the variables of the study are given in Table 1.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics

	Mean	Std.Dev.
School Belonging	62.78	12.29
Behavioral Engagement	15.63	4.67
Emotional Engagement	16.69	4.12
Cognitive Engagement	17.49	4.40

Analysis results regarding the predictive effect of the sense of school belonging in high school students on cognitive engagement

The relationship between classroom engagement and sense of school belonging was first examined in the context of cognitive engagement, which is one of the sub-dimensions of classroom engagement. Simple Linear Regression Analysis results of the sense of school belonging and cognitive engagement are presented in Table 2.

When the analysis results of the cognitive engagement are examined, it is seen that sense of school belonging is a significant predictor of cognitive engagement, ($R=.41$, $R^2=.17$, $F_{(1, 224)}=46.45$, $p<.01$). 17% of the total variance about cognitive engagement is explained through school belonging.

Table 2. The relationship matrix between school belonging and cognitive engagement

	B	SEB	Beta	t	p
Constant	Cognitive Engagement				
School Belonging	.15	.02	.41	6.82	.00

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

Analysis results regarding the predictive effect of the sense of school belonging in high school students on behavioral engagement

The predictability of school belonging to behavioral engagement was carried out with the Simple Linear Regression Analysis technique. Results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Relationship matrix between school belonging and behavioral engagement

	B	SEB	Beta	t	p
Constant	Behavioral Engagement				
School Belonging	.21	.02	.55	9.86	.00

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

When the analysis results of the behavioral engagement are examined, it is seen that sense of school belonging is a significant predictor of behavioral engagement, ($R = .55$, $R^2 = .30$, $F_{(1, 224)} = 97.12$, $p < .01$). 30% of the total variance about behavioral engagement is explained through school belonging.

Analysis results regarding the predictor of emotional involvement in high school students' sense of school belonging

Finally, the relationships between emotional engagement, one of the sub-dimensions of class participation, and belonging to the school were examined. Analysis results for this purpose are presented in Table 4.

Table 4. The Relationship matrix between school belonging and emotional engagement

	B	SEB	Beta	t	p
Constant	Emotional Engagement				
School Belonging	.17	.02	.51	8.76	.00

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

When the results of the analysis are examined, it is seen that sense of school belonging is a significant predictor of emotional engagement, ($R = .51$, $R^2 = .26$, $F_{(1, 224)} = 76.68$, $p < .01$). 26% of the total variance about emotional engagement is explained through school belonging. In Figure 1 below, the findings of the study are summarized.

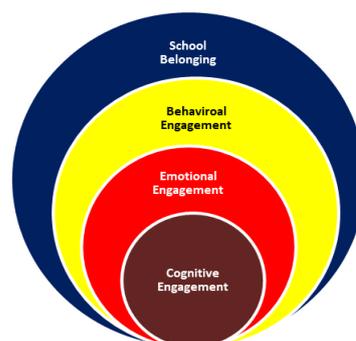


Figure 1. The relationships between school belonging and classroom engagement

DISCUSSION and CONCLUSION

This study was conducted with the aim of examining the relations between the sense of school belonging and classroom engagement. When the study results are examined it is seen that school belonging has relations with all dimensions of classroom engagement in a positive direction. It is seen that sense of belonging explains behavioral engagement most, then emotional engagement and lastly cognitive engagement.

First of all, it is seen that studies examining the relations between the sense of school belonging and classroom engagement are rare. In the existing studies, that the sense of school belonging may increase the students' motivation levels and engagement levels is taken into hand with possibility and theoretically (Goodenow, 1993; Li, Chen & Li, 2020; Saraví, Bayón, & Azaola, 2020; Skinner, Furrer, Marchand, & Kindermann, 2008). In this study, the relation which was referred as possibility, was taken into hand and evaluated empirically. At this point, it can be said that this study made a significant contribution to the literature.

In this study, it is found that that the sense of school belonging is related with behavioral engagement most. In other words, as students' sense of school belonging increases, their classroom engagement levels increase in behavioral terms, too. Studies conducted in literature reveal the importance of behavioral engagement. For instance, according to Chase, Hilliard, Geldof, Warren and Lerner (2014), as students' classroom engagement levels in behavioral terms increase, their academic success increases, too. However, these studies are interested most in behavioral engagement at school level. On the other hand, this study is interested in behavioral engagement at classroom level. Furthermore, because this study examines behavioral engagement as a result of school belonging, it differs from the other studies.

Moreover, the conducted studies have revealed that as the students' sense of belonging increases, they take place in various activities at school actively (Abdollahi, Panahipour, Akhavan-Tafti, & Allen, 2020; Altınsoy & Eryılmaz, 2017; Arslan, 2021; Eryılmaz & Altınsoy, 2016; Finn, 1989; Maddox & Prinz, 2003; Thomson, 2005). By carrying the meaning of the findings stated above to the classroom dimension, this study specialized it more. In other words, the topic that in which activities the students take place in an active way has been taken into hand generally in school context. However, the direction and context of that being active should be expressed. This study is important because it added direction and context to the previous explanations. In other words, as the students' sense of belonging increases, students ask more questions about the lesson in the classroom, answer the questions asked by the teacher and join the activities about the topic more behaviorally in the classroom.

According to the results of this study, as the high school students' sense of school belonging increase, their classroom engagement in emotional terms increases. In other words, as the students' sense of belonging increase, their sense of curiosity and their interest in the lesson increases and they feel integrated with the lesson. These findings reveal the importance of positive feelings both at school and in the classroom environment. According to Frederickson (2001), positive feelings build the individuals' capacity, widen their point of view and mend the negations of the past. Additionally, Eryılmaz and Aypay (2001) expressed that in getting motivated to engage in the lesson for the students, an important factor is to be in positive body and mood state. In conclusion, this study revealed the importance of positive feelings both at school and in classroom context. Furthermore, this study revealed that there is a spillover effect from school context to classroom context in terms of positive feelings.

In this study, it is seen that that the sense of school belonging is least related with the students' cognitive engagement in classroom context. The reason of that situation may be cultural factors. According to Markus and Kitayama (1991) there are two kinds of societies; individualist and collectivist. Individuals in Turkish society seem close to collectivist cultures (Kağıtçıbaşı, 2000). At

this point, relational collectivity in collectivist cultures seems much more significant. When classroom is taken as a small microcosmos of the community, it is seen that school belonging is much more closely related to the behavioral and emotional engagement of this group. However, in individualist societies, personal effort based success is taken as a more important factor. Thus, cognitive engagement may be affective in much more individualist communities. Studies supporting these data were conducted in Turkish culture. For example, Arastaman (2006) stated that Turkish high school students displayed high dependence to school behaviorally, but low dependence cognitively.

As a consequence, the increase in high school students' sense of school belonging affects their classroom engagement behaviorally, emotionally and cognitively. The findings of the study can be summarized in that direction. Moreover, based on the findings of the study, applications to increase the students' school belonging are needed in order to increase the students' engagement in classroom level. At this point, school psychologists, psychological counselors, teachers and school managers can produce preventive and constructive intervention programs that will increase students' sense of school belonging in school context.

Limitations of the Study

Although important findings were obtained in this study between classroom engagement and sense of school belonging in high school students, there are some limitations. Since the study was conducted on a limited sample, the generalizability of the findings can be considered as a limitation. Another situation is that this study is a correlational study due to the cross-sectional nature of the data being collected in a single time.

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