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# Belonging a Key Concept to Explain Success in Higher Education in the Netherlands

Carl Hermann Dino Steinmetz<sup>1</sup>, Dliman Salim<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Expats & Immigrants B. V., Amsterdam, the Netherlands

<sup>2</sup>Social Work, University of Applied Sciences Windesheim, Almere, the Netherlands

## Email address:

[carl@expats-immigrants.com](mailto:carl@expats-immigrants.com) (C. H. D. Steinmetz), [L.salim@windesheim.nl](mailto:L.salim@windesheim.nl) (D. Salim)

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**Abstract:** This article proposes a model for predicting student success and well-being (dependent variables) at Windesheim University of Applied Sciences, Social Work, Almere, the Netherlands. This model is based on a international literature review. This model consists of two predictive components (independent variables), namely secure attachment and a positive sense of belonging (to the University of Applied Sciences and its learning communities). Attachment will be measured through a Belgian standardized questionnaire. Belonging, on the other hand, through standardized OECD questions. COVID-19 is a covariate (a control variable that might affect the outcome). COVID-19 is measured through a Dutch Municipal or Community Health Service (GGD) questionnaire. Due to the lockdowns in the Netherlands, face-to-face education at Universities of Applied sciences and Dutch Universities was no longer provided. Education was online. Online, teachers cannot convey to their students that they belong and that students are cared for by them. This model distinguishes between Western and non-Western conceptions of belonging. This is done because most students are from non-Western countries and teachers are mostly from the Netherlands. Apart from the above, this model also assumes that students' sense of belonging is influenced by the directors and CEO's of this University of Applied sciences. Teachers can give students a sense of belonging when their executives and boards of directors (CEOs) also care about them.

**Keywords:** Attachment, Sense of Belonging, COVID-19, Students, Study Success, Well-Being

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## 1. Introduction

Child and developmental psychology have taught us much about the function of love and affection parents and carers have for their children (attachment theory). The prevailing view of the British psychiatrist John Bowlby and the American psychologist Mary Ainsworth<sup>1</sup> (from whom Bowlby derived his attachment theory) is that the more lovingly a child is brought up, the better her/his life can go. This does not take into account possible stressful life events on the life course from birth to death [1]. Bowlby (1988) distinguishes in his attachment theory many attachment outcomes<sup>2</sup>. The best outcome is the so-called secure attachment: "this attachment takes place when the child can

trust the nurturers and when the nurturers offer closeness, protection and emotional support to the child."

The undesirable outcomes are: a) anxious ambivalent attachment ("this attachment occurs in children who experience separation anxiety when they are separated from their attachment figure (parents and nurturers). The care figure is often unpredictable and absent at crucial moments"), b) avoidant attachment ("in this attachment style, the child is very avoidant of the care figure. The child is independent at an early age. The care figures are often dismissive, absent-minded and not very sensitive"), and c) disorganised attachment ("these children have alternating characteristics of the above styles of attachment. Sometimes the child seeks an approach from the parent/ carer, but this results in both stress and anxiety. The care figures are often unpredictable and inconsistent. This type of attachment may also involve traumas or other impactful events").

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.universiteitiden.nl/nieuws/2015/07/de-gehechtheidstheorie-van-bowlby-en-ainsworth>

<sup>2</sup> [https://psychia.be/hechtingstheorie\\_bowlby.html](https://psychia.be/hechtingstheorie_bowlby.html)

