Examining the Psychological Sense of School Membership among the Basic School Students

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Abstract

Studies on Psychological Sense of School Membership (PSSM) have been widespread globally for three decades. However, it has not been discussed in the context of Nepali schools' education. A positive sense of belongingness to schools among the students is essential to foster their good academic achievement as well as their mental health. Furthermore, it also increases students' motivation and peer adjustment. This study uncovers the sense of school belongingness of grade eight students in community schools in Nepal employing a descriptive survey design under quantitative research. The five points PSSM scale, a valid and widely used measurement scale, has been used to examine the students' perceptions about their school membership. Four major concepts have emerged from the data analysis: sense of attachment with school, sense of acceptance, sense of school ownership, and sense of respect and honour. Results revealed that students lack a strong sense of membership towards their school although they have feelings of attachment with their school. While students have a strong perceived sense of school ownership, they feel of being a weaker relationship with their teachers. Therefore, the study has immediate application to create awareness about the psychological sense of school membership among students and PSSM into academic discourse so that the Ministry of Education can initiate the necessary measures for improved students' learning.

*Keywords***:** PSSM, attachment, perception, belongingness, community schools

Introduction

Psychological Sense of School Membership (PSSM) scale (Goodenow, 1993), a valid and reliable scale to assess the adolescent students' sense of school belongingness, has been widely accepted and used for around three decades. After

developing the PSSM scale by Goodenow (1993) in the United States, many other studies (also in different countries/geographical regions) such as Cortina et al. (2017), Craggs and Kelly (2018), Slaten et al. (2016), St-Amand et al. (2020), St-Amand et al. (2017) have confirmed its validity and reliability. Primarily the PSSM scale is developed for adolescent students. However, it has been equally used to study primary school students (Wagle et al., 2018). Besides the original English version, the translated versions of PSSM are tested and used in different languages. For instance, a French version of the PSSM scale (St-Amand et al., 2020) is tested to ensure its validity. Although the Open and Distance Learning Centre, Tribhuvan University, has been surveying PSSM as a part of a larger study on gender-inclusive pedagogy recently, no study of PSSM has been conducted yet in Nepal.

Besides students' individual differences such as abilities, interests, skills, and learning capacities, the 'school or the classroom contextual factors' (Goodenow, 1993) affect their school/learning success or failure. The study confirms (Goodenow & Grady, 1993) that students' sense of school belongingness or psychological sense of school belongingness is a major contextual factor for PSSM. As Goodenow (1993) defines it, the "psychological sense of school membership is the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others in the school social environment" (p.81). While students' sense of belonging is a prerequisite to active engagement/participation in the teaching-learning process and better academic achievement (St-Amand et al., 2020), it is neglected in Nepal. Although some focus has been paid to creating inclusive pedagogy with the existing pedagogical practices (Bista et al., 2016; Sharma, 2019), none of the efforts are existent to foster the PSSM of Nepali school students. Therefore, studying the PSSM in the context of Nepal is imperative.

Since the discussion on PSSM is in the very beginning state in Nepal, this descriptive study can contribute to examining students' sense of school belongingness from the Nepali perspective so that the study findings could help to understand students' sense of school belongingness in order to create "motivation, engagement, and participation, especially among students from groups at risk of school dropout" (Goodenow & Grady, 1993, p. 60). This article aims to examine the PSSM of basic level (primary level) school students using Goodenow's (1993) scale.

Literature Review

Students' sense of school belongingness gained momentum in 1990 after Goodenow (1993) developed the PSSM scale. Among the various studies, Goodnow's (1993) scale became popular; as a result, many studies adopted this scale to study students' perceived sense of school membership. PSSM is a valid

and widely used five-point Likert-type scale (1 = not at all true, and 5 = completely true) containing 18 self-reported statements. After that, the PSSM become a major tool for studying the relationship between the school environment (context) and the students' "motivational and achievement outcomes" (Ye & Wallace, 2014, p. 202). The PSSM becomes a major aspect of student engagement in the school's activity and building relationships with peers and teachers. Students' feeling of acceptance, respect, and other support plays an essential role in their learning, motivation, and achievement. For instance, a study in the US found that the relationship between peer and teacher shape their sense of school belongingness (Ballard, 2017). In addition to assessing a sense of school belongingness, PSSM is equally valuable for examining primary-level students, as reported by various studies (Craggs & Kelly, 2018; Wagle et al., 2018; Wagle, 2021). As such, in her doctoral research in the US primary [Elementary] school context, Wagle (2021) stated that "female students were more likely to experience high school belonging levels than male students" (p. 12). Similar to these findings, other studies such as Cortina et al. (2017), Sari (2012), and St-Amand et al. (2020) also reported that female students have a higher sense of school belongingness than male students. The literature indicates that gender difference is a significant impetus factor in determining the students' sense of school membership.

