Exploring Social Skills Development and Their Impact on Students' Belongingness Needs at the Secondary Level

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ABSTRACT
This study explored the development of social skills and the sense of belonging among secondary school students in Rawalpindi, Pakistan. Social skills, including communication, cooperation, empathy, conflict resolution, and peer interaction, were considered essential in shaping students' emotional experiences and relationships within the school environment. The research aimed to examine how these skills influence students' feelings of acceptance, inclusion, and connectedness, which are vital for their personal development and academic involvement. A quantitative correlational research design was used. A sample of 400 students from 24 public secondary schools in Rawalpindi was selected using proportionate stratified random sampling. Data were gathered through a structured questionnaire adapted from the Social Skills Improvement System (SSIS) and the School Belongingness Scale (SBS). Instrument validity was confirmed by expert review and a pilot study, while reliability was measured using Cronbach's Alpha, which gave a score of 0.722. Descriptive statistics and cross-tabulation identified subgroup differences. Pearson's correlation showed a significant positive link between social skills and belonging. Gender, environment, culture, and school climate influenced outcomes. Findings support promoting social-emotional learning to foster belonging and student growth.
Keywords: *Social skills development, sense of belonging, secondary school students, communication, school climate, emotional well-being, student inclusion, Rawalpindi.*

1. Introduction

Social skills are basic abilities that help people interact with others in effective ways. These include speaking clearly, listening carefully, understanding others, and working together as a team. Communication means not just talking, but also paying attention when others speak, so responses can be thoughtful and respectful. Empathy is the ability to understand and share others' feelings, which helps build stronger relationships. Cooperation involves teamwork, sharing responsibilities, and solving problems together. These skills are important in daily life, such as making friends or doing group work. Social skills are learned behaviors that help people connect and interact with others in different situations (Gresham & Elliott, 2008).

In secondary schools, where students face more complex social situations, social skills become even more important. Good communication helps students express their ideas and needs. Empathy helps them understand their classmates' feelings, while cooperation is necessary for group activities. Conflict-resolution skills help students keep peaceful relationships. Schools also play an important role in socializing students by teaching them norms, values, and behaviors. A positive school environment supports students' sense of belonging, which is linked with academic success, motivation, and emotional well-being (Goodenow, 1993; Osterman, 2000).

Improving students' social skills has a positive effect on their social and emotional development. Programs that teach self-awareness, self-management, relationship-building, and decision-making have been effective in enhancing these skills. These programs help students build strong social connections with their peers.

Belongingness is a natural human need. In Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, it comes right after physiological and safety needs (Maslow, 1943). A lack of belonging can lead to emotional pain, social withdrawal, and behavioral issues. Teaching social skills is a helpful way to make students feel included.

Belongingness means feeling accepted, valued, and included in a group. For students, it means feeling like an important part of the school community. When students feel they belong, they are more motivated, more involved in school activities, and do better academically. Their attitude towards school also becomes more positive.

For teenagers, belonging is especially important. It builds their self-esteem and helps them adjust better to school. Students who feel left out often face stress, low grades, and poor social relationships. Those with strong social skills, like empathy and cooperation, are more likely to feel connected and less isolated.

This study aims to explore how developing social skills like communication, empathy, and cooperation influences students' sense of belonging. It also reviews how Social Emotional Learning (SEL) programs support student development (CASEL, 2020). Previous studies have shown a positive link between social skills and belongingness. However, many schools still focus more on academics than emotional needs, including in Pakistan, where competitive exams and rigid teaching reduce social interactions (Rehman, 2016). This research will help guide policies and programs to make secondary schools more supportive and inclusive.

Statement of problem

Despite growing awareness of the importance of social skills, many secondary schools in Pakistan still focus mainly on academics, neglecting students' emotional and social development. Limited research exists on how social skills influence students' sense of belonging. This study investigates

how the development of social skills affects students' feelings of inclusion, connection, and emotional well-being within school environments.

Objectives of the study

1. To explore the relationships between social skills development and students' sense of belonging at the secondary level.

Research question

1. How do specific social skills have an impact on students' sense of belonging at a secondary school level?

Hypotheses

H_{01}: There is no significant relationship between social skills development and students' belongingness needs at the secondary school level in Rawalpindi.

