# Exploring Predictors of School Belonging in Senior High School Students

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## Abstract

Adolescents spend a lot of time at school because schools are centers of activity for them. Thus, it is normal for students to feel supported, comfortable, and connected to all components of the school. These feelings can make students think of themselves as part of their school or known as school belongings. This research was conducted to explore what factors can affect school belonging and to find the factors that have the most meaningful influence on school belonging for high school students in Indonesia. This research used a qualitative approach with a generic qualitative approach, and consisted of five participants who were 10th and 11th grade high school students attending schools in Bandung. Data analysis uses reflexive thematic analysis. The results of the study revealed that four themes could affect school belonging for students at school, including relationships with school members, adequate learning facilities and infrastructure, students' participation in extracurricular activities, and the match between students' interests and their school majors. On the other hand, it was found that peers were a factor that consistently influenced students' school belongings because it is consistently mentioned by every subject in this study.

**Keywords**: high school, Indonesia, school belonging

## *Abstrak*

*Remaja banyak menghabiskan waktu di sekolah karena sekolah menjadi pusat kegiatan bagi remaja pada umumnya. Dengan demikian, sudah sewajarnya jika siswa merasa didukung, nyaman, dan terhubung dengan seluruh komponen sekolah. Rasa didukung, nyaman dan terhubung dengan sekolah dapat membuat siswa menganggap dirinya sebagai bagian dari sekolahnya atau dikenal dengan istilah* school belonging. *Penelitian ini dilakukan untuk mengeksplorasi faktor apa saja yang dapat mempengaruhi* school belonging, *serta mencari faktor yang paling bermakna pengaruhnya terhadap* school belonging *pada siswa SMA di Indonesia. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan* generic qualitative approach, *dan terdiri atas lima partisipan yang merupakan siswa SMA sederajat kelas X dan XI yang bersekolah di Kota Bandung. Analisis data menggunakan* reflexive thematic analysis. *Hasil penelitian mengungkapkan bahwa terdapat empat tema yang dapat mempengaruhi* school belonging *siswa di sekolah, yaitu relasi dengan warga sekolah, sarana dan prasarana pembelajaran yang memadai, keikutsertaan siswa dalam kegiatan ekstrakurikuler, dan kesesuaian antara minat siswa dengan jurusannya di sekolah. Disisi lain, ditemukan bahwa teman sebaya adalah faktor yang secara konsisten dapat mempengaruhi* school belonging *siswa karena secara konsisten selalu disebutkan oleh setiap subjek dalam penelitian ini.*

*Kata kunci: school belonging, Indonesia, sekolah menengah atas*

## Introduction

Adolescents spend a lot of time at school because it is the center of activities for adolescents in general (Arslan & Duru, 2017). According to *Keputusan Menteri Pendidikan, Kebudayaan, Riset, dan Teknologi (Kepmendikbudristek)* No. 262 of 2022, SMA/MA students spend about 6 hours and 18 minutes to 7 hours and 3 minutes per day at school. Meanwhile, SMK/MAK students spend time at school with a duration of 6 hours, 56 minutes. Other activities, such as ceremonies, extracurricular activities, etc., are not included at this time. Therefore, it is normal for students to feel supported, comfortable, and connected to all the components of the school, such as their teachers, their friends, or even the administrative staff and the janitor of the school (Parada, 2019). Feeling supported, comfortable, and connected to the school can lead students to see themselves as part of their school (Parada, 2019).

A sense of belonging to school in adolescence is very important to develop because it can predict a variety of positive school outcomes (Korpershoek et al., 2020). Some of the positive outcomes that students receive when they successfully feel belong to the school are their ability to achieve, healthy behavior, ability to manage social emotions, and life satisfaction (Allen et al., 2018; Allen & Bowles, 2012). When pupils do not feel like they belong in their school, they might be vulnerable to depression, loneliness, promiscuity such as alcohol and drug use, psychosocial disorders, and mental illness (Allen & Bowles, 2012; Arslan & Duru, 2017). The feeling of being valued, considered important, and accepted as part of the school can also be referred to as school belonging (Arslan & Duru, 2017; Goodenow, 1993; Parada, 2019; Wagle et al., 2018).

