School belonging during challenging times

A qualitative interview study of students transitioning to high school in the
context of a global pandemic

Isabel Maria Machado Da Silva

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Stockholm
University

Department of Education

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Abstract

This thesis seeks to explore how students transitioning to high school under the context of a global pandemic have experienced a sense of belonging at school. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with eleven students from the same high school located in France comprising of all mandatory schooling levels. The thesis compares the experiences of two different groups of students, who have contrasting connections with their new learning environment. Earlier research has demonstrated that a positive belonging at school has important outcomes on how much students believe in their own potential and considerably impacts their academic motivation, engagement, and performance. On the contrary, a sense of not belonging results in students feeling socially isolated, alienated, and at risk of dropping-out. Unfortunately, international surveys have shown that students' sense of belonging at school has been deteriorating for the past 15 years across countries. At the same time, the field of education has mostly been neglecting the theoretical growth of the notion of belonging at school. This thesis uses Wright's theorisation of belonging, who turns to Weak Theory to consider the notion. The thesis emphasises that by carefully theorising belonging, it is possible to use it as a tool to expose exclusive and/or inclusive practices and values experienced at school. It also enables the understanding of how diverse agents, from micro to macro levels, impact students' sense of belonging at school. The interviews conducted with 10th grade students were analysed and interpreted through a thematic analysis. The results show that students experience belonging fluidly through time and through inclusive caring relations, practices, and spaces, which are influenced by a multitude of dynamics that go beyond the walls of a school. The results also showed that COVID-19 preventative measures shifted the students' sense of belonging at school, as it impacted their social interactions, their everyday practices, and even their learning environment. The comparison allows for a better understanding of the dynamics of belonging and demonstrated that students define and experience belonging through similar inclusive practices and relationships.

Keywords

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COVID-19   Corona Virus Disease 2019

ERIC   Education Research Information Center

ISCED   International Standard Classification of Education

OECD   Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

PDI   Power Distance Index

PISA   Programme for International Students Assessment

Chapter 1 – Introduction

This Masters' thesis is a qualitative interview study on students' experiences of school belonging during their transition from middle school to high school, a period of uncertainty compounded by a global pandemic. Eleven semi-structured interviews were conducted with students attending the same semi-private institution situated in France, which comprises all the French mandatory schooling levels – from early childhood to upper secondary education. The study compares the experiences between two divergent group of students: a first group composed by students who have been attending the institution from at least middle school, and a second group, composed by students who just joined the institution for their upper secondary education, and come from a public middle school.

The notion of 'belonging' is deeply intertwined in human history (Halse, 2018). Nations, societies, collectivities and daily lives have been constructed, reproduced and reinforced through dynamics surrounding this notion (Antonsich, 2010; Halse, 2018; Wright, 2015; Yuval-Davis, 2006). As the world becomes increasingly interconnected and humans experience more mobility and varying encounters, profound questions surrounding belonging have started to emerge in multiple disciplinary areas in the past recent decades: who belongs and who does not? Who has the power to confer belonging? How is belonging and exclusion enforced and perpetuated? What privileges does belonging entail? How do the consequences of belonging manifest themselves, or fail to do so? What are all the implications of belonging that entail for people and societies? Through time, some of these questions have been explicitly, or more often implicitly, negotiated and have deeply impacted the human experience (Halse, 2018).

In general terms, belonging is a feeling of being "at home" [1], to feel comfortable and safe in a given group, collectivity or place (Riley, 2019). A sense of belonging is felt when we can feel confident and at ease in showing ourselves, where we can be ourselves without fear of rejection by other individuals (Goodenow, 1993). A place where we belong is a space where we can find caring and inclusive relationships (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Goodenow, 1993; Wright, 2015). Thus, belonging is very relational; it is in our encounter with the Other that a sense of belonging, or a lack thereof, can be experienced (Wright, 2015).

Current research on school belonging in the broad field of Education is highly influenced by the work of scholars in educational psychology that was conducted in the 1990's. These scholars have produced evidence on the positive impact that a sense of belonging at school has on students' academic motivation, engagement and performance (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Goodenow, 1993; Osterman, 2000). Students' thrive and are empowered when they can sense belonging in their learning environment. And on the contrary, earlier research has also proven that a lack of belonging often leads students to feel isolated, alienated and more subject to drop-out from school (Alesech & Nayar, 2020; Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Chiu et al., 2012; Faust et al., 2014; Goodenow, 1993; Halse, 2018; Lee, 2002; Longaretti, 2020; Osterman, 2000; Pendergast et al., 2018; Rose & Shevlin, 2017; Smerdon, 2002; Vickers et al., 2014). Researchers came to notice that minority students are more likely to lack a sense of belonging in their learning environment (Halse, 2018). Hence, the experiences of disadvantaged students are one of the most explored in the literature around belonging, especially in the areas of citizenship, minorities and international education (ibid.). Moreover, it has been observed that school transitions – from primary to lower secondary schools and/or from lower to upper secondary

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[1] Although "home" is not always a space where one can feel they belong to.

schools – tend to destabilise students' sense of belonging (Longaretti, 2020; Pendergast et al., 2018). It has also been discovered that through their progress in the educational system, students tend to identify less with their school (Wang & Eccles, 2012). Researchers have come to observe that belonging is mostly perceived when threatened and as such, it can be perceived as an invisible privilege (Halse, 2018).

As demonstrated by early research, a sense of belonging at school is essential for students' wellbeing and academic outcomes. Yet, according to the surveys conducted by the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), students' sense of belonging has generally been deteriorating over the past 15 years across the overwhelming majority of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries. In 2018, one in four students reported feeling like they do not belong to their school (OECD 2019, 2019a, 2019b). More alarmingly, students from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds are twice as more subject to feel like they do not belong in their school, and four times more at risk to be excluded (OECD 2019, 2019a, 2019b ; Riley, 2019b). According to Riley (2019b), this worrying trend is due to "three specular failures by policymakers" (Riley, 2019b, p. 21):

(1) the disregard of the growing evidence regarding the positive impact of a sense of belonging at school on students,
(2) the concerning consequences of a sense of *not* belonging has been mostly ignored,
(3) and due to the current increasing national and international demands, teachers and schools are focusing on performance goals instead of the students' needs.

For Riley (2019b), in order for schools to become a place of belonging, a radical narrative on students' wellbeing and empowerment is needed. And for that to happen there is a necessity to seek and listen to the voices of young people.

Unfortunately there is a lack of research that explores students' narratives on school belonging (Alesech & Nayar, 2020; Longaretti, 2020; Rose & Shevlin, 2017). Many studies around belonging have been testing scales on how to measure students' school belonging. Others have also used these scales to compare the level of belonging between different groups of students. However, these studies often do not explore the meaning of their results or the factors that foster or hinder belonging according to the students themselves.

At the same time, since March 2020, students' routines were heavily impacted due to a global pandemic. COVID-19 has impacted education in an unprecedent way and youth has been highly impacted by policy measures to contain the virus (OECD, 2021). In 2020, 1.5 billion students around 188 countries saw their school close due to the global pandemic (ibid.). This crisis has impacted students' learning experiences, exposed and stressed inequalities in school systems (ibid.). There were difficulties in accessing technologies or caring supportive environments for students to be able to thrive and focus on their learning (ibid.). For many young people, school is one of the fewest points of stability in their daily lives, and yet, as Riley (2019) expresses " schools are not always places where they feel they belong." I believe that with COVID-19, a bigger wall has been created between students and schools. Other than the failure of local authorities to develop new approaches and resources to respond to students' needs (OECD, 2021), young people found themselves confronted to a "new normal". As Wright (2015) points out, belonging is produced and reproduced through performance, through our daily routines. I argue that this is what preventive measures against COVID-19 have precisely done to students; their daily routines have been destabilised. Hence, it can be expected that the routines that made students (re)produced their identity has students was impacted, hence potentially threatening their sense of belonging at school.

Although the field of Education has been exploring the notion of school belonging since the 1990s, it has mostly been done in an empirical way, often simply referring to the early work of educational psychology scholars (Halse, 2018). In general, earlier researched has neglected the conceptual and theoretical growth of belonging (ibid.). The notions that surround belonging, such as 'sense', 'feeling' and 'school' have mostly been assumed, not conceptualised or put into context (Antonsich, 2010; Halse, 2018; Wright, 2015). Only recently, few educational researchers started to look at how scholars from other social sciences fields have been theorising belonging and using these theories to approach their own data (Halse, 2018). These recent studies have managed to provide evidence on the potential of a theorised belonging in exploring macro and micro practices that can positively or negatively impact students' sense of belonging at school and their educational experience (Charlton et al., 2018; Halse, 2018b). Thus, other than the need to approach studies on school belonging through a strong theory, I would state that the field has yet to further grasp the full potential of using belonging as a framework for enquiries around inclusive education. Furthermore, belonging is a very complex concept to grasp, it encompasses multiple dynamics that cannot be grasped by simply approaching it as something that happens within the walls of a school without further contextualisation (Halse 2018, Wright, 2015). I argue that the field of education has yet to further explore students' narratives from an approach that manages to encompass all the complex dynamics of a sense of belonging. Finally, it seems that there is little research done in Europe, especially in France, that explore students' narratives on belonging at school (further explored in background chapter). This thesis aims in connecting to and enrich early research on school belonging by considering the above mentioned gaps.

In order to do so, this study explores students' narratives on their sense of belonging at school. And in order to analyse their narratives, this study will conceptualise and theorise belonging by using the work accomplished by scholars in the broad field of social sciences. More specifically, it will follow the work of the social geographer, Sarah Wright (2015) of whom attempted to theorise belonging through a weak theory approach (see theoretical consideration chapter). A weak theory approach allows an in-depth and open approach to school belonging, in which all its' complex dimensions will be exposed and explored rather than assumed (Wright, 2015). Moreover, in an attempt to grasp the potentiality of using belonging as a framework to investigate inclusive and exclusive practices at school, this study aims in offering a micro-level analysis of the operation and experience of belonging. Further, in a nuanced manner, this study will also indicate the meso and macro dimensions that impact students' sense of belonging at a micro level, in order to illustrate the multidimensionality of the concept and hint to the variety of research that such concepts could entail and such, allows a holistic approach to belonging. Finally, this research also explores the potential impact the current global pandemic, and the measures to prevent its spread, have had and are having on students sense of belonging at school. This study does not intend to generalise, instead aiming to explore the challenges brought by COVID-19 on the interviewees' lives and senses of belonging at school.

To do so, interviews were conducted with 11 students in 10th grade at the Sacred Heart high school[2], situated in France. The interviewees were aged 15-16 at the time of the interviews which took place during February-March 2021. As this study focuses in putting forward students' narratives on belonging, and to explore their feelings and personal experiences, interviews were a preferred method, as it allows the investigation of experiences as told by individuals (Bryman, 2012).

I decided to interview students in 10th grade as it represents the first year in high school. For students it is a new environment after four years in middle school. Transitions – such as 10th grade –

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[2] The schools and interviewees' names used in this thesis are all pseudonyms.

allow to better perceive the dynamics of belonging as students meet new people, places, values and new learning approaches (Longaretti, 2020; Pendergast et al., 2018; Wright, 2015). All of these new experiences can potentially lead to many challenges and hence, shift students' sense of belonging (Longaretti, 2020; Pendergast et al., 2018; Wright, 2015).

To further investigate the mechanisms of belonging, this study compares the experiences of two different groups of students. The Sacred Heart High school is a peculiar institution as it is a semi-private school which comprises all mandatory French school levels. There are students who have been in this institution since kindergarten, and for the most part, since middle school. However, at each transitional year – and particularly during 6th and 10th grade – new students from other schools join the institution. Hence, this study compares how two different groups experience belonging while transitioning to high school.. The first group, named "Sacred Hearts", is composed of five students who have attended the Sacred Heart institution since at least 6th grade. The second group, "the Stariers", comprises six students whom all attended the same middle school in a different town, and hence are "new students" at the Sacred Heart institution. These pseudonyms have been symbolically chosen, as the students distinguish themselves and their groups by the names of the middle schools they used to attend. This comparison is significant as it is meaningfully contrasting (Bryman, 2012). It follows the hypothesis that, since these two groups have a different levels of personal connection to the Sacred Heart institution, they experienced belonging differently during their transition under a global pandemic. The results of such comparisons, under this specific context, may improve theory building as it allows a better understanding of the complexities of belonging by inquiring into "the operation of generative causal mechanisms" (Bryman, 2012, p. 74), which allow certain groups of students to experience belonging differently and/or similarly. These are some of elements that motivated the choice of the Sacred Heart high school students' as interviewees for this study (further developed in background chapter).

Aim, objectives and research questions

The aim of this thesis is to investigate how students experience belonging at school while transitioning to high school under the context of COVID-19. More precisely, the study aims to explore 10th grade students narratives on their sense of belonging during their transition to upper secondary school under the circumstances of a global pandemic. The study will analyse and compare the narratives of students who were already enrolled in the institution prior to their transition (Sacred Heart) to 10th grade and new students who just enrolled for their upper secondary education (Stariers). The interviews mostly focused on the students' experiences from September 2020 to February-March 2021. This timeline approximately corresponds to the middle of the school year.

The objectives of this thesis are as follow:
- To conceptualise and theorise the concept of belonging
- To explore students' experiences of belonging at school during their transition to high school
- To investigate the possible impact COVID-19 has had on students' sense of belonging at school
- To compare how belonging has been experienced between the two group of students.

The research questions are as follow:
1. How are students experiencing a sense of belonging in their educational environment?
2. How have measures to prevent COVID-19 transmission impacted students sense of belonging in their educational environment?
3. How do these experiences vary between the two concerned groups?

Relevance of the study to the field of Comparative and International Education

This subsection will discuss the relevance of the theme, the context, the methodology and the theory to the field of international and comparative education.

Wright describes belonging as "a powerful way of understanding and producing the world" (2015, p. 399). It emerges through a multitude of emotions and experiences and it can be found in a wide range of contexts: in different cultures, languages, in literature and pop culture. This notion is so present that it often becomes very assumed, like words we employ without a second thought. Belonging is innate to the social world, as it is impossible not to belong to something (Calhoun 2003, as cited in Halse, 2018).

Belonging is a multidimensional term that is difficult to apprehend, and due to the effects of globalisation it has become more complicated to research and to disentangle (Antonsich, 2010; Halse, 2018). In fact, as the world is increasingly more interconnected, schools and students' needs are becoming more diverse (Halse, 2018). As students constantly experience new encounters, within and outside school, their sense of belonging shifts, moves, in a constant but delicate way (ibid.). Moreover, many educational systems are also being criticised on the lack of inclusive education, or an approach to inclusion that limits itself to the physical presence of students at school (Ellery, 2019). There are calls for the implementation of a contemporary understanding of inclusive education that is applied to *all* students, in tandem with a respect for the students' diversity (ibid.). As a consequence, there are increasing demands for inclusive curriculum and practices that correspond to the diversified student population (Baroutsis & Mills, 2018; Marshall, 2019). And as some researchers have claimed, inclusive practices goes in hand with a sense of belonging (Alesech & Nayar, 2020; Chiu et al., 2012; Ellery, 2019; Longaretti, 2020; Pendergast et al., 2018; Smerdon, 2002). If educational systems keep on ignoring the variety in students' profiles and needs, it will ultimately fail in its purpose of preparing students' to the realities of a diverse social world (Alesech & Nayar, 2020; Chiu et al., 2012; Ellery, 2019; Longaretti, 2020; Pendergast et al., 2018; Smerdon, 2002). Furthermore, an educational system that fails in providing a sense of belonging to all students, and hence allows further exclusion, ultimately fails in providing equal access to education (Ellery, 2019). Ellery (2019) reminds that the articles 12 and 13 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child calls for " 'meaningful participation' for all students as opposed to mere access " (Ellery, 2019, p. 54). Through this perception, a sense of belonging at school is not a need, but a *right*. Hence, in order to develop an inclusive and equal participation in education, and for educational systems and schools to engage in the cocreation of belonging, it is important to understand how belonging is being experienced by students. To illustrate this claim, Riley quotes a headteacher :

> " *'It all begins with the great umbrella of belonging… those whom globalisation affects the most are the most qualified to determine what it is that makes them feel like they belong.'* In short, it is time to listen to young people." (Riley, 2019, p. 23).

As the field of international education is concerned with how globalisation has influenced educational policies and practices, at the local, national and international level, it was one of the first fields in education to explore the notion of belonging (Halse, 2018; Marshall, 2019). As mentioned, due to the current increasing national and international demands, teachers and schools are focusing on

performance goals rather than the students' needs (Riley, 2019b). This is partly a consequence of the effects of globalisation on educational systems (Marshall, 2019).

Furthermore, schools are social institutions that are the object of social and political aims, such as creating and reproducing certain definitions and practices of belonging, this is what Yuval calls 'politics of belonging' (Yuval-Davis, 2006, 2016). The discourses of such political agenda, done at a macro level, are ideologically shaped by relations of power and construct individuals' consciousness and educational practices at a micro level (Gee, 2014; Sugrue, 2019). If belonging is conceptualised and theorised, it can be used as a lens to reveal the reproduction of ideologies and asymmetrical power relations that are at play in the micro practices in classrooms which remake certain social norms that affect students' sense of belonging negatively (Charlton et al., 2018; Halse, 2018). Once the practices that negatively impact students' sense of belonging are revealed, they can be challenged, at a macro and/or micro level (ibid.). Hence, research on belonging subscribes to concerns very much relevant to the field of international education.

To summarise, researching about a sense of belonging is to explore a notion that is connected to globalisation, inclusive education, children's rights, to political agendas and relations of power from a micro to a macro level. All domains that have been highly present and significant within the field of international education.

This study's context is also international as per the school and the participants' background. The Sacred Heart school is a semi-private school that has been open to internationalisation by offering multiple options for classes in different languages (other than French). It has also become an authorised centre for a prestigious international language assessment of English. It offers many trips abroad and has had exchanges with schools in Europe, Asia and Africa. Moreover the school is situated in a city that borders countries and hence all students have quite a diverse background. The Sacred Heart participants in this study were born in France and are French citizens, although some of the participants have other origins and might sometimes speak a language other than French at home. The Stariers participants are all issued from recent migration, and have different citizenships. At home they can hear and/or speak French, Portuguese, Tagalog and Tamil. The participants and the school are not necessarily a direct representation of the average students and schools in France. However, they illustrate the effects of a globalised world and the impact of certain political agendas on the internationalisation of schools. In this thesis, the context can also illustrate how local, national and international dynamics have been forging a school and influencing students' experiences (Marshall, 2019). It can be particularly perceived by the values of the school and how the school has responded to a global pandemic and implemented preventive measures (further discussed in the background chapter).

This thesis also contributes to the field of Comparative and International Education as a qualitative study that uses interviews to compare how belonging has been experienced between two divergent groups of students. Thus, this study is using a research method at a micro-level. Nevertheless, it also develops on the context and the students' narratives in order to situate the research and put into perspective the students' experiences with meso and macro dynamics, in a holistic approach. Hence, this study follows the work of early comparativists that have leaned towards interpretive traditions (Grant, 1977; King, 1989; Kazamias, 2001) and detailed contextual qualitative work. According to Crossley (2009), these approaches have been seldom regarded in the field. Although this study is not a case study, as it only uses one method of data collection, it still connects the micro level context, experiences, and practices with broader dynamics. In fact, the students' experiences have important implications on different analytical levels, from the most personal and micro level, to a more meso-level when they describe the impact of the learning environment and society's structures on their sense of belonging at school. This sensibility to how micro practices and experiences at schools are influenced

by dynamics at broader levels, and vice-versa, is inspired by the observation made by Bray et al. (2014) on how most comparative research remains at a single level. In fact, the researchers highlight the importance of multi-level analysis for comparative studies (Bray et al., 2014).

Furthermore, this study uses the narratives of students in order to compare how two different groups have experienced belonging during the first half of their 10th grade. Narrative research – which collects and analyses individuals' accounts – that is applied to comparative studies, has been described by Crossley (2009) as an innovative context-sensitive research. The interviews and comparison allow for students to voice their personal experiences, feelings and emotions and hence allow a better understanding of the complexities of a sense of belonging (Bryman, 2012; Wright, 2015). And in this thesis, the students' voices allows for a tentative comparative analysis of possible similar or counter experiences that illustrates how belonging works and impacts the participants' school life. Moreover, the students can potentially produce critical and counter perspectives on educational practices in their own context which are brought about by broader dynamics – such as national and/or international political agendas (Bray et al., 2014; Crossley, 2009). It can also reveal unequal power relations by considering the often omitted students' voices (Halse, 2018b; Riley, 2019b; Wright, 2015). This approach can then "contribute to the reconceptualisation of comparative research and notions of internationalisation in ways that reflect [the students'] distinctive geopolitical locations." (Hayhoe, 2006, cited in Crossley, 2009). Hence, this method allows a focus on specific contexts and the building of contextual knowledge (Bryman, 2012; Coe, 2017; Cohen et al., 2011).

Theoretically, this study follows the work of the social geographer, Sarah Wright (2015) that attempted to theorise belonging through a weak theory approach. By doing so, this thesis aims to contribute to the field of Comparative and International Education by analysing the data through the lens of a theory that highlights the diverse and complex dimensions of a sense of belonging at school. It contributes to earlier research, which has mainly assumed the notion, by seldom conceptualising or theorising it (Halsey, 2018; Wright, 2015). Moreover the theory allows a holistic approach to the data, allows to better perceive any multilevel agents that affect one's belonging. In fact, Wright (2015) considers belonging as ultimately relational, but not only as a feeling that emerges through micro encounters between individuals. For Wright (2015) belonging is also performative and more-than-human, as every day we interact with a multitude of actors that impact – often subtly – our myriad of belongings. The aim of this theorisation was to show how a sense of belonging co-constitutes individuals, spaces, action and objects around us (ibid.). Hence, this approach could enable the detection of micro, meso and macro factors that shape belongings and possibly allow to analyse the data deeply. To theorise belonging, Wright (2015) also looked upon literature on emotion, material performativity, Indigenous and feminist geographies to further complement the use of weak theory. I would argue that this theory bridges different types of knowledge produced by different disciplines in different cultural and geographical contexts. It is an innovative approach to a complex notion that can further contribute to the field of Comparative and International Education. It can answer to the call of Michael Crossley (2009) for a bridging process in the field between different disciplines, theories, levels of analysis and cultural contexts. Crossley (2009) argues that "such efforts could do much to help to address many of the challenges raised about the impact, authority and accessibility of educational and social research […]" (Crossley, 2009, p. 1179). Hence, Sarah Wright's (2015) theorisation of belonging could highly contribute to the field of Comparative and International Education.

To conclude, this thesis also aims to further promote the potential of the notion of belonging at school, as it has been seldom explored within the field of Comparative and International Education. Yet, when carefully conceptualised and theorised, exploring the students' sense of belonging at school can

reveal smaller and bigger practices that hinder and/or foster inclusion. I hope that this thesis also encourages further research that allows for students' experiences of belonging to be explored.

Organisation of the thesis

This thesis is composed of eight chapters. Chapter 1, presents the reasoning for researching on belonging at school. It provides a road map to the thesis by summarising the context, problematisation of the topic, presents the aim and research questions as well as situates the thesis position. Chapter 2 provides the background to the study. It discusses features of the French educational system, important information on the Sacred Heart high school and the preventive measures against the spread of COVID-19 that were in place throughout the first half of the 2020-2021 academic year. In Chapter 3, the key concepts are reviewed – belonging and school – and a literature review on studies around a sense of belonging at school is provided. This chapter further explores the gap within the field of Education regarding belonging. The theoretical considerations are presented in Chapter 4, of which also explains how I intend to use the theory in order to analyse the data. Chapter 5 defines the methodology of the research – a qualitative interview study with 10th grade students transitioning to high school under a global pandemic. Chapter 6 presents the findings through 3 main sections: Belonging and self-perception in relationships, Belonging and the learning environment and Belonging during the 'hybrid period'. These results are then discussed in Chapter 7 in the light of the previous research and the theoretical framework. Finally, Chapter 8 concludes by summarising the answers to the research questions and adopts a reflective lens on the research process by discussing the implications of the findings and by giving future research ideas.

Chapter 2 – Background

Chapter 2 contextualises this study and further explains why I decided to study belonging within this specific setting. Moreover, in order to explore the students' experiences of school belonging, it is important to understand the context they are situated in and the different dynamics that can somewhat impact their belongings (Halse, 2018b; Wright, 2015). Hence this section will firstly provide main information on the French education system, followed by a descriptive timeline of the COVID-19 preventive measures that impacted schools in France from March 2020 to March 2021. Then, it will depict the main characteristics of the Sacred Heart institution. It is important to lay out this information in order to set the stage for explaining in the last section why I decided to study belonging in France, at the Sacred Heart high school.

French Education System

This section gives a short summary of the main characteristics of the French education system that are relevant for this thesis. It discusses the different school transitions, the student population and the status of private French schools. It also discusses the organisation and the management model of the country towards education. It is important to discuss such information in order to provide context for the macro dynamics that somewhat could impact a student life experience. It will set the necessary information required to recognise the multidimensionality of belonging, even when focusing on micro experiences.

Mandatory schooling in France stretches from 3 to 18 years old (Eurydice, 2021). It comprises the levels 0 to 3 of the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED). Figure 1 illustrates these different levels and gives an overview of the structure of the French education system. As figure 1 shows, these levels are divided and physically separated mainly among four schools[3] (ibid.) :

(1) *École maternelle* – Three years of early childhood education and care
(2) *École élémentaire* – Five years of primary Education
(3) *Collège* – Four years of secondary Education (lower)
(4) *Lycée* – Three years of secondary Education (upper).

It is important to recognise these transitions as according to previous research (Longaretti, 2020; Pendergast et al., 2018), they are followed by a significant decrease of students' sense of belonging at school. They also accompany, and symbolise, important stages in the young people's growth: new encounters, shifts in identities, self-exploration etc. All these challenges can have important effects on a student experience of belonging at school, especially if during these shifts the students do not feel supported enough by peers and teachers (ibid.).

