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Denise T. LeBlanc
Nicholls State University, denise.leblanc@nicholls.edu

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BELONGINGNESS IN THE CLINICAL SETTING

Belongingness in the Clinical Setting Among Baccalaureate Nursing Students: A Comparative, Descriptive Study

The concept of belongingness is a universal human characteristic. The need to feel wanted and connected to others is a fundamental need which influences learning. People who are deprived of belongingness have decreased happiness and self-esteem. It has also been shown that this deprivation causes increased stress and anxiety (Levett-Jones, Lathlean, Higgins, & McMillan, 2009a). The clinical setting is where most of the identity formation and socialization occurs for nursing students, although it is typically a high-stress environment. Additional stress and anxiety can negatively impact growth, learning, and clinical performance, all of which can impact patient care and safety (Levett-Jones, Pitt, Courtney-Pratt, & Harbrow, 2015). The nurse educator can influence the student's sense of belonging in the clinical setting by better preparing the student before entering the clinical environment (Levett-Jones et al., 2015). The purpose of this study was to determine the influence of the presence or absence of a sense of belongingness within clinical placements of students enrolled in a BSN program. This study examined for differences or relationships among gender, age, and level of BSN program. The findings of this study can be utilized to influence curriculum design for BSN programs and to promote awareness in the clinical setting of the importance of a supportive environment for nursing students.

Background

In nursing education, the clinical experience is vital to the development of a competent and confident nurse. Since human beings need social interaction, the need to be accepted is pivotal in emotional, psychological, and physical well-being (Levett-Jones, Lathlean, Maguire, & McMillan, 2007). People that are deprived of belongingness experience increased stress,

BELONGINGNESS IN THE CLINICAL SETTING

anxiety, and depression, and a decrease in self-esteem, happiness, and well-being (Levett-Jones & Lathlean, 2008). Clinical placements are designed to facilitate hands-on learning opportunities for nursing students. However, the clinical setting is the cause of stress and anxiety, especially for beginning nursing students. These negative emotions combined with an absence of belongingness or feeling wanted can be detrimental to the learning of a student. When a student is engaged and connected with their clinical staff, a sense of comfort and well-being emerges, with decreased anxiety (Sedgwick, 2013).

The sense of belongingness is important in the transition from student to nurse, as new nurses develop the skills and knowledge needed to function in a new career. Workplace socialization and belonging is critical to workplace satisfaction. It has been shown that being engaged and being included as part of a team fosters confidence and independence (McKenna & Newton, 2008). The desire to be accepted as part of the clinical team can influence the student's developing role as a nurse. It is imperative that clinical staff, leaders, and supervision be cognizant of nursing students' needs to create a clinical environment that is accepting of students. A supportive environment can increase the satisfaction, learning, and critical thinking of nursing students. Students who experience a sense of belongingness in the educational setting are more active and motivated (Ashktorab, Hasanvand, Seyedfatemi, Salmani, & Hosseini, 2017). Continuing the sense of belongingness into a new nurse's first year can influence job satisfaction, confidence, and ultimately, increase retention and decrease turnover rates (Winter-Collins & McDaniel, 2000).

Purpose & Research Question

The purpose of this study was to explore the influence of age, gender, and curriculum level on belongingness among baccalaureate nursing students. An extensive literature review

BELONGINGNESS IN THE CLINICAL SETTING

was conducted to ascertain the presence or absence of belongingness among nursing students. The data obtained from the Belongingness Scale Clinical Placement Experience (BES-CPE) was analyzed to ascertain feelings of belongingness within clinical placements. This study examined for a relationship or difference between the students' level of curriculum, age, and gender and feeling of belongingness in the clinical setting. The data obtained from the study can be utilized to influence BSN curriculum design for clinical preparation. In addition, the data can be utilized to facilitate clinical staff, leaders, and supervisors' understanding of the importance of a supportive learning environment for nursing students and new graduates. This study examined three questions in the population of baccalaureate nursing students:

1. Is there a relationship between age and sense of belongingness?
2. Is there a relationship between gender and sense of belongingness?
3. Is there a relationship between level of curriculum and sense of belongingness?

Literature Review

Belongingness

A thorough review of the literature related to belongingness in the clinical environment among students was conducted. Keywords including “belongingness”, “sense of belonging”, “belonging” and “clinical setting”, “baccalaureate nursing students”, “nursing students”, “job satisfaction”, “new graduate retention” and “nursing” were used in the literature search. Many international studies were found regarding the sense of belongingness in the clinical environment, while fewer studies were conducted in the United States.