According to Goodenow (1993), school belonging is a student's subjective sense of feeling accepted, valued, and supported by all people in the school environment. Parada (2019) also found that school belonging is the feeling of students who feel affiliated and connected to all components of the school. Students with high school belonging feel supported and cared for by all parts of the school (support), have the perception that school rules are purposeful, fair, and reasonable (rule acceptance), and feel connected and comfortable while at school (attachment) (Parada, 2019). Therefore, students should have these characteristics as part of efforts to provide positive school outcomes.

Schools can identify important factors in the system to intervene on or, alternatively, that may be a marker of poor school belonging by understanding what factors are strongly associated with school belonging (Allen et al., 2018). Some factors that are strongly associated with school belonging are parent, peer and teacher support, positive characteristics, and the school environment (Allen et al., 2018; Slaten et al., 2016). In the meta-analysis study conducted by Allen et al. (2018), the factor with the strongest relationship with school belonging was teacher support. Interestingly, peers influence is not greater than the teacher's effect on school belonging (Allen et al., 2018).

The reason why teacher support has a stronger effect than peers is that the pattern of friendships established at school is limited to being in the same class without deep relationships between students, and a lack of interest in making friends. In addition, negative interactions with parents or peers can even be intervened in by teachers, so the role of teachers is strongly related to school belonging. However, this meta-analysis is based on studies from Australia and US, so the results may be different if the studies are based on non-Western and developing countries (Allen et al., 2018). Therefore, further research is needed to determine what factors can be related to school belonging, what factors have the strongest relationship with school belonging, and the reasons for it in Indonesia.

In Indonesia, research on school belonging has been conducted at several levels, including preschool, junior high school, high school, and university. At the preschool level, Yulia et al. (2021) examined the effect of learning on preschool students' school belonging. At the junior high school level, Hayati and Andayani (2018) have examined gratitude training to increase junior high school students' school belonging, and Fadilah et al. (2018) have examined the impact of academic emotions and school belonging on junior high school students' life satisfaction.

At the high school level, Lestari (2021) has examined the relationship between school belonging and homesickness, Setyowati and Fauziah (2019) have examined the description of school belonging in SMKN Yogyakarta, and Ardini et al. (2020) have examined existential counseling to improve school belonging. As for the university level, Dani et al. (2021) have examined the relationship between gratitude and sense of belonging in Madiun Karesidenan students, and Latifah et al. (2021) have examined the description of sense of belonging of students of the Islamic Guidance and Counseling Study Program, Faculty of Ushuluddin Adab and Da'wah IAIN Langsa. Based on several studies that have been mentioned, it can be seen that there are still rare studies that explore what factors can affect the sense of school belonging, as well as what factors have the strongest influence on the sense of school belonging among high school students in Indonesia. Therefore, this study will focus on exploring what factors can influence school belonging as well as finding the factors that have the most meaningful influence on school belonging among high school students in Indonesia.

## Methods

### Participant

This research was conducted in the middle of May 2023. The subjects of this study were four grade X students and one grade XI high school student, consisting of three males and two females, where these five participants have met the criteria for participating in this study, which is high school students who study in Bandung. The decision to include five participants in this study was based on saturation which is usually used in qualitative research as a criterion for discontinuing data collection and/or analysis, thus when the participants' answers have fulfilled the research questions and the majority of participants have revealed answers with the same points, the data collection process can be terminated (Saunders, et al., 2018). In addition, from several students who were offered to become participants, there were five students who were willing to become participants so these five students were included as participants to appreciate their willingness to become participants in this research. Furthermore, the high school students selected were only from Grades X and XI because, during the data collection process, the Grade XII students had already graduated and were no longer part of the school.

This research was conducted by taking samples from a school in Bandung. The sampling technique used was convenience sampling, which is a technique used to identify research subjects based on their accessibility to the researcher (Leavy, 2017). The data collection process was conducted by answering structured open-ended questions through a Google form distributed through the Whatsapp application within one week, starting from May 15, 2023, to May 22, 2023. In addition, an interview process was also carried out through a WhatsApp call to deepen the answers previously submitted by the subject through the Google form.