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[3] for the exception of the *école maternelle* that is often situated within the same space as the *école élémentaire,* although they are often clearly divided within the buildings.
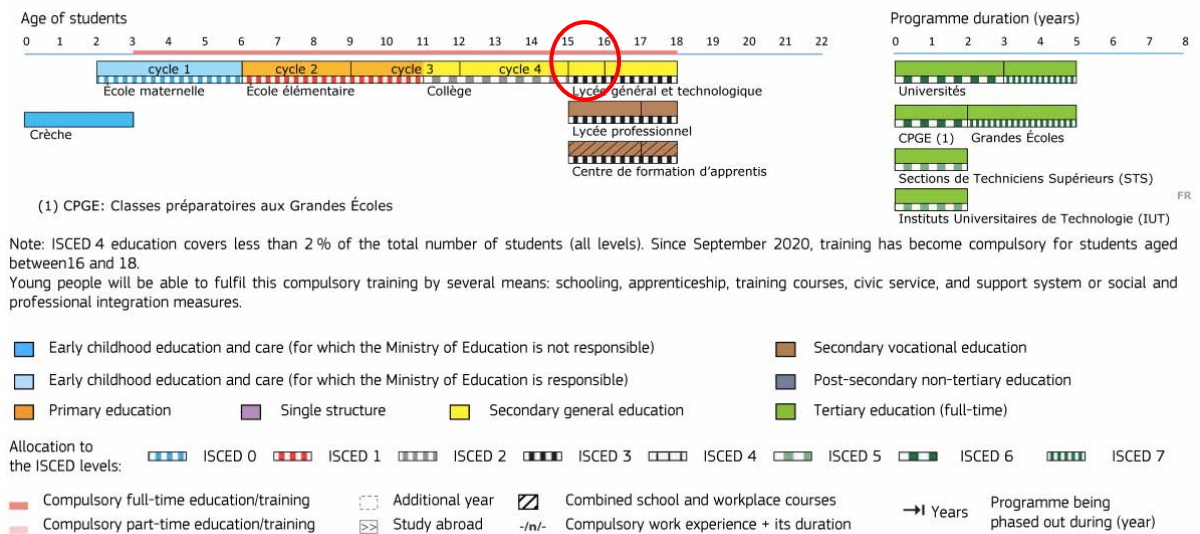
Figure 1. Structure of the French national education system as of 2020/21. Retrieved from Eurydice (2021)

The red circle added to figure 1 situates the year that is of interest for this thesis. The students' interviewed are all between 15-16 years old and attend a *Lycée general et technologique,* which will be called Sacred Heart high school (pseudonym) for comprehension purposes. As figure 1 indicates, the participants of this study are following a secondary general education. The Sacred Heart high school does not provide secondary vocational education, and as such, is not a *Lycée professionnel* nor a *Centre de formation d'apprentis.* As students' following a secondary general education, they are expected to pursue a tertiary education, although it is not mandatory per se.

As per the beginning of the 2020-21 school year, France counted about 12 352 200 pupils registered in the mandatory school levels. In total, about 2 266 100 young people attended a public or private high school, including 645 900 students in vocational high schools (Ministère de l'Education Nationale de la Jeunesse et des Sports, 2020). Among them, 468 884 students attended a private high school under state contract (Ministère de l'Education Nationale de la Jeunesse et des Sports, 2021). The students in this study belong to such school; a semi-private high school. In France, the status of the private schools depends on its' relations and contract with the State (Ministère de l'Education Nationale de la Jeunesse et des Sports, 2020c). After five years, a private school can ask to be linked to the State by a contract (ibid.). This is the case for the Sacred Heart high school which is under a contract, as per the *Loi Debré*. This contract obliges the institution to welcome students regardless of their origins, values or religious faith (ibid.). The State has a similar control over private schools under contract as for public schools. In fact, these private schools follow the same curriculum, standards and prepare for the same national diplomas (ibid.). The French state is also in charge of the teachers' training and salary and the public collectivities must finance the private school under contract as much as they do for public schools (idib.). The States' educational inspectors must also inspect private schools (ibid.). In other words, although the Sacred Heart institution has a semi-private status, it stays highly influenced by the French State's regulations and even values.

As the above paragraph suggests, France has an educational system that is highly centralised (Normand, 2016). It is also a quite bureaucratic system that is based upon French Republican values (ibid.). These values can be found in the French maxim *"Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité"* (Liberty, Equality,

Fraternity) (Ministère de l'Education Nationale de la Jeunesse et des Sports, 2020b). Moreover, in more recent years, French governments have also attached *laïcité* (secularism), as a prominent value of the French Republic and regard it as a "protective principal for students" (ibid.). These values are propagated by lawmakers and school practitioners (such as principals, teachers and staff) of whom are civil servants (Normand, 2016). School practitioners in private schools under contract must also transfer these republican values to their students (Ministère de l'Education Nationale de la Jeunesse et des Sports, 2020c). The current French government believes that social unity can be achieved by subscribing to the State's vision of the Republican values and promotes a "*culture commune*" (a common culture) in schools (Ministère de l'Education Nationale de la Jeunesse et des Sports, 2020b; Normand, 2016). However, for Normand (2016), republican values in this context, justifies the power of the State over the administration of French schools and it limits the autonomy of schools as well as the development of a school culture owned by its community. Normand (2016) believes that it also limits the recognition of diversity in schools and thus limits the implementation of diverse school practices that can respond to the students' demands and also limits innovation.

To discuss diversity in the French educational system remains a sensitive topic because it questions certain interpretations of the republican values and the egalitarian principles of the society (Brinbaum & Kieffer, 2009). Such a system views students as inherently equal, regardless of their background and of the reality of their lives (ibid.). According to the 2018 PISA results, France is one of the OECD countries where the socio-economic status of students has the strongest link with their performance. In fact, students who are more economically advantaged notably outperformed disadvantaged students[4] (OECD 2019, 2019a, 2019b). Moreover, France has an important portion of students with immigrant backgrounds as having socio-economically disadvantaged statuses (OECD 2019, 2019a, 2019b).

The French educational system shares similarities with the formal and cultural models described by Bush (2020) on systems of educational management and leadership. These models have their limitations. On one hand, formal models are not flexible to change and hence are slow in responding to modern challenges (Bush, 2020). On the other hand, one of the limitations of cultural models is if a monoculture is imposed to schools through dynamics of power to control people. It can potentially limit the co-construction of a school culture between students' and pedagogical agents or even undervalue certain characteristics of schools and students (ibid.). The way a school culture is constructed and how flexible it can be in responding to its' students' personal challenges, has implications on the development of the students' sense of belonging at school. As previously mentioned in the introduction chapter, according to previous research, students' belonging is fostered when the school culture is academically and emotionally supportive, as well as inclusive and accepting of each individual (Alesech & Nayar, 2020; Chiu et al., 2012; Ellery, 2019; Longaretti, 2020; Pendergast et al., 2018; Smerdon, 2002). This would mean that a more inclusive belonging for students' is developed when a school can easily respond to their personal needs. Yet, if we take into account the mentioned limitations of Bush's (2020) models, Normand's (2016) work, and the discourse of the French government; the French schools' culture should be identical and in line with discourses constructed at higher levels through an asymmetrical power relation dynamic. In other words, agents who are higher in the hierarchy are the ones that should be entitled to construct notions of belonging at French schools.

Bush (2020) also underlines that a theory on an educational model cannot paint the diverse dynamics of a specific context. Hence, a school can still develop its own personal characteristics even under very centralised education systems. However, a theory on a model can provide useful insights on

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[4] A socio-economically disadvantaged student is a student in the bottom quarter of the PISA index of economic, social and cultural status (ESCS) in his or her own country/ economy (OECD 2019, 2019a, 2019b).

the micro-practices within a context (Bush, 2020). It can be possible to pinpoint societal discourses and values held at higher levels that have effects on the micro-practices and experiences (ibid.). This is the reason why it is important to give a description of how the French education system is organised and how it can be described. Once the thesis goes in-depth into micro-practices that affect students' sense of belonging, one can better understand the dynamics behind them.

COVID-19 preventive measures

In order to understand how the interviewees experienced belonging while transitioning to high school under a global pandemic, it is important to describe the preventive measures against COVID-19 that were implemented in French schools before and during their transition. The hypothesis is that these measures somewhat impacted the way students experienced a sense of belonging at school. This section will also briefly mention the measures that the Sacred Heart high school implemented according to the information that the interviewees shared.

Figure 2 illustrates relevant dates in which important preventive measures were enforced in French schools (Ministère de l'Education Nationale de la Jeunesse et des Sports, 2021b). The participants in this study have all experienced these measures, firstly, during their last year in middle (from March to July 2020), and then during their first year in high school (from September 2020 up to March 2021). In similarity to many schools around the world, the first lockdown in March 2020 required much adaptation work. The French government has given some information on the support and online educational tools it tried to provide during this important shift (Ministère de l'Education Nationale de la Jeunesse et des Sports, 2021b). However, teachers were still fully in charge of the preparation of their classes, and there was no harmonisation regarding the teaching practices. During their last trimester in middle school (March to July 2020), the participants in this study reported that only few teachers provided classes through an online platform, or sent them homework. All participants reported that the attendance to these online classes were not mandatory per se, thus most of their classmates would not attend them.
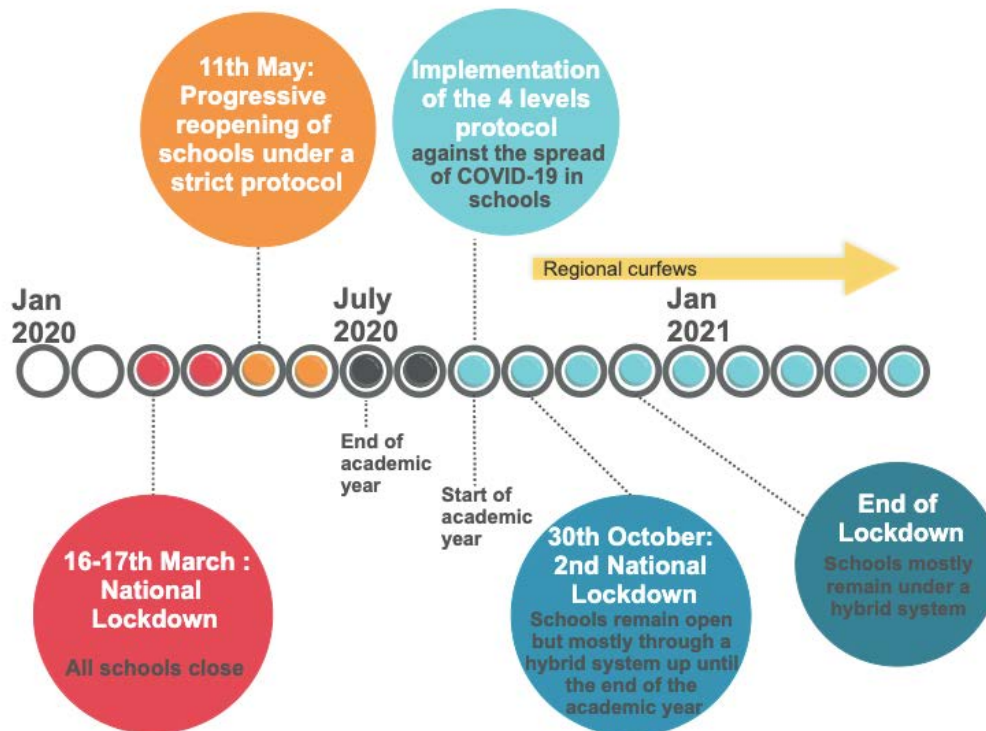
Figure 2. Chronology of implemented measures in schools against the spread of COVID-19 in France. Own figure.

The access to school after the 11th of May was rather slow and also scarce between schools. It was not mandatory for students to physically go to school. The Stariers, for example, reported that as all grades from their last trimester in 9th grade were cancelled[5], most students decided to not go back to school or to only attend few classes. The students who did go back to school, end of May 2021 were for the first time confronted with strict preventive measures against the spread of COVID-19 (Vie publique, 2020). It included the use of the mask inside the school, temperature checks before entering the school, not being able to sit next to each other during lunch etc. (ibid.).

At the start of their first high school year, in September 2021, the preventive measures in schools were more flexible. Students' above 11 years old must wear masks, and physical distancing is not mandatory. The State asks for the schools to ventilate and clean the classrooms as much as possible. However, as positive cases started to rise, schools were obliged to apply new measures. As figure 2 indicates, on the 30th of October 2020 the French government asked for all secondary schools to adopt a 50/50 policy, meaning that the schools could only allow 50% of their students to have classes at school per day. The goal was to not close the schools during the 'second wave', making sure that students could still go to school in rotation, while still responding to the crisis. There was no specific directive from the government on how to implement this policy, so it highly depended on each school.

According to the interviewees, the Sacred Heart school firstly opted to divide each class into two groups and in an alternate way, there were students who were *en présentiel*, physically present, versus *en distanciel* – distant, remote (learning). The school had enough facilities to make sure the students at home could attend the classes being held at school by video-conference. The school also made sure that those who lived far away would come to school for at least four hours of class per day,

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[5] Decision taken by the French Education Government.

and that each student could attend their extra classes (such as Latin) on-site. Hence, not every student would spend the same amount of time having classes on-site. Although the teachers had only half of the students physically present in the classroom, they would make the roll call and the class just as usual, without little adaptation towards the students attending the class remotely. According to the interviewees, the Sacred Heart high school implemented this approach up until early January 2021. It then proceeded to allow each 10th graders to continuously come to classes at school, with their complete class, while there was an alternation between 11th and 12th graders. According to the interviewees, from January to March 2021, there were very few students' who were still exempt from attending classes on-site. However, whenever a student got in contact with someone tested positive to COVID-19, the student was not allowed to go to school but could require to attend classes remotely. This happened to the majority of the interviewees in this study. As mentioned, this approach was specific to the Sacred Heart institution, as the government gave freedom to the schools on how to effectively implement the hybrid period (Ministère de l'Education Nationale de la Jeunesse et des Sports, 2021b). Moreover, some of the participants reported that students from a nearby public high school, who also had to apply the 50/50 policy, did not have classes by video-conference and would mostly have extra exercises to do when at home. Finally, other than the rules concerning the school, the students also had to respect regional and national curfews that generally started at 6pm until 6am. These curfews depended on each region but they were generally implemented from end of October 2020 until May/June 2021. Moreover, most indoor extracurricular activities were cancelled for the majority of the academic year.

The measures described in this subsection are those that are of importance regarding the transition process the interviewees undertook: from their last trimester in middle school to the first two trimesters in high school. During the interviews, the participants were asked to discuss on how these measures impacted their experiences at school and how they personally felt about them through time (see upcoming chapters).

The Sacred Heart high school

This subsection gives some further contextual information regarding the Sacred Heart high school, as per the students' narratives and information publicly given by the school.

As previously mentioned, the Sacred Heart high school is a semi-private high school under contract with the French State. It belongs to the Sacred Heart catholic institution, which comprises all levels of mandatory education. Its' status allows for the school to conserve certain of its own characteristics such as the vehiculation of Christian values outside regular classes. The institution is known for their excellent results at national examinations. It is also known for being an institution that is prone to exchanges with schools abroad as well as foreign language education. All the Stariers also mentioned that the Sacred Heart high school is notorious for the amount of work it asks from their students. The Stariers mentioned being aware that the high school was going to ask for an important level of work as well as certain grades for them to be able to get accepted to 11th grade and their preferred specialisations.

In fact, the high school values excellent grades and academic performance. According to the participants, teachers also promote a certain competition among students and among classes. The school openly creates stratified classes, and hence the majority of students with higher grades are in the same class. This is usually not implemented in most public French schools. The school also has a mandatory

class on orientation in which the 10th grade students are encouraged to explore what future work they would like to do and hence plan accordingly which specialisation they will choose the upcoming year.

The structure of the school is similar to any public school, it is divided into three sectors; the administration constituted by the principals and their team, the pastoral care sector whom are entrusted of controlled orderliness and attendance, and the teachers who are autonomous in their classroom as per their status in French law (Ministère de l'Education Nationale de la Jeunesse et des Sports, 2020c ; Normand, 2016). These three sectors usually refrain from entering in the domain of each other. As mentioned, the State is in charge of the teachers training and salary and hence, teachers are not so accountable to the principals but to the academic inspectors (Normand, 2016). In private schools however, the principals have some extra freedom when hiring a teacher (Ministère de l'Education Nationale de la Jeunesse et des Sports, 2020c). Nevertheless, as civil servants, the teachers are considerably protected, for the exception of a serious fault, which means that the teachers do not have to follow the prescriptions of principals or even their own inspectors (Normand, 2016). Thus, teachers have a considerable freedom and control within their classrooms. According to the eleven participants, in most cases, the teaching style seems quite teacher-centre, in a lecture based style. This matches with the national trend (Normand, 2016).

The Sacred Heart high school has some freedom in choosing which students they accept in their institution. As mentioned, this school contains all mandatory school levels, and many of their students were at least enrolled in the Sacred Heart middle school. Students from other middle schools must fill an application with their school track in order to enter the Sacred Heart high school. The Stariers in this study mentioned knowing that the high school looked into their grades and teachers' appreciation in order to determine whether or not they would accept their application.

The majority of the students in this study have diverse backgrounds; most of the Stariers have an immigrant background, as well as few Sacred Hearts. During the interviewes, participants were not asked about the socio-economic background of their parents, but few Stariers mentioned it. The Stariers that mentioned it felt like most Sacred Hearts had a higher socioeconomic status compared to them. The concerned Stariers could perceive it through the experiences certain Sacred Hearts had that they do not relate to. They mentioned how those Sacred heart students visited many places in the world with their parents; that their parents helped them in their homeworks and were very engaged in the high school sphere. One Starier also mentioned that she felt like certain teachers expected their students to be able to get help from their parents on homework. This was very much not the case for her as she is the first generation in her family to be schooled in France and get this far in an education system.

It is important to mention that this was a sentiment that the Statiers had regarding a good proportion of the Sacred Heart students. But in fact, the three Sacred Heart girls interviewed also mentioned a certain socioeconomic disparity among students in the school. They also distinct themselves from certain students whom they regarded as having a higher socioeconomic status compared to them. The three girls were mostly concerned about the divergent values between them and the other group of students. Interestingly, from these interviewee's accounts, it seems that the students' who were viewed as having a high socioeconomic status were grouped within the same high level class.

To conclude, according to most of the participants, the Sacred Heart high school seems to have quite a diverse body of students, as per their origins but also their socio-economic background. It seems that certain students are aware of it, but some participants mentioned that they feel that the school staff does not necessarily acknowledge it. At the same time the school seems to have a particular culture, in which catholic values come in hand with a competitive approach to education. This approach seems in line with some of the aspects of the knowledge economy that has been prominent in the global education superstructures: the use of student test scores to access each class level, the presence of international

language examinations, the promotion of a certain competition and the accent put into the students' future career (Marshall, 2019).

Researching on belonging in France and at the Sacred Heart high school

After conducting a literature review on the Education Research Information Center (ERIC) database, about students' experiences and perceptions of belonging, it was clear that this type of research has mostly been prominent in the United States, New Zealand and Australia (Machado Da Silva, 2021). Very few articles were found that had an European country context, and none that had France has a context, even after researching the topic in French. This could partly be explained by the prominent presence of English written articles in the ERIC database (Machado Da Silva, 2021). However, when searching for French articles on school belonging on google scholar or scopus, the concept seems to be only researched or mentioned in relation to citizenship education in France. Hence little is none about French students' experiences of belonging at school. And it is important to note that the French education system and culture is quite different from those of the United States, New Zealand and Australia. For example, the French education system is known for its' focus on national citizenship values and culture and has a higher Power Distance Index (PDI) compared to the previously mentioned countries (Hodstede Insights, 2021). The PDI measures the attitudes of a given society towards the inequal distribution of power (Hodstede Insights, 2021; Marshall, 2019). As Marshall (2019) explains, in countries with a high PDI, there is a certain acceptance of unequal power relations between students and teachers and a teacher-centre learning is expected. This can potentially impact the teacher-student relationship dynamic (Marshall, 2019), and hence students' sense of belonging at school. In previous research, positive teacher-student relationships have been proven to be essential for the students' sense of belonging at school (Alesech & Nayar, 2020; Basel & Hamilton, 2019; Chiu et al., 2012; Ellery, 2019; Faust et al., 2014; Lee, 2002; Longaretti, 2020; Pendergast et al., 2018; Smerdon, 2002). Hence it can be interesting to conduct such research in France, as students might have a divergent relationship with teachers especially compared to the three mentioned countries, which have a lower PDI compared to France (Hodstede Insights, 2021). Choosing France as a context has the potential to further contribute to the understanding of the notion of belonging, as well as initiating discussions on the students' experiences.

The Sacred Heart school is an interesting context as it illustrates a current global paradox: a push and pull between nationalism, that promotes a common French culture, and the internationalisation of education that also promotes a world culture and a common approach to education. These students are situated in this complex context, in which they also try to understand their multiple and sometimes complex identities, which is also a consequence of an increasing global interconnectedness. These factors make research on belonging a complex endeavour; a myriad of complex dynamics are at play and can potentially impact the student's experiences of belonging. That is why researching belonging at the Sacred Heart high school is interesting; it is a particular context that still illustrates a certain global trend. It is an ideal context in which different values (such as nationalism and those from Catholic values, come hand in hand with the outcomes of a globalised world and the internationalisation of education. And at the same time, this context allows a valuable comparison in which it is possible to explore how belonging can be experienced between those who know they are Sacred Hearts, and those who still call themselves the Stariers. This transition can potentially be a shaky point in the Stariers

sense of belonging at school. And yet, the situation with COVID-19, the "new normal" that replaced old routines, can potentially impact every student. To explore how belonging is experienced under an unprecedented situation that shakes our daily lives can only be beneficial for the understanding of the notion, as those are the occasions where it is easier to perceive our belonging. It is through times in which our relations to the Other is changing and/or challenging that one is more prompt to perceive the mechanisms of belonging.

In a context in which complex macro forces are at play, it is rare to find research that listens to the voices of French youth. In a context where belonging is only researched or mentioned within citizenship education, which promotes given values and definitions of belonging constructed by macro forces, this research aims to explore how students perceive belonging from their own narrative. In this thesis, the upper dynamics are only used to better understand the experiences felt and told by students.

Chapter 3 – Key Concept and Literature Review

The Concept of Belonging

In social sciences, 'belonging' is ever so often regarded as a readily comprehensible term (Antonsich, 2010). In fact, various scholars leave the term undefined, making 'belonging' a under-defined and even under-theorised term (Antonsich, 2010; Halse, 2018a). This section will explore how the concept of belonging has so far been defined by previous literature.

In the field of Education, the notion of belonging is often defined in the literature through the frame of 'sense of school belonging' (Korpershoek et al., 2020). Researchers in the field of educational psychology were among the first to explore such notion as Maslow (1943) included belonging in his list of a primal human need. The definition given by Goodenow (1993a, 1993b) is still one of the most used and accepted in the field. According to Goodenow (1993), a sense of belonging at school reveals "the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others in the school social environment" (p. 80). Belonging is in fact associated to the quality of students' experience of social relations at school. But is goes further than the simple 'linking' or 'nice' relations. As indicated by Goodenow (1993), as well as Bausmeister and Leary (1995) it is about consistent caring connections, where support and respect of one's individual person can be found. The literature also uses terms such as membership, connectedness, relatedness, belongingness, attachment and emotional engagement to describe features of belonging (Longaretti, 2020; Pendergast et al., 2018). These terms can also be regarded as synonyms (Korpershoek et al., 2020).

Regardless of these previous works, there is little research on students perceptions of what school belonging means for them (Alesech & Nayar, 2020; Longaretti, 2020; Rose & Shevlin, 2017). According to (Nichols, 2006, 2008), students' perceptions on school belonging involved many tangled aspects. In his study at a middle school, it appeared that students conceptualise belonging at school through three dimensions: interpersonal relationships (both teacher-student and between peers), learning community and school facilities/activities (Nichols, 2006, 2008). Hence, in educational research, belonging has mainly been interpreted through its interpersonal/relational and emotional aspect.

However, Riley (2019), in her research around place and belonging in school communities, has expanded the definition of belonging. According to Riley (2019), belonging is "that sense of being somewhere where you can be confident that you will fit in and feel safe in your identity, a feeling of being at home in a place and of being valued" (p. 2). In fact, the researcher includes notions such as 'identity' and 'place' in her definition of belonging. Moreover, Riley (2019) further precises that belonging is a concept that is formed not exclusively by relational factors, but also "by cultural, historic, geographic and contextual factors" (p. 3). Riley (2019) hints to the holistic characteristic of the concept of belonging, how macro factors impact micro factors, and how these factors come to form belonging in an entangled way. In this regard, Riley (2019) gets closer to the conceptualisation and theorisation of belonging developed by other fields in social sciences such as political sciences and social geography.

Compared to other disciplines, the field of education has given less attention to how belonging might operate, be conceptualised and theorised, regardless of the previous researches pointing at its significance for students (Halse, 2018). In a collaboratively written book, twelve academics – mainly from the field of education – reviewed various theories about belonging "from disciplines *beyond* the field of education" (Halse, 2018, p. 2). These theories were put "*into dialogue*" with the authors' own empirical data in order to explore further how belonging is experienced, enacted and understood by young people in their school life (Halse, 2018). The study comprises an international and sometimes comparative approach, making it a very comprehensive work around school belonging. In the book, belonging is viewed as a broad concept, which involves complex dynamics in a highly connected and ever so changing world. Schools, regions, nations are becoming more diverse and technologies allow further dispersal of values, ideas and cultures at different geographical levels (ibid.). These dynamics are creating new social solidarities and fields of social interaction that impact young people's lives as well as their belonging to specific social groups and particular places, spaces and times (ibid.). Hence, Halse (2018) approaches the concept of belonging as one's bond to specific social groups which are,

> "… formed on the basis of shared values, attitudes, and cultures, of emotional attachments to specific places, spaces, people, animals and material things, or by participating in specific flows of ideas, cultures and social practices" (p .5).

This definition joins those given by scholars in social sciences (Calhoun, 2003), political sciences (Yuval-Davis, 2006, 2016) and social geography (Antonsich, 2010; Wright, 2015). It also points at the social and political effects belonging entails, as it can structure individuals and societies through the effects of social institutions such as schools (Halse, 2018; Yuval-Davis, 2006, 2016). Belonging can be concrete, as in recognized by society, and can also be an emotion (Halse, 2018; Wright, 2015). Halse (2018) specifies that there are different ways and modes of belonging. Moreover, belonging is in action in multiple dimensions – from home to a country to a continent to global communities or networks – individuals can belong to a multitude of social groups from a very young age (family, friends, schools, religious practices, networks formed online, through social media) (Antonsich, 2010; Halse, 2018a). From this conceptualisation, belonging is always shifting, it is mutable by essence. A sense of belonging can evolve subtly at unexpected times, frequency and tempo due to unexpected circumstances or by choice (Halse, 2018). Hence, it is through this process that an individuals' sense of belonging, and by extension its identity, is bestow on/constructed and can either be accepted, rejected or resisted (ibid.). This explains why it is difficult to perceive belonging. Only when truly scrutinised or threatened one can perceive it (Halse, 2018; Yuval-Davis, 2006, 2016). It is also for these reasons that some researchers view belonging as an invisible privilege (Baroutsis & Mills, 2018; Yuval-Davis, 2006).

