SYNERGY AND ENVIRONMENT TO
EMPOWER DECENTRALISED SCHOOLS

GREEN·S.E.E.D.S

TOOLKIT GREEN S.E.E.D.S.

MODULE 1
Seeds for Boosting

UNIT 3
Students' sense of belonging

PARTNERS

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UNIT 1.3

STUDENTS' SENSE OF BELONGING, ENGAGEMENT AND DISENGAGEMENT WITH THE SCHOOL AND THE COMMUNITY.
Analyzing institutional and social barriers and support

"Room of Suffering"

The head of studies office makes me feel distressed, discomfort, and pain since when people go there, it's mostly because of something bad.

"Concerns"

I took this photo because I think it's an important topic and that it's good that the school is trying to raise awareness and do something about the issue.

The two images above are photographs taken by secondary-school students while they were doing a photo-voice activity to detect barriers to, and help with, developing a sense of belonging at their school. The first one shows a barrier; the exclusively punitive nature of the head-of-studies office; according to students, they only go there if something bad has happened. This does not make them feel good. The second one is of something which helps make students feel like belong; in this case, the student appreciates the school's involvement in socially-relevant issues (domestic violence).

These two images represent only two aspects which can increase or decrease a student's sense of belonging at the school. Students feeling as if they belong and as if they are connected to the school is essential for student well-being and their ability to adapt to the school academically; their lack is associated with dropping out and failure. This situation is especially delicate in rural schools and classrooms. Studies dealing with this question in remote and isolated areas agree on the importance of pointing out that increasing a feeling of belonging among students can be especially beneficial; this is not only true with regards to academic results, but also with the students' educational aspirations (Hardré, 2007). These aspirations, understood as the desire to

learn and medium-term and long-term goals, are much less in said environments.

Taking into account the relevance of complexity of these questions, this unit will analyze the concepts of belonging, engagement, and disengagement as experienced by the students, the factors which determine whether a student feels as if they belong, and aspects requiring work to increase students' sense of belonging at the school.

1.What are school engagement and disengagement?

School engagement is defined by Wehlage, Rutter, Smith, Lesko and Fernández (1989) Newman (1992) as psychological inversion done by the student during the process of comprehension and mastering of knowledge, abilities, and skills learn at school. As such, school engagement means that the student is committed to learning; this is a definitive factor in their academic performance and knowledge acquisition.

On the other hand, disengaged students have been defined by Finn and Zimmer (2012) as those who do not actively participate in class, do not get cognitively involved in their learning, do not try to develop their relationship with the school, or who behave inappropriately. The

disengaged student who drew this definition is not unknown to many teachers; they have met students with this profile before. Nonetheless, disengagement is not sudden or immediate; rather, it develops throughout a student's school life,sometimes beginning prior to this. Furthermore, it is a multi-dimensional concept because a student can be disengaged in different manners (contents, classes, relations, etc.). Also, since it is both a process and result it can lead to truancy and, as a consequence, dropping out.

2.How does one identify whether a student is engaged or disengaged?

Engagement is demonstrated by students participating in daily tasks, and by them being committed to performing them correcting; it is also seen when learning makes them curious, when they value education and, above all, when they feel as if they belong (González, 2015). A disengaged student is one who is not committed, does not participate in daily classroom activities, or who is apathetic towards their own educational experience.

3.What is the feeling of academic belonging?

An element of engagement or disengagement which cannot be debated is the feeling of academic belonging, the sense that one is part of the school. Belonging corresponds to the emotional part of engagement, which is shown students identifying with the school and through two paths: belonging itself and valuing education.

Furthermore, research has shown that feeling as if one belongs to a classroom or school can be increased teaching practices (e.g. cooperative learning or proactive classroom management).

Goodenow (1993) defines belonging as the sensation of feeling personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by one's social environment. Applying this definition to the world of education, belonging is, according to Goodenow, students feeling accepted, valued, included, and encouraged by others (teachers and classmates) in the classroom; it is when students feel as if they are an important part of classroom life and activities.

In this case, the research again points to the direct influence a student's experiences in rural environments and schools has on their academic performance and educational aspirations (Irvin, Meece, Byun, Farmer and Hutchins, 2011).
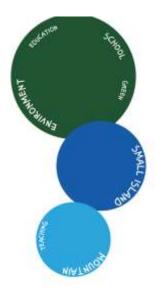
4.What factors influence academic belonging?

