Belongingness:

The Keystone of Student Development in Evolving Educational Environments

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Abstract:

Based on the literature review and analysis of survey responses from Babson College students' changing sense of belongingness before, after, and during the COVID-19 pandemic, this study investigates the influence of belongingness on students in educational environments. The findings reveal that, despite the barriers posed by remote learning, there are effective approaches to mitigate these impacts, such as shorter lectures, facilitated discussions, and maintaining a strong online presence. Moreover, the personal narratives from students during this unprecedented time offer perspectives on the varying degrees of belongingness experienced across different educational stages and modalities. This research underscores the nature of belongingness and its critical role in fostering an inclusive, supportive academic environment, highlighting the need for innovative teaching strategies to preserve student engagement and belonging. In the end, this paper calls for further research into pedagogical practices that can enhance a sense of belonging in both physical and virtual classrooms, which is always evolving.

Keywords: Belongingness; Student Well-being; Community and Connection.

1. Introduction

According to the online dictionary, belongingness is the human emotional need to be an accepted member of a group. Whether it is family, friends, co-workers, or a sports team, humans have an inherent desire to belong and be an important part of something greater than themselves. In the educational period, belongingness,is also a foundational quality of young students. For more than fifteen years, school is not just a building for learning, but a place where teachers and peers create a strong sense of connection and community.

In classrooms buzzing with ideas, the feeling of belongingness is palpable – it is in how classmates engage in lively discussions and how every individual is recognized, not just as a student, but as a person. The sense of community extends beyond academic hours through after-school clubs and activities, creating an ecosystem where it is always noticed if one is having a bad day. People care, and they show it. This warmth and inclusiveness underscore a vital truth: people thrive when they belong.

However, with the hit of the COVID-19 pandemic, a sudden shift to online learning stripped away the daily interactions that subtly affirmed the students' sense of belonging. Classrooms became a place of muted microphones and switched-off cameras, while extracurriculars, once the heartbeat of students' lives, were reduced to memories.

Thus, this paper delves into the concept of belongingness, examining its crucial role in the personal development of adolescents.

2. Literature Review

Osterman (2000) believed that in the field of education, belongingness represents an individual's collective acceptance, which fosters an environment where students can feel valued, understood, and included in the educational community. Thus, belongingness always plays a crucial role, manifesting as a profound sense of connectedness and acceptance with peers and educators.

By looking into different aspects of belongingness, Highley and Thacker et al. (2022) proposed that belongingness is more important than simply feeling included in the community; it has an undeniable connection with significant educational outcomes like motivation, engagement, and academic success.The scholars illustrated the potential of belongingness that it can improve the educational experience and create a conducive learning atmosphere, and highlighted the impact of belongingness on student success, including academic achievement, satisfaction, and well-being across diverse educational fields.

The scholars continued to dig out the deeper relationship between belongingness and student academic achievement is a vital component of educational success. Research highlighted that a strong sense of belonging within

educational environments is not merely a byproduct of effective schooling but a foundational element that propels students toward higher academic achievement and engagement (Polat & Karabatak, 2022; Allen et al., 2018). For instance, Polat and Karabatak (2022) explained how the flipped classroom model, which allows students to participate in class, improves their academic performance by making them feel like they belong. The success of this model comes from its ability to create a collaborative learning environment where students feel seen, heard, and valued, thus contributing to their academic success. Similarly, Tice et al. (2021) claimed that belongingness serves as a key motivator for students, suggesting that when students perceive themselves as integral members of their educational community, their engagement and motivation to succeed are markedly enhanced.

Several studies in the field of education have demonstrated that belongingness and student satisfaction in the educational environment are highly related. Sanders and Munford (2016) illuminated this connection by explaining how fostering a sense of belongingness in schools can guide youth toward positive academic and social outcomes. They argue, "Schools can be a key resource here and indeed school-based professionals have a critical role in enhancing the resilience of vulnerable youth", highlighting how schools and educators can change the lives of students who are going through difficulties and hardships by creating a psychologically safe environment and bringing them a sense of belongingness.

There are always some unprecedented changes, like COVID-19 pandemic,which have undeniably upended traditional educational structures, significantly impacting the sense of belongingness within academic institutions. Due to the academic setting change, people were forced to explore the shift to online and hybrid learning models (Highley 2022), which in some instances diluted academic belongingness, making it even more complicated for students to interact with educators and peers. In response, educators have been prompted to rethink their teaching strategies, with Tice (2021) suggesting that "shorter lectures facilitated informal discussions and online presence" are effective approaches to address the decline in students' sense of belongingness. This shift challenged educators to keep looking for new ways to make sure students feel like they belong to both the virtual and in-person learning environment, even as we move beyond the pandemic.

Although studies generally emphasize achievement above belonging, belongingness is a key consequence in itself rather than just a precursor or mediating factor. Thacker (2022) emphasized the efficacy of interactive and engaging teaching approaches in online STEM education, which can greatly enhance students' sense of connection and inclusion. These modifications represent a transition towards educational practices that value students' social and emotional well-being in addition to academic accomplishment, rather than just being rapid reactions to needs. By incorporating these methods, educators can establish educational settings that cultivate a robust sense of belongingness, which is essential for student engagement, motivation, and overall success.

