

School belonging among young adolescents with SEMH and MLD: the link with their social relations and school inclusivity

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Despite the considerable institutional changes schools have made to accommodate the individual needs of pupils with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), as underpinned by key principles of inclusion, there is still international concern about the mainstream experiences pupils with SEND have in school settings. **This study helps us gain a clearer understanding of the schooling experiences of pupils with social emotional and mental health (SEMH) difficulties and moderate learning difficulties (MLD) by investigating whether they have a sense of school belonging and positive social relations as well as whether these vary according to the level of inclusiveness of the school ethos at the institution they attend. Perceived social relations and feelings of belonging of 1,440 (282 SEND) pupils, attending the 7th to 10th grades, from three secondary mainstream settings that differ in inclusivity, were analysed using a self-reporting questionnaire. Findings demonstrated that pupils with SEND are not a homogeneous group, as pupils with behavioural difficulties were found to have less of a sense of belonging, and social relations than those with learning difficulties. It was also found that the sense of school belonging of both groups of SEND is associated with their positive perceived relations with teachers, as well as their inclusiveness of school ethos. These findings contribute to the literature of special education, as they offer ways of enhancing the sense of school belonging of pupils with behavioural and learning difficulties in mainstream settings.**

Keywords: inclusive ethos; school belonging; social relations; learning difficulties; mental health difficulties

Introduction

A basic definition of inclusion refers to the acceptance of pupils with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) in mainstream settings. A more sophisticated one places the onus on schools to make suitable and often radical adjustments in order to accommodate the individual needs of all pupils (Ainscow, 1999). As Sebba and Sachdev (1997, 9) stated, inclusion is 'the process by which a school attempts to respond to all

pupils as individuals by reconsidering and restructuring its curricular organisation and provision and allocating resources to enhance equality of opportunity'. To achieve this, it is necessary for schools to provide all pupils with suitable support that meets their individual needs. However, it is a common finding in the literature of special education that pupils with SEND often fail to report positive schooling experiences in mainstream settings (e.g. Bouchard and Berg, 2017), particularly those with social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) difficulties, which suggests that their needs are not being met (Cefai and Cooper, 2010; Sellman, 2009). It can be argued that school change to improve inclusion is in vain, if pupils with SEND do not experience greater inclusion. One way to investigate the extent to which pupils with SEND feel included within mainstream settings is to measure their sense of school belonging.

The significant role that school plays in the schooling experiences of pupils has been demonstrated through several surveys. School ethos characteristics, such as pupils' active involvement in decision making and participation in extra-curricular activities, praise and encouragement by teachers, successful implementation of caring behaviour management policies, use of positive language and attitude, as well as knowledge of individual pupils, have been found to have a positive effect on pupils' feelings of belonging towards school and social relations (see for example: Carter, 2002; Cemalcilar, 2010; Flitcroft and Kelly, 2016; Ma, 2003; Wallace, Ye and Chhuon, 2012). These findings relate to typical pupils, but the above characteristics of ethos are also those of an inclusive one for pupils with SEND (see Avramidis, Bayliss, and Burden, 2002; Booth and Ainscow, 2002; Hatton, 2013; Rouse and Florian, 1996) that is, schools that place emphasis on the learning of all pupils, that actively promote their participation in decision making, where staff and pupils have a clear understanding of school rules and behaviour management approaches are applied with consistency and fairness, where teachers work

in collaboration to resolve any problems encountered and share responsibility to employ inclusion. Consistent with findings for typical pupils, it can be hypothesised that pupils with SEND attending a school with a more inclusive ethos would have an enhanced sense of belonging and good social relations. **This paper examines the relationship between inclusive ethos and a sense of school belonging and positive social relations for pupils with two of the largest categories of SEND, mild learning difficulties (MLD) and SEMH, to shed light on how inclusion works.**

Understanding sense of school belonging

Theoretical perspectives and operational definitions

Sense of belonging is recognised as fundamental to human well-being and healthy development, regarding which: Maslow (1943), in his hierarchy of needs theory, conceived belongingness as the third most fundamental need of the self and argued that the need to belong has to be satisfied before other needs can be fulfilled (e.g. self-actualisation). Bowlby (1969), in his attachment theory, supported the assumption that lack of secure attachment with the caregiver in early years can disable an individual's capacity to form caring and affectionate relations with others in later life. The significance of belongingness in an individual's life was also acknowledged by Baumeister and Leary (1995), who described the need to belong as a vital human motivation. The authors articulated that human beings are innately social, having an internal desire to foster and maintain relationships that need to be characterised by approval and intimacy for close social bonds to be formed.