H_{11}: There is a significant relationship between social skills development and students' belongingness needs at the secondary school level in Rawalpindi.

Significance of the study

This study holds importance as it highlights the often-overlooked role of social skills in students' overall development, especially during adolescence. At this stage, students seek identity, friendship, and acceptance. In Pakistan, schools focus heavily on academics, ignoring emotional and social growth. As a result, many students lack the skills to manage emotions, resolve conflicts, or build healthy relationships, affecting their mental health and future opportunities. The research stresses the role of social-emotional learning (SEL) in fostering belonging, reducing negative behaviors, and improving school climate. It provides insights for teachers, policymakers, and mental health professionals to prioritize emotional learning in classrooms. The findings can help shape teacher training, support student retention, and influence national education policies. Additionally, the study addresses cultural diversity and the lack of local research on social skills and belonging in Pakistan. By recognizing students' emotional needs, it promotes inclusive, respectful learning spaces and contributes to national harmony. Ultimately, it urges schools to nurture not only minds but also hearts.

2. Review of literature

In recent decades, researchers and educators have begun to emphasize the critical role of social skills in shaping students' academic and emotional experiences in school. Social skills are a set of interpersonal behaviors that enable individuals to communicate effectively, resolve conflicts, build relationships, and collaborate with others. These skills become especially important during adolescence, a period of intense emotional and social transition. Adolescents seek peer acceptance, identity formation, and emotional support, all of which are closely linked to their sense of belonging within the school environment. This review explores the concept of social skills, their significance in secondary education, the theoretical frameworks supporting them, and how they relate to students' feelings of belonging.

Definition and Importance of Social Skills

Social skills are typically defined as the behaviors that facilitate interaction and communication with others. According to Gresham and Elliott (1990), social skills are "socially acceptable learned behaviors that enable a person to interact effectively with others and to avoid socially unacceptable responses." These behaviors include active listening, empathy, emotional regulation, cooperation, and assertiveness. In school settings, these skills help students form

friendships, participate in group work, understand social norms, and resolve conflicts constructively.

The importance of social skills in schools cannot be overstated. Students who lack these abilities often face challenges such as bullying, peer rejection, and poor academic performance. Conversely, those with strong social skills are more likely to experience success in both academic and social domains. They tend to be more confident, have better self-esteem, and are more resilient in the face of challenges.

Sense of Belonging and Its Educational Significance

The concept of belongingness is rooted in human motivation and psychology. Belonging refers to the emotional need to be accepted, valued, and included by peers and social groups. According to Baumeister & Leary's (1995) "Belongingness Hypothesis," the need to form and maintain strong interpersonal relationships is a fundamental human motivation. When students feel accepted by their peers and teachers, they are more likely to engage in school activities, participate in classroom discussions, and show higher levels of academic motivation.

Research consistently shows that a strong sense of belonging is associated with better mental health, reduced dropout rates, and improved academic outcomes. For instance, Goodenow (1993) found that students who feel they belong in school are more likely to put effort into learning and to persist through difficulties. Schools that foster an inclusive and supportive environment help students feel connected, which is particularly important for adolescents who are forming their identities.

Theoretical Frameworks Related to Social Skills and Belonging

Several psychological and educational theories support the link between social skills development and students' sense of belonging. One key theory is Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943), which posits that belonging is a basic human need that must be fulfilled before individuals can reach higher levels of functioning, such as self-esteem and self-actualization. In the context of schooling, this implies that students need to feel accepted and included before they can thrive academically and emotionally.

Another relevant theory is Bandura's Social Learning Theory (1977), which emphasizes that individuals learn behaviors through observing and imitating others. This theory supports the idea that social skills can be taught and modeled in school environments. When teachers and peers model respectful communication and empathy, students are more likely to adopt these behaviors themselves.

Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (1978) also contributes to this field by highlighting the importance of social interaction in learning and development. Vygotsky emphasized that cognitive and social development occur through guided interaction within the child's zone of proximal development. Therefore, schools should provide structured opportunities for peer collaboration and social engagement to enhance both learning and belongingness.