In researching belongingness in the nursing student, findings have been consistent in reporting that for clinical experiences “a pivotal relationship exists between the extent to which students' experience belongingness and motivation to learn” (Levett-Jones et al., 2009a, p. 154).

BELONGINGNESS IN THE CLINICAL SETTING

According to Levett-Jones et al. (2007), belonging is a universal human need. Maslow's hierarchy of needs recognizes that a more basic need must be met before a person is able to focus on the next level. A person must first experience appreciation, acceptance, and belongingness to progress to self-actualization and self-esteem (Levett-Jones et al., 2007). Levett-Jones et al. (2009a) conducted a study to define the concepts of belongingness and develop a tool to measure belongingness. This study defined belongingness as a personal experience where a person feels secure and accepted by a group, feels connected to a group, and that their values are synchronized with a group. Belongingness has been found to influence emotional and psychological feelings in students, including "self-esteem, resilience, feelings of connectedness, confidence, degree of self-efficacy, the extent to which they were willing to question or conform to poor practice, and their future career decisions" (Levett-Jones et al., 2009a, p. 155).

Belonging in the Clinical Setting

One study showed that students feel underprepared for their first clinical experience and that emotions such as embarrassment, fear, and anxiety were common in first year students (Levett-Jones et al., 2015). This study found that the main concern of nursing students in their first year of clinical rotations is a feeling of not being well-prepared and being unable to recall knowledge in a complex clinical situation (Levett-Jones et al., 2015). The findings highlight the significance of faculty preparing students adequately for the clinical setting by focusing on professional behaviors and student expectations.

Walker et al. (2014) explored the formation of a student nurse's identity in the clinical setting and found that belonging to a professional group in the clinical environment influenced the formation of a student's nursing identity, or the process of being socialized into the profession of nursing. Being accepted into a group has been found to enhance the sense of

BELONGINGNESS IN THE CLINICAL SETTING

belonging and is important when forming a nursing identity (Walker et al., 2014). Positive role models, including faculty and clinical staff, were found to be essential in helping a student to feel accepted professionally.

In a qualitative study by Levett-Jones, Lathlean, Higgins, & McMillan (2009b), students (n=18) indicated they commonly judge the clinical nursing staff on whether they are welcoming and friendly on the first day of a clinical rotation. The students' first impression often set the tone for the latter clinical days. Researchers also revealed students who were made to feel part of a team and who experienced clinical staff that were engaging made them feel respected, valid, and valued as a student nurse. Also, when students encountered staff that were welcoming and supportive, student confidence and self-direction increased (Levett-Jones et al., 2009b).

Belonging and Nursing Identity

Borrot, Day, Sedgwick, & Levett-Jones' study of students (n=476) in their final semester of nursing school found that a lack of acceptance in the clinical setting increases anxiety, and importantly, thoughts of leaving a nursing career (2016). A student's developing identity as a nurse is influenced by the desire to be accepted as part of the team of clinical staff. This study also found that an important factor in a positive sense of belongingness is feeling respected by colleagues. The presence of a sense of belongingness is imperative throughout the nursing curriculum. A direct relationship in the absence of belongingness and thoughts of leaving nursing, or a change in careers entirely was found (Borrot et al., 2016).

Sense of belonging is an essential need in the undergraduate nursing program and clinical setting. Encouraging students to be part of a team within the clinical setting has multiple benefits. Students feel respected and are motivated to learn. With a positive experience, the students' opinion of the clinical facility as a potential workplace is favorable, which leads to

BELONGINGNESS IN THE CLINICAL SETTING

increased recruitment of new nursing graduates. This cohesive team of students and clinical staff working together positively impacts patient care and the entire patient experience (Tremayne & Hunt, 2019). The presence of belonging influences nurse retention and workplace satisfaction in the early period of a nursing career (Levett-Jones, Lathlean, Higgins, & McMillan, 2009b).

Nursing students must transition from the role of student into the role of “new” nurse.

Methodology and Instrumentation

A comparative, descriptive study was performed to determine the presence or absence of a sense of belongingness among BSN students. Ascertaining a sense of belongingness was accomplished by administering the Belongingness Scale-Clinical Placement Experience (BES-CPE) questionnaire to BSN students enrolled in Level I (beginning nursing foundations with well-defined health alterations), Level II (multiple health alterations with a focus on planning and implementation), and Level III (coordinating multidisciplinary care with a focus on implementation and evaluation) clinical courses (Nicholls State University Department of Nursing [NSU Department of Nursing], 2017). The BES-CPE questionnaire was adapted and modified by Dr. Tracy Levett-Jones (Levett-Jones et al., 2009a) from the original Belongingness Scale (Somers, 1999). This questionnaire was easily administered, free of cost, and took approximately 15 minutes to complete.