Students' sense of school membership has multiple stimulus effects: their engagement at school, feeling of acceptance and affinity with peers, and harmonious relationship with the teachers. Moreover, peer relationships significantly affect the children's balanced social and emotional growth both inside the school and in their lives in society. Concerning peer rejection, in a comprehensive study, Van der Wilt et al. (2019) states that meaningful peer relations offer unique interpersonal relationships and get acquainted with social norms. They further argue that peer rejection has "devastating effects on a child's future development. Compared with children their peers accept, rejected children have been found to experience higher levels of anxiety, loneliness, and depression" (Van der Wilt et al., 2019). Similarly, a closer and harmonious student-teacher relationship significantly affects the students' sense of school belongingness and well-being. While considering school belongingness is a positive construct (Wagle et al., 2018), "it is assumed to contribute to academic motivation constructs, such as engagement and self-efficacy which, in turn, improve academic achievement" (Cortina et al., 2017, p. 1). Several studies, such as Evans et al. (2019), Riley (2009), Wagle (2021), and Ballard (2017) have discussed the importance of students' relationships with the teacher not only on their emotional and social development but instead, on their sense of school belongingness. From the adult attachment perspective, Riley (2009) reported that elementary teachers were found to have higher attachment with the students compared to secondary teachers.

Given that students' sense of belongingness is significantly affected by the student-teacher relationship, reciprocally, teachers' well-being is closely dependent on such a relationship (Evans et al., 2019). Moreover, as Riley (2009) argues, the teacher-student relationship "offers teachers new ways to inform and improve their classroom practice" (p. 626). While students' perceptions of attachment with peers and teachers significantly affect their social adjustment and academic achievement, it is also closely related to their school misconduct. A study has identified that "while higher perceived teacher support and school belonging related to less school misconduct, higher peer attachment was associated with higher rates of school misconduct" (Demanet & Van Houtte, 2012, p. 499).

For instance, a study reported that "school belongingness is essential to improve students' life satisfaction" (Ahmadi & Ahmadi, 2019, p. 8). For instance, a study of Nepalese adolescent students found that family factors related to psychological dysfunction are alarming (Bista et al., 2016). Generally, it has been assumed that students with higher academic achievement have a strong sense of school membership and a lower feeling of rejection from the school. Another study of elementary students in the Turkish context reported similar results to female students, and the students with higher academic achievement have a strong sense of school belongingness (Sari, 2012). As the above discussions suggest, understanding the complexities that exist in the construct of the psychological sense of school membership is important for the student's mental and physical health.

Methods and Procedures

The study employed the descriptive survey design under quantitative research for examining the PSSM of the Basic Level students. This design intends "to describe what exists concerning the individual, group, or condition" (Edmonds & Kennedy, 2016, p.161) to uncover the phenomena of PSSM. Additionally, the researcher describes the PSSM from the field data without "manipulating the natural setting" (Siedlecki, 2020, p.8) of the existing school classroom. The researcher is very cautious about his presence with the students, so students' responses will not be affected. Nonetheless, he made it clear even reading repeatedly to clarify the items. As the researcher experienced, grade eight students understood the items of the PSSM scale, while grade six students became confused.

The study is carried out in a community school in the Kaski district. The school was selected using the 'convenience sampling' method (Ary et al., 2014) since the school was closer to the researcher's house and was easily accessible. Thirty students out of forty-six from Grade eight of the sample school were selected using a simple random sampling method. The five-point PSSM scale of Goodenow (1993) was used.

The PSSM scale was used once with a group of grade eight students. The sample students were requested to gather in a library room, and the printed questionnaire was distributed to them. Students responded to the questionnaire within thirty minutes after the researcher described each statement and procedure to respond. Data were tabulated first and analyzed descriptively in percentage.