### Research Approach

In this research, a qualitative approach is used with a generic qualitative approach. A qualitative approach is an approach that examines the value of the depth of meaning and subjective experiences of individuals and their meaning-making processes (Leavy, 2017). As for generic qualitative, it is an approach that examines individuals about subjective opinions, attitudes, beliefs, or self-reflections about their experiences or things in the external world (Percy et al., 2015). This approach was chosen because it is consistent with the purpose of the study, which is to explore students' experiences related to school belonging. Thus, this study can identify which factors are considered to be influential and most influential on students' school belonging based on student's personal experiences and subjective opinions, as well as the meaning-making process that occurs.

Data Analysis

The data analysis technique used in this study is reflexive thematic analysis. This reflexive thematic analysis focuses on the development of themes that emerge from the code. The process emphasizes the active role of the researcher to engage in interpretive reflection on specific data sets. The themes formed are the result of the researcher's interpretation of patterns of meaning in the data set, so they are influenced by the researcher's values, skills, experience, and training (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Thus, this reflexive thematic analysis emphasizes the reflexive and thoughtful engagement between the researcher and the research data and the reflexive and thoughtful engagement between the researcher and the analytic process (Byrne, 2022). The process of conducting the analysis can be done in six stages: familiarization, coding, generating initial themes, reviewing and developing themes, refining, defining, and naming themes, and writing the report (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

## Results and Discussion

Result

The results of the study present the factors that could play roles students' school belonging and the priority order of each participant in determining which factors had the most meaningful effect on school belonging. **Table 1.** showed that four themes could affect students' school belonging at school, including relationships with school members, adequate learning facilities and infrastructure, students' participation in extracurricular activities, and the match between students' interests and their school majors. **Table 1.** explained the process that occured within students so that each factor affected students' school belonging. It should be noted that although the themes of adequate learning facilities and infrastructure, and the match between students' interests and their school majors were only stated by the same student, the voice of each participant in qualitative research is an important thing, unlike quantitative research (Chandler, et al., 2015). Thus, the two themes were still included as research results even though they were only stated by one participant.

**Table 1.** Factors Affecting School Belonging

| No | Factor | Statement | Subject |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Relationships with school members | Peer relationship: <br><br> *"I always meet my friends from morning to evening. So I can imagine how uncomfortable it would be if my friends were so annoying that I wouldn't feel part of the school."* <br><br> *"They always say hello and then invite me to chat even though I'm not in a group. If there is a difficult assignment, they ask me, and I can also ask them. So I feel like I'm accepted. It makes me feel comfortable and finally feel like I belong to the school."* | S1, S2, S3, S4, S5 |
| | | Teacher support: <br><br> *"The appreciation they give me makes me feel even more like I belong to my current school. When I've done something good, I'll get appreciation from the teacher, and that makes me feel appreciated, and automatically I feel like I belong to this school.* <br><br> *"They can be a second parent to me, a comfortable place to* | S1, S2, S3, S4 |

| No | Factor | Statement | Subject |
|----|--------|-----------|---------|
| | | vent, and even add insight for me." | |
| | | Relationships with other school members: | S1, S2 |
| | | *"So if there is anything, for example, if there is a need, I can ask them and maybe borrow something from them. Now with that, I feel like "Okay, it turns out that there are many people who know me and many people who really care about me out there". That makes me feel like I'm part of the school."* | |
| 2 | Adequate learning facilities and infrastructure | *"So my classroom was broken, but the school didn't fix it. I had to wait a few months before it was fixed. Then there are the facilities for vocational training. Actually, it's enough, but for many of us, I think it's still not enough. Then there is also the problem of cleanliness, which seems to have never been paid attention to. I feel like they don't care about their students, and I don't feel like I'm part of this school."* | S3 |
| 3 | Students' participation in extracurricular activities | *"So maybe because I joined the OSIS, then I was involved in various activities, I felt needed, and I felt like I belonged to the school."* | S2, S4, S5 |
| | | *"The school gives certain workshops or events, and I'm always associated with the workshop, whether it's an audiotory or whatever. So I feel like, "Oh, okay" the school considers me to be a part of the school.*`` | |
| 4 | The match between students' interests and their school majors | *"I feel more accepted at school, or I belong to the school because it suits my interests. My interest is in the culinary department, and then I entered the culinary department. So I feel like there is a part of me that is connected to the school. So when I'm in a school whose majors match my interests, I feel more a part of my school."* | S3 |

