Sense of School Belonging and Coping Self-Efficacy Among At-Risk Youth

Namhee A. Kim, Caihong R. Li, and Ellen L. Usher, PhD

**Literature Review & Theoretical Framework**

- Ecological systems theory proposes that personal, social, and environmental contexts interact in the process of one’s development (Bronfenbrenner, 1977).
- Social support and positive self-perception are key elements for healthy adolescent development (Bandura et al., 1999).
- A sense of school belonging is positively related to motivation, effort, and achievement (Amato & Keith, 1991).
- Coping self-efficacy mediates the effect of environmental stressors on psychological distress (Pelow et al., 2006).
- Biological, cognitive, and social developmental factors influence the coping process (Campas et al., 2001).
- Higher level of family support leads to positive outcomes (Amato & Keith, 1991).
- Students attending alternative schools face various challenges that may make coping difficult (Zwieg, 2003).

**Purpose of the Study**

- To investigate the relationship between at-risk students’ coping self-efficacy and sense of school belonging.
- To examine whether coping self-efficacy and sense of school membership differ as a function of students’ home family structure.

**Method**

**Participants**

121 students in Grades 7 - 12 attending an alternative school in the Southeastern U.S.

Participants completed a paper survey in the Fall semester of 2014. According to self-report, students were:

- 37.5% girls ($M_{\text{age}} = 16.87$, $SD = 1.44$) and 62.5% boys ($M_{\text{age}} = 16.69$, $SD = 1.73$).
- 67.8% Caucasian, 19.1% African American, 3.5% Hispanic, and 9.6% other ethnicities (5 students not reporting).

**Measures**

- Coping Self-Efficacy Scale (Chesney et al., 2006)
  - 13 items (e.g., “When things aren’t going well for you, how confident are you that you can ... keep from feeling sad?”)
  - Six-point scale from 1 (definitely false) to 6 (definitely true)
  - 3 factors measuring perceived efficacy related to
    - problem-focused coping,
    - emotion-focused coping (i.e., stopping unpleasant emotions and thoughts), and
    - social support coping (i.e., enlisting support from friends and family).

**Participants**

121 students were 37.5% girls ($M_{\text{age}} = 16.87$, $SD = 1.44$) and 62.5% boys ($M_{\text{age}} = 16.69$, $SD = 1.73$).

**Results**

**Table 1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Problem-focused coping SE</td>
<td>4.02</td>
<td>.28</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Emotion-focused coping SE</td>
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<tr>
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<td>4. School belonging</td>
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<td>.89</td>
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Note. SE = Self-Efficacy; N = 121; *p < .01

**Analyses**

- Pearson’s correlations were calculated to examine the relationship between coping self-efficacy and sense of school belonging.
- Independent t tests were conducted to determine whether students’ coping self-efficacy or sense of school belonging differ by family structure.

**Key Findings and Future Research**

- At-risk students’ coping self-efficacy was positively correlated with their sense of school belonging.
- Regardless of their home family structure, students reported similar levels of coping self-efficacy and school belonging.
- The results of this study add to previous research on the relationship between coping self-efficacy and a sense of school belonging with at-risk youth.
- The results of this study might help educators design programs focused on increasing at-risk students’ coping self-efficacy and sense of school belonging.
- Future research should compare the level of coping self-efficacy and sense of school belonging reported by students from traditional schools and alternative schools.

**References**


**Figure 1**

Means Levels of Coping Self-Efficacy and Sense of School Belonging by Family Structure

**Table 1**

Means, Standard Deviations, and Zero-Order Correlations for Coping Self-Efficacy and Sense of School Belonging

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