Results and Discussion

Analysis of the data generated the four major concepts. Generally, the previous studies presented the findings separately, like in the original PSSM scale. However, this study presents the findings as the studies (Craggs & Kelly, 2018; St-Amand et al., 2020; Ye & Wallace, 2014) allow the researcher to present the result in the following four dimensions.

Sense of School Attachment

In a larger context, school attachment is related to the students' connectedness or belongingness, generally known as "school membership" (Wagle, 2021, p.1). In a broader sense, school attachment is also understood as a student's relationship with their teachers and peers. Besides, school attachment is influenced by parental involvement in school. In addition, a study (Ahmadi & Ahmadi, 2019) found that students' sense of school attachment/belongingness is also essential for their life satisfaction. As shown in Table 1, respondent students have no strong sense of school attachment/belongingness.

Table 1

Students' Sense of Attachment to School

Statements	Not at all true 1	2	3	4	Completely true 5
I feel like a part of my school	-	13.33	23.33	30	33.33
People at my school notice when I am good at something	-	23.33	40	33.33	3.33
It is hard for people like me to be accepted at my school	50	20	20	10	-
I can really be myself at my school	-	13.33	36.66	16.66	33.33

Source: Field Survey 2022.   Note: Figures in the table indicate the percentage

Only one-third of students (33.33%) have a strong sense of attachment to school.

Most students do not feel that other people in their school notice them when they are good at something. Although 50% of the students do not find it difficult to be accepted at their school, the other 50% felt it hard to be accepted to some extent. As data indicate, it is striking that none of the students (no response) are confident about their acceptance within the school. As such, 33.33% of students felt that they could be themselves at their school. These findings are consistent with the previous studies of the global north (Goodenow & Grady, 1993; St-Amand et al., 2020; Wagle, 2021). Besides, Goodenow (1993) claims that "when young people begin to consider who they are and wish to be, with whom they belong, and where they intend to invest their energies and stake their futures" (p. 81). The data analysis indicates that students did not feel like a part of their school due to their poor sense of school membership/attachment/belongingness.

Sense of Acceptance

This study has examined the student's attachment to their peers and teachers. Such acceptance plays a pivotal role in their active engagement in the teaching-learning process and school activities. Table 2 indicates students' perceptions of their attachments with their peers and teachers.

Table 2

Students' Sense of Acceptance from their Peers and Teachers

Statements	Not at all true 1	2	3	4	Completely true 5
Other students in my school take my opinions seriously	13.33	40	26.66	10	10
Most teachers at my school are interested in me	16.66	16.66	26.66	16.66	23.33
There is at least one teacher or adult I can talk to in my school if I have a problem	10	13.33	26.66	23.33	26.66
Teachers here are not interested in people like me	43.33	43.33	6.66	-	6.66
Teachers at my school respect me	16.66	13.33	16.66	20	33.33
Other students at my school like me the way that I am	2.66	3.33	36.66	36.66	16.66

Source: Field Survey 2022. Note: Figures in the table indicate the percentage

While a majority of students perceived that their opinions are taken seriously to some extent, only 10% of students strongly agreed with it. Likewise, while many students (36.66%) perceived it to be quite true, other 36.66 % perceived it with certainty when asked about other students liking them the way they are. Considering the peer acceptance of one's opinion, studies (Van der Wilt et al., 2019; Wagle et al., 2018) conclude that it has profound effects not only on students' immediate school connectedness but also damage their future development, such as on creations of anxiety, loneliness, and depression. This notion of peer acceptance indicates that it creates several multiplier effects concerning the students' school belongingness, impacting their achievement and social adjustment (Slaten et al., 2016). Moreover, other studies (Craggs & Kelly, 2018; St-Amand et al., 2020; Wagle et al., 2018; Wagle, 2021) have also confirmed the critical role of peer support in gaining a sense of school belongingness. Similarly, as Slaten et al. (2016) said, there is a positive correlation between school belongingness and support from peers, teachers, and parents. Besides, they further note that the school type, location, and school year also affect the students' sense of belongingness. This finding directs toward the notion of developing unsocial behaviors with the students. School belongingness not only their learning progress in the school, but it can also mitigate students' sense of alienation (Craggs & Kelly, 2018). Regarding the relationship with teachers, students responded diversely. Like this finding, studies, such as Cortina et al. (2017), Wagle (2021), and (St-Amand et al., 2020) conclude that the higher the teacher support, the more the students' sense of school membership, while the lower teacher support contributes to loose students' sense of school membership.