Literature Review on Belonging in the Educational Field

Relevant findings of early research

As previously mentioned, research on belonging has a rather long history in psychological research. Among the most cited researchers are Baumeister and Leary (1995) whom developed the 'belongingness hypothesis' that is still the basis for all the concepts surrounding school belonging (Korpershoek et al., 2020). According to the researchers, one's need for belongingness is stronger than the longing for social contact. Their theory suggests that individuals are driven to form and preserve a minimum amount of regular, stable, positive and meaningful interpersonal relationships. It is only through these interpersonal bonds that one can satisfy its need for belongingness. To fail to meet this

need may result in negative feelings such as social isolation and alienation. At the time, Baumeister and Leary (1995) already mentioned that individuals who have not meet their need for belongingness tended to express it more strongly than those who have. Hinting at the fact that belonging is often only perceived when threatened. Research has also pointed out that when the need for belongingness is correctly satisfied, this leads to physical and mental well-being (Maslow, 1962).

In educational research, it has been proven that students tend to thrive when their need for belonging is met in their learning environments (Alesech & Nayar, 2020; Chiu et al., 2012; Faust et al., 2014; Goodenow, 1993; Halse, 2018; Lee, 2002; Longaretti, 2020; Osterman, 2000; Pendergast et al., 2018; Rose & Shevlin, 2017; Smerdon, 2002; Vickers et al., 2014). Goodenow (1993) further suggested that a feeling of belonging and perceived support can increase students' beliefs in their own success and hence considerably impact their academic motivation, engagement and even performance. They further precise that students who feel belonging to their learning environments are reportedly happier, more enthusiast and confident in engaging in learning activities than those who do not feel they belong (ibid.). When the need to belong is not met, students feel more isolated and develop anxious behaviour, feel frustrated and sad in their learning environment, this has a direct impact on their academic engagement and performance (ibid.). Moreover, a lack of belonging can increase self-consciousness of young people which can negatively affect their engagement in a classroom due to an intense feeling of public exposure leading to negative emotions such as discomfort and embarrassment.

However, there is less research on students' narratives and perceptions of the factors that enhance their sense of belonging at school. According to the few early studies, three aspects are often mentioned by students attending secondary education :

(1) Positive teacher-student and student-student relationships (Alesech & Nayar, 2020; Basel & Hamilton, 2019; Chiu et al., 2012; Ellery, 2019; Faust et al., 2014; Lee, 2002; Longaretti, 2020; Pendergast et al., 2018; Rose & Shevlin, 2017; Smerdon, 2002; Vickers et al., 2014).

(2) School/classroom culture that is supportive – academically and emotionally – inclusive and accepting (Alesech & Nayar, 2020; Chiu et al., 2012; Ellery, 2019; Longaretti, 2020; Pendergast et al., 2018; Smerdon, 2002).

(3) Engaging, hands-on learning practices (Alesech & Nayar, 2020; Basel & Hamilton, 2019; Ellery, 2019; Pendergast et al., 2018; Rose & Shevlin, 2017; Smerdon, 2002).

Moreover previous research has found that a sense of classroom belonging further allows the development of a sense of belonging to the school community leading to all the positive outcomes previously mentioned. Finally, some studies have found that students' feel their sense of belonging at school being enhanced when they are engaged in school activities (classroom related, extracurricular, personal input…) (Alesech & Nayar, 2020; Basel & Hamilton, 2019; Ellery, 2019; Pendergast et al., 2018; Rose & Shevlin, 2017; Smerdon, 2002). Finn's (1989) model of participation-identification, has been used to construct measurements to investigate school belonging. The author has indicated that the concept of 'identification' is similar and connected to the concept of 'belonging' (Finn, 1989; Korpershoek et al., 2020). The model focuses on students' participation in their learning environment. According to the model, if students maintain diverse and larger forms of participation in the school activities, there are more chances for the students to successfully complete their schooling. However, if the school fails to provide students with a sense of belonging, chances are that they do not feel comfortable to participate in these activities, which increases their chances to drop-out from school activities and thus, making it more difficult for the students to be successful in their schooling.

To conclude, belonging has been proven by previous studies as highly important for students' school mental well-being. When students perceive their learning environment as a place where they belong, they tend to believe in their capacity to succeed, it impacts their motivation and performance

positively. However, a lack of belonging can make one feel isolated and alienated. Students' who do not feel belonging in their school environment are at-risk of drop out.

Recent researches have indicated the main factors that fosters sense of belonging at school according to the students. The results come back to what Baumeister and Leary (1995) claimed every human needs: a minimum amount of regular, stable, positive and meaningful interpersonal relationships. Moreover, students like to feel engaged in their classes; a way for them to feel acknowledge by the others, a 'here I am, I do, so I belong'.

Concerning the main factors that foster school belonging, interestingly, regardless of the countries, school years, participants, schools or research methods, there were rather concordant outcomes.

Main characteristics of early research

Research on belonging at school has mainly been conducted in the United States Australia and New Zealand. Reportedly there is less research conducted on this topic in Europe. This might be partly explained by language limitations as the searching for previous research has mainly been conducted in English. Moreover, as Antonsich (2010) mentions, the English word 'belonging' is not easily translated in other languages. As an example, in French 'belonging' can be translated as '*appartenance*', which is a term rarely used in daily conversation (Antonsich, 2010). The term '*être à sa place*' or '*se sentir à sa place*' would be better used (ibid.). Interestingly, these later words can be literally translated in English as "to be in its place" or "to feel in its place", the opposite of such feeling would be 'to feel out of place'. These words hint to the relation between a feeling of belonging and notions of place/space. Yet this relation has been rather neglected by early research in the educational field. Nevertheless, when looking for early research on the topic in French, the very few outcomes are either studies conducted in Canada or studies focusing on citizenship.

In the broad field of education, belonging has indeed been more predominant to citizenship education, minorities in education as well as international education. And in fact a systematic review conducted through ERIC database reported a certain number of studies concerned about specific minorities in education, as they are more at risk of lacking a sense of belonging at school (Machado Da Silva, 2021). Moreover studies were also concerned about the impact of educational transitions on students sense of belonging (ibid.). The transition from a school facility to another, such as from an elementary school to a secondary school, brings changes in teachers, class, peers, space and even pedagogies. As mentioned, belonging is partly formed by relational factors, hence, as new interactions are experienced, belonging is impacted. Moreover these transitions often take place at a period in which students are developing new identities hence scholars point at the importance of meeting the need for belongingness during early adolescence (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Goodenow, 1993; Longaretti, 2020; Pendergast et al., 2018).

Ironically, for a topic that focuses on students' sense of belonging at school, there is a lack of research on students' perspectives, also indicated by the literature reviewed (Alesech & Nayar, 2020; Longaretti, 2020; Rose & Shevlin, 2017).

The most recent studies on school belonging are still highly influenced by the studies and results of the field of educational psychology previously mentioned. The theory and methodology of current studies – from small sample studies in specific contexts, to international studies such as PISA's survey on sense of belonging at school – are mainly influenced by the previous studies in educational psychology. In other words those studies view belonging through a rather relational point of view in a specific context at a specific time. Hence, school belonging is rarely placed within wider factors, in a holistic approach. Furthermore, as much as belonging has been proved to be extremely significant on students' experience of schooling, the field of education has been slow in exploring the concept and even neglected theoretical growth. Studies often use the same definition of belonging provided by the

field of educational psychology. Yet, the way belonging is defined and connected to other relevant concepts, can impact the way one looks at the data collected, hence impacting the interpretation of the results of a study.

Position of current study

The literature review on belonging in the educational field shows that the topic has been somewhat empirically researched by earlier studies. But as Halse (2018) mentions, there is a true lack of conceptualisation and theorisation on how students experience belonging. There is also this tendency to mention 'school' and 'belonging' without exploring what a school as a space means and represents. 'School' seems to be approached as a space that is fixed and standing on its own. But as previously mentioned, schools are social institutions, they are political entities, schools stand within a local and national context, they are a symbol that entails other symbols (Halsey, 2018; Riley, 2019). Moreover, when mentioning students sense of belonging at school, there is also a tendency to frame the experience only inside the school within a particular point in time. Yet, belonging is mutable, always shifting through one's life (Halse, 2018). Only very recently, a minority of educational scholars started to explore the work other disciplines have done regarding belonging (Halse, 2018). The field has yet to further explore students' belonging narratives from an approach that manages to encompass all the complexities of the concept of belonging. For example, in the literature reviewed regarding perceptions of school belonging, students have mentioned the significance of positive relationships on their sense of belonging at school (Alesech & Nayar, 2020; Basel & Hamilton, 2019; Chiu et al., 2012; Ellery, 2019; Faust et al., 2014; Lee, 2002; Longaretti, 2020; Pendergast et al., 2018; Rose & Shevlin, 2017; Smerdon, 2002; Vickers et al., 2014). Yet there is little information regarding the nature of these relationships, and how these relationships are connected with a sense of belonging. Moreover certain studies have connected belonging to the notion of identity, but do not explain how these two notions connect to each other. Finally, little is known about the potential impact the current global pandemic, and the measures to prevent its spread, have had and are having on students sense of belonging.

Hence, this thesis aims in considering the missing pieces identified in the literature review. The study will develop upon this conceptualisation of belonging and by using Wright (2015) theorisation of belonging. This will be put into dialogue with consideration and appreciation to the field of International and Comparative Education.

Chapter 4 – Theoretical considerations

Acknowledging that the concept of belonging has somehow been left without a proper theorisation, regardless of its' fundamental nature and the amount of researchers that engage with it, Wright (2015) wondered how to theorise belonging while considering its' multiple meanings, uses and contradictions. Wright (2015) suggests the use of 'weak theory' in order to allow multiple understandings of belonging to appear. Weak theory "sees things as open, entangled, connected and in flux" (Wright, 2015, p. 392), adjectives that are shared with the definition of belonging given by certain academics, as previously mentioned. Weak theory allows partial and multiple understandings, contradictions and inconsistencies and focuses on emotions and affections; how things, individuals, feelings, and places interact with each other. This theory requires attention to the everyday life, practices and to "more-than-human" operations. The weak theory approach to belonging by Wright (2015) will be explored in this section.

Belonging-as-emotion

Studies around belonging always use the words 'sense' or 'feeling' – such as 'sense of belonging at school' – and these words are also employed through the narratives of participants. Yet, as Wright (2015) points out, studies have rarely explicitly explored the emotional character of belonging, regardless of it being always connected to words such as 'sense' and 'feeling'. Hence, the emotional component of belonging has been assumed, just like the concept itself in the field of education. However, the constant use of these terms and the call of weak theory towards a focus on emotions, led Wright (2015) to deeply explore the emotional aspect of belonging. She points at the relevance of exploring how belonging (or not) feels like; how these emotions can create attachments and at what extent they are significant. This enquiry may produce further perceptions that move beyond the vision of belonging as being either emotional, political or practical (ibid.).

After turning to literature on emotion and affect, Wright (2015) stated that in order to truly understand belonging as a 'feeling' or a 'sense', one must recognise the significance of "emotions as relational" (Wright, 2015, p. 398). From this perspective, emotions emerge through the interaction between people but also between people and collectivities, things and places. Emotions build upon connections and then generate them, in a circular movement. Moreover, emotions come into being through "borders" or "sites of contact" (Wright, 2015, p. 398). They make a distinction between the 'self' and the 'other' and vice-versa. Wright (2015) states that "emotions are critical in the construction, performance and policing of borders in ways that may create a sense of fitting in or of dislocation" (Wright, 2015, p. 398). Hence, in order to understand belonging as a 'sense' or a 'feeling', it is important to recognise the relational character of emotions: the dynamic of belonging-as-emotion that can connect or separate subjects and even develop a collective through shared feelings. In other words, the emotions emerging through the encounter with 'otherness' is what connects us to a collective, and the collective is then also constructed as a result of such encounter. Thus, the feeling of a sense of belonging with others emerges through connections and attachments to individuals, places, practices and ways of being or becoming. It's stimulated by this desire of becoming that is continuous throughout life (ibid.).

Then, an effective question would be; to which emotions is the creation of belonging the most associated to? Wright (2015) gives a wide range of studies that associated belonging with a multitude

of emotions such as desire, nostalgia, longing, pride or joy. These emotions can create belongings that are inclusive and/or exclusive. According to Proby (in Wright, 2015), the most inclusive type of belonging forms itself through physical closeness, through "affective community-making" (Wright, 2015, p. 399). Belonging that is inclusive *does not* rise through sameness or essentialist ideas, but rather through encounters that are caring and that challenge power relations (ibid.). In contrast, a sense of not belonging is also the result of encounters and a desire that causes a sense of difference in which no perceived connection can be found, there is a lack of perceived similarities with what is at the other side of the 'border' (ibid.). In this case the border differentiates rather than connects.

To conclude, belonging appears at the junction between emotions, politics, personal and societal concerns. It is a complex concept that is moderated by "relations of power as well as personal experience and affiliation" (Wright, 2015, p. 400). As there is a great "interdependence between emotions, collectives, belongings, people and places […] belonging becomes a question of epistemology and ontology" (Wright, 2015, p. 400).

Belonging as performance

Secondly, as mentioned, weak theory also focuses on affective acts; and hence to the day-to-day experiences, performances and practices of belonging (Wright, 2015). Through this approach, belonging is not viewed through an essentialist ideology, but rather as a performance; the ongoing practices that people perform every day in order to position themselves in the world (ibid.). This approach to belonging cares for epistemological and ontological considerations, as the creation of the 'self' is the result of-, rather than predefined, it generates subjectivities. In other words, one does not naturally belong to somewhere or something. It is through everyday performance and practice that one (re)creates belonging, and through belonging, individuals, collectives and places are constructed. Belonging is cultivated and performed in multiple contexts, it is multiple, and it's performance is not limited to individual practices in defined places, but it includes "the work of policy, regulations and institutions in performing, mobilizing and constraining belonging" (Wright, 2015, p. 400). Hence, through performance, belonging is affective and collaborative and can structure one's life and society. For example, repetitive practices in particular social and cultural places become associated to the particular context, and these practices connect the individual to the places, connecting them to a collective, hence allowing the construction and reproduction of identities and attachments.

However, previous research tends to limit the understanding of performativity to human related activity, in other words, only between humans. Yet, for Wright (2015), by carefully analysing our daily performances of belonging, one can perceive 'more-than-human' agents that can also produce a sense of belonging. By using weak theory, Wright (2015) goes beyond human interaction. She gives multiple examples of studies that have associated the co-constitution of belonging to :
- Bodies: embodied practices such as the act of grooming, moving, dancing
- Organisms such as plants and animals: for example, the interaction with landscapes of our childhood can inform and co-produce identity and belonging in intertwined ways
- Food: the recipes, the act of preparing and eating food
- Music and sounds
- Smells …

These more-than-human agents actively co-create feelings and senses of belonging, they shape and take part in the performances of belonging, "and they materialize belonging in, through and with place" (Wright, 2015, p. 402). To conclude, through this perspective, affects are not only produced by humans or politics, but also by other beings, organisms, practices, emotions, sounds etc., they all impact

belonging in a complex and tangled way. Hence, Wright (2015) agrees that belonging is in fact fundamentally relational, but this relational aspect is broad, multidimensional and not limited to human related relations.

Belonging as co-becoming

Moreover, Wright (2015) goes on by arguing that the affects, performances or agents of belonging also form 'things', builds identities, communities and places. Together, they (re)construct the world and themselves in a multitude of ways. Hence, Wright (2015) draws upon emotional, indigenous and feminist geographies but also material performativity in order to expand the insights of weak theory and to explore how "belonging actively co-constitutes people and things and processes and places" (Wright, 2015, p. 393). In other words, when humans and more-than-humans come together, they determine what it means to belong or not, and by doing so, they determine and construct themselves. Hence, belonging can be perceived as an act of co-becoming, it is built upon relational ontologies. Wright (2015) goes further and ads that what is co-created also creates us: the place that humans and more-than-humans create, also creates us. For example, individuals or collectives exist through their belonging with a place and the multitude of agents, affects and performances that co-constitute the place. Wright summarises:

> " Following these insights, I suggest that belonging is relational, performative and more-than-human. It is not pre-determined but comes into being through affective encounters, through doing, being, knowing and becoming in careful, responsive ways. It is deeply implicated in notions of care and responsibility that stem from a recognition of the essential co-constitution of people with the beings (other people, non-human animals, plants, processes, affects and all that is tangible and intangible) with whom they belong. To paraphrase Bennett, rather than belonging to the world, this is belonging as the world […]. Through our myriad belongings, we 'remake the world anew', as the world and our belongs remake us." (Wright, 2015, p. 404).

Hence, Wright's (2015) three main characteristics of belonging – belonging-as-emotion, belonging as performance, belonging as co-becoming – are addressed within each section of the results and discussion chapters in order to interpret the data.

Chapter 5 – Methodology

This chapter discusses the approaches undertaken in order to research about a sense of belonging at school. It starts by discussing the strategic basis of this study, as well as the research design: a qualitative interview study with comparative elements. It then describes the methods for data collection, followed by the sampling considerations. Following this, the analytical process of the data collected is discussed: a rather iterative approach to thematic analysis. Finally, the latter sections mention issues of quality, ethics, limitations and delimitations of the study.

For clarification purposes, a distinction must be made between the notions of methodology and methods: the foremost refers to how this research looks into the phenomena at stake in general the latest refers to the instruments used in this research (Cohen et al., 2018).

Research strategy and design

The research strategy of this study is qualitative. This choice is coherent with the research questions, aims, objectives as well as the theoretical considerations as this strategy allows a focus on the perspectives of the participants within a given context (Bryman, 2012). Moreover, such strategy is known for viewing social life in terms of a continuous process (ibid.). This feature of qualitative research follows the perspective of belonging being a never ending continuous process in one's life (Halse, 2018).

Furthermore, this study also encompasses a comparative element method to compare experiences of belonging at school between two groups of participant-students who transitioned to high school. A qualitative comparative method allows for diverse understandings and complexities of each comparative element and it aims in understanding multiple experiences rather than measure similarities or divergences (Palmberger & Gingrich, 2014). Through this method, it is possible to explore students' experiences, how they interpret and make sense of their own actions and connections with others, while keeping in mind the contextuality of the research as well as the limitations of meaning-making (ibid.). It is important to emphasise that this comparative element lies within the interviews analysed and in between micro experiences. The comparison is used in order to further understand how a sense of belonging is felt, performed and co-created by understanding the different dynamics in the students' experiences in transitioning to high school under a particular context that is a global pandemic. Hence, the main comparative component of this study is the comparison of experiences between two groups of students – the Stariers and the Sacred Heart – whom transitioned to 10th grade at the Sacred Heart high school in September 2020. The two group of students are compared to delve into feelings, performances and co-creations of belonging and also non-belonging, which can lead to forms of inclusion, co-becoming or exclusion and alienation. Other bodies of comparisons are also made by comparing experiences of belonging between different micro-contexts such as different classes, teaching practices, learning environment, on-site classes, remote classes.

In spite of the fact that this research focuses on a very specific setting, it is not a case study, as it only uses one method of data collection, and it truly focuses on the students narratives rather than on an intensive examination of the setting by interviewing other stakeholders (Bryman, 2012). Hence, this research is an interview study that has great interest in the interviewee's perceptions, as "Individuals' consciousness gives access to the most complicated social and educational issues, because social and educational issues are abstractions based on the concrete experience of people." (Seidman, 2006, p. 7). In other words, while speaking, the interviewees are in a process of meaning-making of their experiences and behaviours with what surrounds them (Seidman, 2006). Hence, an interview study

allows to explore how students make sense of their behaviour (Bryman, 2012; Seidman, 2006), when first interacting with the high school setting, their peers, teachers, friends, environment, the social context etc. Moreover this approach also allows a certain freedom in the way students tell their own stories, allowing multiple meanings, uses and contradictions of belonging to appear (Bryman, 2012), just like how Wright (2015) approached the theorisation of belonging.

Although, qualitative research is usually assumed to be inductive (Bryman, 2012), this research is concerned in using a clear theory on the concept of belonging within a school setting, and yet, it generates codes from the data itself. In this sense, as this research moves between theory and data, it can be considered as an iterative research. Moreover, a research process can be much more complex, and have much more background than firstly perceived. For transparency purposes, my personal research process will be henceforth explained. In order to visualise the main steps in qualitative research, Bryman (2012) provides a figure (see figure 3). As *inductivism* is often related to qualitative research, the steps stated in this figure follow the mentioned approach.
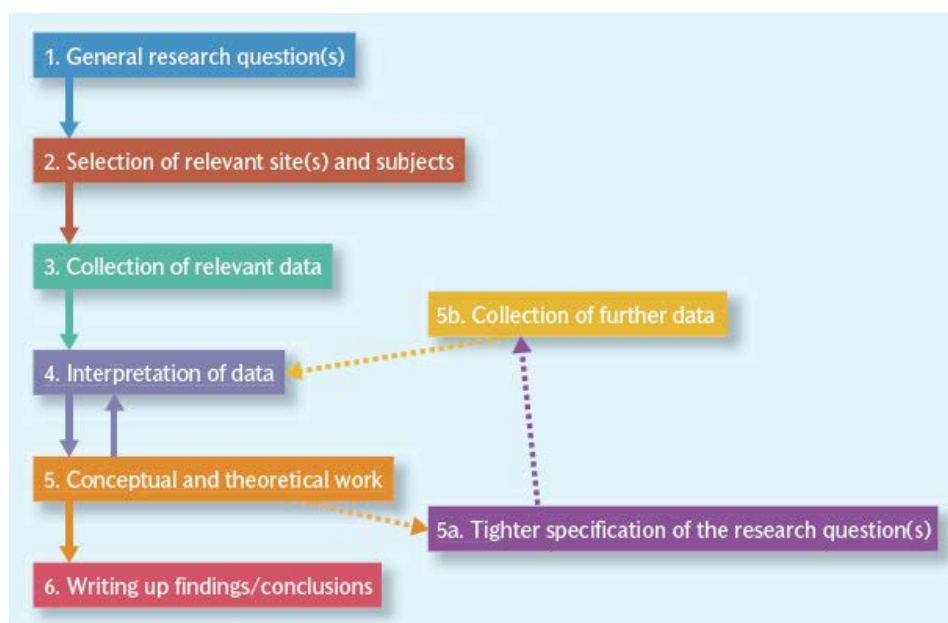
Figure 3. An outline of the main steps of qualitative research. Retrieved from Bryman, 2012, p. 384.

Drawing from personal experience, I have had an interest on how schools or educational systems could be more inclusive toward migrant students. I had very general questions surrounding this matter *(first stage)*. Once on exchange in Japan, I attended a class on *minorities in Japanese Education* in which I conducted an ethnographic field work in a diverse non-mainstream school that allowed me to collect a first wave of data – both field notes and semi-structured interviews *(second and third stage)*. Through my classes' essays I interpreted the data collected *(fourth stage)* and reflected on a first concept that was introduced in the class; *ibasho (fifth stage). Ibasho* is a Japanese indigenous word that could be defined as a place where one belongs, feels safe and accepted (Tokunaga, 2018). As I started my Masters' in Education with International and Comparative specialisation, I have continuously tried to explore more conceptual and theoretical work around *ibasho* and school belonging. By always keeping in mind what I have observed during by ethnographic field work in Japan, I found the literature on school belonging in the field of education lacking of strong theorisation. This eventually led me to research on belonging and it's theorisation in different social sciences fields *(continuity of fifth stage)*. It allowed me to tighter my research questions on a sense of belonging at school *(fifth-a stage)*. This

long process led me to this masters' thesis, in which new data has been collected in a new site with new participants in order to answer to new research questions, which are then interpreted through a specific theory on belonging by Wright (2015) (*second, third/fifth-b, fourth, fifth stages*). The findings will be presented in chapter seven, and discussed in chapter eight (*sixth stage*).

I believe it is important to describe these stages in order to illustrate how research can be slowly built and conducted. As well as to inform and be transparent on how my own personal experiences have somewhat impacted this thesis.

Research methods for data collection

This research used semi-structured interviews as a method to collect data. Here will be stated the rationale behind this choice as well how it was designed and put into practice.

Semi-structured interviews with the use of open-ended questions allow flexibility, rich and detailed answers (Bryman, 2012; Coe, 2017; Cohen et al., 2018; Seidman, 2006). It also allows the interviewee's stories to be of focus (ibid.). This approach is connected to the aim, the research questions and the theoretical considerations of this thesis, as students are encouraged to express their experiences about belonging at school in an open manner.

Concerning how the semi-structured interviews were designed, figure 4 illustrates the process from which the interview questions, and the interview guide (see Appendix), were produced. As figure 4 indicates, the interview questions were influenced by the aim, the research questions as well as the literature review of the study. The questions focus on personal experiences, feelings, relationships, daily routines, teaching practices and school culture. Firstly, these questions were inspired by previous research on belonging that also explored students' narratives (Alesech & Nayar, 2020; Basel & Hamilton, 2019; Chiu et al., 2012; Ellery, 2019; Faust et al., 2014; Lee, 2002; Longaretti, 2020; Pendergast et al., 2018; Rose & Shevlin, 2017; Smerdon, 2002; Vickers et al., 2014). They were also further influenced by Wright's (2015) theorisation of belonging as an emotion, everyday performance, and an act of co-becoming. For example, the students were asked to describe a typical day at their high school under the context of COVID-19. And then asked to express their feelings regarding that routine. This question allowed to perceive how students made sense of everyday performances, how they feel emotionally about it, and how these performances often develop a form of co-becoming. Students' were only directly asked whether they felt a general sense of belonging to their school at the end of the interview. This was made in order for students' to actually reflect on how the experiences they previously mentioned, somewhat influence their sense of belonging at school.