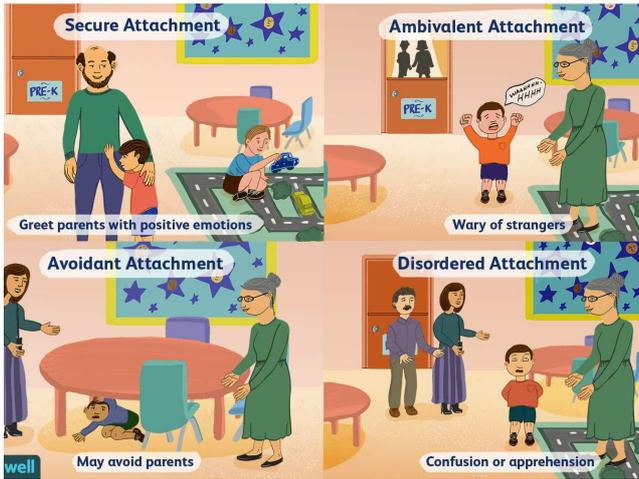


Figure 1. Secure Attachment and Other Attachment Styles (Cherry, [17]).

A definition of attachment<sup>3</sup> is: “Attachment is a process of interaction between a child and one or more of its carers that leads to a lasting affective relationship. Under normal circumstances, children develop their first attachment relationships with adults when they are between six and twelve months old. This usually involves the parents, grandparents and, for example, educational staff. This creates a network of attachment relationships, although children often have a preference for one person over another. Attachment is decisive for the good development of a child. For the creation of a secure attachment relationship, there are three basic conditions: sensitive and adequate reactions to the child, continuity in the presence of the attachment person, and the degree to which a parent can put himself in the child's position (mentalization by the parent).

It is often thought that only attachment is the key to a 'happy' life. In other words, attachment is the foundation of being able to function 'well' in life.

Not only the foundation of a happy life and possibly also (study) success stands or falls with secure attachment. Also responsible for a happy life and study success is 'sense of belonging' (giving a young person the feeling that she/he belongs). Sense of belonging may be regarded as the next step on the ladder of secure attachment. Sense of belonging refers to adults other than educators who can give adolescents a sense of belonging to the educational organization and/or learning community. From an organizational perspective, sense of belonging is taking good care of adolescents (including students) and indicating that they are part of the organization. Responsible for this are directors and chief executive officers of an organization. In our literature study, we follow the conclusions of Pedler [2] at the teaching faculty of SCU College, Southern Cross University, Gold Coast Australia.

“Research suggests that higher education students who have a greater sense of belonging tend to have higher motivation, more academic self-confidence, higher levels

of academic engagement and higher achievement.”

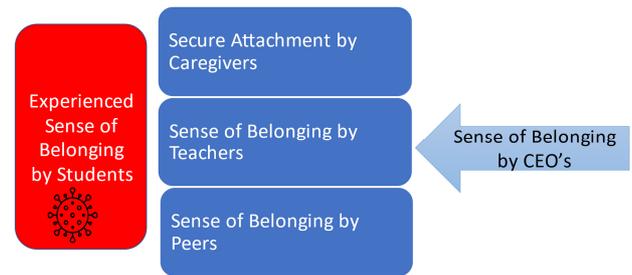


Figure 2. Attachment, Sense of Belonging and COVID-19.

Attachment interventions do not stop after childhood but continue well into adolescence. Hence our hypothesis that 'attachment' is a superstructure. The foundation of that superstructure is attachment itself. Thus, our hypothesis is that attachment and belonging are the basis for a happy and successful life. This article is about the 'superstructure' of attachment. For students, on top of the 'foundation' of attachment is the sense of belonging and being cared for. Sense of Belonging can be broken down to the students themselves, their peers, their teachers and supervisors. All of them are supposed to let the other person know that they belong and that they are cared for. This applies in particular to the managers and CEO's of an educational institution. They are supposed to show teachers that they belong and that they are cared for. Those teachers, in turn, show students that the educational organization shows them that they belong and that the organisation cares for them. Non-Western cultures further assume that Sense of Belonging is also applied by the peer group showing that fellow students belong. Figure 2 also shows that COVID-19 can negatively affect outcomes (student success and well-being).