The BES-CPE, a 34-item forced response questionnaire, was constructed to assess students’ behaviors, cognition, and feelings. The questionnaire has three subscales which reflect the major components of belongingness: esteem (feeling secure, included, valued and respected by others), connectedness (being accepted and feeling part of a group), and efficacy (behaviors undertaken to enhance one’s experience of belongingness) (Levett-Jones et al., 2009a). Statistical testing of the BES-CPE was performed using Cronbach’s alpha to measure the internal

BELONGINGNESS IN THE CLINICAL SETTING

consistency reliability of the tool and each subscale. Reliability coefficients of the tool and subscales were high: BES-CPE 0.92; Esteem 0.9; Connectedness 0.82; and Efficacy 0.8 (Levett-Jones et al., 2009a). After obtaining permission from Dr. Levett-Jones, the survey was administered to Level I, II, and III BSN students via Qualtrics software. Participants chose their responses on a 5-point Likert scale, where 1=*never true*, 2=*rarely true*, 3=*sometimes true*, 4=*often true*, and 5=*always true* (See Appendix A). Data was obtained and analyzed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS).

Data Collection

Prior to data collection and survey administration, the study was approved by the Nicholls State University Human Subjects Institutional Review Board. Permission to conduct the research was also obtained from the Department Head of Nursing at Nicholls State University (NSU). The target sample included NSU BSN students currently enrolled in clinical courses, and who have completed a minimum of one full clinical rotation in the previous semester. The sample included students who are enrolled in Level I (NURS 255), Level II (NURS 355 and NURS 371), and Level III (NURS 400 and NURS 428) courses at NSU. Participants were invited via emailed announcement to participate in the survey. An informed consent was included prior to accessing the survey content. If the student consented to participate, a link to the BES-CPE was available to proceed with the survey. Participation was voluntary, and students choosing not to participate could close the invitation without further participation or penalty. Prior to the questionnaire, a brief demographics survey was obtained, including age, gender, and level of curriculum. The survey was distributed through Qualtrics software.

BELONGINGNESS IN THE CLINICAL SETTING

Data Analysis and Results

Descriptive statistics were utilized to analyze and describe study participants' characteristics. Of the 160 respondents who completed the survey, the majority (92%, n=147) were female and 49% (n=78) were in the 21 to 23 age range. All three levels of the BSN curriculum were represented in the sample, with Level II students having the highest participation (38%, n=61), closely followed by Level I (35%, n=56). See Table 1 for demographic information.

*Table 1**Gender, Age and Level of Program (N=160)*

Variable	f (%)
Gender	
Male	13 (8)
Female	147 (92)
Age	
18-20	43 (27)
21-23	78 (49)
24-26	15 (9)
27 and up	24 (15)
Level of Curriculum	
Level I	56 (35)
Level II	61 (38)
Level III	43 (27)

SPSS software was utilized in performing the data analyses. Descriptive statistics, including measures of central tendency, were obtained. Mean, median, and standard deviation were obtained on each of the 34 questionnaire items, the subscale categories, and a total for the entire questionnaire. To test for a relationship between age, gender, and/or BSN level and belongingness, Spearman's rho correlation coefficient was performed. Correlation coefficients

BELONGINGNESS IN THE CLINICAL SETTING

were performed on BES-CPE survey responses to evaluate the relationships between age and belongingness, gender and belongingness, and BSN level and belongingness.

Majority of the data did not signify a relationship between the presence of belongingness and either of the three variables (age, gender, and BSN level) and therefore was statistically insignificant. Nineteen items (10 for BSN level, 6 for age, and 3 for gender) showed very weak, although statistically significant ($p < 0.05$) relationships. This indicates that there is enough evidence present to conclude that there is no relationship between age, gender, or BSN level with the presence of belongingness. The Spearman's rho values of the subscales were also analyzed for a relationship between age, gender, and BSN level. The subscales included measures of esteem, connectedness, and efficacy. No statistically significant relationship was found between age, gender, or BSN level and the three subscales that measure belongingness (see Table 2). Therefore, regardless of age, gender, or level of curriculum, students are perceiving similar feelings of belongingness.