The feedback from the supervisor and the conduct of a pilot interview – which is not included in the study – allowed for a revision of the questions and assured the quality of the interview questions and guide.
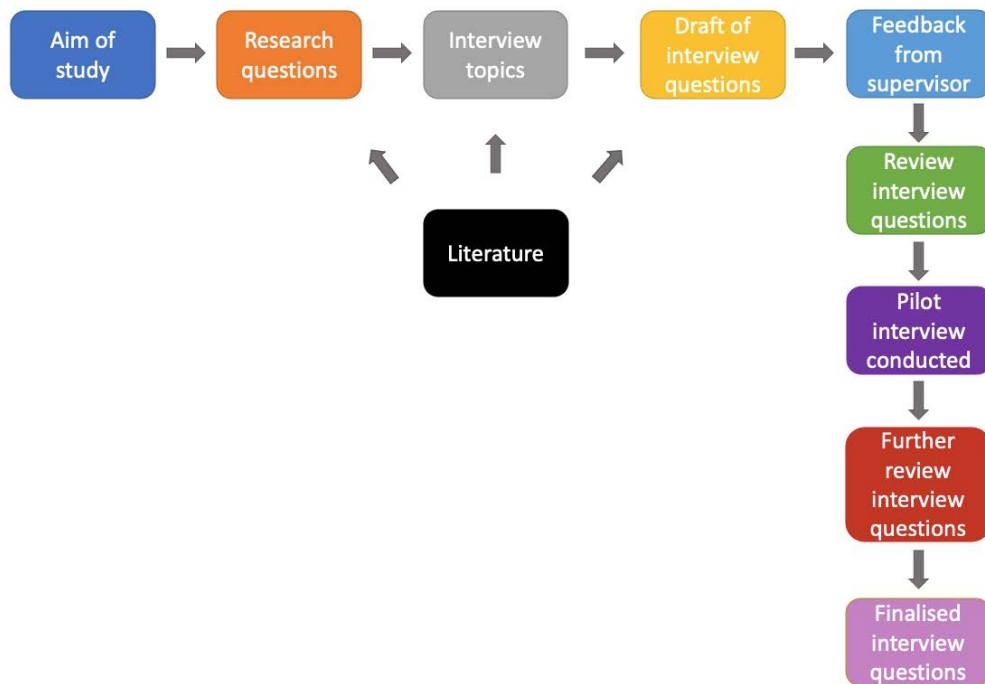
Figure 4. Preparing an interview guide. (Own illustration)

All the interviewees answered the same questions, however, as semi-structured interviews allow, further questions were asked according to the answers. Some extra interview questions evolved further elaboration from the interviewee such as; "why?", "could you elaborate?", "how do you feel about that?", "how come?". In certain occasions I would also try to understand what the interviewee reported by directly reiterate what they said and ask them if my interpretations were correct. In total, the interview guide contained more than 30 questions and was organised into five sections (see appendices);

    (1)   introduction to the interview with simple personal questions,

    (2)   general information about students' relationships with education since primary school,

    (3)   general impressions around their experience so far as high school students at Sacred Heart under the pandemic context,

    (4)   questions around sense of belonging and feeling at ease as high school students

    (5)   final questions.

In practice, a total of 11 interviews were conducted within two weeks – excluding the pilot – and in general lasted 45 to 55 minutes. The shortest interview lasted for approximately 25 minutes and the longest for about 1 hour and 15 minutes. All the interviews were conducted in French, with sometimes the use of English or Portuguese words from certain interviewees, as they were aware I could understand these languages. In order to make sure the interviewees were feeling at ease during the interview, but also by taking into consideration the COVID-19 preventive measures, I decided to conduct the interviews during their two week school break and let them choose where/how they wanted it to be conducted. Hence the interviews were all conducted in different contexts, according to the interviewees choices and possibilities. The pilot interview as well as five interviews were conducted in person, face-to-face in a private safe space. Five interviews were conducted by video-conference, with cameras turned on. One interview was conducted by phone-call as the interviewee did not feel comfortable with video-conferences and felt self-conscious if the cameras were turned on. Moreover,

all interviewees, as well as their legal guardians, were asked for a written permission to participate and record the interview. Just before the start of the interview, the participants were once again reminded of their rights and asked for oral and the written permission to record the interview. Each interview was transcribed into a word document shortly after they were conducted. Following each transcription, the full audio was re-listened to attest for the quality of the transcription. A naturalised transcription methodology was mostly used for comprehension purposes, although some intonation features were added if it felt like they were important for the comprehension of the interview (Bucholtz, 2000). This approach allowed a comprehensive and accurate analysis of what the students expressed (ibid.). All interviews were audio-recorded, given pseudonyms and uploaded to a safe box provided by the University of Stockholm.

Sampling and participants

There are two levels of sampling, firstly the sampling of context and secondly the sampling of participants (Bryman, 2012). Here I will state the rationale behind my sampling strategies as well as how it was implemented.

The introduction and background of this thesis, explained why researching this topic in France is significant and relevant. Moreover, as mentioned in the research strategy and design section, this thesis is an interview study focusing on students' narratives, but students' are situated within a particular context that evolves their school. Hence it is important to develop the reasons behind the choice of the Sacred Heart high school for the searching of interviewees (Bryman, 2012). The reasoning behind this choice has also been developed in the introduction and background chapters of the thesis. In summary, the aim, the research questions of this study and my field of study informed this decision. Hence a generic purposive sampling was undertaken (Bryman, 2012). Other than the factors previously mentioned in the concerned chapters, this context was also chosen as per my own personal knowledge regarding the functioning of this high school. In fact, I am an alumni of the Sacred Heart school, and as a consequence, was aware of its' structure prior to the start of this thesis. However, during my research, I did not have any sort of personal connection with the school (see the section on Ethical considerations).

Regarding the selection of participants, I firstly opted for a purposive sampling and organised potential participants through a stratifying approach between two separate groups. This approach allows to compare and assess whether there is any similarities or differences in experiences regarding students' sense of belonging while transitioning to high school (Bryman, 2012). The name thereby chosen for each group was inspired by the fact that students make a distinction between themselves by calling each other/groups by the name of their previous school, which is quite symbolic per se. The two groups are:

- The Sacred hearts: Students who have been enrolled at the Sacred Heart institution since at least the 6th grade;
- The Stariers: Students who just enrolled at the Sacred Heart institution at high school age. All coming from the Starier middle school.

Moreover, at the time of the interviews, all participants needed to be in 10th grade as it corresponds to the first year of high school in the French educational system. As previously mentioned, the Sacred Heart high school accepts quite some students from other middle schools in different towns. I decided to choose to only interview students' coming from the Starier middle school for three main reasons. Firstly, as previously explained (see key concepts, literature review and theoretical considerations chapters), belonging is concerned about identity building in relation to the Others (Halse, 2018; Wright,

2015). Hence, in order to illustrate that connection, it was deemed important to select students coming from the same middle school, who have previously experienced belonging together under the same context. Hence, all the Stariers, came from the same public middle school, and know each other to a certain extent. Secondly, as new students, they represent a minority in the Sacred Heart institution and have quite different a background compared to the average Sacred Hearts (see introduction and background chapters). This approach allowed a better comparison between the two groups, as students within a group shared connections and experiences in the same middle school, at the same time it allows to explore any possible variation in the ways each group discusses their experience in high school. Finally, I knew I could easily reach Starier students, as per my personnel connection with a "Starier" at the Sacred Heart high school, which became the pilot of this thesis.

In fact, once the specific group of students were determined, I used a snowball sampling approach to reach out to potential interviewees. Firstly the pilot of this study (a Starier), introduced me to several fellow Stariers, who were split into different 10th grade classes at the high school. However, the pilot had no contact with any Sacred Heart students so I decided to rely on the other Stariers and asked them if they knew any Sacred Heart that would be willing to participate in the study. Two Stariers talked about my research to some Sacred Hearts and four of them accepted to get in touch with me and later accepted to participate in the research after reading the interview consent form. Later, a Sacred Heart participant put me in contact with another Sacred Heart student, which allowed me to have a total of five Sacred Hearts in my study and six Stariers – excluding the pilot. Table 1 gives the chosen pseudonyms for each participant and informs their group. Within the results chapter, pseudonyms will be followed by the name of their group, for clarity purposes. As a reminder, I decided to label these students through the pseudonyms of their previous middle schools because the students themselves are the ones who created such labels. They distinct themselves as the Sacred Hearts and the Stariers.

Table 1. Participants pseudonyms and their group

Sacred Hearts	*Stariers*
Lejla	Inés
Maxime	Chloé
Zain	Sofia
Anna	Margarida
Victoria	Nuno
	Angel

The pseudonyms given to each participant respects the origins of their actual names in order to stay sensitive to their personal stories and background (Seidman, 2006). Finding these pseudonyms was a difficult task and will always limit the story behind each of the students actual names (ibid.). However, to further protect the students' identity and to secure their anonymity, no further information will be specifically attached to any participant. As per the demographic information, eight participants identified as female, three as male. The participants were 15-16 years old at the time of the interviews. All the Sacred Heart students were born and raised in France and are all French citizens. All the Stariers were issued from recent migration, and have different citizenships. However, all participants were

raised in France, two of them were born in Portugal and migrated at a very young age. At home they hear and/or speak French, Portuguese, Tagalog and/or Tamil.

Regarding the communication with all the participants, the Pilot was the main mediator between most Stariers and I. The five Sacred Heart participants, communicated with me through email or their preferred social media. Most Stariers also had the possibility to reach me through social media or email, but rarely did so.

Analysis of data

Once collected, the data was managed, analysed and interpreted (Bryman, 2012). This section describes these three stages and justifies each decision made.

Firstly, each of the 11 word documents containing each transcribed interview were imported into the Nvivo software program. A case classification was created for each participant in order to attribute four main characteristics to each of them: background, school class, gender and group of students (Starier or Sacred Heart). The interviews were then ready for the coding process.

The data was thematically analysed through an iterative approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006), as I move between the data collected and theory. A thematic analysis allows the identification and analysis of themes within the data collected (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Bryman, 2012). It is not connected to any pre-existing theory and hence can be used within different theorical approaches (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In this thesis, the thematic analysis reports on students' experiences, perceptions and feelings but it also situates them within different analytical levels corresponding to prominent discourses operating within the given society. This follows Wright's (2015) claim that belonging appears at the junction between emotions, politics, personal and societal concerns, and is moderated by relations of power.

As mentioned, I iteratively moved between data and theory. I firstly inductively generated codes from the data, but theory and previous research impacted this decision as well as the organisation of the codes into main themes. Firstly, as belonging is sensed in complex and multiple ways, and is highly connected to context (Halse, 2018; Wright, 2015), I firstly generated the codes inductively from the data itself. This allows the different meanings, uses and contradictions of belonging within this specific context to emerge. This decision was made by considering Wright's (2015) theoretical approach to belonging as a concept that is open, entangled and in continuous movement. Hence, for this reason, the management and analysis of the data remained very open. This approach allowed a rich, precise and open description of the data in relation to a specific topic and context. Secondly, earlier research and the theoretical understandings of this thesis, also affected the way main themes emerged as well as the interpretation of the data. Earlier research mostly affected the way the data was organised into three final themes, while the theory had much impact into the interpretation of the data in order to contribute to the (further developed below).

The analysis followed the six phases developed by Braun & Clarke (2006). After familiarising myself with the data, by transcribing and re-reading it several times *(phase 1)*, I started to systematically generate codes across the entire data set *(phase 2)* (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Table 2 gives an example on how a data extract could be coded within Nvivo. As this table shows, a short answer could contain several codes.

Table 2. Coding example

Data extract	*Codes*
(Describing her transition to the Sacred Heart high school under the context of COVID-19) *Firstly, I did not expect it to be such a shock, but it was ... since I am a rather reserved person, it was rather complicated for me. When you can actually see a person, it's different than when you see someone with a face mask. And even with the teachers it was different. The atmosphere ... there was a distance that we didn't have before ... well for starters, there's always a distance at the beginning of the year but under this context ... it was harder.* (Chloé – Starier)	- Transition - Difficult experience - Self-perception - Masks - School atmosphere - Negative feelings on COVID-19 consequences - Relationship with teachers - Relationship with peers

In total 40 codes were generated in the first round of coding. After this process some codes were reviewed and were merged or considered as 'sub-codes', as they often overlapped. For instance, the code "remote classes" encompassed the 'sub-codes' "negatives experiences" and "positive experiences". Then I started to associate codes to potential themes and created a first mind map illustrating this process *(phase 3)* (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Five main themes were firstly found (see appendices for the initial mind map with the five themes): self-perception in relationship, hybrid system, learning environment, transition period, COVID-19 general outlook. The themes were reviewed in relation to the extracts and the whole data set *(phase 4)* (Braun & Clarke, 2006), at this stage the two latent themes merged with the three earlier themes. The three remaining themes were refine and defined and are illustrated in figure 5 *(phase 5)* (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Finally, these themes allowed the creation of three sections in the results chapter of this thesis: belonging and self-perception in relationships, belonging and the learning environment, belonging and the hybrid period. As previously mentioned, these three main themes emerged through the data but they join previous research. The two first themes specifically – which are concerned about relationships and the learning environment – have been quite discussed in literature on school belonging (Alesech & Nayar, 2020; Basel & Hamilton, 2019; Chiu et al., 2012; Ellery, 2019; Faust et al., 2014; Lee, 2002; Longaretti, 2020; Pendergast et al., 2018; Rose & Shevlin, 2017; Smerdon, 2002; Vickers et al., 2014).

Illustrative extracts were also selected, translated from French to English and interpreted within the results chapter. Regarding the translation process, as I am fluent in both languages, I mostly approached the translation of the extracts thereby quoted through a literal translation. However, participants also used slangs, and certain French expressions that were hard to express in English, in a way that respected its' meaning. I discussed the most difficult translations with a fellow colleague that is native in French, and a peer from my cohort that is native in English. This was done to ensure the quality of the translations present in this thesis.

Finally, the results and discussion chapters answer to the research questions and interpret the data in relation to the theory and previous research *(phase 6)* (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In these chapters, the findings are connected to earlier research on belonging conducted within the field of Education, further justifying the quality of the findings and interpretations. Wright's theory was used for an in-depth interpretation of data, in order to go further in what has been found in earlier research, and to contribute to the field.
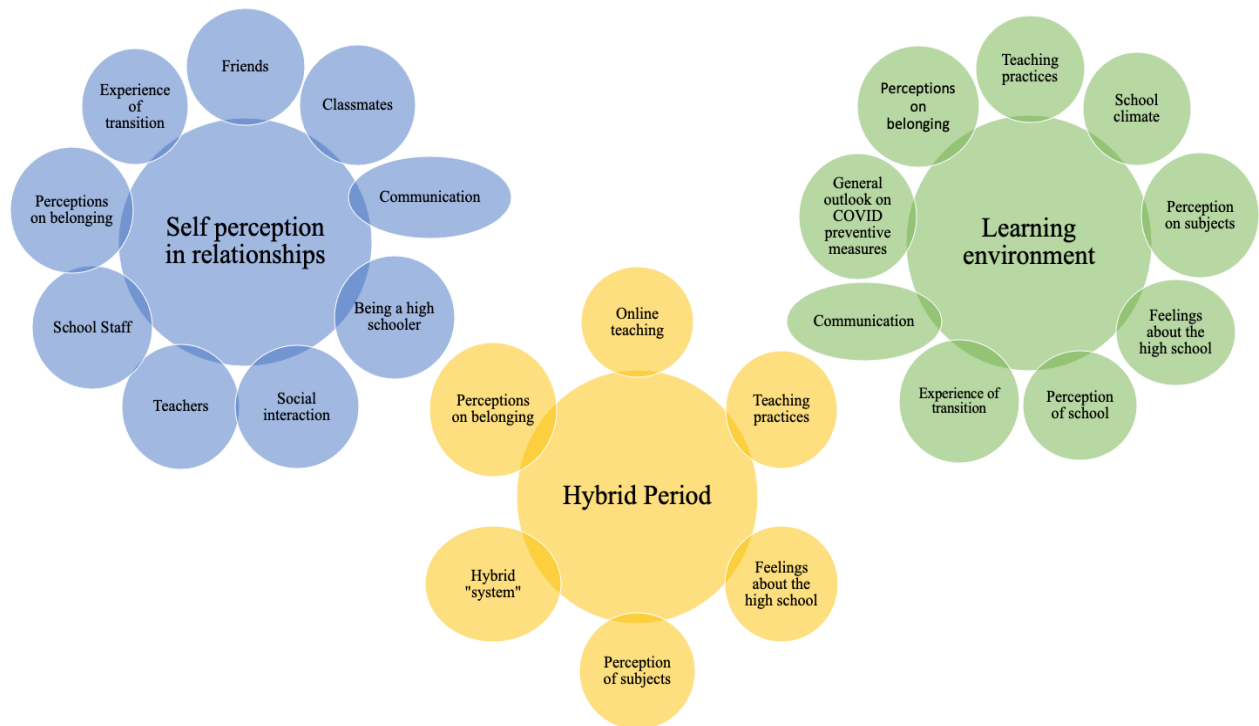
Figure 5. Overview of the three final themes. (Own figure).

Moreover, as belonging is entangled in our everyday lives (Wright, 2015 ; Halse, 2018), each theme entails different analytical levels (Halse, 2018). Figure 5 demonstrates the three main analytical levels – macrosystem, mesosystem and microsystem levels – in relation to the three themes generated from the thematic analysis. Firstly, the theme on 'self-perception in relationships' can be mostly associated to a microsystem level. Secondly, 'learning environment' can mostly be linked to a mesosystem level, as it is mainly concerned by the schools' culture and values, and its status as a social institution situated within a community. Finally, the 'hybrid period' theme corresponds to a specific period, a given time in the students' schooling experience, which was decided by structures situated at the macrosystem level that highly impacted microsystems.
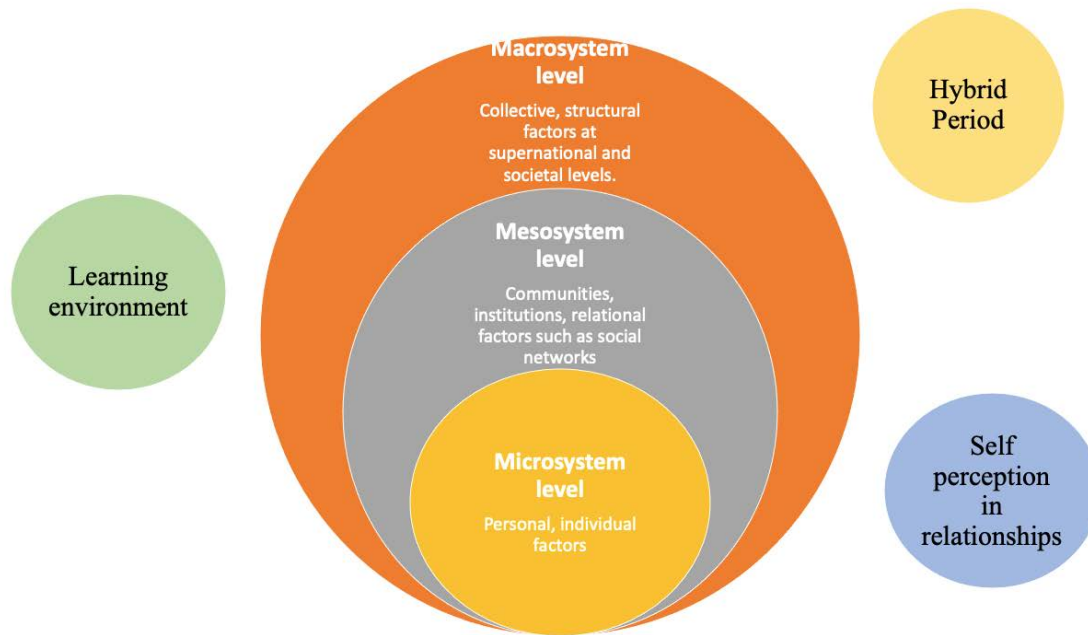
Figure 6. Relationship between themes and analytical levels. (Own illustration).

However, as Figure 6 depicts, all the analytical levels are connected, they impact and are impacted by each other. As an example, although the theme on 'self-perception in relationships' evolves individual factors, self-perception is highly influenced by social networks and communities, which are influenced by societal discourses and cultures. Hence, through the results and discussion sections, students' experiences surrounding a sense of belonging are explicitly situated within these three analytical levels. There are two main reasons why I have deemed important to clarify the analytical levels of each theme. Firstly, it is inspired by how the educational researchers in Halse (2018) have approached belonging through a micro-level analysis, while considering broader agents. Secondly, it aims to illustrate the multidimensionality of the notion of belonging, as emphasised by Halse (2018).

Quality criteria

As this study is conducted through a qualitative research strategy, I will use the two primary criteria developed by Lincoln and Cuba (1985) to access the quality of this paper. The two primary criteria are: trustworthiness and authenticity (ibid.).

Trustworthiness

Firstly, there are four sub-criteria to evaluate the trustworthiness of a research: credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability (Bryman, 2012; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Credibility

Credibility encourages researchers to question how well they depicted the different meanings and interpretations given by participants (Bryman, 2012; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This criteria can be fulfilled through respondent validation and by a thick description of the analytical procedure of the data.

Firstly, regarding respondent validation, this research has been conducted according to good practices (see ethical considerations section). Throughout the interviews, students were often asked to

further explain their experiences, feelings and emotions. Whenever I would like to make sure I understood the interviewee's point of view, I would reiterate what they said, sometimes give an interpretation and ask the interviewees for validation. Moreover, each interviewee had access to their personal transcribed interview and were encouraged to provide any further explanation or to change any of their answer, even after the interview. Only one participant gave further precision regarding their experience of remote learning after the interview, by sending me vocal messages. The results have been shared with the participants too, however no pressure has been put into the participants' to actually read this study. Revision could potentially be necessary if any participant gives any essential feedback.

Secondly, extracts of raw data are provided and the analytical process is described in order to be transparent in the way the data has been interpreted. Moreover, every interpretation given within the results or discussion chapter, is carefully supported by earlier research on belonging or/and the theoretical framework on the research.

Transferability

Qualitative research is concerned about the contextual uniqueness of their findings (Bryman, 2012; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). As this can be limiting for the transferability of a research (Bryman, 2012), it is important to produce a thick description of the context under research (Geertz 1973, as cited in Bryman, 2012). This thesis provides a description of the different contexts that are of relevance. It considers the structure of the French educational system and its' main values and culture. It situates the research in a particular time and provides information regarding external measures that impacted students' schooling (e.g. COVID-19 preventive measures). A description of the structure, organisation and culture of the Sacred Heart high school was also presented, thanks to the students' interviews and research conducted on the schools' website. Finally, this study also gives some information regarding the background of the students, while also considering their right for anonymity (see ethical considerations section).

Dependability

This criterion encourages researchers to guarantee that "complete records are kept of all phases of the research process" (Bryman, 2012, p. 392). The research processes were recorded and firstly shared with my supervisor. Moreover, these processes are made traceable in the paper through the thick description of how the research was conducted. In fact, all important stages that lead to the results of this thesis are transparent – the main steps of qualitative research, the method of data collection, sampling, analysis etc.

Confirmability

While considering that research cannot be fully objective in social research, a researcher must act in good faith (Bryman, 2012; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). A researcher must insure that personal values or inclinations do not dominate the research and its findings without any research evidence (Bryman, 2012; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). As long as the criteria of credibility, transferability and dependability are satisfied, the criterion of conformability can be fulfilled. Furthermore, as previously mentioned, any interpretation in this thesis is carefully supported by previous research.

Authenticity

Although contested (Bryman, 2012), Lincoln and Guba (1985) argue for the inclusion of authenticity as a criteria to access the quality of qualitative research. Similarly to action research, the authenticity criteria considers matters such as empowerments, representation and accountability (Bryman, 2012; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). It takes a more engaged stance on social research (ibid.). The criteria of authenticity is composed of five sub-criteria: fairness, ontological, educative, catalytic, and tactical authenticity.

Fairness is concerned about the extent to which multiple voices are being fairly represented among the social context under study (Bryman, 2012; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This research mostly focuses on the experiences of students, and did not explore other important actors such as the teachers or school staff. However, this research aims in allowing the voices of a group of individuals that are seldom considered in research on belonging: young people (Alesech & Nayar, 2020; Longaretti, 2020; Riley, 2019; Rose & Shevlin, 2017). It is the aim of the study to focus on the narratives of those most affected by school belonging. Moreover, this study explores the experiences of two different group of students, which come from different middle schools and hence are expected to have divergent experiences regarding their transition to the Sacred Heart high school. As previously mentioned, these students have also a quite diverse background.
Finally, an effort has been made to equally approach all the students' experiences surrounding belonging and no outcomes were concealed. One of the objectives of this thesis was to actually depict the complexities and the multidimensionality of a sense of belonging; hence important efforts were made in order to honor all these complexities in the data collected.

Ontological authenticity is concerned about whether the research allowed participants to better understand their context (Bryman, 2012; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In other words, whether the research raised consciousness. During the interviews, students often expressed making sense of their experience for the first time, which often required them to think before giving answers to certain questions. In that sense, students were challenged for the first time to reflect and become aware of their context and how that context is impacting themselves. For most of the participants, this led them to engage in a critical stance regarding their own experience. This can be found in the data when some students start to critically reflect on teaching practices, or social practices, and then explain why these practices make them feel a certain way, and yet, they often recognise that these experiences are shaped by multiple factors. They often cannot fully perceive these factors, but some of the participants recognised that their experience at school is not only determined by teachers and their peers. After the conduction of the interviews, most participants expressed feeling positive about the experience because they rarely reflect and share their feelings and emotions regarding their school life.
Regarding my own experience, as a researcher, this study also pushed me to further explore and understand this social context. Exploring the notion of belonging allowed me to better perceive how the notion is tightly connected to how a social context is constructed and reproduced. It encouraged me to be aware of inclusive and exclusive practices that impact one's belonging and identity. Most importantly, it made me aware of the multiple agents that impact and create belonging: what Wright (2015) calls the more-than-human agents.

Educative authenticity asks whether the participants of the study can now better understand diverse perspectives regarding belonging and their context (Bryman, 2012; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). As the data was collected through individual semi-structured interviews, the participants did not have the possibility to directly share their own experiences with other students. However, interestingly, at the end of the interviews, most students asked about others participants interviews. They were curious to know if there were any similar or different point of views. They also expressed throughout the

interviews that other peers could have a different experiences than them. There was a certain curiosity expressed by the participants regarding the views of other students. Hopefully, by reading the results of this thesis, they will be able to better understand different perspectives and experiences. Moreover, other than the interviewee's own understanding of divergent perspectives, this research has been promoting discussions among peers in the masters' on the significance of the concept in Education studies.

Catalytic authenticity is interested on how the research encourages participants to engage and change circumstances (Bryman, 2012; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Throughout the interviews, participants often expressed not having any power regarding the teaching practices, school culture or the relationship with their teachers as per the asymmetrical power relations. One of the students even said that if he had a major problem with a teacher, he would not feel entitled to discuss with the teacher directly, and that only his parents would be able to. However, after the interviews, two Sacred Hearts mentioned that they should try to reach out to new students. Another Sacred Heart reflected about a student that was bullied – not by her – but she wondered whether she should have done something to stop it. There was a small catalytic moment for few participants, which made them become empathetical of other students (this can also connected to the *Educative authenticity* criterion).

Moreover, the more I discussed my thesis topic with peers, the more they also reflected on belonging in relation to their own research – be it on education language, curriculum or learning design. Once this thesis is accessible to the public, and further discussions can take place, I hope this thesis will encourage anyone in taking "action" towards inclusive and caring belongings.