Based on **Table 1.**, it could be seen that relationships with school members include relationships with peers, support from teachers, and relationships with other school members (seniors, administrators, janitors, cafeteria workers, and security guards). The availability of adequate learning facilities and infrastructure, included school facilities and a clean school environment. Student participation in extracurricular activities, including the Intra-School Student Organization (OSIS), and other school activities (e.g., participation as a committee assistant in a training, seminar, or teachers' meeting). The match between students' interests and their current majors at school refers to students who are accepted in their majors of interest.

In addition, **Table 1.** showed the proportion of subjects for each factor that is considered to influence school belonging. The most proposed factors by the subjects came from the group of relationships with school members, which is peer relationship by five subjects, teacher's support by four subjects, and

relationships with other school members by two subjects. The next position came from the group of extracurricular factors proposed by three subjects. The last position came from two groups of factors, which were adequate learning facilities and infrastructure and the suitability between students' interests and their current majors at school, each of which was suggested by one subject.

In this study, the factor that most affected school belonging could not yet be determined because each subject chose a different factor when asked to indicate which factor most influenced them to belong to the school. **Table 2.** showed the factors that influenced school belonging for each subject in order of influence. However, peer relationships were always mentioned by each subject (see **Table 1.**) and were always in the top two (see **Table 2.**) of the factors that most influenced school belonging. Thus, it could be said that peer relationships are a factor that consistently has a strong influence on students' school belonging.

**Table 2.** Ranking of Factors Influencing School Belonging

| Subject | Ranking of Factors Influencing School Belonging |
|---|---|
| S1 | 1. Peer relationship<br>2. Teacher support<br>3. Relationships with other school members |
| S2 | 1. Peer relationship<br>2. Teacher support<br>3. Students' participation in extracurricular activities<br>4. Relationships with other school members |
| S3 | 1. The match between students' interests and their school majors<br>2. Peer relationship<br>3. Teacher's support<br>4. Adequate learning facilities and infrastructure |
| S4 | 1. Teacher support<br>2. Peer relationship<br>3. Students' participation in extracurricular activities |
| S5 | 1. Peer relationship<br>2. Students' participation in extracurricular activities |

Based on Table 1, it could be seen that students' opinions about factors that could affected school belonging are diverse. In addition, based on **Table 2.**, it could also be seen that some students have different priorities in chose the most meaningful factor to influence school belonging. **Table 3.** presents students' reasons about the factors that are considered to influence school belonging the most.

**Table 3.** Students' Reasons for the Most Meaningful Factor to Influence School Belonging

| Factor | Students' Reason | Subject |
|---|---|---|
| Peer relationship | *"Because with friends, we can be free, like there are no boundaries at all, maybe in terms of language or time. So we're really open to each other. Then, friends always meet from morning to evening. So I can imagine how uncomfortable it would be if my friends were so annoying that I wouldn't feel like I belonged at school."*<br><br>*"When there is a teacher who is annoying in class or at school, I can become stronger if there are friends who support me, because if, for example, there is a teacher who is like that, my friends will say to me " be patient"."* | S1, S2, S5 |
| The match between students' interests and their school majors | *"Interest is the first thing because if I don't have an interest in culinary, I won't go to a school that majors in culinary. Then, if I don't have an interest in that school, I also won't enjoy going there with the lessons or the friends. So if I go to a school that doesn't match my interests, no matter how good the friends are, I still won't feel part of my school."* | S3 |
| Teacher support | *"Teachers not only guide, but they also have a role to play in making students better. Also, apart from being close without me having to ask, teachers like to give me pocket money and food sincerely, and I want to help them sincerely, finally putting teachers at the very beginning. Then, with friends, you can be friends today but enemies tomorrow. A teacher can also be a mother figure; it can also be a friend to confide in; it can be a story friend; it can be anything."* | S4 |