Table 2

Comparison of Subscales for Gender, Age, and Level of Curriculum

	<i>Subscale</i>	<i>Spearman's rho (r-value)</i>	<i>Significance (two-tailed)</i>
<i>Gender</i>	Esteem	-.149	.061
	Connectedness	-.019	.808
	Efficacy	-.014	.859
	Total	-.066	.406
<i>Age</i>	Esteem	-.059	.456
	Connectedness	-.106	.182
	Efficacy	-.027	.737
	Total	-.092	.246
<i>Level of Curriculum</i>	Esteem	-.177*	.025
	Connectedness	-.145	.066
	Efficacy	-.093	.241
	Total	-.160*	.044

BELONGINGNESS IN THE CLINICAL SETTING

Measures of central tendency were performed to determine the mean, median, and standard deviation of the scores of the 34 items of the BES-CPE. Interestingly, questions related to feeling accepted ($M= 4.14$, $SD=.89$), feeling competent ($M=4.04$, $SD=.71$) and feeling welcomed ($M=4.46$, $SD=.67$) were all found to have higher mean scores favoring belongingness for most of the students. Not surprisingly, *never true* or *rarely true* were commonly selected for items which asked about colleagues inviting students to lunch ($M= 2.91$, $SD=1.13$) or social events ($M=2.79$), the importance of birthday acknowledgement ($M=2.24$, $SD=1.14$) and feeling uncomfortable at social functions ($M= 2.33$, $SD=1.07$). The highest scoring item, question 19: “*I am supportive of my colleagues*” ($M=4.56$, $SD=.60$) indicating many of the students selected often or always true. Two items refer to offering to help colleagues ($M=4.13$, $SD=.76$) and asking for help from colleagues ($M=4.37$, $SD=.66$), indicating a higher level of belongingness. The BES-CPE subscale scores and total score were also analyzed. The total mean score of the tool for the population ($N=160$) was 3.8, which indicated that overall, belongingness is often present in BSN students (see Table 3).

Table 3

Descriptive statistics for BES-CPE scores (n=160)

	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Median</i>	<i>Standard Deviation</i>
<i>Esteem</i>	3.59	3.61	.503
<i>Connectedness</i>	3.31	3.40	.614
<i>Efficacy</i>	3.70	3.75	.397
<i>Total</i>	3.81	3.83	.439

BELONGINGNESS IN THE CLINICAL SETTING

Discussion**Significance**

The findings demonstrated some weak but statistically significant findings. Enough evidence is present to indicate that there is no relationship between age, gender or BSN level and the presence of belongingness. The mean scores of the three subsets range from 3.4 to 3.8, indicating a moderate level a sense of belongingness. Based on the total mean score of the BES-CPE, BSN students feel a moderate level of belongingness regardless of age, gender, or level of curriculum. This finding is significant, since this reflects that students are not feeling that they are being treated differently by staff based on their age, gender, or level of curriculum.

Implications

Findings of this study can be utilized in nursing education to influence pre-clinical student preparation, and to inform clinical faculty of student preferences and needs. The need to feel accepted, welcomed, and supported were the highest scoring concepts overall, indicating that most students feel this is *often true* or *always true*. These findings should also be disseminated to the leaders and nursing staff of the clinical facility, to increase awareness of these important concepts, which could increase feelings of belongingness for students. It is important for clinical leaders to realize that belonging is not only important for students, but new graduates as well. Developing a sense of belonging in a work environment is associated with higher levels of satisfaction and lower turnover rates (Shermont & Krepcio, 2006). Exploring the perceptions of the clinical nursing staff towards students may be an area of future research in this topic.

BELONGINGNESS IN THE CLINICAL SETTING

Limitations

One limitation of this study is that the convenience sample was from only one BSN program. Therefore, findings cannot be generalized to other programs. The participants were not diverse in age range, with almost half of the participants in the 21 to 23 age group. Gender was not equally represented since most of the participants were female. Additionally, since answers were self-reported, a level of bias may be present to provide socially acceptable answers. Another limitation of the study was the absence of a definite scale to indicate the presence of belongingness. The absence of a total score leaves the determination of belongingness to the discretion of the researcher and can be interpreted differently by multiple people.

Conclusion

Nurse educators are often subject to the thoughts and opinions of many students, including their experiences in the clinical rotations. The clinical setting is vital in the learning experience of students, and when students feel comfortable in that setting, many studies have shown that learning increases. Since it has been found that feeling accepted, welcomed, and competent are important to nursing students, it is important to educate clinical faculty and staff on this topic in order to promote belongingness and provide a welcoming environment in the clinical setting.