Tactical authenticity asks whether the participants felt empowered by engaging in the research (Bryman, 2012; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). It is very difficult to assess whether participating to an interview empowered the students. Yet, I believe that awareness is always empowering. Ultimately, I hope this research can help each participant to appreciate and understand better their own perspectives and the perspectives of other participants.

Regarding my own experience conducting this research, it empowered me by also better reflect on my own experience of school belonging. It encourages me to further continue research on this topic, to engage in social actions towards inclusive education and to engage in action research. In line with Riley (2019) research, it is now my belief that engaging students' in a collaborative research around belonging can empower them to develop their sense of belonging at school and create a positive school transformation.

Ethical considerations

Conducting ethical research entails considering several issues. This thesis is aligned with ethical considerations developed by the European Parliament & Council (2016) on GDPR as the study was conducted in France, within a Masters' program based in Sweden. Moreover Diener and Crandall's four main ethical issues in social research were considered (1978, cited in Bryman, 2012).

Firstly, as all the participants were under 18 years old, a consent form was given to them and their legal guardians. This consent form is inspired by the template given by Stockholm University, which was directly translated in French (see Appendix A and B). All the participants provided the consent form duly filled before the interviews were conducted. The consent form stated the students' rights during and after the interview. Moreover, the participants were orally reminded, before and after the interview, that they could withdraw from the research at any point as well as skip any interview questions. The participants, and legal guardians, were also informed about the general aim of the

research in the consent form and encouraged to ask for further precision before and after the interview. However the consent form did not precise that the study would compare the experiences between two different groups. This was avoided so the students could focus their own personal narratives and experiences. As previously mentioned, the participants were given access to their personal transcripts as well as the results of the study. Although they were encouraged to make any type of changes in their personal transcript, no changes were made by any participant. Personal data was processed in a secure manner, the consent forms were kept safe and the recordings were placed in a secure data storage provided by Stockholm University and only accessed by my supervisor and I (European Parliament & Council, 2016).

As certain topics were sensitive for some participants, I was very careful in providing a safe and relaxing setting. As mentioned, students could choose how/where/when to get interviewed. They were encouraged to make themselves at ease, to drink or eat during the interview and let me know when anything was unclear or uncomfortable. Five interviews were paused by a short break either because the topic was becoming heavy for the participant or because the space in which the interview was being conducted was temporarily not private or secure. The personal data was directly anonymized and made confidential just after the interview. Pseudonyms were directly given to each transcription and consent forms were stored separately from data in order to ensure direct confidentiality of the participants. Moreover, information that could potentially identify participants, such as their country of origin, was anonymised.

For ethical and transparency matters I must also be clear about my personal relationship with the mentioned schools as well as the participants. As stated, I am an alumni from the Sacred Heart high school, but also an alumni from the Starier middle school. Thus, I have a personal connection to both schools that partly shapes my understanding and interpretation of certain experiences shared by the participants. I can also visualize the spaces of the schools as per my own experience there. However, while this research was being conducted I had no personal direct connection with both schools. Most importantly, experiences and contexts are rarely absolutely similar, and throughout the whole research process I kept in mind the aim of the study that is to explore experiences around belonging during transition periods under an unprecedent global pandemic context through the lens of a strong theoretical background. Hence, my analysis and results are rooted firmly in the theoretical framework of belonging by Wright (2015). The research also follows precise analytical procedures as mentioned in the analysis of data collection section.

Furthermore, few of the Starier participants and I knew each other. However the nature of our relationship barely evolved acquaintanceship. Neither of us are involved in each other's personal lives. This relationship could have potentially made the student more reluctant in sharing certain experiences but on the contrary, the concerned participants deeply engaged in the interviews as they were assured about the confidentiality of their personal information. Finally, as an individual I also shared some personal information mainly after the interview. Only basic personal information was shared before the interview simply to make sure the interviewees could feel at ease, especially if we were meeting for the first time. However, I avoided to share certain personal information before the interview, such as mentioning that I was an alumni of the high school, in order to not bias the answers of the participants. As an interviewer, I avoided any comment or opinion on what the participants were sharing, and would only make sure they knew I was listening and understanding what they were saying. As a researcher, I stayed open to any question regarding my study, be it before, during or after the interviews were conducted.

Limitations and delimitations

There are four main limitations within this study. Firstly, as a small scaled qualitative study, it seeks to discover experiences of belonging rather than to ascertain generalisable findings. Hence, the results of this thesis cannot be perceived as representative or generalisable. It aims however to contribute and promote the theorisation of the concept in the field of education as I believe that by carefully theorising belonging, one can use it as a tool to disentangle non inclusive education practices and values (Halse, 2018). It allows a better understanding of how multiple agents – from different analytical levels – positively or negatively impact students' belonging at school (ibid.).

Regarding the multidimensionality of belonging, this thesis tried to expose certain meso and macro practices that somewhat impact students' experiences of belonging at school. However, the study mostly focused on the students' own life narratives, prioritising the analysis of micro experiences and practices. It is very difficult to comprise all the dynamics of the concept of belonging within a Masters' thesis, as per its' complexity and holistic nature. Nevertheless, this thesis still exposes how certain personal experiences, expressed by the participants, are being structured by meso/macro agents. In a way, this thesis shows that belonging is more than a personal feeling, it is not only about the Self or an identity (Charlton et al., 2018). Belonging is co-constituted by multiple agents and it is important to expose these dynamics in order to promote or contest practices that can be inclusive or exclusive (Charlton et al., 2018; Halse, 2018).

This thesis opted for a snowball sampling in order to select the participants. A snowball sampling has been criticised for not being representative of a population or for collecting data from people that know each other and hence share very similar experiences and meanings/interpretation of those experiences (Bryman, 2012). Firstly, concerns regarding the generalisation of the results beyond the research setting, do not really emerge in this qualitative study. As previously mentioned, this study seeks to explore experiences, interpretations and focuses on theoretical growth, rather than generalisations. Secondly, belonging is related to the construction and (re)production of identity in relation with Others (Wright, 2015), and a snowball sampling focuses and reflects these interconnections between people and other agents (Bryman, 2012). In this case, it is a highly relevant strategy, like Holbrook and Jackson claim (1996, in Bryman, 2012). Furthermore, in order to have a certain diversity in experiences among the participants, I opted to interview at least one participant for each class in 10th grade. Hence, the interviewees' come from the 5 different classes of the Sacred Heart high school. This cannot be considered as a representative sampling, but this was done in order to allow multiple experiences to emerge.

Finally, this research only depicts belonging positively. However, a sense of belonging can be used for harmful or extremist means and it is necessary to not be reductive of this concept (Riley, 2019). Criminal gangs for example, use belonging as a fundamental factor that co-constructs the gang and its members (Riley, 2019). But this fact reinforces the need to understand how belonging works and to further recognise the dangers of *not* belonging. For Riley (2019), when young people feel alienated, like they do not belong to school, they are more at risk of social exclusion and exploitation. This leads to the search of belonging through dissatisfaction and alienation, and as we always seek to satisfy our need to belong, this can potentially result in finding belonging in extremist and harming ways (Riley, 2019). As a matter of fact, often in this data, there are imposed ways of belonging to the school that are sometimes rejected by some of the participants or anxiety inducing – as students' feel like such ways of belonging are exclusive of their Self. In these cases, students' often reported feeling isolated or alienated (see results and discussion chapters).

Chapter 6 – Results

Belonging and self-perception in relationships

This section explores how the participants define a sense of belonging and how this definition is concerned about the encounter between the Self and the Other. Just like previous research has pointed out, positive relationships considerably enhance the participants' sense of belonging at school (Alesech & Nayar, 2020; Basel & Hamilton, 2019; Chiu et al., 2012; Ellery, 2019; Faust et al., 2014; Lee, 2002; Longaretti, 2020; Pendergast et al., 2018; Rose & Shevlin, 2017; Smerdon, 2002; Vickers et al., 2014). Furthermore, the use of Wright's (2015) theory for interpretation, allowed for understanding the deep connection between relationships, self-perception and belonging. For the interviewees' the most positive relationships are those in which they know they can be their true selves. However, negative relationships are those in which the participants feel like they cannot be their true selves. Moreover, this section also develops on the nature of each relationship the interviewee's encounter in high school. This is due to the fact that every participant made clear the distinctions between their relationships with friends, peers and teachers. Some of these relationships seem to be defined through social-cultural factors.

Perceptions of belonging

Towards the end of the interview participants were asked about what a feeling of belonging meant to them, all mentioned belonging as ultimately being relational but also self-perceptive. In other words, all of the students associated a feeling of belonging to a positive emotion produced by caring relations in which they feel they can be themselves and feel good and confident about being themselves. Students used words such as *"being at ease"* – which was mentioned by seven students – *"be yourself"*, *"we get along"*, *"being welcomed"*, *"accepted"* and *"no fear"* of being oneself or be judged by others.

The participants were then asked whether they felt that feeling of belonging in their high school, in the way they defined it themselves. Three participants – Inés (Statier), Lejla (Sacred Heart) and Sofia (Starier) – were very straightforward in answering that they cannot feel a sense of belonging in their high school. The other remaining participants answered that in general they do feel they belong at school as they are well surrounded by friends and in general, feel good. Moreover, few students also referred to their class when they felt like the general class atmosphere is inclusive and caring. Interestingly, all the participants did not mention their teachers or school staff or the school as a whole as reasons why they feel they belong in the school. The explanation to why they felt they belonged in their high school is limited to their relationship with their friends which generated positive emotions. As an example, while Maxime (Sacred Heart) is more straightforward in answering that he feels like he belongs, Angel (Starier) who is still adapting herself to a new environment, is more cautious. Yet, both of them emphasise that it is thanks to their friends that they feel like they belong in their high school.

> *… because I am with my friends, and then it is true that we study but then we are in the recreation ground and I am with my friends so honestly, it's alright. With my friends, it goes well so we laugh.* – Maxime (Sacred Heart)

> *Umm… maybe not in the high school, but when I am with my friends and all that yes. […] Umm… in the high school, it's not the same. I don't know how to say it… I am always with my*

group of friends, so nothing much changes, but for example... Actually, I am at ease everywhere, so there's not really a place where I am disturbed, where I don't feel at ease, where I don't belong […]. In high school... I think it's a question of... to adapt myself to what to what there is in school, but I am not yet fully adapted to everything that is going on at the high school […].
– Angel (Starier)

These two quotes illustrate what most participants expressed: their sense of belonging at school is driven by friendship, and they distinguish this emotion produced by their relation with friends to what they feel about their learning environment. Angel (Starier), for example, expressed how part of her feels that she belongs to the high school because her friends are there, yet, because she's trying to adapt herself to "what is going on at the high school" part of her feels like she does not belong to the school. Maxime (Sacred Heart) on the other hand talks about recreation time as the time he feels a sense of belonging at school because he gets to meet his friends.

As Wright (2015) explains, a feeling of belonging emerges through the emotions produced by the interactions between people but also the interactions between people and collectivities, things and places. Hence, for most participants, belonging as an emotion builds upon their connections with other students within their high school. These connections then generate emotions and belonging in a circular movement. Moreover, it is rather interesting that participants only refer to their connections with friends – and sometimes classmates – when reflecting on school belonging, while a high school is a symbolic place where students interact with teachers, with school staff, with certain pedagogical practices etc. Previous research has proven that these elements are also fundamental for students' belonging at school (Alesech & Nayar, 2020; Basel & Hamilton, 2019; Chiu et al., 2012; Ellery, 2019; Faust et al., 2014; Lee, 2002; Longaretti, 2020; Pendergast et al., 2018; Rose & Shevlin, 2017; Smerdon, 2002; Vickers et al., 2014), yet, every participant avoided mentioning such actors .

As previously mentioned, three participants – Inés (Statier), Lejla (Sacred Heart) and Sofia (Starier) – reported not feeling a sense of belonging in their school. Although the three of them were experiencing some changes in their friendship relations, they still felt like they had a reliable and stable friendship group with some students in the high school. However, when rationalizing this lack of belonging, the three participants referred to the high school as a whole, as a space that represents a multitude of dynamics which they do not feel comfortable with. Lejla and Inés reflect on how the school climate is quite heavy with COVID-19, how they feel a constant surveillance from the school staff, how it impacts them, their friends and their experiences as high schoolers. The three girls also deeply reflected on certain values that are promoted at the high school that they struggle to relate to, especially the promotion of competitiveness by teachers. Sofia and Lejla also mentioned that they struggle to connect with certain of their classmates due to divergent values. Lejla is a Sacred Heart, however, this year she was placed in a higher ranked class and has to interact with students she previously never did, although they were also Sacred Hearts. It is due to these multiple factors that the three girls struggle to feel like they belong to the Sacred Heart, although they have caring and stable friendships. When explaining why she could not feel a sense of belonging at the Sacred Heart, Sofia said:

[…] But then, if it's at high school, and that I am with the people I feel good with, I am not going to feel good neither because we are in the high school. And the high school, for me, equals anxiety […]. Well it's really... everything that we live in the high school and everything that ... all the, all the problems that we experience there. Everything that it does to us etc. Even if it's just to have fun, it's going to stress me. […] But really, high school, for me, high school

is anxiety, high school is fear of the future, stress, it's only dark words, it's dark words. – Sofia (Starier)

Wright (2015) explains that individuals tend to connect people to a place, and hence the place is also connected to the people. We also connect values to a place and people, and the place and the people to these values (Halse, 2018; Wright, 2015). I suggests that this explains why, when these three participants express the reasons why they do not feel like they belong to the school, they refer to a multitude of factors; the high school in itself represents all these factors and the factors represent the high school. When Sofia, Inés and Lejla came into interaction with new people, practices and values, emotions emerged through "borders" creating a distinction between their 'Self' and 'the Other' (Wright, 2015). In this case, these emotions create and perform borders that seem to generate feelings of perceived disconnection (ibid.). Hence, it seems that Sofia, Inés and Lejla experience non-belonging because of a difficulty in relating to certain classmates, competitive school values and constant surveillance because of COVID-19 measures. And because they cannot relate to this culture, they also feel personally rejected by it, their Self cannot be accepted. When asked what she would need in her high school in order to feel like she belongs, Sofia replied "*people*" that accept and respect who she is. Similarly, when Inés was asked whether shefelt the feeling of belonging she previously defined in her high school, she replied:

> *No. Not at all, at all, at all. I really feel like there's a big big difference already when I enter in the school compared to when I am just outside the school. […] I feel already more at ease at my bus stop than at the school, really. […]*
> *Everything that is teachers… For me, once I enter in the high school, I have to become another person, pay attention to what I say, pay attention to how I behave, not be too quirky, the teachers observing us, pay attention because rumours can spread quickly so.. […]. It's as if we were actors actually […].* – Inés (Starier)

For all the interviewees', a place where they belong is a place where they can be accepted and respected by being themselves. And it is precisely what Inés, Sofia and Lejla struggle with. In general, they do not feel enough safe and comfortable in showing their true selves at the Sacred Heart high school.

To conclude, in contrast to the other participants, when reflecting on why they could not feel belonging in their school, Inés, Lejla and Sofia regarded their high school in its global form. For them, it represents a space where certain interactions – be it with peers, teachers or school staff – feel very uncomfortable and even unnatural. Moreover, from these extracts we can recognise a struggle in the ongoing practices that students perform every day in order to position themselves in the world.

Nature of relationships

Throughout the interviews, all the participants made distinctions regarding the nature of the relationships between themselves and their friends, peers, teachers and other school staff. When confronted with questions on these different relationships – for example to "describe their relationships with their friends/colleagues/teachers" – the answers showed a clear division into what was expected from these three different types of relationships. When referring to friendship, students tended to employ similar words to those used to describe belonging – *being at ease*, *being oneself* without fear of being judged. And as previously mentioned, the students associate their friendship to a group they belong to. However, when describing their relationship with their colleagues or teachers, the answers were much more complex.

Relationships with classmates and friends

Overall, the interviewees appreciate a cooperative class, which make them feel a bit more at ease and academically supported, in contrast with a competitive class atmosphere. However a cooperative class does not mean that the participants necessarily feel comfortable with their classmates. When the participants reflected on their relationships with classmates, they pondered as to whether or not they can relate to the general beliefs and practices of their classmates. As an example, Sofia mentioned that her class is quite cooperative, and they try to help each other academically, however she struggles to relate to a given group of students in her class that makes her feel uncomfortable and self-conscious. Anna who feels like she's generally at ease with her classmates still makes some distinctions between certain people in her class :

> *I feel at ease too, but as I said, there are certain people that when you talk to them you don't have the impression you are on the same wavelength. So, it's a bit complicated because in our class, there are a lot of people that have different values and principals. We don't all have the same views on life neither, because there are still a lot who are actually childish and who don't have this maturity while talking. We don't have the same scale of maturity in the class.* – Anna (Sacred Heart)

Many of the participants mentioned these divergent values between themselves and certain students, yet they struggled in clearly defining those divergent values. As per the constant mention of these values by many participants in the data collected, I believe that these values are important to them, and are strongly connected to the way they view themselves and their identities. Some of the participants mentioned that sometimes they have to perform a certain role with some given peers – the performance of these roles does not necessarily feel comfortable to the participants. On whether she feels what she defined as belonging in her school, Victoria explains:

> *Umm... with my friends. Well, yes, yeah with my friends, yes. But the rest, as I was saying previously ... I have this impression that I am not fully myself so I am not very accepted by ... yeah it's actually strange. It's like, I give myself a type with them whereas I don't really like it at all, but to not... to not ... I don't know how to explain it ... for them to not criticise me, or that they do things to me and everything... but not my friends! The others really.* – Victoria (Sacred Heart)

Some other participants expressed the same concern as Victoria. As Goodnow (1993), explains, this struggle in not being able to be one true self without fear of judgement, is an important factor that hinders students' sense of belonging. Hence, I suggest that, like in any society, in school there are also normative behaviours that everyone is expected to perform. Deviant behaviours can be dangerous for the students' status at school. All the participants made a careful distinction between the relationship they have with their classmates and other peers, and the relationship they have with close friends. For all the participants, having a stable close group of friends is determinant for their sense of belonging at school. Because, for all the participants, it is when they are with their group of friends that they can be themselves and feel at ease the most. The participants also feel like their friends provide the emotional support that they need at school. However, this is not enough for all the participants' to feel like they belong to the high school, or feel at ease.

Teacher-student relationship

On the other hand, regarding the participants' relationship with teachers, all students mentioned that the quality of their relationships highly depended on each teacher. Interestingly, all the students' answers focused on the teaching practices and the societal definitions of the role of a student and a teacher:

> (when asked to describe his relationship with his teachers) *It's alright because, well, I am calm. I am not someone who messes around, who laughs, screams or speaks, no no. I am focused on the classes, I ask questions, I listen to the teacher and that's all. Well, I do my role of student.* – Zain (Sacred Heart)

> (regarding her relationship with teachers) *[…] there are teachers whom … well they don't really care, they are just here to do their lessons […] well, anyways that's their job, they give us lessons and that's it. And I follow their classes so … nothing really changes.* – Angel (Starier)

According to these narratives, the student-teacher relationship seems to be well defined and structured through cultural expectations of the typical role of a student and the typical role of a teacher in France (Norman, 2016). None of the participants really talked about a close relationship with a teacher. They truly focused on how well their respective roles were being performed. However, few participants mentioned not feeling comfortable with this type of relationship as it supposes an asymmetrical power relation. Inés explains that this asymmetrical power restricts her from feeling comfortable in interacting with her teachers:

> (when talking about how comfortable she feels in interacting with her teachers) *Not at ease at all, because I have the impression that I cannot be myself, that I cannot be … my personality must stay hidden. […] Clearly not* [myself], *because I am afraid of saying something stupid, it's like… I know that I am not in a situation in which it is possible to say anything.*
> (when asked whether she felt like the teachers could judge her) *Yes yes yes, a lot, even when I try to appear natural or that I try to be myself, but in the end, I can't quite manage, and then, I show another personality, I feel like even like that they judge me so… But then it's not really the judgement that bothers me, but more their power.* – Inés (Starier)

Inés explains that teachers have an authority over their students that makes her feel like she cannot be at ease in being her natural self. For these reasons, I argue that this negatively impacts her sense of belonging. Sofia also explains that the teachers have the power in defining what they expect from their students:

> *It's the fact that they mainly focus on… speaking in class, which I do not do and I think that there's half of them that don't know my name yet and we are at the end of the second trimester! Actually, they focus on those who participate the most and those who are more active in the class, and me, I'm not really active in the class… I am a bit the minor character so, they do not focus much on my case.* – Sofia (Starier)

I argue that this is an issue of power that teachers hold in defining the role of a "good student" in which students feel like they have no power over. It is an issue on whether the students feel like they correspond more or less to that definition and/or whether they feel comfortable performing that role that is to a certain extent imposed to them. According to the data, the definition of a good student is

allusive and perceptive, it does not necessarily translate into students who obtain good grades. Few participants mentioned how they feel like professors value students who participate in classes as well as competitiveness. Yet, according to the data, not every student feels comfortable in performing these characteristics, or/and do not identify with them. The concerned interviewees expressed feeling like they do not belong to a certain definition of what a good student is. I argue that, as students' feel like they do not belong to a given definition of 'a good student', they feel like their true Self is disregarded, negatively impacting their sense of belonging. Early research states that belonging is considerable hindered when students' do not feel personally accepted (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Goodenow, 1993). At the same time, these participants expressed feeling excluded when teachers do not acknowledge them as individuals. Ironically, according to most participants, the reason why they would not participate much in class would often be because they were concerned of being negatively judged by the others or because the professor did not make them feel comfortable.

Nonetheless, students all mentioned few teachers whom they felt comfortable with, they described these few teachers as caring and supportive. In fact, a sense of belonging does indeed emanate from caring relationships, and it is also built upon inclusive truthful relationships in which the students do not feel like they have to perform a role they do not feel comfortable with (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Wright, 2015). The students find belonging when they can perform their own identities without feeling alienated or lesser (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Wright, 2015). The expectations the others' have on what they should or not be, can be quite oppressive for some students, especially those who are very self-aware, to the point they start to isolate themselves.

As Wright (2015) explains, the most inclusive type of belonging does not emerge from essentialist definitions but through caring connections that challenge power relations. It seems in this case, that the societal role given to the teacher and the role given to students seem to set these teachers and students apart – and even set students apart between them. This can be explained by the high PDI in France, which accepts such unequal power relations and emphasis hierarchy in societal interaction (Hodstede Insights, 2021; Marshall, 2019). The school institution is also impacted by such dynamics (Marshall, 2019). Hence, in line with Halse (2018) and Wright (2015), I argue that issues of belonging often appear at the intersection between political, personal and societal concerns. The roles, characteristics and identities put forward in a school seem to emerge from greater discourses at a macro level, as a school mirrors its society (Halse, 2018).

In previous research, it was found that students' sense of belonging was enhanced when they shared a positive caring relational bound with their teachers. Unfortunately, from the accounts of the participants in this thesis, it seems that this type of bound is not the norm. However it was possible to identify few teachers across the whole data set that truly positively impacted the participants. For instance, the same French teacher was mentioned by five participants, from different classes, as being someone that made them feel at ease. Zain discribes:

> *Madame X is super cool, she truly listens to us, every time she makes us laugh. Actually, she seems like a teenager when she conducts her classes, so we feel more at ease. She's easy going.*
> – Zain (Sacred Heart)

What this extract seems to illuminate is that, because this teacher is attentive to the students, because she engages with them in a more open relational manner, to the point that *she seems like a teenager*, that she seems like them, they can relate to her and feel at ease in being themselves. Zane, as well as the other five participants that mentioned this French teacher, also mentioned that she is quite strict and pushes them to give their best in her classes, as strict doesn't mean uncaring. Few other teachers were

also mentioned by the participants as making them feel comfortable. The students mentioned that these teachers were;

- constantly trying to motivate them, by for instance saying: *"we will make it"* (Anna – Sacred Heart),
- very supportive both academically and emotionally,
- helping them staying focused,
- understanding of the students' situation with the actual pandemic,
- attentive to the students' voice.

These are the characteristics that seem to constitute a caring teacher-students relationship for the interviewees. These are also characteristics that have been pointed out by literature on belonging as enhancing students sense of belonging at school (Alesech & Nayar, 2020; Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Chiu et al., 2012; Ellery, 2019; Goodenow, 1993; Halse, 2018; Longaretti, 2020; Pendergast et al., 2018; Smerdon, 2002). However, within these mentioned literature on belonging, there is little to no information regarding the nature of this relationship, the underlying power relationships and what is perceive as the social norm regarding teacher-students relationships.

When asked about the teachers that made them feel uncomfortable, or less at ease, the patterns among all the answers was that there was no personal relational bound with them at all. The relationship felt very distant, and marked by power relations.

> *Well they don't make us feel at ease. It's like they are here just to conduct the class, they just do the lecture intensively, they don't let us breathe.* – Zane (Sacred Heart)

> *I am not asking to be pampered neither but at least followed-up. Because… they often forget that… their job, it's not necessarily to teach and then leave afterwards. There's still… them whom speak and us whom listen and learn. I think a minimum of communication, like "did you understand everything?" is needed. And if we didn't understand, then reexplain it. So for example, in mathematics […] I asked a question and she* [the teacher] *puffed at me […]* – Inés (Starier)

In this case, I suggest that the important power relation teachers hold over their class and their students seem to hinder the extent to which students' feel belonging. When the teachers do not acknowledge the presence of the students, like Zain (Sacred Heart) explains, or disregard the needs of the students, like Inès (Starier) explains, it negatively impacts the students' sense of belonging in the class. The participants' belonging seems to thrive when they feel acknowledge, respected and understood by their teachers.

Self-perception and co-becoming while transitioning to high school

This sub-section illustrates how belonging goes beyond individual experiences and perceptions by showing how students collective co-become with their learning environment.