## Discussion

Based on the results presented, there are four themes that can affect high school students' school belonging, which include relationships with school members, adequate learning facilities and infrastructure, students' participation in extracurricular activities, and the match between students' interests and their school majors. There are several explanations as to why factors from each of these themes can affect students' sense of school belonging. The next paragraphs will further explain the dynamics that occur between each factor and students' school belonging.

### Relationships with school members

There are several factors in the theme of relationships with school members, including relationships with peers, which is considered to have a strong influence on school belonging to each subject in this study. Peers are individuals or groups that students meet with most often on a daily basis, and interactions are established from the start of school until they go home, even when they are at home or doing homework outside of school hours. When interactions among students are of poor quality, such as being ignored or even bullied, it can make students feel like they do not belong to their school (Han et al., 2021). Conversely, students feel more belonging to school when peers can provide support, are often involved in conversations among friends, are invited to play games, help when they are in trouble, and share their complaints (Lim et al., 2022). Thus, this study supports the statement of Allen, et al. (2018) that the quality of friendship relationships with peers can affect how students feel a part of their school.

Second, teacher support is the second factor that is considered to have a strong influence on students' school belonging, in accordance with the research conducted by Allen, et al. (2018). The teacher support in question includes (1) verbal support, such as encouraging students who are doing assignments and giving appreciation for students' achievements and work, and (2) attitudinal support, such as being trusted to do certain tasks, being involved in various activities, being cared for, giving affection, listening to complaints, giving direction, and making sure that the teaching methods used are appropriate for them. The influence of teacher support on students' school belonging is also supported by El Zaatari and Maalouf (2022) who wrote that when students feel supported when they are struggling and congratulated for their achievements, students' well-being and sense of belonging to school will also increase.

The support given by teachers to students can create a positive relationship between the two. Bronfenbrenner (1979) said that there are three important components that can form positive relationships between students and teachers: positive affect, balanced power, and complete reciprocity. Positive affect refers to feelings of love, respect, and attachment between teachers and students, such as the attention, support, and trust given by teachers to their students. Balanced power refers to the balance of power between teachers and students in the learning process, such as teachers listening to students' opinions about the learning process that has been, is, or will be carried out. Meanwhile, complete reciprocity refers to the cooperation that must exist in the relationship between teachers and students, such as working together in a particular activity (Ibrahim & El Zaatari, 2020).

Third, relationships with other school members are also considered to have an influence on school belonging, which includes seniors, administrative staff, janitors, canteen keepers, and security guards. When students feel cared for, greeted, and assisted by other school members, their presence is considered at school and makes them feel more part of the school. Thus, students' school belonging can also be built by other school members, as stated by Parada (2019).

### Adequate learning facilities and infrastructure

Factors that also affect students' school belonging are adequate learning facilities and infrastructure, which refers to the availability of school facilities and cleanliness. The availability of academic support can increase students' sense of belonging to the school and their beliefs about their potential. Not providing adequate school facilities makes students feel that they are not cared for and treated unfairly by the school, as well as that the school environment is dirty. Students who feel they are not cared for and treated unfairly by the school may automatically feel they are not part of their current school (El Zaatari & Maalouf, 2022). Thus, school policies also contribute to students' school belonging, as stated in the research by Allen, et al. (2018).

### Students' participation in extracurricular activities

Students' participation in various extracurricular activities can also make them feel part of their school. Extracurricular activities include student council and other activities organized by the school. In line with capital theory, extracurricular activities are said to serve as a vehicle for the acquisition of social capital through greater interaction with peers and school personnel. Extracurricular activities can also serve as a facility to increase students' sense of belonging and identification with school and peers (Wachsmuth et al., 2023). Thus, extracurricular activities can also be a factor that affects students' school belonging. As for the significance of its influence, it still has to be further reviewed because the research of Allen et al. (2018) found that the effect of extracurricular activities was not significant.