Social Skills and Belonging in School Contexts

Numerous studies have explored the connection between social skills and a sense of belonging in school settings. Students who are able to communicate effectively, cooperate with peers, and regulate their emotions are more likely to be accepted and valued in peer groups. This, in turn, fosters a stronger sense of belonging.

A study by Wentzel (1998) found that social competence predicted not only peer acceptance but also classroom behavior and academic outcomes. Students who were perceived as socially

competent by teachers and peers were more likely to experience positive relationships and higher academic motivation. Similarly, Osterman (2000) concluded that students' feelings of connectedness at school are shaped by their relationships with teachers and peers, which are often facilitated through strong social skills.

In Pakistan, the development of students' social and emotional competencies is still an emerging area in education. The traditional emphasis on academic performance and discipline often overshadows the importance of emotional and social development. As a result, many students do not receive the structured support needed to develop essential social skills. This can lead to emotional distress, isolation, and behavioral problems, especially during adolescence.

Challenges in Social Skills Development in Pakistan

In many Pakistani schools, there is little structured curriculum or teacher training aimed at promoting social-emotional learning (SEL). Moreover, cultural norms and rigid discipline-oriented school systems often discourage open expression of emotions and collaborative interaction. Teachers may not feel equipped to handle emotional issues or facilitate social development, particularly in overcrowded and under-resourced classrooms.

Despite these challenges, recent educational reforms and NGO-led initiatives have begun to incorporate SEL into school programs. However, these efforts remain limited in scope and rarely evaluated for effectiveness in promoting students' belongingness or emotional well-being. There is a need for empirical studies that examine the impact of such programs on students' social and academic outcomes.

Research Gaps

Although international research supports the link between social skills and belongingness, there is limited data available from the Pakistani context, especially at the secondary school level. Most studies focus either on behavioral issues or academic achievement, without examining the emotional and social dimensions of student life. Furthermore, there is a lack of clarity on which specific social skills, such as communication, empathy, or teamwork, have the greatest impact on students' feelings of connection and inclusion in school.

This gap highlights the need for studies that not only assess students' social skills but also investigate their perceptions of belonging within the school environment. Such research can inform the development of culturally relevant interventions and policies aimed at fostering inclusive, student-centered learning spaces.

Figure 1 the relationship between social skills development, school belongingness, emotional well-being, academic engagement, and dropout risk.

3. Research Methodology

Research design

This study employed a quantitative correlational research design to investigate the link between students' social skills and their sense of belonging. Using structured questionnaires and statistical analysis, the research aimed to objectively measure the strength and direction of this relationship among secondary school students in Rawalpindi.

Population

The population included 16,545 female students from 81 Government Girls' High and Higher Secondary Schools in Rawalpindi, representing diverse urban and semi-urban areas with varied socio-economic and cultural backgrounds.

Delimitation of the study

The study was delimited to:

1. Government-sector schools in Tehsil Rawalpindi.

2. Female students from grades 8, 9, and 10.

3. Covered selected areas such as Murree Road, Satellite Town, Sadiqabad, Muslim Town, Shamsabad, Asghar Mall, Saddar, Chandni Chowk, Committee Chowk, Liaquat Bagh, Dhoke Kashmirian, Dhoke Mangtal, Dhoke Elahi Bakhsh, and Dhoke Matkal

Sampling procedure

A proportionate stratified sampling technique was used to ensure fair representation from different areas and school sizes. Using the Taro Yamane formula, a sample of approximately 400 students was selected from 24 government schools in Tehsil Rawalpindi. Students from grades 8th, 9th, and 10th were included, covering various urban and semi-urban localities for diversity and balance.

Formula to Calculate Proportion
Proportionate Sample from Each Area = (Total students in all areas/No. of students in that area) x total sample size (schools)

Instrument of the study
A structured questionnaire was used, adapted from the Social Skills Improvement System (SSIS) and School Belongingness Scale (SBS), to assess students' social skills and belongingness. It was culturally modified to suit government secondary school students in Rawalpindi, ensuring clarity and contextual relevance.