In line with previous research on school belonging during educational transitions (Longaretti, 2020; Pendergast et al., 2018), five out of the six Stariers mentioned having a challenging experience when first arriving in the High School as per their relationships with the others. They reflected on the fact that they knew very little people, in total contrast to their experience in middle school where they knew or heard of most students and were familiar with everything in the school. Margarida was the

only Starier that did not feel any difficulty in her transition to high school and was the only one who already knew quite a bit of Sacred Heart students and became the representative of her own class. However, it took the other five Stariers a bit longer to get to know new people and adjust to their new life as high schoolers as they felt like they needed to be careful when interacting with people they did not know. Inés and Sofia, reflected on how it was difficult for them to determine who they could trust, who they could be themselves with and also who felt approachable :

> *But really, I found it really difficult in the beginning to communicate with people. I quite like to talk, really a lot, but not to everyone. So... it was really complicated to know whom I can trust, whom I can speak to... well with respect to judgement of others and everything, as I don't really know, I didn't want to make myself a reputation neither. – Inés (Starier)*

> *Because in middle school well... even during the first year in the middle school, I knew more or less everyone. I felt in security, I knew them from the activity centre. We were all from [name of the city], we knew each other for the most part. At the end of middle school too, I felt at ease with everyone, even if I never talked to them. There were a lot of people with whom I didn't mind to talk to or to make [...] It didn't scare me. But I arrived in high school, I didn't know anyone. I knew 10 people out of, I don't know, 600, 700, 800. – Sofia (Statier)*

What Inés and Sofia describe, is a situation in which they were having new encounters in a new environment. Hence, they seem to struggle to understand how to react as they have no information or previous experiences that could help them understand how to navigate socially. According their narratives, this experience also made them feel very self-conscious regarding whom they are, whom they are not and whom they seek to be, and how the Other would react to it. Because it is through this encounters that emotions can emerge, and a sense of belonging or not form (Wright, 2015).
Inés, Nuno, Chloé and Sofia reflected on the need to be self-confident under such circumstances. Chloé, who perceives herself as a reserved person, explained that this experience can be extra challenging for reserved people, especially under the COVID-19 preventive measures that limit interactions. But for her, interacting is a necessity as: "it's when we interact with people that we feel more like we belong to something" (Chloé – Starier). Nuno explains that over the past few year he gained quite a lot of self-confidence while playing volleyball, he believes that thanks to that experience he is now more comfortable in interacting with others.

Again, students mainly mentioned other students when referring to their quest in finding their own place and their belonging. Yet, few Stariers also mentioned how they did not know the teachers neither and it was difficult sometimes to understand what they expected from them. Moreover, most of the Stariers mentioned that it was more difficult to get through this process with the COVID-19 related measures. They particularly mentioned the mask and the social distancing as being two measures that made it harder for them to approach others. For these participants, it was difficult to read the emotions of the others, to scrutinise their face expressions and thus to understand the other and know where to place themselves and act according to these indicators. Inés (Staerier) explains that the mask made it difficult for her to understand the emotions of others and hence create new friendships. However she could partly rely on the friendship she has with other Stariers.

> *But otherwise, well I was from the Starier middle school, there are some people around [...] and we are friends and... It was complicated to make other friends. So luckily they were here, but still, we are not in the same class, so inevitably I am going to make other friends and, it's*

not easy to build trust with people, to really discuss, to confide with when we don't really see what the person in front of us feels. – Inés (Starier)

By considering this data, I argue that this process of transition was a quest for the Stariers to discover the underlying atmosphere and culture, in an institution they do not deeply know. A quest to discover which performances, practices and beliefs this new environment embodied. It was also a quest for students to understand whether they could be themselves while not being negatively judged by their new peers. The Stariers expressed feeling like they landed in a foreign environment in which they still had to find their own place, their belonging. Margarida (Starier) had a very good 'social map' that would guide her through the transition, the five other Stariers had to draw their own map as they were transitioning. However, the speed to which they could draw their own map was impacted by the measures to prevent COVID-19, but also by the degree of self-confidence and support along the journey. These five students mostly relied on their friends from middle school; although they were all divided in different classrooms. Moreover, most of the Stariers expressed a certain nostalgia regarding their student life in middle school. Angel explains:

I still can't get over the fact that I left middle school. And... and it's still rather new for me ... the atmosphere is not really the same at high school compared to middle school. At least not until now... well I am at ease but I am not yet fully at ease because, I don't have the same feeling I felt in the middle school, but well, maybe I'll never find again that feeling of what I had in middle school in the high school [...]. It was feelings like being... at home let's say, be like a family in the middle school [...] What is missing... well it's the feeling of really knowing everyone, to truly adapt with everything and... yeah get along with really everyone, everyone! Even the people from other classes and everything, not only my class. – Angel (Starier)

I believe that it is in this longing for what once was, the realisation that one is not any more a middle schooler but a high schooler in a new establishment, that it is possible to perceive what Wright (2015) calls the process of co-becoming through belonging. While in middle school, for four years, the Stariers came in connection with their peers, teachers, other staff, discourses and everything that represented that place. Through these connections made in middle school, they all came to develop different forms of belonging. It is this understanding of belonging that they constructed themselves as students and as a person, at a certain extent. They then embodied what constructed themselves: they *are* Stariers. Now the Stariers come into connection with a new environment, and they are aware that it is through interaction and through each new encounter that they can once again build a sense of belonging in the high school. However, most of them are still in a period of negotiation with their new environment. The process of co-becoming is not necessarily inclusive and not everyone equally participates in determining what it means to belong to a place like a high school (Wright, 2015). In fact, there are normative behaviours that are constructed through relations of power (ibid.). Students often have to comply to certain social behaviours in order to feel and be considered to belong to a school, and they have little power in questioning these behaviours.

Regarding the five Sacred Hearts, they all viewed this transition as a continuity rather than a marked milestone between middle and high school. They all seemed to understand the different group dynamics, the stories behind most students. They also seemed aware of their school culture, of what was expected from them by their peers, teachers and the school in general. Some also knew more or less the personality of some of the high school teachers – either because they knew people who knew the teachers or due to the fact that some teachers in high school also teach in middle school. All of these

factors made all the Sacred Heart feel like there was not a big change in their school life and that it was very obvious that they *are* Sacred Hearts. Two of them even referred to the school as a sort of home.

> *I find that it doesn't really change much because, as I already did my middle school at the Sacred Heart, I was a bit used to the teachers, to the pressure Sacred Heart puts on us. And … there was no real change apart from the fact that we went from the bigger building to the small one.* – Lejla (Sacred Heart)

However, this does not mean that the transition was not challenging. Firstly, for Lejla, starting high school was harder compared to the other four Sacred Heart participants. Lejla felt attached to her last class in middle school as it had a very cooperative and caring atmosphere. Lejla is now struggling to belong to her new class, which is considered to be an elite class by the teachers. She feels a certain competitiveness she does not adhere to and the presence of certain values she does not identify with. She also highlighted a divergence of socio-economic background between her and the other students in her class, who seemed to have a higher status than her. She does not feel enough supported by her classmates and feels under pressure by the competition supported by her teachers. Lejla also deeply developed on the negative impact of the pandemic on her daily life and relationships.

Three other Sacred Heart participants also mentioned that this transition was mainly marked by COVID-19 preventive measures such as the mask, social distancing, the hybrid period, and the lack of learning during their last year of middle school. As the students had very little classes during the second half of their last year in middle school, they felt like they had to make more efforts in order to follow up on the high school level, which was more challenging according to them. Moreover some of the participants mentioned that the COVID-19 preventive measures make social interaction more difficult, in and out of high school. As previously mentioned it is through interaction with their friends and peers that these students can sense belonging at school, and a lack of interaction can potentially negatively impact the students experiences (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). The four Sacred Heart students also mentioned that their routine has become *heavier* and *exhausting*, since the pandemic outbreak. They also expressed how this is a general feeling that they also sense from the teachers whom they feel more dense. When discussing about his routine Zain declared:

> *It's like we are robots a bit, since we always have to go… well we have the masks, we go to school, we come back home, we have the masks, we go to school, we come back home. Well it's every student, they are all like us. […]… well I don't even know how to explain it, I am so used to this now that I don't know what… what I actually think about it. It has become a routine.* – Zain (Sacred Heart)

The preventive measures seem to have had an impact on these students' usual daily routines, practices and social interactions they once were used to. And as reported, belonging emerges from interaction and it is also (re)created through everyday practices (Wright, 2015). As such it seems that these changes had an impact on the students experiences at school. However, according to some of the Sacred Heart participants, they have been adapting to these new routines and in overall, they still feel a sense of belonging to their school. Yet, I argue that there is a clear longing for what once was in their routine and the feelings that came from it. And it is this feeling of nostalgia and longing that the Stariers and the Sacred heart commonly share.

To conclude this theme, on one hand, for most of the Stariers, the main challenge when arriving at the Sacred Heart high school was to find affective and caring new encounters that could lead them to an

inclusive belonging and co-becoming in their new school. On the other hand, for the majority of the Sacred Heart participants, their main challenges related to COVID-19 measures and the school work.

Belonging and the learning environment

Research has demonstrated that students' belonging is fostered when the school culture is inclusive and accepting and academically and emotionally supportive (Alesech & Nayar, 2020; Chiu et al., 2012; Ellery, 2019; Longaretti, 2020; Pendergast et al., 2018; Smerdon, 2002). Moreover, students tend to feel like they belong when the learning practices are engaging and hands-on (Alesech & Nayar, 2020; Basel & Hamilton, 2019; Ellery, 2019; Pendergast et al., 2018; Rose & Shevlin, 2017; Smerdon, 2002). For these reasons, participants were asked to reflect on their experiences and perceptions of the school climate and teaching practices. This section follows the findings of early research on belonging, and further develops on how such factors impact students' sense of belonging.

School climate : culture, values and norms

The participants were asked about their thoughts regarding their high school as well as how they felt about being high schoolers there. Nine out of the eleven participants regarded the Sacred Heart as being a strict institution – among these nine students were all the six Stariers and three Sacred Hearts. The Stariers mentioned that before arriving to the Sacred Heart, they already knew that the school was known for being exigent, and that not everyone can be accepted into the school. There was a certain pride coming from the Stariers to be accepted in the school. Zane (Sacred Heart), perceived this exigence positively as he felt that the school was continuously pushing him to give his best. Some of the Stariers, as well as two other Sacred Hearts, Anna and Lejla, were more skeptical towards this strict climate. In fact, eight participants – five Stariers and three Sacred Heart – mentioned feeling pressured at some point during the year. The pressure was given by the school staff in general and it could be due to diverse reasons such as the school rules and norms and the general situation with COVID-19.

Firstly, according to the data, the high school has rather strict rules and makes sure that every student complies with them. These rules are generally the same among French schools, with little differences, and are meant to assure social cohesion and a common culture (Normand, 2016). Like every French school, as per the students' accounts, the Sacred Heart high school charges the pastoral care sector [6] of assuring that such rules are followed.

However, three Sacred Heart – Anna, Lejla and Victoria – as well as two Stariers – Inés and Sofia – mentioned feeling under pressure due to the over surveillance of the school staff. Anna and Victoria mentioned that some school supervisors would talk down to them and try to overhear students' conversations during recreations. According to the participants, this surveillance goes beyond the physical building of the school, as they can be punished by the school over disagreements among peers on social media. These five participants have a negative outlook on this level of surveillance by the school, they mention feeling uncomfortable and sometimes too self-aware due to it. Victoria and Inés mentioned not being able to dress as they want, and feeling restrained by the strict dress code for girls at the school. Both were punished due to transgression of the school's dress code. Inés said:

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[6] These are school staff that are in charge of watching over the students when they are outside of classes but within the school facilities. They make sure that the students comply to the general rules of the school.

> *[…] it's not like McDonalds, "come as you are". It's really strict, so it's not "come as you are", so just regarding that, it's quite complicated.* – Inés (Starier)

For these five girls, it feels like the school's rules restrain them from feeling at ease and being themselves. Just like Inés (Starier), the other four interviewee's mentioned that the rules and the constant surveillance makes them feel worried about the way they portray themselves at school. They feel like the school is not accepting of certain aspects of themselves. Anna (Sacred Heart) also mentions feeling like the school surpervisors' treat them like "babies" and not like teenagers that are looking forward to gain independence and responsibility.

This seems to negatively impact their sense of belonging at school as they do not always feel like they can be their true self due to these strict rules and surveillance. To feel included and accepted as they are is essential for one's sense of belonging (Goodenow, 1993; Wright, 2015). I argue, that these rules force the students to follow imposed normative behaviours which they do not feel comfortable with, and under this context students cannot participate in the co-creation and negotiation of such norms. These rules actually make sure that the students understand their hierarchical position at school, and get accustomed to hierarchical models and the society's expectations. In fact, these rules are very symbolic of the French centralized-hierarchal educational model; they promote the acceptance of inequal power relations and also a social common culture (Hodstede Insights, 2021; Marshall, 2019). Yet, as Wright (2015) indicates, the inclusive belongings does not emerge through sameness nor essentialist ideas, but through caring encounters that challenge power relations.

Another important feature of the Sacred Heart is the promotion of competition among students. Five participants – two Sacred Hearts and three Stariers – reported feeling pressured by a certain competition that is encouraged by teachers. Lejla reported that a teacher classifies and gives back tests from the worst to the best grade. According to Sofia, one of her teachers also pressures them to get better grades than other classes. The school does indeed encourage inter class competition as they organise a common examination week for all 10th graders, in which the correction of the copies will be conducted by other than their own teachers. According to Anna (Sacred Heart), they do so to prepare the students' for their future as they envision upper education and the work world as competitive per se.

Yet, all the participants expressed feeling belonging in cooperative and caring environments, rather than competitive ones. This is in line with what previous research has indicated regarding the positive impact of a supportive learning environment on students' sense of belonging at school (Alesech & Nayar, 2020; Basel & Hamilton, 2019; Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Chiu et al., 2012; Ellery, 2019; Faust et al., 2014; Goodenow, 1993; Lee, 2002; Longaretti, 2020; Pendergast et al., 2018; Rose & Shevlin, 2017; Smerdon, 2002; Vickers et al., 2014).

From my interpretation of the participants accounts, it seems that the Sacred Heart school however follows a knowledge economy approach to education in which students' only need to be educated and ready to become competitive global workers (Marshall, 2019). Just like Riley (2019) warned about, under national and international pressures, teachers and the school seem to focus on performance goals instead of the students' well-being.

Most students also felt like sometimes the teachers and the school staff tended to encourage them in a negative way. They shared moments in which teachers and other school staff would make generalising speeches emphasizing the students' weaknesses and that they needed to work more in order to succeed.

> *[…] there are certain teachers that are going to try to shake us but in the wrong way, like we have teachers that will say "if you don't wake up you're going to ruin your life, I'm telling you*

you're going to have to repeat the year, yes you won't be able to do what you want to, your project makes no sense". – Lejla (Sacred Heart)

So for example, certain teachers, sometimes they can lecture us for 15, 20 minutes, right in the middle of a class, lecturing us on what we should do […] and sometimes I feel like these lectures are a bit too pessimistic […] they don't motivate. […] For example, they can tell us "you know if you keep on going like this, next year, you won't be able to choose your educational orientation, your subjects, your options […]". I think that they insist a lot on what we will fail, instead of what we will succeed, our key strenghs, what we can do, to motivate us. – Anna (Sacred Heart)

These speeches seem to emotionally affect students negatively. They also put pressure on students' over their future. The students also mentioned feeling confused by the generalizing approach of such discourses; some of them know that these speeches do not personally concern them, but because they are conducted in a general way, it still affects them and they feel emotionally drained.
As supported by early research (Alesech & Nayar, 2020; Chiu et al., 2012; Ellery, 2019; Longaretti, 2020; Pendergast et al., 2018; Smerdon, 2002), it is through a supportive school culture that the students' sense of belonging at school is nurtured.

On a positive note, as the Sacred Heart values the planning of the students' future projects, most of the students feel that they are very well supported on the matter. Most of the participants' felt well guided by most of the school staff regarding their future educational orientation. However, there is no clear evidence from the data on whether this has a positive impact on the students' sense of belonging at school.

Another cause of great emotional pressure at school are the COVID-19 preventive measures. Most participants, mentioned feeling that the strict trait of the high school has been intensified due to the current situation with COVID-19. These participants mentioned feeling a very uneasy atmosphere in the high school as professors and school staff seem more nervous than usual due to the unpredictability of the pandemic and for the participants, this negatively impacts the general school climate. Victoria and Margarida explain :

Teachers are upset and everything because they cannot hold their classes correctly. […] So, as they are irritated, we also feel their emotions so it's annoying. – Victoria (Sacred Heart)

It's true we have been living in a state of constant anxiety. […] we have a bit of pressure from our teachers, parents, and also the government and everything. – Margarida (Starier)

According to these narratives, COVID-19 seems to have had a considerable impact on the everyday teaching practices, creating a certain distress among teachers and students. The everyday practices that they once performed, and informed their belonging to a certain status as teachers, have been shacked and challenged by the preventive measures against COVID-19.
Few students reported that some of their teachers would call them the "COVID generation" as the teachers perceive that they have many learning gaps. Inés also reported that some teachers claim that some students only got accepted into high school as the admission criteria was loosed due to COVID-19. Anna explains:

[…] already at Sacred Heart, in the beginning, they would already quite pressure us. I have the impression that they put us under more pressure with covid, knowing that there are many that have learning gaps. It's not necessarily their fault. It's due to the complicated context […]. So, I have the impression that … they put us under a lot of pressure. – Anna (Sacred Heart)

Just like Anna, for this particular situation with COVID-19, most participants seem to understand that the situation is not easy for the teachers and school staff. However, this climate makes students feel more under pressure at school. Moreover, the school usually encourages students to participate in extracurricular activities or social work in line with the school's Christian values. Some students mentioned that they were looking forward to participating in such activities, mostly the Stariers. Nuno and Chloé (both Stariers) mentioned that for them, these activities would have allowed them to feel like they actively belong to the school. However, due to COVID-19, all these activities have been cancelled for the 2020-21 academic year.

Teaching practices

This subsection focuses on teaching practices that can foster or hinder belonging at school according to the interviewees. It is distinct from the subsection on student-teacher relationships, as it focuses on the teaching-learning techniques implemented by teachers. Findings in early research have also usually distinct these two pillars of belonging at school (Alesech & Nayar, 2020; Chiu et al., 2012; Ellery, 2019; Longaretti, 2020; Pendergast et al., 2018; Smerdon, 2002). In one hand "teaching practices" is concerned about the way teachers engage and personalise their teaching to students as well as how they assess and grade students. According to the literature, students' belonging is positively impacted through student-centre learning and hands-on activities (Alesech & Nayar, 2020; Chiu et al., 2012; Ellery, 2019; Longaretti, 2020; Pendergast et al., 2018; Smerdon, 2002). On the other hand "student-teacher relationships" focused on the students' self-perception, the nature and building of these relationships. However, some sections are tightly connected, as in practice they seem to influence each other.

From all the students' accounts, the classes they attend seem to be very lecture style and very teacher centred. As previously mentioned, according to all the participants: the teacher teaches and the student listens. This is a style that has been the most prominent throughout their education, and hence students feel quite accustomed to it.

Moreover, students have pointed out that recently, because of the COVID-19 preventive measures, teachers organise less hands-on activities, in which the teacher becomes a demonstrator or facilitator while the students have a more active position. Yet, it is through these types of hands-on activities that participants have expressed feeling more engaged in the class. This outcome joins previous research in which researchers have found that engaging, hands-on classes tend to enhance the students' sense of belonging at school (Alesech & Nayar, 2020; Basel & Hamilton, 2019; Ellery, 2019; Pendergast et al., 2018; Rose & Shevlin, 2017; Smerdon, 2002).

Interestingly, when the students were asked which type of class they feel more engaged in, they all answered according to how the teacher interacts with them. As Inés points out: *it is the teacher who makes the class.* Nevertheless, some patterns were identified in the data set regarding the teaching practices that make students feel engaged in the class. These patterns mainly evolved students feeling like they could personally engage in the making of the class, in the learning process, while feeling encouraged and at ease by a teacher that is supportive and communicative. Hence, according to the data,

it is through inclusive relations with teachers, engaging practices, and co-construction of the learning process, that students' sense of belonging to a class can be enhanced.

Regarding the teachers' academic support, most participants felt like they could communicate with most of their teachers in case they needed further academic support, be it during or after lectures. However, few participants had more trouble reaching out to teachers, especially the three students that explicitly expressed feeling a lack of belonging at school. Sofia, reported that three different teachers refused to clarify the lecture or give her further feedback on what she needed to improve in a test.

> *I don't have the instinct to go and ask them how to fix things etc. as I don't really have the impression that it interests them, it's just "well it is what it is. It's how I felt about your work then. So that's all, it's what it is". I don't have the impression that they really want to care about those who don't speak […] those who prefer to ask questions privately instead of asking questions in front of the whole class.* – Sofia (Starier)

Sofia reported that these incidents made her feel more excluded and feel like stopping making efforts to progress in these subjects. Moreover, as mentioned in the literature review, a lack of belonging increases self-consciousness, which can negatively impact engagement in a classroom (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). As Sofia expresses, public exposure leads to negative emotions such as embarrassment and discomfort. Sofia expressed feeling uncomfortable in participating in class, and because of that, Sofia believes that the teachers' pay less attention to her, making her feel like her personality does not match with what the teachers expect from students. What seems to be a lack of academic support, has important consequences on Sofia has she seems to internalise the issue. She believes that because her personality does not match her teachers' expectations, she feels excluded and like she does not belong. This illustrates how a lack of a sense of belonging at school – due to a lack of supportive and caring relationships – can potentially exclude students academically too.

Sofia is not the only participant who reported that some teachers do not give enough feedback on their work. Few interviewee's mentioned that it was important for them to have a comprehensive and constructive feedback on their work. It seems that when students feel like they don't receive enough academic support and guidance from their teachers, they tend to feel excluded from the subject, as they feel left behind. Few students mentioned that some teachers would just make sure that the majority of the students understood the lecture to then move on, leaving behind a minority of students. This happened to few participants who felt alienated, this feeling was further frustrating for them as it happened in subjects in which they were trying their best, but the efforts were not being recognized. Some students indicated that they have experienced little individualised instruction in the school, as well as personalised support.

In regard to these experiences, it seems that when teachers at the Sacred Heart high school do not adapt their pedagogies according to the students' needs, they to tend to feel excluded from the subject. These students expressed feeling frustrated and sad in such classes, which also impacts their academic engagement and performance. Moreover, it is important to note that it is not surprising that some teachers get frustrated when students' ask for further feedback on their work; Sofia explained that some teachers feel like such request questions the teachers' authority and autonomy. This goes in line with the status of teachers in the French educational culture.

Finally, most participants mentioned feeling overwhelmed by the amount of homework and tests they had to produce along the year. For instance, participants mentioned that teachers could potentially announce tests for the next day and give both tests and homework for the same day or week.

Students also reported that they would have several tests in different classes on the same day or week. According to them, there are two main reasons that explain this overwhelming amount of personal work: the demanding educational level at the Sacred Heart high school and the pandemic situation. Victoria recounts:

> *Well the teachers overburden us with homework, graded home assignments and mostly with tests because, well Mister X explained to us […] that they are afraid of a total lockdown just like in March [2020]. So, to avoid not having any grade, like for the March 2020 lockdown, they prefer to evaluate us by giving a maximum of graded home assignments, maximum of tests, so if there's a lockdown, we will have plenty of grades […]. [I feel] tired, overworked … I have no time for myself. But I am organised but stil, sometimes I think it's too much. They could try to put themselves in my shoes.* – Victoria (Sacred Heart)

Some students mentioned that this amount of homework, together with the COVID-19 curfews and partial lockdowns during the weekends, make their routine quite heavy and complicated. From these narratives, it seems clear that COVID-19 has had an impact on the teaching practices and the interviewees' well-being. Teachers seem to have privileged the academic continuity and performance, leading to a certain exhaustion by some students over their current routines.

Few students mentioned that few teachers are more concerned about their emotional well-being with all the COVID-19 related issues. They mentioned that these teachers make sure to communicate more with their students, in and out of school. These teachers made the students feel more cared for. Unfortunately, in general, it appears that there is a lack of understanding and emotional support. It is difficult to assess how the impact of COVID-19 on teaching practices directly impacted students' sense of belonging at school. Yet, it is possible to state that, a lack of emotional support and promotion of mental well-being at school negatively impacts students' sense of belonging at school (Alesech & Nayar, 2020; Chiu et al., 2012; Ellery, 2019; Longaretti, 2020; Pendergast et al., 2018; Riley, 2019, 2019b; Smerdon, 2002). And the data clearly points out that the situation with COVID-19 has negatively impacted most of the students' mental well-being,

      To conclude, this subsection is in line with the findings of previous research. Students' sense of belonging at school is negatively impacted when they do not feel enough engaged in the classes nor academically and emotionally supported. This subsection also demonstrates how a lack of belonging can also have a considerable impact on students experiences in class. It further points at how certain social norms regarding teaching practices can negatively impact belonging (e.g. asking for further feedback on grade being an act that question the authority of teachers).

There was no particular divergence in experiences between the Sacred hearts and the Stariers. All mentioned the same preferred teaching practices. Nonetheless, the Stariers expressed that since they did not know the teachers well, they sometimes struggled in understanding what exactly was expected from them, compared to their previous teachers in middle school.

Belonging and the "hybrid period"

When discussing about their period of transition to high school, the students could not ignore the hybrid period that started from the end of October 2020 up until mid-January 2021. During this time, students had to face many new challenges and thus, during their interviews, they spent a considerable amount of time narrating on this experience. I believe this period is a perfect example of a time in which many dynamics of belonging can be perceived because it is a challenging time, that considerably impacted

the students' daily practices, as per their accounts. This section is divided into two main subjections that illustrate the two different learning contexts of this period: a first section on the students' sense of school belonging during remote learning, and a second section on the students' belonging when attending school with half of their class.

Belonging remotely

The data revealed three main challenges that the students faced during their remote classes: adapting to a new learning environment, difficulties in interacting with teachers and adapting to remote teaching practices. After interpretation, the data suggested that under these circumstances, students were more at risk of feeling excluded. This led students to particularly rely on their friends and peers in order to adapt.

Personal new experiences: adapting to a new space

According to the participants, experiencing remote learning through this hybrid approach was a completely new experience. During the first quarantine from March to May 2020, not every teacher conducted classes online, and when it was the case, all the students were collectively at home. Moreover, participants have almost exclusively conducted their learning on-site, in a school building. This means that they all have based their learning routines and normative behaviours towards learning mostly through on-site classes. For all the participants, the hybrid period was quite challenging, especially when attending the classes remotely. Most of the participants mentioned struggling in adapting to this disorienting new approach to learning in which teachers were simultaneously giving classes to half of the class on site and the other half on video-conference. When asked about her experience of remote learning, Sofia answered:

> *A disaster! It's nice that we can stay at home but the problem is that we don't necessarily have similar conditions to what we used to know. […] But when we are on video-conference, we are really, well we are behind our screen but it's weird to ask questions. We don't feel at ease enough. And then, I don't know, it's like, the fact of giving documents through the screen, to write on the computer etc. It's a bit complicated... well I am not used to it and I don't know how to organise myself in that regard. I have always been accustomed to another approach. –* Sofia (Starier)

Sofia's account reflects a disorienting period that impacted her learning experience. Most participants mentioned having the same challenges.