Contrary to this, most of the students (33.33%) perceive that they are getting respect from their teachers. The notion of teacher support has several positive effects in increasing the students' sense of school belonging and is closely related to the teacher's good mental health (Riley, 2009; Slaten et al., 2016). Given that life satisfaction is one of the major concerns related to school belongingness, "satisfaction is one of the essential missions of education" (Ahmadi & Ahmadi, 2019, p. 1). As such, students' sense of school belongingness is indispensable for increasing the conditions of their life satisfaction. Findings in this study reveal that the teacher's support and acceptance are relatively moderated and do not adequately contribute to increasing students' sense of school membership.

Sense of School Ownership

School ownership is a 'feeling of connectedness' (Cortina et al., 2017) with the school community in a sociocultural context. Existing 'cultural constructs' (Cortina et al., 2017) in a particular school context influence school belongingness. In the western setting, several studies have demonstrated the critical role of school

ownership in contributing to the students' sense of school belongingness (Goodenow & Grady, 1993; St-Amand et al., 2020; Wagle et al., 2018; Ye & Wallace, 2014). Table 3 shows that students' sense of school ownership is relatively higher on average.

Table 3

Students' Sense of Ownership of their School

Statements	Not at all true 1	2	3	4	Completely true 5
Sometimes I feel as if I don't belong in my school	43.33	26.66	10	10	10
People at my school are friendly to me	3.33	13.33	16.66	33.33	33.33
I am included in lots of activities at my school	16.66	20	50	10	13.33
I wish I were in a different school	50	16.66	16.66	3.33	13.33

Source: Field Survey 2022. Note: Figures in the table indicate the percentage

As this study reports, students (43.33%) have a sense of school ownership and are satisfied with being a student at their school. This finding indicates the students' positive sense of school attachment. Such an attachment motivates students to move ahead in many ways: it contributes to their positive sense of psychological development; builds a strong bond with their peers, teachers, and parents. In the broader school context, the feeling of school ownership contributes to harmonious social, psychological, and emotional development. As a result, students sense themselves as strongly affiliated with the school community, which ultimately prevents 'academic failure' (Van der Wilt et al., 2019).

Additionally, 33.33% strongly perceive that people in their school (peers, teachers, staff) are friendly to them. While most of the students (50%) perceive their inclusion in the school activities, a small number (13.33%) do not feel the same. Importantly, students (50%) do not wish to be in another school currently, while a few (13.33%) wish to be in a different school. It is assumed that school is supposed to earn the trust of their students. When the school loses or gradually loses the students', trust is a serious matter, although it is a perceived sense of a small number of students. The findings above allow the researcher to conclude that the students' perceived (strong) satisfaction regarding school ownership.

Sense of Respect and Honour

Given that students' sense of respect and honour shapes their school membership, it indicates the perceived sense of trust and security gained "through relationships with others in the school setting" (Craggs & Kelly, 2018, p.13). At the same time, students gain the feeling of dignity through the "positive social relationships with members of the school environment" (St-Amand et al., 2020, p.20), which helps them achieve a higher sense of school belongingness. Table 4 indicates the moderated sense of students' respect and honour.

Table 4

Students' Sense of Respect and Honour

Statements	Not at all true 1	2	3	4	Completely true 5
I am treated with as much respect as other students in my school	6.66	13.33	26.66	36.66	16.66
I feel very different from most other students at my school	-	36.66	33.33	13.33	16.66
People at my school know that I can do good work	3.33	16.66	16.66	16.66	13.33
I feel proud to belong to my school	6.66	13.33	30	6.66	43.33

Source: Field Survey 2022. Note: Figures in the table indicate the percentage

A small number of students (16.66%) were completely satisfied with the treatment they received from teachers, peers, school management personnel, and parents, while a majority of them (36.66%) did not seem fully satisfied. Studies such as Wagle et al. (2018), Goodenow and Grady (1993), and Ballard (2017) have similar findings. For instance, when the students perceive as he or she is recognized, particularly by the teachers and peers inside and outside the school, they feel proud of being a member of a school. While the students feel they are fitted with the school environment, it tends to motivate them for better achievement through engaging activities. As a result, such school belongingness also reduces the chances of being a victim of peer bullying. As the findings indicate not a strong perceived sense of teacher's favorable treatment, other studies, such as Cortina et al. (2017), have similar findings. Cortina et al. (2017) further said that "the experience of belonging at school requires that the students feel that the teacher respects them and has positive expectations of them" (Cortina et al., 2017, p.2). It is generally assumed that teachers, critical aspects of school belongingness, are vital catalytic