Attachment and sense of belonging is viewed in the non-Western world from the perspective of collectivism [3]. For example, aunts and grandmothers in the non-Western world, independent of the parents, show that their children belong and that they care for them. In the Western world, on the other hand, the promotion of autonomy and independence is central. It is from this that the Western world looks at attachment and belonging. So it is not the unique teacher in the non-western world who is responsible for the sense of belonging, but the collective.

Attachment and Sense of Belonging is elaborated here for students of Windesheim of the University of Applied Sciences in Almere, the Netherlands. But we will not leave it there. We also look at what belonging means for Windesheim teachers. If their management is not able to make teachers feel that they belong and that they are cared for, these teachers will not be able to do the same for their students. The existence of this mechanism has been demonstrated for the Dutch police [4].

## 2. Sense of Belonging

Every person belongs to one or more groups in society. This is often referred to as multiple identity. The degree to

3 <https://www.nji.nl/cijfers/hechting>

which one experiences a sense of belonging is called 'sense of belonging' [5]. This is a Western definition. A non-Western definition of 'sense of belonging' is holistic, in other words, a person is part of her/his extended family, her/his ancestors (living and dead). In the latter group, a distinction is made between ancestors we remember and those we do not. Furthermore, a human being is part of the children (born and not yet born), the Gods and Spirits, mother earth, her plant and animal kingdom and the universe. This idea was presented by the South African philosopher Bernard Ramose Mogobe [6] in the philosophical concept of Ubuntu. Ubu are all forms of 'I' and UNTU is the mirror of 'I' in the other. In other words, belonging is always present because a piece of ourselves is our father, mother, great-grandparents, children, etc. Psychologists call this 'Agency' or in other words our SELF.

Belonging includes an affective, emotional dimension - not just being there, but also the desire to belong, as Elspeth Probyn [7] puts it. Belonging often includes a performative, ritual aspect.

"Performative is appealing behavior to manipulate others<sup>4</sup>.

Performative is to perform in a stylised way to bring about a transformation. Performances are staged actions that seek to touch people sensually."

### 3. Sense of Belonging in the Western and Non-western World

Deci & Ryan [8] consider the feeling of belonging to be a dynamic, reciprocal relationship between an individual and a group to which someone belongs. Belonging translates into 'demands' from the group that must be met. Deci & Ryan [8] expect that these 'demands' may differ from culture to culture. This implicitly introduces a self-determination theory. In other words, only super-motivated students will get far (psychologists call this intrinsic motivation). This is in line with the perception of non-Westerners in the Western world that the 'failure' of their children is caused by the children themselves and especially by their educators who are not capable of educating these children. How non-Western educators view the Western education system is beautifully expressed by Professor Dr. Paul Kirschner [9]. He states:

"These results seem to contradict the prevailing orthodoxy of educationists that the more discovery-oriented the education is, the more likely they are to acquire stronger scientific literacy. The first 'truism' has fallen into the well and drowned."

This is an attack on the foundations of self-determination theory [9]. This means that 'Sense of Belonging' should not be based on 'intrinsic motivation'. Another supposedly established truth falls into the pit once again after Kirschner [9] has had his say on a Canadian study by Gabrielle Garon-Carrier and colleagues who followed around 1,500 Canadian primary school students for four years to find out

what the relationship between intrinsic motivation and school performance in maths actually is. The outcome of this research is according to Kirschner [9]:

"This turned out not to be the case: math performance did have a significant positive effect on intrinsic motivation, but motivation had no effect on math performance. This was true for both boys and girls. The authors write that their results go against the prevailing view that intrinsic motivation naturally leads to higher performance in arithmetic, which raises questions about the theoretical assumptions underlying the self-determination theory. Contrary to what this theory claims, intrinsic motivation does not translate into higher learning performance".