Regarding the need to belong in the school environment, Finn (1989) proposed the 'identification-participation' model to explain pupils' engagement and disengagement from school. He suggested that only when pupils feel that school satisfies their needs (i.e.

they feel respected and valued) do they develop a sense of belonging to the institution, which promotes their commitment to school goals and enhances their willingness to participate actively in school activities. Research has shown that no matter what the causes of a low or absent sense of belonging, pupils who fail to have a positive belonging to school are more likely to display low academic achievement, low attendance, risky behaviours, even dropping out of school (Goodenow, 1993; Voelkl, 1997). A different angle regarding belongingness was taken by Goodenow (1993), who placed emphasis on the social relationships of pupils with others in the school environment, where belongingness to school reflects “the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included and supported by others” (Goodenow, 1993, 80). Various researchers have attempted to define and measure school belongingness. Despite the differences in the operational definitions used to measure it, one thing that is consensually agreed, is that a sense of belonging is a psychological need that when fulfilled has a positive impact on pupils’ school lives.

Studies on school belonging have shown a strong link between pupils’ feelings of belonging and its positive effects on their psychological, social and academic lives. In particular, pupils who feel that they belong to school are found to be more motivated in their learning, more willing to participate in all school activities, have higher school attendance rates, better social relations and better academic outcomes (Goodenow, 1993; Osterman, 2000). However, most studies have focussed on typically developing pupils, while studies involving pupils with SEND are fewer. In the current study, emphasis is given to school belonging as evidence of pupils feeling included within their school. It is plausible to expect that those with SEND may have greater difficulties in fostering a positive school belonging than their typically developing peers.

Belonging and social relations

Of the studies defining belonging institutionally, the research outcomes have revealed a strong link between pupils who feel that they belong to their school and those having positive social relations within the school environment. For example, in a Canadian study, Bouchard and Berg (2017) employed individual interviews with teachers and pupils to investigate how middle school pupils (4th-8th Grades) foster a sense of belonging to their school. Thematic analysis of both teachers and pupils' responses revealed that a high sense of belonging is fostered through positive and caring social interactions with teachers as well as peer friendships. Similarly, in a Turkish study involving 799 typical middle school pupils, Cemalcilar (2010) examined the impact of different social relations (i.e. with teachers, administrators and peers) on pupils' feelings of belonging towards school. The findings indicated that all three relationships were positively correlated with a sense of school belonging and pupils' perceived relations with their teachers were found to be the most significant of all.

The key role that quality teacher-to-pupil relations play in pupils' sense of school belonging was highlighted by Chiu and colleagues (2016). Through conducting a large-scale study, the researchers examined the school belonging of 193,073 15-year-old pupils from 41 countries. Their findings indicated that positive teacher-to-pupil relations have the strongest association with sense of school belonging.

One of the few studies on this topic examining the **impact of different social relations on the sense of school belonging of pupils with SEND** was carried out in the USA by Murray and Greenberg (2001). **The sample comprised 289 primary pupils with SEND (i.e. SEMH, MLD, Mild Mental Retardation (MMR), or Other Health Impairments (OHI)) or without SEND.** The findings indicated that pupils with SEND were more likely to have negative relations with teachers, and lower rates of sense of school belonging than

pupils without disabilities. Among the pupils with SEND, those with SEMH and MMR were found to have less intimate relations with and were more dissatisfied by teachers than pupils without disabilities. **Similarly, in an Italian study, Nepi et al. (2013) used self-reporting questionnaires to examine the link between sense of school belonging and social position of 418 primary school pupils with and without SEND. Findings revealed that pupils with SEND are less accepted and less likely to have a positive sense of belonging than their typical counterparts.** In another study, McCoy and Banks (2012) analysed qualitative data from a National Longitudinal Study of Children in Ireland. The research outcomes revealed that the sense of school belonging of all pupils, with or without SEND, was positively related to their perceived relations with teachers and peers. Taken together, these works underline the importance of positive social relations for the sense of school belonging of pupils with SEND. Another important adult group for pupils with SEND in the school is the Teaching Assistants (TAs), as discussed by Webster and Blatchford (2013). However, the impact of TA relations on pupils with SEND school belonging is relatively unexamined.

