

ADOLESCENTS' SENSE OF BELONGING AT SCHOOL: THE ROLE OF EMPATHY AND INDIVIDUAL CHARACTERISTICS

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Abstract

There are many benefits of a high sense of school belonging (i.e., lower psychological distress), yet a lot of students do not feel like they belong to their schools. Many researchers have therefore tried to increase the sense of belonging in adolescents via different interventions. One of the recent review articles (Allen et al., 2021) discovered that successful interventions targeted students' strengths and promoted positive interactions. One way these strengths and positive interactions could be targeted is to build empathy capacities. Although personal characteristics have been widely recognized as predictors of school belonging (i.e., age, gender, academic achievement, etc.) this does not seem to be the case for empathy. Only a few studies explored empathy components when addressing school belonging (i.e., Batanova & Loukas, 2014) and none, to our knowledge, have looked into empathy as a possible mediator of the relationship between personal characteristics and school belonging. The present study investigated the relationship between personal characteristics and the sense of belonging at school while investigating the mediating role of empathy on the relationship. A randomized sample of 1990 students from Slovenia ($M = 15.35$ years, $SD = 1.23$; 58.3% female) was used in a structural equation modelling to determine the relationships between the individual characteristics (gender, age, grades) and the Sense of belonging at school (OECD, 2018), while looking into the mediating role of both empathy components, namely, Empathic concern and Perspective taking (IRI; Davis, 1980). Results showed that all personal characteristics (gender, age, grades) are positively connected to both empathy components. Also, both empathy components (Perspective taking, Empathic concern) have a positive connection with the Sense of belonging at school. Furthermore, grades have a direct positive and gender a direct negative connection with the Sense of belonging at school. Lastly, both empathy components mediate all the indirect paths from the personal characteristics to the Sense of belonging at school, thus providing 6 positive indirect paths in-between. The model provides an insight into the important role that empathy has when addressing the sense of school belonging. Not only is it connected to it, but it also mediates the paths from the personal characteristics, which is especially important for the direct negative path from gender. Addressing empathy (especially empathic concern, which has the highest connection to school belonging) is advisable when trying to influence the sense of belonging at school.

Keywords: *School belonging, empathy, adolescents, individual characteristics, positive youth development.*

1. Introduction

Although there are many benefits of a high sense of school belonging (i.e., higher psychological strengths and lower psychological distress; Wagle et al., 2021), a lot of students do not feel like they belong to their schools. Many researchers have therefore tried to increase the sense of belonging in adolescents via different interventions, and one of the recent review articles (Allen et al., 2021) discovered that successful interventions targeted students' strengths and promoted positive interactions (between students as well as between school staff and students). One way these strengths and positive interactions could be targeted is to build empathy capacities among students (and other individuals). Although personal characteristics have been widely recognized as predictors of school belonging (i.e., age and gender, Kashy-Rosenbaum & Aizenkot, 2020; academic achievement, Azagba et al., 2014) this does not seem to be the case for empathy. Only a few studies explored empathy components when addressing school belonging (i.e., Batanova & Loukas, 2014; Safara & Rafiee, 2020) and none, to our knowledge, have looked into empathy as a possible mediator of the relationship between personal characteristics and school belonging. The present study investigated the relationship between personal characteristics and the sense of belonging at school while investigating the mediating role of empathy on the relationship.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

A randomized sample consisted of 1990 students from Slovenia ($M = 15.35$ years, $SD = 1.23$; 58.3% female) who participated in a study Positive Youth Development in Slovenia: Developmental pathways in the context of migration (PYD-SI Model).

2.2. Instruments

Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI; Davis, 1980) was used as a measure of empathy. It consists of four scales; two of them labelled as emotional empathy (Empathic concern, Personal distress) and the other two as cognitive empathy (Perspective taking, Fantasy). In our study, two scales (Empathic concern and Perspective taking) were included, where students assessed how well the items described them. Each had 7 items on a 5-point Likert scale (1 – “Not at all like me”, 5 – “Very much like me”), Cronbach’s alpha was .75 for Perspective taking and .69 for Empathic concern. Sense of belonging at school (OECD, 2018) was used as a measure of school belonging. It consists of 6 items, where students assessed how well the items describe their experiences, on a 4-point Likert scale (1 – “I strongly disagree”, 4 – “I completely agree”). Cronbach’s alpha was .80. Gender was coded 0 for males and 1 for females. Five non-binary people were excluded from the model due to poor representation. Grades was measured with one item, assessing the most common grades the students get in the school, on an 8-point Likert scale (1 – “mostly worse than 2”, 8 – “mostly 5”). In Slovenia, grades are labelled from 1-insufficient to 5-excellent.