Strayhorn [10] uses two concepts to clarify 'sense of belonging'. This is exhibited below via two quotes:

"I am somebody! I am somebody! I must be respected! I must be protected! I am God's Child! I am somebody!" This is how Reverend Jesse Jackson opened Saturday morning meetings of Operation PUSH. These words gave meaning and power to disenfranchised Black people in Chicago and across the United States. These words also held profound meaning for me, a Black graduate student swimming upstream in the sea of whiteness at the University of Chicago. Family, tribe, community—the Black nation—had affirmed, embraced and sustained me on my journey through unwelcoming, oftentimes hostile, white spaces. Without these places and spaces where I truly belonged; where I felt safe, valued and "normal," I surely would have been lost ([10], p. 11)."

"Say this: "I belong here." Now, turn to someone near you and say it again: "I belong here." If you're alone, grab your cell phone and text someone: "I belong here." What's their reaction? What's yours? If you receive affirming nods in agreement or feel a sense of warmth, then pause and connect with the moment. That's your mind (cognitive), body (behavioural), and soul (affective) converging on the sentiment that you are important, that you matter to others around you, and you belong. If your declaration is met with blank stares, disagreement, dismissive laughter, or the all-too-familiar text reply (?! ☹) then take a moment to sense your feelings. Channel them toward your mind. What are you thinking? What do you want to do now? What meaning do you make of the entire exchange? Connect with those emotions before moving on ([10], p. 21)."

These quotes, which come from African-Americans, deal with two important aspects of sense of belonging. Firstly, being aware of sense of belonging and reflecting on how this affects others. Secondly, it shows that sense of belonging rituals and affirmations are crucial for feeling 'included and protected'. Psychologists call this 'containment'.

Above, with the exception of the last two African-American quotes from Terrell L. Strayhorn [10], we have mainly discussed Western insights into 'sense of belonging'. Further attention should be paid to non-Western sense of belonging, as mentioned earlier, from a holistic perspective. In short, a perspective in which wanting to meet the 'demands' of the group (read especially students) is of crucial importance on

4 <https://www.ensie.nl/jannes-h-mulder/performatief>

study results.

Turkish research ([11], p. 1) shows that 'Sense of Belonging' in Turkey among children aged 10-15 corresponds to the following general statement about 'Sense of Belonging':

"In many studies the direct link was revealed between sense of belonging to school and school attendance, preparation for school, fulfilling the given tasks and homework, and active participation in social and sports activities. Another factor related to sense of belonging to school is "leaving the school". Due to all these reasons, valid and dependable measuring tools are needed for determining the primary school students (10-15 years old) sense of belonging to school."

Turkish and OECD Sense of Belonging test

Turkish scientists [11] developed a Turkish 'Sense of Belonging' scale (Chi-square = 80.93; df = 34; p-value = 0.00001 and RMSEA = 0.059 (root mean square error of approximation). This scale has two main dimensions (which are correlated,  $r = 0.48$ ): a) school satisfaction and b) obeying the school rules. About this scale, the authors conclude:"

"In summary, it is believed that Sense of Belonging to School Scale developed for the students at the second grade of primary education can be helpful for handling problems, such as violence at school, school gangs, and destructive behaviours towards the school, low academic success, and truancy. It is certainly important that the learner has a positive attitude towards the school in the implementation of the curriculum in an efficient way. For this reason, alienation of the student from the school and his/her not having the sense of belonging to school may prevent the curriculum from being successful. Thus, it is believed that the developed scale is competent enough to measure the sense of belonging to school of the second grade primary school students and to provide the implementers (school administrator, teacher, psychological counsellor of the school) with guidance ([11], pp. 11-12)."

It is possible that the ideas underlying this scale are useful because they contain an explicit non-Western component, namely, obeying the school rules. This fits with the non-Western view of having respect for the teachers (read elders) and the group (read learning group, and the school as a whole).

Yao [12], however, warns us against using concepts such as integration, which is tantamount to abandoning one's original culture, etc., among international students at American universities. She rejects Tinto's theories, which she implicitly characterises as racist. She does so because the underlying assumptions are that minorities (read international students) must adapt to the majority (read white American students). She uses the definition of 'Sense of Belonging':

"Feelings of belonging are a basic human need and often serve as motivation for positive behavior according to Maslow [10]. The need to belong and to 'fit in' are a part of human desire to find connection and community with others. Sense of belonging is a concept based on the relational nature of individuals and groups. The need for belonging is particularly relevant for college students who

are thrust into a foreign environment with strangers when they attend college."