Belonging, individual characteristics and school ethos

Research outcomes of several studies in the international literature have shown that the sense of belonging of pupils to school is affected by their individual characteristics and the quality of school ethos (Cemalcilar, 2010; Smerdon, 2002). For instance, in three large-scale studies, Smerdon (2002), Ma (2003) and Fullarton (2002) examined the association between individual pupils' characteristics and school characteristics in relation to pupils' sense of belonging. Using hierarchical linear modelling for their analysis, all three studies delivered similar research outcomes: that the majority of variation in pupils' belonging lies within rather than between schools. Smerdon (2002) found that the proportion of the variance within-school was 95%, but a small nevertheless

significant proportion of variance was explained by school factors (5%). Similarly, Ma (2003) showed that 4% of school variance in belonging was attributed to school factors, while 96% was down to the students. Fullarton (2002) found slightly higher results for the between-school aspect, which reached 9% of its variance. The fact that most variability was found to be within schools, points to not just individual differences in belonging, but also, that the experiences and opportunities pupils have at school vary by individual. It is worth noting that all these studies employed quantitative methodologies for the data collection. In contrast to individual characteristics (e.g. gender) that can be objectively measured, ethos is a difficult term to define and measure, as it is subjectively perceived and experienced (Solvason, 2005). The small amount of variance in belonging explained by ethos might be as a result of the inadequacy of the measures. Despite the between-school differences in belonging not being found to be large, the fact that they exist at all indicates that the quality of the school a pupil attends does play a role in their sense of belonging. That is, this suggests that, irrespective of the individual differences a pupil might have, the ethos of a school can equally enhance or discourage pupils' sense of belonging towards school.

Educational and psychological research over time has provided evidence that the quality of school ethos affects the sense of belonging of pupils to school. In a Turkish study involving 799 middle school pupils from 13 schools, Cemalcilar (2010) found that pupils' perceived satisfaction with their social relations as well as with the school ethos were significant predictors of positive feelings of belonging towards school. This is higher in schools that promote positive relationships between individuals as well as in those where they are given the opportunity to take decisions about academic work, learn collaboratively (Smerdon, 2002) and participate in the school's extracurricular activities (Flitcroft and Kelly, 2016). The applied behaviour management of a school was also

found to be linked with pupils' belonging. Cassidy (2005) elicited that care-based¹ disciplinary practices can be more effective in sustaining school belongingness than the traditional ones that rely on punishment. Fair treatment was also argued by Newmann (1992) to be crucial to a student fostering a positive sense of belonging to school. In a similar vein, Ma (2003), drawing on quantitative data from a large-scale study conducted in Canada, found a school's disciplinary climate was positively associated with 8th grade pupils' sense of school belonging.

In the field of special education, school ethos characteristics were explored in one American and one English study for any positive influence on the sense of school belonging in pupils with SEND (Frederickson et al., 2007; Hagborg, 1998). Neither study, using Goodenow's (1993) Psychological Sense of School Membership scale, found any significant difference in the sense of school belonging between typical pupils and pupils with SEND. In the Harborg study, this mark of inclusion was attributed to small size of the participating school and the quality of special support provided to pupils. In the study by Fredrickson and colleagues pupils with SEND received education in classes which were part of an innovative inclusion programme. However, to researchers' knowledge none of the existing studies had ever investigated whether the sense of school belonging and social relations of pupils with SEMH and MLD vary according to the level of inclusiveness of the school ethos at the institution they attend. The following research questions were compiled to guide this study aimed addressing the gaps in the literature identified above:

1. Are there differences in belonging, and social relations (i.e. with teachers, TAs and peers) between typically developing pupils and those with SEND?

¹ Care-based practices focus on promoting the academic and personal welfare of students.

2. Is there a relationship between the perceptions of pupils with SEMH and MLD regarding social relations (i.e. with teachers, TAs, and peers) and their sense of school belonging?
3. Is there a relationship between the perceptions of pupils with SEMH and MLD about ethos with their sense of school belonging, and social relations?
4. Is the inclusiveness of school ethos linked with school belonging and social relations for pupils with SEMH and MLD?