BELONGINGNESS IN THE CLINICAL SETTING

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BELONGINGNESS IN THE CLINICAL SETTING

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BELONGINGNESS IN THE CLINICAL SETTING

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BELONGINGNESS IN THE CLINICAL SETTING

Appendix A

Belongingness Scale Clinical Placement Experience

In the next pages, you will find a list of statements. Read each statement and then select the response that best indicates **how often the statement is true for you**.

For each question:

- **Please answer every item**, even if one seems similar to another one
- **Answer each item quickly**, without spending too much time on any one item.
- **When answering, reflect on your last clinical placement experience (last full semester clinical rotation.)**

In the statements below, '**placement/s**' refers to your clinical site/experience as a nursing student, and '**colleagues**' refers to clinical/hospital staff in the area of your placement.

01	I feel like I fit in with others during my placements	<input type="radio"/> Always True	<input type="radio"/> Never True	<input type="radio"/> Rarely True	<input type="radio"/> Sometimes True	<input type="radio"/> Often True
02	It is important to feel accepted by my colleagues	<input type="radio"/> Always True	<input type="radio"/> Never True	<input type="radio"/> Rarely True	<input type="radio"/> Sometimes True	<input type="radio"/> Often True
03	Colleagues see me as a competent person	<input type="radio"/> Always True	<input type="radio"/> Never True	<input type="radio"/> Rarely True	<input type="radio"/> Sometimes True	<input type="radio"/> Often True
04	Colleagues offer to help me when they sense I need it	<input type="radio"/> Always True	<input type="radio"/> Never True	<input type="radio"/> Rarely True	<input type="radio"/> Sometimes True	<input type="radio"/> Often True
05	I make an effort to help new students or staff feel welcome	<input type="radio"/> Always True	<input type="radio"/> Never True	<input type="radio"/> Rarely True	<input type="radio"/> Sometimes True	<input type="radio"/> Often True
06	I view my placements as a place to experience a sense of belonging	<input type="radio"/> Always True	<input type="radio"/> Never True	<input type="radio"/> Rarely True	<input type="radio"/> Sometimes True	<input type="radio"/> Often True
07	I get support from colleagues when I need it	<input type="radio"/> Always True	<input type="radio"/> Never True	<input type="radio"/> Rarely True	<input type="radio"/> Sometimes True	<input type="radio"/> Often True
08	I am invited to social events outside of my placements by colleagues	<input type="radio"/> Always True	<input type="radio"/> Never True	<input type="radio"/> Rarely True	<input type="radio"/> Sometimes True	<input type="radio"/> Often True
09	I like the people I work with on placements	<input type="radio"/> Always True	<input type="radio"/> Never True	<input type="radio"/> Rarely True	<input type="radio"/> Sometimes True	<input type="radio"/> Often True
10*	I feel discriminated against on placements	<input type="radio"/> Always True	<input type="radio"/> Never True	<input type="radio"/> Rarely True	<input type="radio"/> Sometimes True	<input type="radio"/> Often True
11	I offer to help my colleagues, even if they don't ask for it	<input type="radio"/> Always True	<input type="radio"/> Never True	<input type="radio"/> Rarely True	<input type="radio"/> Sometimes True	<input type="radio"/> Often True
12	It is important to me that someone at my placement	<input type="radio"/> Always True	<input type="radio"/> Never True	<input type="radio"/> Rarely True	<input type="radio"/> Sometimes True	<input type="radio"/> Often True