Pilot testing
A pilot study was conducted with a small group resembling the target population to test the clarity and suitability of the questionnaire. Feedback led to necessary adjustments, improving the instrument's effectiveness and identifying logistical concerns for final data collection. Cronbach's Alpha reliability calculated was 0.722.

Data Collection and Analysis:
Data were collected over four months, with two months for survey administration and the rest for data entry and analysis. Ethical protocols were followed, including informed consent and confidentiality. Data were analyzed using SPSS, employing both descriptive and inferential statistics. Pearson's correlation assessed relationships between variables. Findings are presented with tables and charts, aligned with research objectives. Interpretations were based solely on collected data, ensuring accuracy, reliability, and relevance to the study's context.

Results

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics for Social Skills Development.

Social skills	N	Maximum	Minimum	Mean	Std. deviation
Communication skills	400	4.40	21.00	15.7845	3.49910
Cooperation and Teamwork	400	4.00	16.25	12.1456	2.63261
Emotional Regulation	400	6.00	16.25	12.2881	2.42798
Empathy and Perspective-Taking	400	5.75	16.25	12.2331	2.60078

The table presents descriptive statistics for four social skills components from 400 students. Communication skills had the highest mean (M = 15.78, SD = 3.50). Cooperation and teamwork (M = 12.15), emotional regulation (M = 12.29), and empathy/perspective-taking (M = 12.23) showed moderate ratings. These results suggest students rated themselves moderately overall, with communication emerging as the strongest area.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics for Belongingness Needs

Belongingness Aspects	N	Maximum	Minimum	Mean	Std. deviation
Sense of Inclusion	400	5.75	16.25	12.2331	2.30571
Positive peer relationship	400	2.33	11.67	8.4708	2.00465
Relationship with teachers	400	2.33	11.67	8.2217	2.04755

The table presents descriptive statistics for students' sense of belonging: sense of inclusion (M = 12.23, SD = 2.31), positive peer relationships (M = 8.47, SD = 2.00), and relationships with teachers (M = 8.22, SD = 2.05). These findings indicate moderate inclusion, generally positive peer connections, and teacher support, reflecting students' perceptions of their school social environment.

Table 3: Correlation between Social Skills and Belongingness

Variable	r	p-value	Relationship
Overall, social skills and belongingness components	.239	<.001	Moderate positive, statistically significant

The table shows a significant moderate positive correlation (r = .239, p < .001) between students' social skills and their belongingness needs. This indicates that improved social skills are linked to a stronger sense of school belonging.

Table 4: Model Summary of Regression Analysis

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R-squared	Std. error of estimate
1	.291	.085	.075	4.92134

a. Predicator: (constant) communication skills, cooperation and teamwork, emotional regulation, and empathy/perspective-taking.

b. Dependent variables: Sense of Inclusion, Positive peer relationship, Relationship with teachers

The table shows a multiple linear regression analysis where four social skills components predicted students' belongingness needs. The model had a positive correlation (R = .291) and explained 8.5% of the variance (R^2 = .085). The adjusted R^2 = .075 confirms modest explanatory power, with a standard error of 4.92, reflecting the average deviation of actual scores from predicted ones.

Table 5: ANOVA Table for Regression Model

Model	Sum of squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	885.858	4	221.464	9.1444	<.001
Residual	9566.729	395	24.220		
Total	10452.587	399			

a. Dependent variables: Sense of Inclusion, Positive peer relationship, Relationship with teachers
b. Predicator: (constant) communication skills, cooperation and teamwork, emotional regulation, and empathy/perspective-taking

The table shows that the multiple linear regression model with four predictors was statistically significant, $F_{(4, 395)} = 9.14$, $p < .001$, indicating a meaningful prediction of belongingness needs. The regression sum of squares was 885.86, the residual sum was 9566.73, and the total was 10452.59. The mean square for regression was 221.46, compared to 24.22 for residual.