Methodology

Participants and Procedure

Data were collected from 1,440 pupils attending the 7th to 10th grades of three mainstream state-funded English secondary schools in a suburban metropolitan area, pupils identified with SEND by their schools and all their classmates. The schools were purposively selected based on the inclusivity of their school ethos. Three schools, one ‘very inclusive’, one ‘just inclusive’ and one ‘less inclusive’, were identified after a rigorous selection process based on School Census statistics provided by the Department for Education in England and accepted for participation in the study. The identification of schools that differ in inclusivity was based on *two initial criteria*, followed by matching *three further criteria*. *First criterion*: the ‘inclusivity’ of each school was measured by the difference in the percentage of SEND pupils in each school with the average for the Local Authority (LA) to which it belonged. *Second criterion*: another indication of ‘inclusivity’ was the percentage of exclusions. Schools that had a lower percentage when compared with the LA’s average were characterised as inclusive, while those with a higher percentage were deemed as less so. Schools that had been refined from the first and second criteria also needed to have similar Ofsted reports, socioeconomic background (i.e. percentage of pupils eligible for free school meals) and ethnicity levels (i.e. percentage of pupils who

speak English as first language) to meet the third, the fourth and fifth criteria, respectively. The current study focused on pupils with SEMH and MLD, as they are among the largest groups of SEND receiving education in mainstream English settings at the time of the study (DfE, 2011. Typical pupils attending the 7th to 10th grades in the same schools were also included as a comparable group.

The number of participating pupils from each school was approximately 500. At the time of the study, schools were required to identify pupils with SEND as requiring School Action, School Action plus or a Statement of SEND (DfE/DHSC, 2015). The majority of pupils, nearly 78% were classified by schools as typical, while 19% were identified as having some level of SEND (3% of pupils were not classified in either of the two categories due to missing data in the information provided by pupils in the self-reporting questionnaire). Of the total sample: 2.4% pupils (n=36) were identified by the school as having SEMH, including those with SEMH and another SEND category; 6.7% (n=99) were identified by the school as having MLD, including those identified as having this and another SEND category. Pupils with another category of SEND, as well as those pupils that had a combination of MLD and SEMH, were classified as having Other SEND (9.9%, n=147) for the purpose of this study.

For triangulation purposes on the identification of SEMH, all pupils were asked to complete the pupil self-reported version of the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) (Goodman, 1997). The SDQ is a brief measure of screening for behavioural and emotional problems with pupils and adolescents. According to its terminology, behavioural problems are labelled as externalising difficulties and emotional problems as internalising ones. Classification made based on the SDQ total difficulties scores revealed that 70.3% of pupils were identified as normal, 11.5% as borderline and 7.5% as abnormal (10.8% missing values). On the SDQ externalising difficulties sub-scale, 76.3% were

classified as normal, 7.2% as borderline and 5.9% as abnormal. Whilst a comparison of the percentages of pupils classified by the school as SEMH and by self-report as abnormal on SDQ externalising scale revealed some degree of concord, disagreement was also evident, i.e. half of the pupils identified by their school as SEMH had scores in the normal range on the SDQ externalising scale and half of the pupils with scores on the borderline or in the abnormal range on the SDQ externalising scale were not identified as SEMH by their schools. Consideration of the challenges in accurately identifying SEMH is beyond the scope of this paper and will be discussed in a later one. Identification of SEMH provided by school SENCO and SDQ questionnaire are used in this paper.

Informed consent was sought from all participants and parents of participating pupils. All participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study and of their rights to confidentiality and anonymity.

Measures

Developing new scales

Two scales were developed for the purpose of the current study, the sense of school belonging and the social relations. The former was developed for the following reasons. In the literature, there are two core drivers underpinning the perceptions of researchers on school belongingness. The first, used by numerous researchers, pertains to measuring pupils' belongingness to school in terms of social relations, by examining the extent to which students feel valued and accepted by the members of the school community (i.e. teachers and peers) (see Goodeneow, 1993; Ma, 2003; Smerdon, 2002; Voelkl, 1996). The second perspective is in respect of a pupil's belongingness to the school as an institution. Relations with school are measured mostly by examining pupils' feelings of school liking or belonging (see Cemalcilar, 2010; McCoy and Banks, 2012).