From school, we are in a position to intervene to enhance school belonging. The factors which influence it are varied. The school's characteristics, the relations with the teachers and with peers are some of the more relevant tones. Regarding school characteristics, the size, layout, or location are important. As such, small schools, those containing fewer grades, and those located in rural surroundings favor belonging (Eisner, 2001). In terms of student-teacher relations, perceived support, conflict management, and the type of link established with the teachers play an important role. Therefore, the closeness of the teachers, the creation of warm bonds, good conflict management and the feeling of independence towards teachers, which develops throughout school, encourage a sense of belonging. As far as peer relations are concerned, being accepted or rejected by part of the group is closely related to feeling part of the school. In this way, friendship offers emotional support while rejection reinforces low self-esteem.

5.Some advice for improving student belonging at schools

Just as previously mentioned, rural schools bring with them great potential with regards to belonging, since their size and makeup allow for greater relations between school members. The following are some tips for improving the sense of belonging felt by students at school:

ABOUT THE RELATIONS

- Create a safe environement which promotoes student well-being in the classroom.
- Promote close relations with students.
- Foment relations in the class group.

ABOUT THE METHODOLOGY AND CURRICULUM

- Attend to the particular needs of each student in the best manner possible.
- Develop participative and inclusive teaching-learning methodologies.
- Encourage active, and participative, group work.
- Apply different evaluation methods.

ABOUT RELATIONS WITH THE OUTSIDE

- Establish continuous contact with the families.
- Hacer inferencias de lo aprendido en el aula al contexto real.
- Connect the school with the community; use the surroundings as a teaching resource.

ABOUT TEACHING DUTIES

- Observe other teachers in the classroom as a learning method.
- Teacher coordination and organization: collaborative work with other school members.

ABOUT THE ENVIRONMENT IN THE SCHOOL AND IN THE CLASSROOM

- The negotiation and establishment of school, or classroom, rules.
- Make the school an agreeable place, more than the feeling of an empty school (careful with space).

DO IT IN YOUR CLASSROOM

Goodenow (1993) designed a scale for measuring the sense of belonging felt by students; this scale is called The PSSM

Psychological Sense of School Membership; it consists of 18 items which allow this issue to be evaluated.

№	ITEM
1	I FEEL LIKE A REAL PART OF [NAME OF SCHOOL]
2	PEOPLE HERE NOTICE WHEN I'M GOOD AT SOMETHING
3	IT IS HARD FOR PEOPLE LIKE ME TO BE ACCEPTED HERE
4	OTHER STUDENTS AT THIS SCHOOL TAKE MY OPINIONS SERIOUSLY
5	MOST TEACHERS AT [NAME OF SCHOOL] ARE INTERESTED IN ME
6	SOMETIMES I FEEL AS IF I DON'T BELONG HERE
7	THERE'S AT LEAST ONE TEACHER OR OTHER ADULT AT THIS SCHOOL I CAN TALK TO IF I HAVE A PROBLEM
8	PEOPLE AT THIS SCHOOL ARE FRIENDLY TO ME
9	TEACHERS HERE ARE NOT INTERESTED IN PEOPLE LIKE ME
10	I AM INCLUDED IN LOTS OF ACTIVITIES AT [NAME OF SCHOOL]
11	I AM TREATED WITH AS MUCH RESPECT AS OTHER STUDENTS
12	I FEEL VERY DIFFERENT FROM MOST OTHER STUDENTS HERE
13	I CAN REALLY BE MYSELF AT THIS SCHOOL
14	THE TEACHERS HERE RESPECT ME
15	PEOPLE HERE KNOW I CAN DO GOOD WORK
16	I WISH I WERE AT A DIFFERENT SCHOOL
17	I FEEL PROUD OF BELONGING TO [NAME OF SCHOOL]
18	OTHER STUDENTS HERE LIKE ME THE WAY I AM

With your students, have them debate the ideas contained in these sentences and create a decalogue of advice which students feel may help them feel better at school. Once done, stick the decalogue to a visible area in the classroom and the school to foment a culture in which students participate in, and identify with, their school.

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