Yao ([12], p. 5) gives the following recommendation for 'Sense of belonging' in practice:

"Broadly, I recommend that institutions of higher education assess current practices that are intended to assist international students with their transition. Are the current practices culturally sensitive? Do they assume that international students should conform to current university practices, or do they help students understand the cultural and institutional foundations of these practices?"

#### 4. COVID-19 Undermining Sense of Belonging

It has not gone unnoticed that in the Netherlands on 15 March 2020, all schools had to temporarily close their doors due to the outbreak of COVID-19. From 25 September 2021, colleges and universities will be fully open again. There is also a maximum group size of 75 students per room. From Monday 20 December 2021 to 9 January 2022, the colleges and universities are closed again.

Temporary closure meant that students had to sit at home. Lessons were given online unless there was no other option. The impact on the economic situation and living conditions of students was put to the test by COVID-19. Parents and caregivers of students with low socio-economic status (SES), immigrants and refugees were particularly affected by COVID-19. This was because these people live in too small houses and have to share a space with several people [13]. The OECD study shows that students from disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely to have a quiet place to study than students from privileged backgrounds. In addition, not every household has a laptop for all family members. This was quite a challenge not only for the students but also for the teachers and caregivers of the children. From one day to the next, the caregivers and parents became the designated persons who had to give extra assistance with homework and or take on part of the education in addition to their work.

COVID-19 has had an impact on students' sense of belonging and well-being. Steinmetz [13] compares this period with the operation of a 'pressure cooker'. The reason he uses the pressure cooker as a metaphor is that everything from the past, present and future comes under pressure without the steam being able to escape. He gives an example of this such as, expressing feelings of helplessness in children with pre-existing feelings of anxiety and depression (see also Cicek [14]. His explanations are: a) families being at home put pressure on the family system, resulting in more family conflict, violence and abuse, b) the pandemic also alienated family members through conspiracy theories and loss of social contact with peers and/or students, c) the psychological health of children and young adults was put to the test and d) the lack of influence and/or input on the approach to COVID-19 by the government, which could have been done by being allowed to have a say, and thus have a say in their future.

## 5. Future Research Design

This literature study is the prelude to a research programme on belonging among students and their teachers at Windesheim University of Applied Sciences Almere in the province of Flevoland in the Netherlands. The research programme starts with workshops for students and their teachers and aims to provide an insight into the questionnaires to be used by the OECD [15, 16] on Sense of Belonging and attachment by Brenning [17], University of Ghent, Belgium. Subsequently, the study provides a large-scale survey among students and teachers. We are aware of COVID-19 that has disadvantaged Dutch students in recent years through lockdowns and online education. Our expectation is that COVID-19 will have a negative impact on belonging. The results of the workshops and surveys will be reported and published separately. The aim of this step is to examine how plausible the hypothesis formation with control variable COVID-19, as described in Figure 2, actually is among students and teachers at Windesheim University of Applied Sciences.

## 6. Conclusion

People thrive when they are loved. This starts with the birth of a child and continues throughout her/his life. This article uses the concepts of positive attachment and belonging. Attachment is the foundation on which the 'building' of belonging rests. Furthermore, we assume that both attachment and belonging are put under pressure by COVID-19.

This theoretical framework is applied to students and teachers of Windesheim, University of Applied Sciences, Almere city, the Netherlands. This is done because previous research by, among others, the OECD [15, 16] shows that students who feel part of the community of the University of Applied Sciences have better study results and a higher sense of well-being compared to students who do not experience this. This is called belonging. Belonging is also when students feel that lecturers care for them [18].

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