The majority of previous studies focused mainly on examining typical pupils' feelings about school, using a definition that involved social relations to measure school belonging. In contrast, for this study the interest lies in investigating the feelings of pupils identified as having SEND towards an institution, by using inclusion as a theoretical framework. According to Florian (1998), inclusion is defined as the opportunity for active involvement and choice in the school setting, and not something given to SEND pupils. Thus, in order to examine pupils' belonging to school as an institution there is a need to separate out social relations, and relations to school, i.e. probing each one discretely.

Regarding the social relations scales, most of the previous researchers (see Cemalcilar, 2010; Goodenow, 1993; Morrison et al. 2012) have devised tools to examine typical pupils' social relations. None of the existing scales assess the social relations of pupils with SEND, nor can they capture the difficulties that pupils with SEMH and MLD encounter in their social interactions with peers and key educators. Accordingly, a new scale measuring social relations with peers, teachers and teaching assistants (TAs) was constructed, where some of the items were developed specifically for this study and others were based on existing validated instruments (e.g. Booth and Ainscow, 2002; Goodenow, 1993; Ma, 2003).

Scales used in the main study

Prior to the data collection, a pilot study was conducted to test the clarity of items and their internal consistency. Participants were asked to fill in a self-reported questionnaire on a 5-point Likert scale.

Perceived sense of school belonging scale was assessed using nine items (e.g. I like to take part in student council (or student body), I feel equal to other pupils in this school). The internal consistency of the scale was .79. Higher scores indicated higher

levels of sense of school belonging. Perceived quality and satisfaction with social relations within school was assessed with three sub-scales, each consisting of 10 items to measure teacher-to-pupil relations (e.g. my teachers give me extra help when I need it), TA-to-pupil relations (e.g. my TA helps me to progress) and pupil-to-pupil relations (e.g. pupils think of me as not fitting in with any group). The internal consistencies for the subscales were .80, .77, and .71, respectively. Higher scores indicated higher levels of satisfaction. Perceived perceptions of the school ethos were assessed using two sub-scales, with the first measuring inclusion and involves 11 items (e.g. my needs are met in this school) and the second sub-scale measuring behaviour management and involves six items (e.g. rules at this school applied equally to all pupils). The internal consistency of the school ethos scale was .83, while the sub-scales for inclusion and behaviour management were .85 and .67 respectively. Further information of the development of the above scales, along with the self-reporting questionnaire can be found in Author (2017).

Findings

Differences in belonging

Table 1 shows the results of a series of independent-sample *t*-tests on school belonging. Statistically significant differences were found between pupils with and without identified SEND ($t(1279) = 2.139, p = .033$), with pupils with SEND scoring lower than their typical peers. There was no significant difference between pupils identified by their school as MLD or SEMH, but belonging scores of those identified as having the former were significantly higher than and those who classified themselves as abnormal on the SDQ externalising difficulties scale ($t(244) = 3.859, p < .001$). Consistent with all group comparisons conducted for pupils with co-occurring MLD and SEMH/abnormal SDQ

scores, the MLD group in the latter analysis excluded pupils who also scored within the abnormal range on the SDQ externalising scale ($n = 25$) to enable comparison between dichotomous groups; and the remaining MLD pupils had a higher mean score on the belonging scale. Finally, it was also found that pupils who classified themselves as abnormal on the SDQ externalising difficulties scale rated their perceived sense of school belonging lower than those who classified themselves as abnormal on the SDQ internalising difficulties scale ($t(277) = 2.992, p = .03$).