agents for facilitating students' better learning progress since teacher support is influential at adolescent and pre-adolescent stages. Empirical studies confirmed that positive teacher affective support significantly influences school belonging levels (Wagle, 2021). Regarding recognizing students' good work from people at school (peers, teachers, school staff, parents), they showed weaker belief (13.33%). While considering students' closeness is the indicator of the quality of learning, as the findings report, it indicates the serious situation of students' perception of their sense of security and honor. In addition, strikingly, the majority of the students (43.33%) feel proud to be a student in their school, which shows (a firm) feeling of belongingness towards their school. These findings are consistent with Goodenow (1993) and (Wagle, 2021) that students' sense of mutual reciprocity with their teachers and peers is fundamental for their psychological development, which has a closer relationship with the student's perceived sense of school belongingness.

Moreover, as the data reports, a more significant portion of schools feels a sense of respect and honor from their school. As such, it indicates that the school promotes comparatively a good sense of respect and dignity, particularly from their teachers and peers; in the larger context of the local school, people/community belonging is related to gaining a perceived sense of broader school community. This scenario promotes a respectful environment with the students and plays a fundamental element in creating the inclusive, socially constructivist teaching-learning practice within the school. More importantly, in a study, Goodenow and Grady (1993) reported that school sense of belongingness and motivation do h reciprocal relationship

The relationship between a sense of school belonging and motivation is undoubtedly far more reciprocal than suggested by these analyses. Just as students who feel themselves to be full and valued members of the school are more motivated and engaged, they are also accorded more acceptance and respect from others in the school, especially school adults.

Conclusion

This study examines the PSSM of Grade eight students at Basic level Schools in Nepal using Goodenow's (Goodenow, 1993) scale. Students' sense of school belongingness has several positive consequences for adolescent and pre-adolescent (puberty stage) students. As their feeling of school membership increases, students are motivated and engage in learning. They gain overall well-being and sound mental health, leading to academic success. The data analysis of this study revealed the existing situation of students' sense of school belongingness/connectedness/membership in four broad areas.

The perceived sense of school attachment among students is moderate and mostly poor. Further, they are not fully confident about their teachers and peer support care. Students' perceived acceptance from their peers and teachers is moderate, which does not fully contribute to earning the feeling of support from other people at school. Likewise, students' perceived sense of school ownership is strong, increasing their sense of school membership. Finally, as the findings revealed, students have an average belief of respect and honor from other people at school. In addition, students are not fully recognized (identity shaping) by their teachers and peers as they wish, which does not indicate a strong sense of dignity.

This small-scale study identified that the existing school context does not adequately promote and foster the students' sense of school membership. The findings from this study have immediate applications in understanding the complexity of PSSM in the context of school education in Nepal. While studying PSSM is pivotal for the student's academic progress, balanced mental health, and well-being, it is being ignored in the Nepali school education system. A large-scale longitudinal study of students from different Grades on PSSM is imperative in the future.

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Appendix

Psychological Sense of School Membership Scale

S. N.	Statements	Not at all true 1	2	3	4	Completely true 5
1	I feel like a part of my school					
2	People at my school notice when I am good at something					
3	It is hard for people like me to be accepted at my school					
4	Other students in my school take my opinions seriously					

5	Most teachers at my school are interested in me					
6	Sometimes I feel as if I don't belong in my school					
7	There is at least one teacher or adult I can talk to in my school if I have a problem					
8	People at my school are friendly to me					
9	Teachers here are not interested in people like me					
10	I am included in lots of activities at my school					
11	I am treated with as much respect as other students in my school					
12	I feel very different from most other students at my school					
13	I can really be myself at my school					
14	Teachers at my school respect me					
15	People at my school know that I can do good work					
16	I wish I were in a different school					
17	I feel proud to belong to my school					
18	Other students at my school like me the way that I am					

Source: Goodenow, C. (1993). The psychological sense of school membership among adolescents: Scale development and educational correlates. *Psychology in the Schools*, *30*(1), 79-90.

Scales: *1 = Not at all true; 2 = Partially/ Little true; 3 = Quite a lot true; 4 = Certainly true; 5 = Completely true*