3. Survey Method

This study employed the belongingness scale developed by Erin Feinauer Whiting, Kimberlee Everson,and Erika Feinauer from their research paper, *The Simple School Belonging Scale: Working Toward a Unidimensional Measure of Student Belonging*, to effectively assess students' sense of belonging. The survey was distributed to participants via Babson College's Microsoft Forms, reaching individuals through a combination of undergraduate class group chats and targeted social media. This approach ensured a diverse representation of student experiences within the college community.

Upon completion of the survey, I engaged further with the topic by conducting semi-structured interviews with 10 participants who had volunteered for more in-depth discussion. These interviews were guided by an initial set of three questions designed to delve deeper into the nuances of students' feelings of belongingness, including "Do you feel you belonged to your current educational community?", "Why do you feel this way?" and "Has COVID-19 impacted your sense of belongingness in the community?" The flexibility of the semi-structured interviews allowed for the exploration of additional follow-up questions, adapting the conversation based on participants' responses to uncover richer, more detailed insights into their personal experiences and perceptions of belongingness within the academic community.

4. Survey Responses

This paper looks to examine students' sense of belongingness by using a sample of college students currently to compare and contrast self-reports of students' changing sense of belongingness before, after, and during the COVID-19 pandemic. This research sheds light on ways that online learning impacted students' sense of belongingness during and in the aftermath of the pandemic.

Many colleges and universities went online during the COVID era, and not all students have been eager to return to school; even in 2024, many courses remain hybrid, and we see more and more trends toward online education. What if, in the future, online universities dominate the landscape and in-person learning becomes scarce? Does

this compromise university students' sense of belonging, and does it matter? In this study, I administered the school belonging questionnaire to twenty student volunteers at Babson College and followed up with ten interviews to understand how students on one US college campus experience belonging.

The survey responses from the Babson College community offer a revealing look at the varied dimensions of belongingness experienced by students. The data shows that more students are inclined to feel belongingness, belonging to the Babson College community. According to the survey, students must indicate whether they strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, or strongly disagree with the questions. When students were asked whether they felt like a part of the school, only 30 percent of the students responded disagree or strongly disagree. Such statistics suggest that most students here at Babson College experience a positive sense of belongingness. More statistical data from the survey support this view. For instance, when asked the question "Sometimes I didn't feel as if I belong here," only 25 percent of the students responded agree or strongly agree. Moreover, when it comes to the question "I wish I were in a different school" only 25 percent of the students picked positive responses. However, the qualitative responses introduce nuanced perspectives that the numbers alone do not fully capture.

Diving deeper into individual responses, the paper uncovers the complexities of belongingness. There is an anonymous response in the survey: "I think COVID-19 has strongly affected my sense of belonging in school because I don't get to socialize with my peers, don't get to participate in events and clubs in person, don't have many opportunities to get a community sense, and don't get to know the school well." The response reveals the major impact of COVID-19 on college students. During COVID-19, students were not able to meet in person, which rendered the difficult situation for students to connect and socialize.

Another interview from Aurora leads the paper to dive deeper into the question of COVID-19's negative effect on belongingness. The answer "because I do not get to meet others without wearing a mask" points out that COVID-19 shifted the way of social. Not only has COVID-19 reduced our social life, but it also disabled us from talking "face to face." The majority of the social events during the COVID period require a face mask, which prevents us from seeing each other's facial expressions. Thus, we felt more alienated from each other during these social events. Comparatively, responses about high or middle school during COVID-19 reflect a different attitude toward belongingness. Responses like "Roughly the same because it was my senior year in High school already, so I felt

attached to that school. But online learning isn't the best for me. I prefer in-person lectures." appears in the survey. The other responses made by students who experienced COVID-19 during high school also show a neutral attitude towards COVID-19's impact on their belongings. This response depicts an inconsistent level of belongingness between the students who experienced COVID-19 in high school and college. This inconsistency could occur because belongingness takes time to build and reinforce. High school students can feel more belonging because they already built their friend circle. Nevertheless, college students all experienced COVID-19 during their freshman or sophomore year, which didn't give them any time to connect with students and faculty on campus.

5. Proposal for Future Research

Considering the complex relationship between belongingness and different educational outcomes, it is crucial to further investigate how promoting a feeling of community and connection can enhance student achievement in various learning situations. Additionally, considering the profound disruptions and adaptations necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic, a particular area for future research would involve examining the effectiveness of digital and hybrid learning models in cultivating belongingness. Specifically, this paper is drawn to the prospect of conducting a comparative study that evaluates the impact of different pedagogical strategies, such as interactive online platforms, virtual breakout rooms, and the flipped classroom model, on students' perceptions of belonging and their academic engagement and performance. Focusing on these areas, can not only enrich the understanding of the mechanisms through which belongingness influences educational outcomes but also equip educators and policymakers with actionable insights to design more inclusive, supportive, and effective learning environments for students navigating the complexities of the 21st-century educational environment.

6. Conclusion and Discussion

Based on the literature review and interview survey, belongingness is one of the key points of students' lives, which has a direct or indirect influence on their further development, including academic performance, personality building-up, and so on. Moreover, students in different periods and grades all show their strong need for belongingness, but it takes time to build and reinforce the feeling, so there is an inconsistent level of belongingness between the students who experienced COVID-19 in high school and college. Next, the survey can continue to further investigate how promoting a feeling of community and connec-

tion can enhance student achievement in various learning situations.

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