Differences in social relations

Comparing responses from different groups of pupils on their perceived relations with teachers indicated statistically significant differences for the majority of the results, as can be seen in Table 1. Differences in perceived relations with teachers were observed between type of SEND status $t(320.972) = 2.276, p = .024$, with typical pupils scoring higher than those identified as having SEND. Comparisons between groups of pupils with different categories of SEND also revealed statistically significant differences in the mean scores between groups. However, there was no significant difference between pupils identified by their school as MLD or SEMH, whereas scores of perceived relations with teachers of those with MLD were significantly higher than those who classified themselves as abnormal on the SDQ externalising difficulties scale $t(232) = 8.706, p < .001$. Consistent with all group comparisons conducted for pupils with co-occurring MLD and SEMH/abnormal SDQ scores, the MLD group in the latter analysis excluded pupils who also scored within the abnormal range on the SDQ externalising scale ($n = 25$) to enable comparison between dichotomous groups; and the remaining MLD pupils had a higher mean score on the relations with teachers scale. A statistically significant difference in perceived relations with teachers was also observed $t(209) = 7.014, p < .001$,

with pupils who classified themselves as abnormal on the SDQ internalising difficulties scale scoring higher than those on the externalising one.

As shown in Table 1, statistically significant differences for perceived relations with peers ($t(292.996) = 4.49, p < .001$) were observed only between typical pupils, and those with SEND, with typical pupils scoring higher than those with SEND. This was also the case between groups of SEND ($t(192) = -3.969, p < .001$), with those who classified themselves as abnormal on the SDQ internalising difficulties scale scoring higher than those who were abnormal on the externalising one.

Table 1: t-tests of belonging and social relations for different groups of pupils

	Belonging			Relations with Teachers			Relations with Peers		
	N	M (SD)	<i>t</i> -test	N	M (SD)	<i>t</i> -test	N	M (SD)	<i>t</i> -test
Typical	1038	32.23 (5.4)	2.14*	988	35.47 (6.1)	2.28*	923	38.25 (5.5)	4.49**
Pupils with SEND	283	31.41 (5.5)		263	34.37 (6.8)		240	36.21 (6.0)	
SEMH	31	30.29 (5.3)	-1.25	30	32.83 (6.0)	-1.78	26	34.12 (6.9)	-1.10
MLD	90	31.60 (5.0)		90	35.16 (6.2)		82	35.76 (5.5)	
MLD	66	32.58 (4.5)	3.86**	66	37.03 (5.1)	8.71**	63	35.84 (5.7)	.447
Abnormal_exter	180	29.43 (6.0)		168	30.42 (5.3)		156	35.47 (5.6)	
Abnormal_inter	46	32.22 (5.0)	2.99**	46	37.02 (5.7)	7.01**	43	32.26 (5.7)	-3.97**
Abnormal_exter	178	29.28 (6.2)		165	30.63 (5.4)		151	35.98(5.3)	

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

Relationship between the perception of pupils with SEND on social relations (i.e. with teachers, TAs, and peers) and their sense of school belonging

The perceived sense of school belonging of pupils with SEND was significantly correlated with all measures of social relations. There was a positive correlation between the perceived sense of school belonging of pupils with SEND with their social relations with teachers ($r = .475$, $n = 1251$, $p < .001$). The correlation was of medium size and explained nearly 23% of the variance in the scores of pupils with SEND on their perceived belonging; the highest of all amongst their social relations. A positive correlation was also found between the perceived sense of school belonging of pupils with SEND and their relations with TAs ($r = .367$, $n = 45$, $p < .001$). It is a medium correlation: 13% of the variation is explained. Finally, the interrelationship between perceived relations with peers and sense of school belonging indicates a positive correlation between variables ($r = .269$, $n = 1163$, $p < .001$), with high levels of perceived relations with peers associated with high levels of perceived belonging. The correlation was small and explained nearly 7% of the variance.

Relationship between the perception of pupils with SEND on ethos with their sense of school belonging, and social relations

Perceived ethos, as measured by pupils themselves, was significantly correlated with all measures (i.e. belonging, and social relations). There was a strong positive relationship between the perceived ethos of pupils with SEND and their sense of school belonging ($r = .575$, $n = 1321$, $p < .001$), thus suggesting that the more positive perceptions pupils with SEND hold about their school ethos, the more likely they are to score high in their sense of school belonging. It was a large correlation: 33% of the variation was explained. Ethos was also positively correlated with social relations with teachers ($r = .456$, $n = 1251$, $p <$

.001), and teaching assistants ($r = .521, n = 45, p < .001$). Perceived ethos helps to explain 21% of the variance in the respondents' scores regarding social relations with teachers, and 27% with TAs, whilst the correlations between variables are medium and large, respectively. Finally, the correlation between the perceived ethos of pupils with SEND and their relations with peers was found to be weak and not statistically significant.