I find that the hybrid period brought many changes into the students' routines, it changed their ongoing practices that they used to perform every day in order to position themselves as high school students. This joins Wright's (2015) vision of belonging as being (re)created thought everyday performance and practice, and through this, individuals, collectivities and places are constructed. I would suggest that while attending classes remotely, students' could not perform the usual practices that make them feel like students' at the Sacred Heart, and this negatively impacted their sense of belonging at school. My findings support this interpretation as ten out of eleven participants mentioned feeling more isolated, less connected, excluded and abandoned during remote classes. Moreover, most students mentioned "not being used to" this new learning conditions and that at home they would just stay in their pyjamas and wake up few minutes before the class starts. While the act of going to school put them in a more focused mindset. Ten participants referred to this ambiguity of being at home but seeing classes being held at school by video-conference, almost just as usual.

Furthermore, I would also suggest that these circumstances made the space usually dedicated for learning become less distinct, which somewhat negatively impacted students' feeling of inclusion to the class. Students – and the teachers for this matter – have always associated the space of a classroom to where learning takes place. As Wright (2015) indicated, performances of belonging go beyond human interaction. This is a case where the space of a classroom co-creates feelings of belonging as the performance of the role of a teacher and a student usually takes place between the walls of a classroom. When the students were at home watching classes through video-conference, the majority of the participants did not feel like they belonged to the class anymore. And from the students' accounts, the teachers themselves acted as if the students at home were simply almost absent, because they were not present in the classroom.

Teaching practices and relationships with teachers

The naturally distant characterisation of remote classes was more distinct as most participants mentioned that the teachers primarily focused on those who were physically present. According to interviewees, this made them feel more excluded and isolated when attending classes from home. Most participants reported that teachers would proposedly not pay attention to students at home in order to "not fall behind with those who are in class" (Anna – Sacred Heart). The majority of the participants reported having much more difficulties in interacting with the teachers. Most students reported that it was much harder to follow school subjects in which they already have difficulties in, as it was more complicated to understand the class while not being able to ask questions to the teacher. Moreover, four students mentioned that French classes were much harder to follow remotely as they mainly focused on the analysis of texts, which for students were extremely hard to engage with at home due to the teaching practices. Classes in which teachers would mostly only talk, and students would only have to take notes – such as French and history – were mentioned by must participants as particularly hard to focus and follow remotely, due to both the less interactive nature of these classes but also due to technical problems such as bad internet connection and/or the teachers microphones stopping working. In fact, all the participants experienced technical issues during the video-conferences. According to them, the school's microphone would often stop functioning every 20 minutes or so and the students had to constantly report it to the teachers. Classes would take longer to start as teachers would struggle sometimes in starting the video-conference. It was also mentioned that some teachers refused to turn on their camera, or forget to share the screen with the students at home, leaving them without any visual support. Moreover all the participants mentioned not turning on their cameras neither and would only unmute their microphone when the teacher would require so. All of these factors made it difficult for the students at home to focus, feel engaged and understand the class. This was a general feeling for all the classes the participants attended remotely. Four students, all Stariers, even confessed to not following must classes at all. Due to this approach to remote learning, most students reported feeling not cared for and not acknowledged. Inés, Nuno and Sofia explained:

> *[…] it's those who are present in class that are the luckiest, because the teacher is more often with them than on the video-conference for example. I don't want to denounce but I had my French teacher, who often, we would connect just for her to make the roll call, and then she was just with those who were in the class because… she couldn't do anything for us, it was about reading texts and study them so…* – Nuno (Starier)

> *So it's really as if we were not present […] They will favour those who are present […] well it upsets me, it gave me even more the urge to give up since I am here like: anyways, I am not going to have any impact in their class. […] they will not receive anything from me anyways*

they will not give me anything neither. So it makes me want to… well it's not interesting for me, it makes me disengage even quicker than if it was interesting. – Sofia (Starier)

[…] [We] *try to understand but really, it glitches every two seconds. We don't understand, we are forced to ask the teachers, but then the time gap, the teachers almost start another lesson.* – Inés (Starier)

From these narratives, I would suggest that during remote classes, students experienced a very poor sense of belonging to their classes mostly due to three factors. Firstly, the teaching practices became highly exclusive towards students following classes at home. These practices were not adapted to remote learning as teachers performed their classes just as usual, mostly focusing on students who were present in class. Secondly, students were experiencing little direct interaction, communication and connection with their teachers. Students did not have access to a minimum stable interpersonal relationship with their teachers. Thirdly, students felt a total lack co-creation in not being able to collaboratively engage in the classes. Hence, when at home, students felt not only "totally abandoned" (Inés – Starier), but also not acknowledged as a direct actor in the making of a lecture. In this case, the three main characteristics of belonging developed by Wright (2015) – belonging as relational, performative and co-becoming – were threatened. Literature focusing on students' narratives of belonging has also been consistent and concordant on the positive impact of inclusive and engaging classes on students' sense of belonging at school (Alesech & Nayar, 2020; Basel & Hamilton, 2019; Chiu et al., 2012; Ellery, 2019; Longaretti, 2020; Pendergast et al., 2018; Rose & Shevlin, 2017; Smerdon, 2002). In the case of this thesis, it is easy to perceive how practices that are rather exclusive of certain students concretely and directly impact their belonging negatively. This then has the expected consequences described by Goodenow (1993); a lack of academic motivation and engagement.

When asked which type of class attended by video-conference that still created engagement, most participants referred to classes they usually feel more confident in, however in general, it was hard to feel engaged in any class. Yet, some participants mentioned feeling somewhat engaged by few teachers with whom they usually feel comfortable with and that still tried to interact equally between them and those present in class or that provided a visual support such as a PowerPoint. Students appreciated seeing the teacher on camera, or at least the board of the classroom. Hence, a visual support seemed to be very important for students in order to feel more present in the lesson.

For Wright (2015), there are more-than-human agents that help in the production of a sense of belonging. Thus, in line with Wright (2015) and my data, I would argue that this need for visuals indicates how a sense of belonging is also constructed through a multitude of sensorial agents: these senses help students in forming emotions that (re)create attachments. To be able to see the teachers, to see the class, to see a PowerPoint and follow the lesson through the teachers shared screen helps the students' to engage sensorily in a lesson.

Hence, from these accounts, the student's feelings of exclusion, non-belonging and distance towards remote learning was further amplified by the teaching practices that rarely engaged students in the class, the lack of communication as well as technical issues. It seems that the majority of classes were not adapted to remote learning as teachers would not give any visual support neither engage with students that were following the classes by video-conference. In fact, few students mentioned that although they were trying to adapt themselves to the situation, they felt like their teachers were not prepared for remote teaching.

Relationship with classmates and friends

Participants mentioned that peer support was very much appreciated during this period as most of them relied on all their peers in order to follow and understand the class as much as possible. Students kept in touch mainly through the social media application "Snapchat", in which they created group conversations. Few students mentioned that communicating with their classmates was a necessity when having classes remotely as they were not able to fully rely on their teachers and they were all "in the same boat" (Chloé – Starier). However this interaction between peers mostly focused on school related work.

As each class was then divided into two groups, throughout the interviews participants employed words such as : 'those' who were present versus 'us', remote students. I would interpret the use of such words as the illustration of a clear class division during the hybrid period. Furthermore, from the participants accounts, there was a clear constrain in socially interact with peers and friends during remote learning which made most participants feel isolated. This seems to have particularly impacted the Stariers. In fact, as the Stariers reflect back on this hybrid period, most think that it slowed down their process of belonging and co-becoming with their new classmates and school.

Hence, although students could help each other in order to follow a lecture, I find that the students' feelings of isolation emerged from the lack of regular, stable and meaningful interpersonal relationships when attending classes remotely. Baumeister and Leary (1995) have in fact found that it is only through such interpersonal bonds that one can truly satisfy our need and right for belongingness. Proby (in Wright, 2015), also indicates that the most inclusive type of belonging comes from such caring and meaningful community-making. The data also supports the significance of caring and meaningful interactions for students, as they often mentioned experiencing an emotional relief when they communicated and shared their struggles in following remote classes with their peers, through online chatting. According to most participants, this allowed them to feel less lonely in facing this challenging period. When talking about remote classes, Inés said:

> *I find it very hard to cope with because I really have the impression of being the only one to not understand but once I discuss with other people, I notice that I am not at all at all the only one to not follow, to not manage to understand.* – Inés (Starier)

Just like Inés, for some participants, discussing with their classmates made them realise that they were all sharing the same difficulties and feelings towards remote learning.

From these accounts, I find that these shared experiences, feelings and emotions allowed the students to not completely feel alone and isolated; they were all together facing the same struggles. I would suggest that these shared feelings somewhat formed a certain sense of belonging, membership or connectedness. Nevertheless, such belonging seems to only be reinforced through meaningful social interactions, which, from the students accounts, were seldom during remote classes. This further emphasises the significant role of meaningful interactions and relations in the (re)making of a sense of belonging at school.

However, a precision must be made here, these shared feelings mainly happened when all the students collectively experienced the hybrid period, but from mid-January 2021 on, some students still had to follow classes exclusively remotely during a given period. This was the case for: students at high risk whose parents especially asked for them to follow classes exclusively from home; students tested positive to COVID-19; students who were in direct contact with someone tested positive – this often concerned the students' close friends from high school. For this last group, the self-isolation and remote learning could go from 7 to 14 days, or more, according to specific cases and measures.

Hence, as of March 2020, many students at the Sacred Heart potentially spent more than two months and a half attending classes by video-conference. It was the case for six of the participants in this study – four Stariers and two Sacred Hearts. These were individual cases, the concerned students were a minority among their classmates to not attend classes at school. From the students narratives, the feelings of isolation, exclusion, non-belonging were worsen as they felt set apart from their class while also being further excluded by the teaching practices.

I would argue that this increased feeling of isolation is due to the fact that the shared feelings and experiences previously mentioned, were not shared anymore. In these cases, students were a minority among the class, making it more difficult for them to feel connected to Others and the school. Furthermore, according to the concerned participants, teachers would just open the video-conference and not interact with students at home at all. While having to stay at home due to COVID-19 related reasons, one of the interviewees experienced a teacher who refused to create a video-conference. The participants also mentioned that they were often the ones who needed to ask teachers to send them work, or ask them to provide a link for the video conference. The concerned students expressed feeling like they had to make especial efforts in order to pursue their right to learn, and felt little motivation and sometimes empathy from their teachers. These are all factors that can further isolate students and hinder their sense of belonging at school, as students do not feel personally acknowledged and do not have access to a minimum of stable, positive and meaningful interpersonal relationships (Alesech & Nayar, 2020; Basel & Hamilton, 2019; Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Ellery, 2019; Pendergast et al., 2018; Riley, 2019; Rose & Shevlin, 2017; Smerdon, 2002).

Belonging while at school

The data revealed that interviewees were not only encountering new experiences when attending classes remotely, but also when at school. In fact, the hybrid period had an impact on students learning space and relationships even when attending classes at school. The students also mentioned some changes in the teaching practices that impacted their experiences at school.

Personal new experience: adapting to a new space

As classes were divided in two, students would attend lessons at school with only half of their classmates as well as half of the normal number of students at the Sacred Heart high school. This meant that students could potentially not have their closest friends and closest classmates with them on site. This happened to five of the eleven participants, whom expressed firstly feeling anxious when finding out that they would have to go to classes without their close ones. Anna explained:

> *The class was divided into two groups and it was a bit complicated because, well, sometimes […] I could be in a group for example without any of our friends. So, we had video-conferences and once we would go to classes, we did not have our friends so, mentally and socially it was quite hard to hold on […]* – Anna (Sacred Heart)

Just like Anna, some participants mentioned that the start of the hybrid period was very stressful as they ended up in a group without their close friends. The concerned Stariers also mentioned that this was even more stressful as they felt like they still did not know their classmates well enough as the hybrid period happened relatively in the beginning of the academic year. Moreover this system meant that students could also be at school on different days and hours as their other close friends from other

classes. Most students specified that this period did not necessarily set them apart from their friends, with whom they would still keep in contact via social media. However from these accounts it seems that in the beginning of the hybrid period, some students feared over what their experience at school might be like without those who are at the base of their sense of belonging at school. As pointed to by Anna, friends are a significant support, both emotionally but also academically.

Literature on school belonging has been clear in stating that positive and meaningful relationships are significant for students' sense of belonging (Alesech & Nayar, 2020; Basel & Hamilton, 2019; Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Chiu et al., 2012; Ellery, 2019; Faust et al., 2014; Lee, 2002; Longaretti, 2020; Pendergast et al., 2018; Rose & Shevlin, 2017; Smerdon, 2002; Vickers et al., 2014). And I would argue that these relationships that (re)make a sense of belonging, also *build* and *form* the learning space as well as the students themselves. This can be perceived in the data when students' expressed struggling to picture themselves at school without their close ones. Wright (2015) supports that agents of belonging also form things, builds identities, collectivities and places. As interviewees mostly feel like they belong to school through their friendship, I find these are the main actors that determine and construct the interviewees as well as their educational space and experiences. The reason why this is a significant finding is because it hints to the important impact of belonging on students' experiences at school: through belonging they can build and develop their identity, their Self, their relations in connection with the school. Then, by following Wright's (2015) reasoning, I would argue that without belonging, students can potentially feel stuck as it makes it more difficult for them to develop their own identity, to discover their Self, to co-build any type of community or place and to co-become.

Nevertheless, this context also challenged few participants to experience new interactions and get to know some members of their class better. These students, which were exclusively Stariers, explained that they had no other choice than trying to socialise with others and be more open to new connections. This will be further developed in the upcoming subsection on 'Relationship with classmates and friends'.

Teaching practices and relationships with teachers

While students attending classes remotely were often struggling to follow the lectures, some participants mentioned that when they were present at school, the experience was rather different. According to them, the teaching practices did not much change, but it was much easier to follow, to engage and to feel at ease compared to when they had to follow classes by video-conference, and sometimes even compared to the usual classes they attended before the hybrid period. For some of the interviewees, as there was a smaller number of students present in the class, they were able to feel less self-aware and the teachers were able to better interact with each student present in the classroom. Nuno (Starier) was the only participant that mentioned spending more time at school than on remote learning during the hybrid period. According to him, this was due to the fact that he had quite few extra courses and lived away from the high school. In fact, according to the interviewees, the school staff made sure that students living further away from the establishment would at least have four hours of class to justify their journey to school. Moreover, extra courses (for example, Latin) were on-site based. Hence, Nuno spent the majority of the hybrid period at school and mentions having rather good memories and experiences during that time. When discussing the hybrid period, Nuno shared:

> *In general… I found it a bit more calm. Since I was on-site there was a bit less people and if there was a bit too much noise coming from those who were on video-conference, it was easy* [the teacher] *cut the sound […] or turned the sound down, so yeah. It really was much calm for*

me. I remember in Spanish, every two weeks we were four present in the class, everyone else was on video-conference. – Nuno (Starier)

Within this data, it appears that while being at school, students could better interact with teachers under an optimal context. The quality of interaction seems to have improved as teachers further focused on the few students present in the class. I suggest that such improved interaction, communication, and improved acknowledgement of the students' in class, positively impacted the students relationship with their teachers and hence improved their sense of belonging at school. This is visible in the data when the concerned participants reported feeling more included in class. And as previous research on belonging reported, positive relationships between teachers and students is extremely important for the students' sense of belonging at school (Alesech & Nayar, 2020; Basel & Hamilton, 2019; Chiu et al., 2012; Ellery, 2019; Faust et al., 2014; Lee, 2002; Longaretti, 2020; Pendergast et al., 2018; Rose & Shevlin, 2017; Smerdon, 2002; Vickers et al., 2014). In this way, students attending classes at school seemed to have had the privilege to have access to a better quality of education than those attending classes remotely. It must be stressed that this interpretation is mostly concerned by the teacher-student relationship. However, as developed in the preceding section on 'belonging and the learning environment', the teaching practices and school climate are also very significant in enhancing students' belonging.

It is also interesting to note that as Nuno spent most of his hybrid period attending classes at school, he was the only participant having a rather positive outlook on this experience. However, once attending classes remotely, Nuno was among the few students reporting not following the lectures at all. His case exemplifies the difference in experiences, reported by all participants, between students' following lectures at school versus those following remotely. It also points out that not every student had access to classes on-site equally. Moreover, some of the participants reported not having lectures on-site for a given class throughout the whole hybrid period.

Relationship with classmates and friends

As previously mentioned, as some students had to attend classes on-site without their close friends, they felt like they had no other choice than to socialise and be more open to new connections. This was uniquely expressed by the majority of the Stariers. For these students, this period actually helped them to develop new bonds and attachments to some of their classmates. Sofia (Starier), whom particularly struggled to relate to her class, mentioned that during the hybrid period, she felt "more comfortable with her class", "more concentrated", and "less scared to talk" as some of her classmates that made her feel uncomfortable were not in the lectures she attended at school. Like Sofia, other Stariers mentioned that during that period they got closer to some of their classmates, whom they barely interacted with before.

On one hand, it is very interesting that the concerned Stariers felt like they had no more choice than to further socialise with their classmates. I find that this supports the work of Maslow (1943) whom lists belonging as one of the primal human needs, as well as the work of Baumeister and Leary (1995), whom support that the need for belongingness if stronger than the simple longing for social interaction. On the other hand, the case of Sofia shows that once she felt a bit more connected with her class, she was able to feel less self-consciousness, which made her feel more engaged and comfortable in class (Goodenow, 1993). For these reasons, this smaller classes positively impacted her sense of belonging at school, during that time period. I would also like to note that the case of Sofia, who clearly stated not feeling a sense of belonging to the Sacred Heart high school, illustrates three dynamics of the notion. It

illustrates that school belonging fluctuates through time, depends on more than one actor and factor. In other words, there are agents, actions and times that make our belonging constantly and continuously fluctuate. Such conceptualisation of the notion of belonging has also been emphasis by Halse (2018).

Another important trend that was noticed in the data collected was the changes in the ways students could interact in person with their friends and peers in and out of high school due to COVID-19 preventive measures. In fact, during the hybrid period most participants reported mainly interacting with friends on social media and that in person interaction was highly avoided or regulated.
From October 2020 up until May 2021, there were regional curfews and lockdowns that often prevented students from meeting outside classes or school. Furthermore, social practices and interactions that students were once able to perform with their close ones or peers – such as kissing each other's cheeks as a daily greeting or the simple act of grabbing a warm beverage at the vending machine – were disapproved and limited. Few Sacred Hearts mentioned having lunch alone at home, whereas they used to have more lunches with friends around the school before. The Stariers, whom often had to eat their lunch in the public parks surrounding the high school, reported that the school staff and the municipal police were highly against it. They viewed it as a situation that could potentially facilitate the spread of the virus. However, the Stariers had little choice in where to eat, as they did not have enough time to go back to their hometowns. Moreover, some participants mentioned that school activities announced in the beginning of the year did not take place due to the second wave of the coronavirus. According to the students, these activities – such as group work, students projects, day trips or school trips – would have allowed easy interactions between students. Without these activities the students felt like they had less occasions to interact with peers. Some Stariers mentioned that they regret not having such opportunities, as these are the occasions that could have facilitated meaningful interactions with their peers and hence allow an easier transition. Finally, most students reported feeling very under surveillance by the school staff whom tried to make sure that students would respect social distancing and the use of the masks at any moment of the day, otherwise the students could be punished with extra school hours. Some students also mentioned feeling very self-conscious and anxious whenever a COVID-19 preventive measure would not be respected in the high school. Some students mentioned the corridors as being very narrow, making them feel very self-conscious about each other's physical proximity. When asked about her thoughts on this situation and how it impacted her social interaction Lejla said:

> *Well, I find that* [everyday life at school] *is very 'COVID COVID COVID' so we never truly feel comfortable […]we are afraid of saying certain things etc. For example, one of my friends, she had a headache, directly they checked her temperature* [and yelled] '*go back home! Get yourself tested'. We cannot breath a second* [without the masks and they say] '*Oh you put back your mask! You get hours of detention!*' (Lejla – Sacred Heart)

From these narratives, I find that the preventive measures against COVID-19 made social interaction, and meaningful interaction, rarer, but also difficult to happen between students who did not know each other previously. At the same time, during any sort of social interaction, the participants seem to feel a certain degree of anxiety regarding the situation with COVID-19; be it due to the strict respect of the restrictions or the fear of spreading the virus. I argue that this whole situation is negatively impacting students' sense of belonging at school. In fact, while belonging is enhanced through regular, stable, positive and meaningful interpersonal relationships (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), the actual pandemic limits such factors to happen. According to the data, encounters have become rarer, restricted and sometimes even associated to a feeling of anxiety. Moreover, within this data, students often tend to recall the 'old normal', before COVID-19. The social interactions they once used to practice without

fear or apprehension. This hints to the performative aspect of belonging (Wright, 2015), which were developed and explained in some of the interpretations given on early sections of this chapter.

To conclude, this section showed different instances during the hybrid period that impacted students belonging positively and/or negatively. In general, during remote learning, both Stariers and Sacred Hearts felt more isolated, whereas when attending lessons at school, the students felt more engaged. Yet, this section also shows that there are multiple agents and actions that impact students sense of belonging at school during a same time lapse. For example, during the hybrid period, most Stariers were able to build new connections with their classmates, which I argue positively impacted their sense of belonging. Yet, at the same time, this same period prevented the students from having stable and meaningful social interactions with their peers, which I argue has negatively impacted their belonging. And here lies an important consequence of the global pandemic on students' sense of belonging: as long as students always try to satisfy their need for belongingness, it will always be possible for them to somewhat sense it. However, the pandemic has made it much difficult for students to have regular, stable, meaningful social interactions and routines. Factors that are of highly important for an inclusive and positive sense of belonging (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Wright, 2015). I argue that as students are struggling to meet these needs, they are more at risk of becoming or feeling isolated. Noteworthily, experiences of belonging at school do not limit themselves to what happens in the act of teaching and the relationship between teachers and students. Althought these were the dynamics most developed in this section, there are other dynamics that also come into play, such as individual, relational and collective factors that shape experience and belonging at school. These were more developed in earlier section of this results chapter.

Chapter 7 – Discussion

In this study, belonging was explored by using weak theory in order to analyse students' experiences, perceptions and feelings, while also situating them within a social context in order to shine light into the multidimensionality of the concept. This section will discuss the way this approach contributes to a renewed understanding of belonging within the field of education by answering to the research questions.

Students' experiences of belonging

According to the results of this study, it seems that participants experience belonging through a myriad of dynamics influenced by different socio-ecological levels. All students' mentioned sensing belonging through their relations, which entailed the continuous construction of the Self, but also through more-than-human agents, such as a space. These findings join Wright's (2015) vision on belonging as emerging through interactions between people, and more-than-human agents. Moreover these findings surrounding students' experiences of a sense of belonging at school, seem to situate themselves mainly in a more micro level. However, it is possible to notice that these experiences are also being influenced by students' interactions within social and cultural groups or even by general assumptions within a society. Thus, also drawing attention to macro dynamics influencing students' sense of belonging at school.

Firstly, a sense of belonging has been defined by all participants as a state in which they feel like their personal Self is fully accepted by the Other, and throughout the interviews, students reflected on their degree of comfort with different types of relations they encountered in the school. As they explain, these relations entail different types of performances of roles and/or practices. It is these everyday performances and practices that (re)creates a sense of belonging or non-belonging to a school. And in turn, it is also what constructs the Self and more-than-human agents.

The performances of roles and/or practices within these relations seem to be influenced by students' previous experiences within the French educational system, their previous schools, as well as their personal experiences with human and more-than-humans agents. And at each new encounter, students' seem to be exploring what are the underlying expectations; the practices and ways of being and becoming promoted by the institution, the place and its' individuals. Through these encounters, students' seem to try to place themselves accordingly. They can feel somehow positive about these beliefs and practices, which then would mean that they feel somehow comfortable in performing what informs the belonging to the institution, the place and its' individuals. Or they can feel somehow negatively towards these beliefs and practices, which would mean that it is harder to perform and identify to them, creating a sense of dislocation with the Other.

But, as the results on the nature of the relationship between teachers and students inform, the determination of the practices and values within a school, is not necessarily equally co-determined but imposed and perpetuated by cultural practices often embedded in power relations. However, as Proby (in Wright, 2015) states, the most inclusive type of belonging rises through affective community-making, caring encounters that challenge power relations. Yet, as the participants' indicate, the relationships with their teachers and school staff is too often embedded by the power they hold over the teaching practices, the learning environment, the classes and the students'. There seems to be a sense

of differentiation between the students, the teachers and the school staff, enabling asymmetrical power relations which highly impact students' experiences of a sense of belonging at school.

The results of this thesis further emphasis those of previous research on school belonging within the field of education, which have pointed at the importance of positive relationships and inclusive school culture on students' sense of belonging at school (Alesech & Nayar, 2020; Basel & Hamilton, 2019; Chiu et al., 2012; Ellery, 2019; Faust et al., 2014; Lee, 2002; Longaretti, 2020; Pendergast et al., 2018; Rose & Shevlin, 2017; Smerdon, 2002; Vickers et al., 2014). However, as most studies around belonging in the field of Education were inductive and/or lacking of theorisation, many failed in encompassing belonging as a multidimensional concept. The few existing studies on belonging in the field of Education mainly focus on the factors that enhance students' sense of belonging according to their experience within a given school context. They do not explore the multitude of relationships students' experience within the school, they do not interrogate the nature of these relationships, the power dynamics within these relations, teaching practices and learning environment. They also fail in connecting belonging to the (re)creation of the Self in relation to the Other as well as how belonging is (re)created and informed by everyday practices, which are often rooted within an institution, a community, a society.

Secondly, through the analysis of the students' narratives, it was possible to perceive that students' experiences of belonging are also cultivated and performed by more-than-human agents, such as spaces and clothing. In fact, throughout the interviews students mentioned several spaces such as: home, surroundings of the school, the school building, the classrooms, the space allocated for recreation. All these spaces are agents that work with the individuals and other more-than-human agents to represent a form of boundary making (Wright, 2015). From this perspective, spaces – as well as other more-than-human agents – are not static nor passive (ibid).

As some students mentioned, the school building represented the practices, the ways of being and becoming of the institution. In other words, entering in the school building meant the start of the performance of certain roles and practices that are meant to be in that place and which inform one's belonging to the place. For participants struggling to feel a sense of belonging at the school, the simple act of entering in the building could be anxiety-inducing. In contrast, for all the participants, home represented a free space, a space were they could feel comfortable and at ease. Moreover, few students' mentioned how they would feel more belonging in the space allocated for recreation, compared to a classroom, as it is a space where there are less strict normative behaviours that need to be performed, although they still feel under surveillance by the school staff.