### The match between students' interests and their school majors

The match between students' interests and their school majors can also be a factor that affects students' school belonging. Based on the results of the study, students who enter a school that they really want and like will feel more belong to their school than when they enter a school that is not in accordance with their wishes. Students feel a connection with the school because it matches their interests. That feeling of connection is what makes students finally feel part of their school.

In line with the statement of El Zaatari and Maalouf (2022), who said that when students perform a task that is valuable and interesting to them, the learning experience will be more meaningful, as well as creating intrinsic motivation and higher student self-esteem. In contrast, if students do not perform tasks that are valuable and interesting to them, they will lose motivation and be unwilling to participate in class or school activities. The feeling that will arise when students are not involved or engaged in school activities is a feeling of exclusion. Feelings of exclusion can hinder students' sense of belonging to their class or school. Therefore, students' interests that match their majors at school will make them feel part of their school.

### The most meaningful factor influencing school belonging

Based on the results, it can be seen that there are differences between subjects in choosing which factors most meaningful affect school belonging. Three subjects (1, 2, and 5) said that relationships with peers are the most important factor to make students feel like they belong to their school. Peers are considered to have a more important role than other factors because many students interact with friends more often than other school members. In addition, good quality interactions with teachers or other school members will not be more beneficial than good quality interactions with friends.

On the other hand, the most meaningful factors for other subjects were interest, and teacher support. Subject 3 felt that the most meaningful factor affecting school belonging was interest. Interest is considered the most meaningful factor because if students do not go to school in a place they are not interested in, they will feel unhappy about it. When students feel unhappy with their school, no matter how easy the lessons are or how good the friends and teachers are, they will still feel uncomfortable at school. With students feeling uncomfortable at school, they will eventually not feel like they belong to the school.

Subject 4 chose teacher support as the most meaningful factor affecting students' school belonging. The teacher is considered a figure who can replace the role of parents at school and plays an important role in student development. His attitude tends to be consistent when compared to his friends at school. Therefore, the role of the teacher is the factor that is considered to influence students' school belonging the most.

Based on previous statements, the most meaningful factor affecting school belonging seems inconclusive. On the other hand, it can be noted that relationships with peers are a factor that is consistently mentioned by each subject even though it is not the most meaningful factor for each subject. When viewed from the stage of development, Laursen and Veenstra (2021) say that peers are an important factor for adolescents. The adolescent phase is also the peak of individuals performing conformity behaviors. It is important for high school students to have uniformity with their peers so that they feel part of a community, or, in this case, the school they attend. As a result, it is natural for peers to be an influential factor in students' school belonging.

## Conclusion

Based on the results, there are four themes that can affect students' school belonging at school, including relationships with school members, adequate learning facilities and infrastructure, students' participation in extracurricular activities, and the match between students' interests and their school majors. Among those themes, the factor that consistently appear in each student and has a strong influence on influencing school belonging is the existence of peers. The findings from this study also explain the dynamics or processes that occur within high school students about the extent to which the interactions that occur between students and their school environment can make students ultimately feel they belong to their school. Qualitative research is the only way to fully understand these dynamics. Thus, the results of this study will be very useful for schools to better understand the process of school belonging in students, and design appropriate interventions that can make students feel they

belong to their school, where when students feel they belong to their school, there will be many benefits that will be felt by students and schools.

It should be noted that there are still limitations on this research, such as the lack of a final decision on what factors play the most role in school belonging. This limitation could be due to the inappropriate research approach used to answer this research question. Therefore, future research can be focused on conducting a quantitative approach that will help to find out what factors play the most role in the school belonging to high school students in Bandung, in which the results of this study can be used as one of the bases for consideration to examine several factors that potentially have an important role in school belonging and determine what factors play the most important role in the school belonging of high school students in Bandung, and find out the dynamics of their influence.

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