Relation of inclusiveness of school ethos with pupils with SEND, sense of school belonging and social relations

Table 2 contains descriptive statistics of the variables for the three different settings. The findings indicate that there was a statistically significant difference in pupils' perceived school ethos in the three schools, $F(2, 1260) = 5.557, p = .004$ for school ethos; $F(2, 1310) = 10.249, p > .001$ for the behaviour management sub-scale; and $F(2, 1264) = 4.20, p = .015$ for the school inclusivity sub-scale. **Post hoc comparisons on school ethos indicated that less inclusive school ($M = 55.37, SD = 9.08$) was found to be statistically significantly lower than the just inclusive ($M = 56.9, SD = 9.99$), and the very inclusive ($M = 57.46, SD = 8.97$), while no statistically significant difference in the mean scores between the just inclusive and the very inclusive was found. Post hoc comparisons in behaviour management and inclusivity sub-scales indicated that the less inclusive school was scoring lower than the just inclusive and the very inclusive school.**

Similarly, findings indicated a statistically significant difference in the mean scores on the sense of school belonging between the three settings, $F(2, 1318) = 4.020, p = .018$. **Post hoc comparisons show that the mean score on the sense of school belonging for the very inclusive school ($M = 32.41, SD = 5.3$) was significantly different from the less inclusive ($M = 31.4, SD = 5.2$), with the very inclusive school scoring higher than the less inclusive. However, the just inclusive did not differ significantly from either of the other two.**

Statistically significant differences were also found in pupils' perceived social relations with teachers according to the three different school settings $F(2, 1248) = 3.840$, $p = .022$. Post hoc comparisons indicate that the mean score for the just inclusive school ($M = 34.72$, $SD = 6.2$) was significantly lower than the very inclusive ($M = 35.86$, $SD = 6.0$), while the less inclusive did not differ significantly from either of the other two. No significant difference across the settings was found in pupils' perceived relations with peers nor with the TAs.

Table 2 Ethos, belonging and social relations scores for different school settings

	Just Inclusive	Very Inclusive	Less Inclusive		
Variable	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	F	p
Ethos	56.92 (10.0)	57.46 (9.0)	55.37 (9.1)	<i>F</i> (2,1260)	.004**
BM	21.04 (4.5)	20.75 (4.1)	19.78 (4.2)	<i>F</i> (2, 1310)	< .001**
Inclusivity	35.87 (6.5)	36.68 (6.0)	35.49 (5.9)	<i>F</i> (2,1264)	.015*
Belonging	32.16 (5.7)	32.41 (5.3)	31.41 (5.2)	<i>F</i> (2,1318)	.018*
Relations with Teachers	34.72(6.2)	35.86(6.0)	35.04(6.4)	<i>F</i> (2, 1248)	.022*
Relations with TAs	41.33(8.4)	38.63(9.0)	33.67(11.6)	<i>F</i> (2, 42)	.177
Relations with pupils	37.83(5.8)	37.89(5.3)	37.73(6.1)	<i>F</i> (2, 1160)	.919

Note. N =, M = Mean, SD = Standard deviation; *p < .05, **p < .01

Discussion

The objective of this study was to explore whether pupils with SEND attending secondary mainstream English settings have a sense of school belonging and positive social relations, along with whether these vary according to the inclusiveness of the school ethos.

It is clear from the analysis that the sense of school belonging varies between different groups of pupils. At a descriptive level, the findings show that pupils with SEND are less likely to have a sense of belonging than their typically developing peers. Differences were also observed among pupils with SEND, whereby their feelings of belonging were affected by their type of special need. In particular, pupils reporting behavioural difficulties or hyperactivity were more likely to have a lesser sense of belonging compared to those with learning difficulties or those with emotional difficulties.

In order to understand any differences in the sense of school belonging among pupils with SEND, we also examined their perceived relations with teachers, peers and TAs, as the literature shows that the sense of school belonging is very much influenced by the quality of social relations at school (e.g. Bouchard and Berg, 2017; Cemalcilar, 2010). Analysis for the current study revealed that pupils with SEND perceive their relationships with teachers as well as peers more negatively than their typically developing counterparts, which is consistent with McCoy and Bank's (2012) finding from the Irish context.

