Chapter 13

Students From Non-Elite Backgrounds' Experiences of Belonging in Elite International Schools

Ellen Christine Heyting

https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0349-8006

The University of Melbourne, Australia

ABSTRACT

A sense of belonging to one's educational institution has been linked to many positive benefits and could be utilised as a tool to close gaps in academic completion rates. In elite international schools, not all students fare the same. One explanation for this gap is a lack of a 'sense of belonging'. The current study addresses the research question of 'How do students from non-elite backgrounds experience belonging at an elite international school?' Semi-structured interviews with ten Grade 11 students from non-elite backgrounds who attended an elite international school in a major Asian city were conducted. The data was analysed using a descriptive qualitative approach. The results suggest relationships and school culture most affected students' sense of belonging. These findings suggest there are many complexities to the belonging experienced by students from non-elite backgrounds studying in international schools. This study concludes with advice to educators in international schools and the wider sector.

INTRODUCTION

A sense of belonging to one's educational institution has been linked to many positive academic, health and social benefits and could potentially be utilised as a tool to close gaps in academic completion between populations (Anderman, 2003; Battistich et al.,1995; Tinto, 1987; Hausmann et al., 2009; Goodenow & Grady, 1993). In elite educational settings, not all students fare the same. There are established patterns of students from elite backgrounds experiencing school positively and graduating with high levels of academic completion compared to students from non-elite backgrounds at the same institutions. One

category of elite educational institutions are international schools, which educate the children of the global elite as well as some who come from diverse backgrounds from around the globe on various scholarship programmes to attend these. One of the commonly asserted explanations for this gap in the differences experienced by students from elite and non-elite backgrounds is what has been broadly named 'sense of belonging' (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). The current study aims to address the research question of 'How do students from non-elite backgrounds experience belonging at an elite international school?'

Literature Review

This study aims to contribute to the field of research in an international school context, and particularly around students from non-elite backgrounds attending these institutions and their experiences of belonging. This thesis aims to bridge the divide between research conducted in international schools, which largely focuses on the shared international culture of third culture kids (Fail et al., 2004; Kano Podolsky, 2004; Pollock et al., 2010), research on why students from non-elite backgrounds tend to experience lower rates of educational attainment and completion than their peers from elite backgrounds (Thomson, 2007; Cohen & Garcia, 2008; Steele, 2010), which has largely been conducted in the US context, and research on fostering a sense of belonging as a way to close this gap in education completion between students from elite and non-elite backgrounds (Santos, 2014; Finn, 1989; Hausmann et al., 2009). While there is literature in these three silos, minimal research has been conducted examining the intersection of these variables.

Sense of Belonging

One factor which drives students' disengagement with school and poor academic performance is a lack of belonging. The importance of this issue is highlighted by Willms and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2003) who write, "Meeting the needs of youths who have become disaffected from school is perhaps the biggest challenge facing teachers and school administrators" (p. 76). A lack of belonging can lead to disaffection from school (U.S. Department of Education, 1993). Recent PISA data suggests that one in four students feel like they don't belong at school and on average across OECD countries, students' sense of belonging has shrunk between 2015 and 2018 (OECD, 2019). However, although the importance of belonging has been established, the role that school belonging and academic motivation plays in academic success has been acknowledged as being under researched (Santos, 2014). A recent study in Australia found that around 50% of schools studied made some reference to belonging in their school's guiding documents such as their mission statements or values (Allen & Kern, 2017), suggesting that around half of the schools studied had either not considered including belonging as a central value of the school, or had considered it, but rejected it in favour of other priorities.

Baumeister and Leary (1995) define belongingness as, "frequent, affectively pleasant interactions in the context of a temporally stable and enduring framework of affective concern" (p. 497). More recently, belonging has been conceptualised as students' sense of being accepted, valued, included and encouraged by teachers and peers, and feeling that they are an important part of the life and activity of the classroom, and has been closely associated with engagement (Thomas, 2012). It is this definition of belonging that will be adopted for the current study.

20 more pages are available in the full version of this document, which may be purchased using the "Add to Cart" button on the publisher's webpage: www.igi-global.com/chapter/students-from-non-elite-backgrounds-experiences-of-belonging-in-elite-international-schools/334323

Related Content

The Role of Chatbots in Educational Leadership: Enhancing Decision-Making and Efficiency Through AI Tools
C. V. Suresh Babu, Malini Premakumari Williamand R. Abdul Fazil (2025). *Chatbots in Educational Leadership and Management (pp. 291-320).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/the-role-of-chatbots-in-educational-leadership/371561

The Construction of Identity in Nigerian Universities' Vision and Mission Statements
Simeon Ajiboye (2023). *Transformation of Higher Education Through Institutional Online Spaces (pp. 237-249).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/the-construction-of-identity-in-nigerian-universities-vision-and-mission-statements/326503

Teacher Leadership in Special Education
Annie Nguyen Tran (2021). *Empowering Formal and Informal Leadership While Maintaining Teacher Identity (pp. 135-174).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/teacher-leadership-in-special-education/276577

A Virtual Linguistic Landscape Analysis of Higher Education Institutions and Their Use of Pronouns of Address in the Hispanic and Lusophone World
Daniel Guarinand Larissa Oliveira Cardoso (2023). *Transformation of Higher Education Through Institutional Online Spaces (pp. 1-28).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/a-virtual-linguistic-landscape-analysis-of-higher-education-institutions-and-their-use-of-pronouns-of-address-in-the-hispanic-and-lusophone-world/326490

Leadership Readiness In K-12 International Schools
Raymond John Schmidt (2025). *Issues and Trends in International School Leadership (pp. 213-252).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/leadership-readiness-in-k-12-international-schools/364729