Table 6: Coefficients Table for Predictors of Belongingness Needs

Model	Unstandardized B	Std. Error	Beta (β)	t	Sig. (p)
(Constant)	22.772	1.935		11.768	<.001
Communication skills	.132	0.75	.090	1.768	.078
Cooperation and teamwork	.037	.099	.019	.377	.707
Emotional regulation	.191	.107	.090	1.788	.075
Empathy and perceptive taking	.450	.096	.229	4.664	<0.001

The table presents regression coefficients for each social skill component predicting students' belongingness needs. The constant was significant (B = 22.77, t = 11.77, $p < .001$). Among predictors, only empathy and perspective-taking showed a significant effect (B = .450, β = .229, t = 4.66, $p < .001$). Communication skills (p = .078), emotional regulation (p = .075), and cooperation and teamwork (p = .707) were not statistically significant. This highlights empathy and perspective-taking as key contributors to students' sense of belonging.

Conclusion

The findings suggest that social skills significantly shape students' sense of belonging in school. Students with strong empathy, communication, and emotional management skills tend to feel more accepted and connected. Empathy stood out as a key factor, helping students build meaningful relationships that meet emotional needs, aligning with Maslow's theory. While schools focus on academics, social and emotional development is often overlooked. Notably, cooperation alone does not ensure belonging without emotional support. The limited role of emotional regulation highlights the need for better guidance in handling emotions. Overall, social skills are essential for fostering belonging and emotional well-being in school environments.

Discussion

This study was conducted to explore the relationship between social skills development and students' sense of belonging at the secondary school level in Rawalpindi. The findings revealed significant insights into how students' interpersonal abilities impact their emotional connection with the school community. The data collected from students aged 14 to 16, across Grades 8 to 10, showed that social skills are moderately developed among students, with communication scoring the highest among the social skills components. This indicates that students are relatively confident in expressing themselves and engaging in verbal interactions. However, other aspects like empathy, emotional regulation, and cooperation scored slightly lower, suggesting a need for further development in these areas. These findings support the theories of Goleman (1995) and Elias et al. (1997), who emphasize the importance of emotional intelligence and structured social-

emotional learning in nurturing well-rounded students. In many Pakistani schools, emotional and interpersonal skill development is often overlooked in favor of academic performance, which may explain the weaker development of these skills.

The sense of belonging was measured through students' feelings of inclusion, peer relationships, and connections with teachers. While students reported a strong sense of inclusion, their relationships with peers and teachers were not as robust. This reflects Osterman's (2000) view that inclusion does not necessarily mean emotional connectedness. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943) also reinforces that belonging is essential for motivation and well-being. Without meaningful relationships, students may feel isolated despite being present in school.

Statistical analysis showed a moderate and positive correlation (r = .239) between social skills and belongingness, indicating that students with better social skills are more likely to feel a sense of belonging. Although the regression model had a low R^2 value (0.085), it still revealed that social skills can predict belongingness to some extent. This aligns with research by Zins et al. (2004) and Bandura's social cognitive theory (1986), which highlight that students actively shape their environment and relationships through learned behaviors.

Empathy emerged as the most significant predictor of belongingness, reinforcing the idea that being able to understand and relate to others' emotions fosters deeper connections. Eisenberg et al. (2006) emphasized empathy as key to forming and maintaining positive peer relationships. Interestingly, communication and emotional regulation, though positively related, were not statistically significant in predicting belongingness. This suggests that while students may communicate well, true belonging comes from emotional understanding rather than just verbal exchange.

Cooperation and teamwork were also found to be weak predictors, possibly due to the individualistic structure of the current education system in Pakistan, where collaborative learning is rarely emphasized. This supports Johnson and Johnson's (1999) findings that effective group work requires structure and teacher guidance.

Recommendations

1. Integrate Social Skills into Curriculum: Implement structured SEL programs focusing on communication, empathy, emotional regulation, and collaboration at all grade levels.
2. Train Teachers in SEL Practices: Provide professional development to equip teachers with skills to model and foster positive social behavior in classrooms.
3. Encourage Empathy and Inclusion: Organize activities like storytelling, peer mentoring, and community service to promote empathy and perspective-taking among students.
4. Foster a Supportive School Climate: Develop anti-bullying policies and ensure a safe, inclusive environment where all students feel respected and valued.
5. Engage Parents and Counselors: Involve parents through awareness workshops and ensure school counselors regularly support students' social-emotional needs.
6. Conduct Future Research: Investigate the long-term effects of social skills training across different school settings and student demographics in Pakistan.

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