Differences in the social relations with teachers were also observed among pupils with SEND. Specifically, those reporting externalising disorders were found to be the most dissatisfied with their relations with their teachers than their counterparts with learning difficulties as well as those with emotional difficulties. **One possible explanation**

for this outcome is that it reflects the bi-directional nature of relationships. Pupils with behavioural difficulties may lack social skills, which negatively affect their ability to build and maintain satisfactory social relationships (Frostd and Pijl, 2007). These may in turn elicit negative reactions from teachers, who may have received insufficient training in the management of challenging behaviours and how it makes them feel (Allan, 2015).

Within the group of pupils with SEND, their perceived relations with teachers had the strongest association with their sense of school belonging ($r = .475$), followed by their relations with TAs ($r = .367$), while the relations with peers, although still significant, showed the weakest association ($r = .269$). Whilst the important role teachers play in shaping pupils' sense of school belonging has been confirmed by the findings of a number of international studies (e.g. Cemalcilar, 2010; Chiu et al., 2016; McCoy and Banks, 2012), for pupils with SEND, one would expect their relations with TAs to have the most significant effect on their belonging. According to Webster and Blatchford (2013), teachers may neglect pupils with SEND, handing over much responsibility to TAs, with the belief that they have more expertise to offer regarding this cohort. **One possible explanation therefore for this finding might be that pupils with SEND might have the need to have more intimate relations** and social interactions with their teachers in class **marking the responsibility teachers have in shaping positive schooling experiences for pupils.**

Another factor that was found to associate positively with the sense of school belonging of pupils with SEND was their perceptions on their school ethos. This means that pupils who perceive as satisfactory the applied inclusive policies and behaviour management strategies that their school implements are more likely to foster a favourable sense of school belonging than those who do not. For example, analysis of this study

revealed that pupils at the very inclusive school, who perceived the ethos of their school as more inclusive, scored higher in their sense of belonging than those at the less inclusive one, who perceived the ethos of their school as less inclusive. The link between school ethos characteristics and typical pupil sense of school belonging is supported by other international studies (Bouchard and Berg, 2017; Cemalcilar, 2010; Ma, 2003). However, very few studies have found an association between the inclusivity of a school setting and the sense of school belonging of pupils with SEND, either nationally or internationally.

Last it must be noted that the analysis of this study also found a positive association between the perceived ethos of pupils with SEND and their social relations with teachers and TAs. The relations of these pupils with their TAs explained considerably more of the variance of their perceived school ethos than their relations with their teachers. This result could be explained by the fact that pupils with SEND receive more attention and care from their TAs than their teachers within class, as demonstrated by Webster and Blacthford (2013). Thus, it is logical to expect that the relationship with TAs is the one that contributes most to a pupil's perception about school.

In sum, it appears that the sense of school belonging for pupils with SEND within secondary mainstream English settings is affected by two factors: their perceived quality of social relations with teachers, and their perceived inclusiveness of their school ethos. Pupils with SEND, particularly those with behavioural difficulties, find it harder to feel a sense of belonging towards school as well as finding it more difficult to form positive relations with their teachers than those with learning difficulties and emotional difficulties. The results of the current study highlight the inefficiency of two practical implications: firstly, the inability of teachers to tackle pupils' challenging behaviour without conflict; and secondly the ineffectiveness of schools to implement successful behaviour management strategies. A further study with more focus on the voices of pupils

with behavioural difficulties to elicit the reasons they feel less belonging is therefore recommended.

Finally, a number of important limitations need to be considered. Firstly, the findings of this study were correlational in nature and hence, assumptions about the causal relationships of variables cannot be made. Secondly, **due to time restrictions only a small number of schools were recruited.** Thirdly, because of the small sample size of schools, it is recognised that the findings are not generalisable. **Another limitation of the study refers to the validity of the sample as identification of pupils was based on school recorded categories which leaves a pupil's behaviour and attainment open to subjective interpretations.** Similarly, some of the data were collected from participant self-reports and the pupils might have misrepresented their levels of belonging to school, for example, to project a more favourable image. **Finally, demographic information beyond age and gender was not collected at pupil level and has not been included in analysis here.** However, despite these limitations, this study adds to the literature of special education as it offers ways of enhancing the sense of school belonging of pupils with SEND in mainstream settings.

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