2.3. Procedure

The students completed a paper or online version of the questionnaire measuring indicators of positive youth development with possible connected factors and demographics. We only present data for the selected measures. Reliability tests and descriptive statistics were calculated with IBM SPSS Statistics 21. The structural equation modelling (SEM) was performed in Mplus. The study was supported by The Slovenian Research Agency as part of the project Positive Youth Development in Slovenia: Developmental Pathways in the Context of Migration (PYD-SI Model) [J5-1781].

3. Results

Descriptive statistics and correlations are summarized in Table 1. As it can be seen, most correlations are significant. When looking at the Sense of school belonging, the outcome of our study, all variables but age are significantly connected to it, with Perspective taking having the highest association.

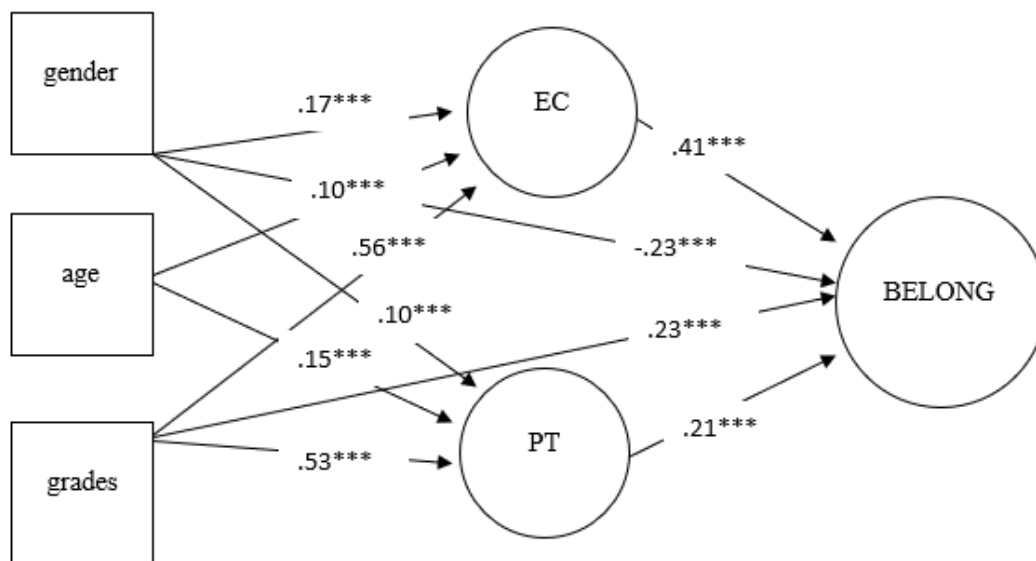
Table 1. Descriptive statistics and correlations across factors.

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Gender	Age	Grades	Empathic concern	Perspective taking
Gender	0.583						
Age	15.347	1.232	0.024				
Grades	5.845	1.584	.167**	-.195**			
Empathic concern	3.609	0.645	.346**	0.008	.145**		
Perspective taking	3.274	0.610	.218**	.076**	.132**	.510**	
Sense of belonging	3.133	0.528	-.100**	-0.026	.074**	.094**	.130**

Notes: ** $p < .01$

Structural equation modelling was used to determine the relationships between the individual characteristics (gender, age, grades) and the sense of belonging at school, while looking into the mediating role of both empathy components, namely, Empathic concern and Perspective taking. The SEM model shows an adequate fit to the data: $\chi^2(216) = 2901.211$, $p < .001$, CFI = .910, RMSEA = .079, 90% CI [.077 - .082], SRMR = .067, according to Hair et al. (1998). Results showed that all personal characteristics (gender, age, grades) are positively connected to both empathy components, with grades having the highest connection (see Figure 1). Also, both empathy components (Perspective taking, Empathic concern) have a positive connection with the Sense of belonging at school. Furthermore, grades have a direct positive and gender a direct negative connection with the Sense of belonging at school. Lastly, both empathy components mediate all the indirect paths from the personal characteristics to the Sense of belonging at school, thus providing 6 positive indirect paths in-between.

Figure 1. Relationships between personal characteristic (gender, age, grades), empathy (EC-Empathic concern, PT-Perspective taking) and Sense of school belonging: structural equation model. The numbers present standardised coefficient estimates. Only significant paths are presented. *** $p < .001$



4. Conclusions

The model provides an insight into the important role that empathy has when addressing the sense of school belonging. Not only is it connected to it, but it also mediates the paths from the personal characteristics, which is especially important for the direct negative path from gender. Based on this model, males have a lower sense of school belonging, but if they tend to express high empathic skills (either component) their sense of school belonging is also higher. Addressing empathy (especially empathic concern, which has the highest connection to school belonging) is advisable when trying to influence the sense of belonging at school. Lastly, we need not forget about the personal characteristics connected to it, and ways to reinforce school belonging, which is highly connected to several future outcomes in the adolescents' life.

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