BELONGINGNESS IN THE CLINICAL SETTING

	acknowledges my birthday in some way					
13	I invite colleagues to eat lunch/dinner with me	<input type="radio"/> Never True Always True	<input type="radio"/> Rarely True	<input type="radio"/> Sometimes True	<input type="radio"/> Often True	<input type="radio"/>
14*	On placements I feel like an outsider	<input type="radio"/> Never True Always True	<input type="radio"/> Rarely True	<input type="radio"/> Sometimes True	<input type="radio"/> Often True	<input type="radio"/>
15	There are people that I work with on placements who share my values	<input type="radio"/> Never True Always True	<input type="radio"/> Rarely True	<input type="radio"/> Sometimes True	<input type="radio"/> Often True	<input type="radio"/>
16	Colleagues ask for my ideas or opinions about different matters	<input type="radio"/> Never True Always True	<input type="radio"/> Rarely True	<input type="radio"/> Sometimes True	<input type="radio"/> Often True	<input type="radio"/>
17	I feel understood by my colleagues	<input type="radio"/> Never True Always True	<input type="radio"/> Rarely True	<input type="radio"/> Sometimes True	<input type="radio"/> Often True	<input type="radio"/>
18	I make an effort when on placements to be involved with my colleagues in some way	<input type="radio"/> Never True Always True	<input type="radio"/> Rarely True	<input type="radio"/> Sometimes True	<input type="radio"/> Often True	<input type="radio"/>
19	I am supportive of my colleagues	<input type="radio"/> Never True Always True	<input type="radio"/> Rarely True	<input type="radio"/> Sometimes True	<input type="radio"/> Often True	<input type="radio"/>
20	I ask for my colleagues' advice	<input type="radio"/> Never True Always True	<input type="radio"/> Rarely True	<input type="radio"/> Sometimes True	<input type="radio"/> Often True	<input type="radio"/>
21	People I work with on placements accept me when I'm just being myself	<input type="radio"/> Never True Always True	<input type="radio"/> Rarely True	<input type="radio"/> Sometimes True	<input type="radio"/> Often True	<input type="radio"/>
22*	I am uncomfortable attending social functions on placements because I feel like I don't belong	<input type="radio"/> Never True Always True	<input type="radio"/> Rarely True	<input type="radio"/> Sometimes True	<input type="radio"/> Often True	<input type="radio"/>
2 3	When I walk up to a group on a placement I feel welcomed	<input type="radio"/> Never True Always True	<input type="radio"/> Rarely True	<input type="radio"/> Sometimes True	<input type="radio"/> Often True	<input type="radio"/>
24	Feeling "a part of things" is one of the things I like about going to placements	<input type="radio"/> Never True Always True	<input type="radio"/> Rarely True	<input type="radio"/> Sometimes True	<input type="radio"/> Often True	<input type="radio"/>
25	There are people on placements with whom I have a strong bond	<input type="radio"/> Never True Always True	<input type="radio"/> Rarely True	<input type="radio"/> Sometimes True	<input type="radio"/> Often True	<input type="radio"/>
26*	I keep my personal life to myself when I'm on placements	<input type="radio"/> Never True Always True	<input type="radio"/> Rarely True	<input type="radio"/> Sometimes True	<input type="radio"/> Often True	<input type="radio"/>
27	It seems that people I work with on placements like me	<input type="radio"/> Never True Always True	<input type="radio"/> Rarely True	<input type="radio"/> Sometimes True	<input type="radio"/> Often True	<input type="radio"/>
28	I let colleagues know I care about them by asking how things are going for them and their family	<input type="radio"/> Never True Always True	<input type="radio"/> Rarely True	<input type="radio"/> Sometimes True	<input type="radio"/> Often True	<input type="radio"/>
29	Colleagues notice when I am absent from placements or social gatherings because they ask about me	<input type="radio"/> Never True Always True	<input type="radio"/> Rarely True	<input type="radio"/> Sometimes True	<input type="radio"/> Often True	<input type="radio"/>

BELONGINGNESS IN THE CLINICAL SETTING

30	One or more of my colleagues confides in me	<input type="radio"/> Always True	<input type="radio"/> Never True	<input type="radio"/> Rarely True	<input type="radio"/> Sometimes True	<input type="radio"/> Often True	<input type="radio"/>
31	I let my colleagues know that I appreciate them	<input type="radio"/> Always True	<input type="radio"/> Never True	<input type="radio"/> Rarely True	<input type="radio"/> Sometimes True	<input type="radio"/> Often True	<input type="radio"/>
32	I ask my colleagues for help when I need it	<input type="radio"/> Always True	<input type="radio"/> Never True	<input type="radio"/> Rarely True	<input type="radio"/> Sometimes True	<input type="radio"/> Often True	<input type="radio"/>
33	I like where I work on placements	<input type="radio"/> Always True	<input type="radio"/> Never True	<input type="radio"/> Rarely True	<input type="radio"/> Sometimes True	<input type="radio"/> Often True	<input type="radio"/>
34	I feel free to share my disappointments with at least one of my colleagues	<input type="radio"/> Always True	<input type="radio"/> Never True	<input type="radio"/> Rarely True	<input type="radio"/> Sometimes True	<input type="radio"/> Often True	<input type="radio"/>

¹ Items indicated with an asterisk are reverse-scored.

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