Other than spaces, some of the female participants mentioned how their clothing is scrutinised by the school staff. The institutions' imaginary around gendered fashion, influenced by societal and religious beliefs, sees the female students' clothes in very defined ways; ripped jeans, skirts and shorts above knees do not belong inside the school. Hence, certain clothes, that could embody a certain identity and have positive affects on one's sense of Self and belonging can be forbidden within the school. Students' who dress with clothes that belong to the school are allowed to enter in the building, those who wear clothes that do not belong to the school, are denied at the school entrance, as school staff observe students' entering in the building each morning. This is how clothes are also agents that represent a form of boundary making: what and whom belong or not within the school (Charlton et al., 2018). Through this perspective, affects are not only produced by individuals, but also by other beings, practices, spaces, clothes etc., they all impact belonging in a complex and tangled way (Wright, 2015).

Earlier research in the field of Education seems to detract from the importance of more-than-human agents in the students' experience of belonging. Few articles have reported on the importance of safe spaces, or spaces within the school in which students' felt a sense of belonging (Baroutsis & Mills, 2018; Basel & Hamilton, 2019; Ellery, 2019; Lee, 2002; Pendergast et al., 2018). However, only

Baroutisis and Mills (2018) somewhat considered these spaces as active agents in the determination of what it means to belong or not to the school and also as representative agents of what belongs to the school. Meaning that, when humans and more-than-humans come together, they co-determine what it means to belong or not, which determines and constructs themselves: what is co-created also creates themselves (Wright, 2015). Again, this does not necessarily mean that students, as individuals', can be part of this co-determination, they co-create and co-become but they are not necessarily included in the determination of what belongs or not in their educational environment.

To conclude, the students in this study experience a sense of belonging through relations with humans and more-than-human agents, which evolve practices and performances that also impact their sense of belonging at school. Moreover, these agents, practices, performances, beliefs and ways of being are rooted in a plurality of multidimensional dynamics that impact students' sense of belonging in a complex and tangled way.

Impact of COVID-19 on students' experiences of belonging

Throughout the interviews, students' were asked to reflect on the possible impact of COVID-19 preventive measures on their relations with the Others, on their social interactions in and outside of school, on their learning environment and on the teaching practices. They were then asked to reflect on how these eventual changes have impacted their sense of belonging at school. Students' mentioned measures such as the use of the masks, the hybrid period but also the overall unpredictability of COVID-19 as having impacted their experiences at school. According to the results, these measures impacted their interactions with their teachers, peers and friends, as well as their learning environment. By applying Wright's (2015) theory on belonging, it is possible to understand that these measures represent a shift in everyday practices, routines and performances that informed one's belonging at school.

For all the participants', for more than ten years, their educational experiences were based within the context of the French educational system. Regardless of their previous schools, their experiences as students had been influenced by their general cultural context. Throughout the years, at any new interaction with humans and more-than-humans agents, everyday practices were performed and a sense of belonging was (re)created continuously which then constructed their identity as students (Wright, 2015). These performances are influenced by individual practices but also by policy and institutions' work in performing and (re)creating boundaries (Halse, 2018; Wright, 2015). In other words, through performance, belonging is affective and collaborative and can structure individuals', collectivities, places, institutions etc. (ibid.). For instance, the everyday practices students' used to perform when going to school, are in fact practices associated to the school context, and these practices connected them to the school, connecting them to a collective and hence allowing the construction and reproduction of identities and attachments. However, the thesis finds that COVID-19 preventive measures somewhat impacted these everyday practices, hence having a certain impact on the reproduction of students' identities and sense of belonging.

Firstly students mentioned certain shifts in the way they interacted with Others. As an example, the mask, that is now a mandatory item to be able to enter in the school, is a totally new agent within their school life, which they feel creates a certain distance between themselves and the Other. This is partly due to the fact that students' were used to analyse facial expressions in order to understand the Other and place themselves accordingly. Certain everyday practices that students were used to perform

between them, such as the kissing greeting or grabbing a beverage at the vending machine, are now strongly discouraged or forbidden. Yet, I argue that these are performances that nurture certain feelings of belonging between individuals and individuals with places, as they are collectively performed through time. Moreover, interaction with teachers also shifted. In fact, as face-to-face interaction was not always assured, some of the teachers started to communicate with their students via mobile applications. Few even chose to communicate through the social media app students felt most comfortable using – e.g. Snapchat. From analysing the students' narratives, I argue that clear and continuous communication with teachers' positively impact students' belonging. Such instances are visible in the data when students' expressed feeling more comfortable with teachers that facilitate communication, especially in the context of COVID-19 and remote classes.

Secondly, teaching practices somewhat shifted too, as teachers must comply to social distancing measures and keep under consideration sudden total or partial lockdowns. Some students' mentioned that the teaching practices that made them feel more engaged in classes, that were already an exception, are now rarer. Teachers also try to give as many tests as possible when students are all together in school in order to avoid a lack of grades due to unexpected lockdowns, or the (re)enforcement of hybrid periods. Most participants expressed feeling more pressured under these circumstances. Moreover, when attending classes remotely, interviewee's shared feeling isolated and alienated from the classes, as the lectures were not adapted to remote learning. Hence, this thesis follows the findings of previous research that has established the positive link between students' sense of belonging at school and inclusive and engaging learning practices (Alesech & Nayar, 2020; Basel & Hamilton, 2019; Chiu et al., 2012; Ellery, 2019; Longaretti, 2020; Pendergast et al., 2018; Rose & Shevlin, 2017; Smerdon, 2002). The thesis argues that the climate and measures implemented due to COVID-19 have made such practices seldom, hence negatively impacting students' belonging.

Finally, students' learning space also shifted due to the global pandemic. And this might be the change that most impacted students' sense of belonging. As Wright (2015) explains, there are more-than-human agents that also produce a sense of belonging in collaboration with humans. A classroom, in a school, is a space in which certain practices and performances take place. When students come in contact with this space, they both co-create feelings of belonging and they shape and take part in the performances of belonging; belonging is then materialised, "in, through and with place" (Wright, 2015, p. 402). However, since the beginning of the academic year in September 2020, all students had to attend classes remotely at a given point, either during the hybrid period or due to personal reasons. The thesis argues that these remote classes totally shifted the space in which learning and teaching were being performed. Students had to shift their perceptions of a learning space for the first time, but as classes were still taking place at school, within a classroom, students' often felt like they did not belong in the class, because they were not physically present in the class. The teaching practices, that did not adapt to those attending classes remotely but were still performed within the context of the classroom, further reinforced the students' feeling of non-belonging.

The global pandemic brought unprecedented challenges to schools and educational systems which are currently being investigated by scholars. I argue that this is a period in which dynamics of belonging can be better perceived, as earlier research on belonging has mentioned that one is more aware of its' belongingness when it is threatened, shaken or challenged (Halse, 2018; Yuval-Davis, 2006, 2016). School transition periods are per se moments that can potentially challenge students' belonging because of changes in routines, learning practices and social interaction (Longaretti, 2020; Pendergast et al., 2018). This thesis shows that the situation with COVID-19 has also created changes that challenged students' usual routines, hence challenging their belonging. Although such contexts allows to better perceive dynamics of belonging, I also believe that this concept can be used as a tool in very diverse contexts in order to scrutinise macro-meso-micro practices that (re)create normative

inclusive/exclusive behaviours. However, this can only be achieved when theorising belonging by considering its' multiple meanings, uses and contradictions.

To conclude, this thesis argues that the above mentioned changes impacted some of the students' everyday practices, thus impacting students' sense of belonging at school. Most of the participants' expressed a certain longing for what once was, the routine they used to belong to. However, this does not necessarily mean that their belonging to the school is highly threatened, but that there is a shift, and this shift is felt through different degrees of comfort and/or discomfort.

Comparison

This study also aimed in comparing how two distinctive groups – the Stariers and the Sacred Hearts– experienced belonging while transitioning to high school under the context of COVID-19. The Sacred Hearts are students that have been attending the Sacred Heart institution since at least middle school. The Stariers are 'new' students has they moved from a middle school from a different town to the Sacred Heart high school. In other words, it investigated how these two groups experience a sense of belonging, how these two groups are experiencing belonging while transitioning to high school and how COVID-19 preventive measures impacted these two groups' sense of belonging. This was done in order to better understand how belonging works and impacts participants' school life. By exploring any possible similarities or differences between two distinctive groups who were experiencing similar changes in their lives within a particular context and time. While the two groups experience belonging in very similar ways, differences were noted regarding their sense of belonging to their new school and under the pandemic context. In fact, the results have shown that most Stariers experienced a more challenging transition to high school compared to the majority of their Sacred Heart peers. This experience impacted their general sense of belonging in different degrees. At the same time, while the remote learning impacted everyone's sense of belonging to the lessons, most Stariers mentioned that the COVID-19 measures made it more challenging for them to develop a sense of belonging to their new environment. The Stariers believe that their process of belonging to the school was slowed down by this context.

When the participants reflected on how they would describe a sense of belonging, the answers were very concordant; they mainly sense belonging when they feel surrounded by caring and inclusive relationships. And on the contrary, a sense of non-belonging was referred to as a feeling of dislocation in relation to the Other. Students' associated a sense of belonging to a positive emotion, like joy and trust, and a sense of non-belonging to negative emotions such as fear and sadness, but also mixed emotions such as awkwardness. Moreover, when interviewees reflected on their relations with friends, peers and teachers, they similarly felt the most comfortable with those whom are caring and inclusive towards them. Hence, using Wright's (2015) theoretical lens to interpret the data of this study allowed the emphasis of the emotional character of belonging. And as emotions emerge through interaction (ibid.), it also allowed to perceive the importance of the students' connections with humans and more-than-humans in order to understand how they experience belonging. In fact, as emotions come into being through "sites of contact" or perceived "borders" between the Self and the Other, emotions can influence the creation, performance and the enforcement of boundaries that may create a sense of inclusion or exclusion (Wright, 2015). All the students could somewhat perceive these boundaries that affected their sense of belonging, although in different degrees of awareness. Students who were

experiencing a lack of belonging in their learning environment were more sensible to these boundaries, and these boundaries felt heavier to them.

These findings follow previous research on belonging, both within the field of education and other social sciences fields, which have put the accent on the significance of positive relationships and inclusive climate for students' sense of belonging at school (Alesech & Nayar, 2020; Basel & Hamilton, 2019; Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Chiu et al., 2012; Ellery, 2019; Faust et al., 2014; Halse, 2018; Lee, 2002; Longaretti, 2020; Pendergast et al., 2018; Riley, 2019; Rose & Shevlin, 2017; Smerdon, 2002; Vickers et al., 2014). These studies focused on different types of students' in different parts of the world; from students' with special needs in New Zealand to a cohort of primary students' transitioning to middle school in the United States. All of these studies, regardless of the context, had similar findings and perceived belonging as inherently relational. However, as mentioned, the nature of the students' relationships and the influence of power dynamics in these relations have mostly been omitted in previous research. These studies often forgot to place the students' experiences of belonging as well as the school itself within a wider context. How wider factors – such as societal beliefs or political agendas – can potentially impact factors that influence one's experience of belonging. Moreover, as these previous studies neglected the theorisation of belonging, and were mostly inductive or simply driven by previous research on belonging, by the field of educational psychology, the understanding around the notion of belonging has been assumed, as much as its' emotional component. This has limited the potential of belonging as a lens through which one can explore inclusive and exclusive micro-practices in schools, while putting it into context with meso and macro contexts. This study, tried to make the complex multidimensional dynamics of belonging visible by connecting the micro to the macro.

The transition to high school was felt quite differently between the two group of students. On one hand, for the Stariers, transitioning to high school was a clear milestone that had quite the impact on their lives. In fact, in a very short time, the Stariers were confronted by a multitude of new connections with other individuals and more-than-human agents: new peers, new classmates, new teachers, new school building, new classrooms, even new sounds (two of the Stariers mentioned their dislike for the high schools' bell). All these new encounters generated different emotions: fear of the new environment, nostalgia for their lives in middle school, longing to feel like they belong to their new environment, awkwardness in trying to place themselves between all these new encounters, excitement for this new stage in their lives, pride in being accepted to the school. These emotions were build upon these new encounters and at the same time, these emotions structured the encounters (Wright, 2015). In fact, these emotions can remind Stariers that they are in fact Stariers in the Sacred Heart high school, among Sacred Heart students; thus creating this distinction between the Self and the Other possibly troubling their sense of belonging to the new school. New connections also entailed possible new daily performances that constituted and structured the school, the collective and the individuals (Halse, 2018; Wright, 2015). Their performances, or non-performance then (re)created belonging or non-belonging (ibid.). Nevertheless, most of Stariers were actively developing their sense of belonging to the school, and again, caring and inclusive experiences were the main factors that enhanced their belonging to the school and not necessarily their proximity with fellow Starier peers. This finding follows the work of Proby (in Wright, 2014) that indicates that the most inclusive type of belonging, does not form itself through sameness but through "affective community-making" (Wright, 2015, p. 399).

On the other hand, for all the Sacred Heart students, moving to high school felt more like the continuity of middle school. Interestingly, few Sacred Hearts expressed feeling surprised or even disappointed by this lack of change in becoming high schoolers. According to them, they already knew most of the students, some of the teachers and were used to the practices and values of the Sacred Heart institution. For them, nothing much has changed apart from the shift to the smaller building allocated

to the high school. When these students were asked about their transition or how they felt about being high schoolers in the Sacred Heart, they would not mention any specific emotion – in contrast to the Stariers – and would just state that nothing much has changed, that *it's just normal*. Some would even find these questions difficult to answer, while the Stariers had very developed answers and stronger feelings towards these questions. I believe that this illustrates how the Sacred Heart students have 'co-become' with the institution throughout the years. The everyday practices and ways of being that were vehiculated in the institution, and indicated a certain way of belonging, constructed the Sacred Heart students' routines, experience and thus, their identities as students. Hence, being middle schoolers or high schoolers felt somewhat similar to them. Again, the process of co-becoming is not automatically equal, as students' don't necessarily actively determine what it means to belong in their institution. Moreover, these constructs of what it means to belong in a French private institution can also emerge from meso and macro agents due to structural, cultural and organisational factors – e.g. the emphasis on competition or good grades.

The fact that the Stariers had a challenging transition to high school and that their sense of belonging was impacted is concordant with previous research (Longaretti, 2020; Pendergast et al., 2018). As these students arrived in a new school, they faced many changes and challenges that affected their sense of belonging. However, very few previous studies opted for a comparative stance when researching about belonging (Machado Da Silva, 2021). This study compared the experiences between two distinct groups within a high school, which allowed a more sensible approach to theory building and to the understanding of the different complex dynamics of belonging. This comparative component allowed the recognition of 'belonging as co-becoming' through the Sacred Heart experiences in opposition to the Stariers' experiences whom are still yet to co-become with their new environment. It also allowed the recognition of everyday practices, that felt very much like a simple routine to Sacred Heart students, but had stronger impacts on the Stariers' sense of belonging. Finally, this comparison demonstrated that regardless of these two categories of groups, whom individually all have different stories and backgrounds, they all expressed the importance of inclusive practices and caring relations on their sense of belonging at school.

As mentioned in the earlier section, COVID-19 brought significant changes into the participants' everyday routines which impacted their sense of belonging at school. This was equally felt among the two groups. Moreover, the Stariers also added that the preventative measures against the spread of COVID-19 made the interaction with their new peers and teachers harder and rarer. It also made it more difficult for them to quickly understand the underlying values and practices of the school due to the social distancing, the use of masks that hide facial expressions, and all the measures that made them follow classes at home rather than at school. The Stariers also mentioned that the activities that could have made the interaction easier with their new peers were all cancelled due to the pandemic. Among these cancelled activities were school trips, school and class projects. Nevertheless, most of the Sacred Hearts felt that their belonging to school was being shaken due to the impact of COVID-19 on their routines, learning practices and school climate, especially during the hybrid period. But, most Stariers seemed to have been challenged by this situation, as these measures limited their process co-belonging with their new environment.

As previously mentioned, the global pandemic seems to be further threatening students' sense of belonging at school, as the results of this thesis imply. This is rather concerning as thousands of French students have transitioned to a new school in September 2020 under similar, and often worse, conditions than the Stariers experienced. In fact, the Sacred Heart high school had quite few resources that facilitated remote learning. Moreover, as previously mentioned, the Sacred Heart high school only cared out the hybrid period during two months and a half, which was not the case for most public French schools who have carried on with the hybrid system since the end of October 2020 until the end of the

academic year in July 2021. Research has proven that students thrive when their need for belonging is met in their learning environments, it increases their beliefs in their own success and positively impacts their academic motivation, engagement and even performance (Goodenow, 1993). Hence, students' sense of belonging must be nurtured, especially under this global pandemic, be it at school or during remote learning. And has this context has had undeniable changes on everyone's lives, particular attention should be brought to micro-practices at school that might further hinder students' sense of belonging as well as micro-practices that can foster students' sense of belonging at school.

In summary, although all the participants perceived belonging in very similar ways, there was an overall distinction on how the transition to high school impacted their sense of belonging between the two groups. Moreover, sanitary measures seem to have further challenged the bloom of the Stariers' sense of belonging in their new learning environment.

Chapter 8 – Conclusion

This chapter is composed of a section that summarised the thesis and its finding, and a last section of the implication of the findings and future research.

Summary of thesis and findings

This thesis aimed to explore how students' transitioning to high school under the circumstances of a global pandemic have experienced a sense of belonging at school. To do so, eleven semi-structured interviews were conducted with students from the Sacred Heart high school, a semi-private French institution that comprises all the mandatory levels of education. This qualitative study also intended to compare the experiences between two distinct group of students: the Sacred Heart students, whom are students that have been attending the institution since at least middle school, and the Stariers, whom just joined the institution for their upper secondary education.

The study provided a detailed conceptualisation of belonging by considering studies from the field of Education as well as other social sciences fields. A literature review on the concept allowed an understanding of the significance of a sense of belonging for students' well-being and academic achievement. It also gave hints towards the gaps in the literature that this thesis aimed in filling – such as the lack of theorisation of the concept within the field of Education. Hence, after exploring how scholars, in other fields of study in social sciences, have attempted to theorise belonging, I used the work of Wright (2015) to approach belonging through the lens of weak theory. It allowed the thesis to explore belonging by considering its' multiple meanings, uses and contradictions, while better perceiving its dynamics in a multidimensional way. The data collected was transcribed and imported into the Nvivo software in order to be thematically analysed through an iterative approach. This facilitated the management, analysis and interpretation of the data collected. Three main themes emerged through such work: belonging and self-perception in relationships; belonging and the learning environment; belonging and the hybrid period. These themes were explored within the findings chapter of this thesis. The findings were later discussed, in connection with literature on belonging and the theoretical framework of the thesis. This discussion chapter was structured in relation to the three research questions of the thesis, which were as follow:

1. How are students experiencing a sense of belonging in their educational environment?
2. How have measures to prevent COVID-19 transmission impacted students' sense of belonging in their educational environment?
3. How do these experiences differ or/and coincide between the two concerned groups?

Firstly, the thesis demonstrated that the interviewees experience a positive sense of belonging at school through inclusive caring relations, teaching practices and spaces. This finding joins earlier research on belonging (Alesech & Nayar, 2020; Basel & Hamilton, 2019; Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Chiu et al., 2012; Ellery, 2019; Faust et al., 2014; Goodenow, 1993a, 1993b; Halse, 2018; Korpershoek et al., 2020; Lee, 2002; Longaretti, 2020; Nichols, 2006, 2008; Osterman, 2000; Pendergast et al., 2018; Riley, 2019a, 2019b; Rose & Shevlin, 2017; Smerdon, 2002; Vickers et al., 2014). I further argued that these factors are influenced by a multitude of dynamics and agents that go beyond the walls of a school and concern socio cultural beliefs and practices. This goes in line with more recent research on belonging by Riley (2019) and Halse (2020). Moreover, I found that participants experience belonging through a very fluid way: they experience it through a multitude of factors that foster or hinder their

belonging all at once through the same lapse of time. As complex and fluid a sense of belonging is, the key seems to be rather simple: students' feel belonging when they are personally acknowledged and accepted by their peers, teachers and school staff. When their learning environment is inclusive and engaging, when they can feel part of the co-construction of a class and school.

Secondly, this thesis argues that the preventive measures against the spread of COVID-19 have in general negatively impacted the students' sense of belonging at school. This is due to the fact that these measures affected their social interaction, their learning environment, their everyday practices and routines. As students could not easily perform what they used to, this seemed to have shaken the reproduction and development of their identity and belonging. This does not mean that students' did not feel any sense of belonging throughout their transition to high school under COVID-19. It means that the students seem to be more at risk of *not* feeling a sense of belonging, and rather isolated or alienated.

Finally, the thesis found that the way the two different group of students' sense and experience belonging is rather similar, yet this does not mean that they shared the same experiences of belonging while transitioning to high school at the Sacred Heart. In fact, for most Stariers the transition was rather challenging as they came to encounter new people and a new learning environment. Meanwhile the Sacred Heart students barely felt any change. This comparative component allowed the recognition of 'belonging as co-becoming' through the Sacred Heart experiences in opposition to the Stariers' experiences whom are still yet to co-become with their new environment. Moreover, as per the experience of the Stariers, this thesis joins the findings of Longeratti (2020) and Perdergast et al. (2018) that have emphasis that during school transitions, students' belonging at school tends to decline, due to change in structural factors. By using Wright (2015) theorisation of belonging, I further suggest that this is due to the change of routines and everyday practices, as it's through them that students (re)create belonging, and through belonging, individuals, collectives and places are constructed. Lastly, this comparison demonstrated that regardless of these two categories of groups, whom individually all have different stories and backgrounds, they all expressed the importance of inclusive practices and caring relations on their sense of belonging at school.

Implications of findings and future research

In this sub-section, two type of implications are elaborated: research and practical implications. These implications entail certain propositions for future research on belonging within the field of Education and Comparative and International Education.

By exploring belonging through a clear theoretical lens it was possible to draw attention to the limitations of previous research, its implications as well as possibilities for future research. As previously mentioned, early studies have attested the major importance of positive relationships at school in order to enhance students' sense of belonging (Alesech & Nayar, 2020; Basel & Hamilton, 2019; Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Chiu et al., 2012; Ellery, 2019; Faust et al., 2014; Goodenow, 1993; Lee, 2002; Longaretti, 2020; Pendergast et al., 2018; Riley, 2019; Rose & Shevlin, 2017; Smerdon, 2002; Vickers et al., 2014). However, within the literature reviewed, not every study considered all the different relationships students experience at school, neither the social nature of these relationships and how their nature impacts interactions. If belonging is in fact, emotional, relational, performative and an act of co-becoming, then the nature of the relationships students' experience at school must be acknowledged. Because it is through these relationships that it is possible to analyse the making, performance and policing of boundaries that create either a sense of belonging or alienation. Moreover, Wright (2015) mentioned the importance of observing our everyday practices in order to perceive the

agents that produce a sense of belonging. She points at the significance of more-than-human agents, present in our quotidian, in our micro-practices that also produce a sense of belonging. This has major implications for research in the field of education: it is limiting to consider an educational space as a simple box, vessel in which education and learning simply take place. The space is an agent in (re)producing practices and norms that give senses of belonging or alienation. Moreover, an educational space is in constant interplay with macro and meso structures. Hence, there is a need for research to take on a more holistic approach on belonging, because the making of belonging is influenced by different multidimensional agents. In fact, the cultivation and performance of belonging is not limited to individual practices within a school, it includes macro and meso agents. Schools are in fact social institutions, often under the control of a Ministry of Education (Halse, 2018). These agents also create, restrain and control belonging (ibid.). These agents that influence the boundary making of practices and relationships in schools must be transparent when researching on belonging for it to be an efficient and useful lens.

This theorisation of belonging by the social geographer Wright (2015) – that considered its multiple meanings, uses and contradictions – can be used in order to analyse education in a rather holistic approach, as some scholars in the field of Comparative an International Education call for (Bray et al., 2014). It can be used to investigate macro-meso-micro practices that (re)create normative behaviours in schools and impact students' sense of belonging. This can be a very useful theory for research in the field that is concerned about inclusive education.

In terms of practical implications this thesis unveiled the challenges students and schools are facing in what many call 'the new normal'. With the pandemic context some of the practices of the 'old normal' cannot take place and as practices shift students' sense of belonging shift too. Other than looking at our daily routines to perceive the agents that produce belonging, it is important to remember that belonging is in fact performative and hence we find ourselves belonging to a routine (Wright, 2015). Under these circumstances, I believe it is important to draw attention to the nurturing of students' sense of belonging to their educational space, especially now that this space has become less stable. Most of the participants' in this study have mentioned the shifts and even the heaviness of their new routine. They also mentioned how sometimes they felt like there was little adaptation or flexibility in their learning environment regarding the situation. According to this thesis results, as of February/March 2021, the way remote learning has been conducted at the Sacred Heart high school has negatively impacted students' sense of belonging. Hence, it is important for all the agents evolved in Education – including students themselves – to reflect on what is needed, in this 'new normal', in order to nurture everyone's sense of belonging in an educational space. This is extremely important in order to maintain students' motivation, engagement and even performance in their learning environment, especially in uncertain or shifting times.

Finally, if the most inclusive form of belonging is in fact co-constituted, one most reflect on its' implications for education; can we imagine a new social reality order in which inclusive belongings would be equally co-created at schools? This would imply that students' narratives should also be included in the determination of what it means to belong or not to/in an educational space. Through belonging, individuals may be able to collaborate with Others to co-create new pathways that are more inclusive.

For future research, it would be interesting to keep on using a more holistic approach to belonging in different educational contexts. This research has been conducted within a very specific school, but it would be interesting to expand research into other contexts. It would also be interesting to research how macro agents, such as the Ministry of Education, (re)produce discourses on belonging. Moreover, it would be relevant for research to use certain methods that would allow and encourage

dialogue on the (re)creation of belonging in schools. Methods such as participatory action research and collaborative and longitudinal research have much potential in encouraging dialogue on belonging and could be potentially empowering for all participants.

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Stockholm University

Appendices

Appendix A : Consent form (in French)

Master International et Comparatif en Éducation (2021)

Nous espérons que vous soyez disposé(e) à participer dans cette étude qui enquête sur l'impact que le protocole sanitaire des établissement scolaires a sur le sentiment d'appartenance des élèves au lycée.

Cette étude veut explorer les expériences que les élèves ont eu durant leur transition vers le lycée sous les mesures contre la propagation de la covid-19. Le but étant de contribuer aux récentes recherches sur les facteurs qui encouragent le développement d'un sentiment de bien-être dans un établissement scolaire.

Afin de réaliser l'étude nous avons besoin de conduire des interviews, qui seront audio enregistrées, du 18 février 2021 jusqu'au 6 mars 2021.

L'étude fait partie du programme obligatoire du master et est supervisée par Rebecca Ye, Professeure assignée par le Département d'Éducation à l'Université de Stockholm, qui assurera que l'étudiante, Isabel Machado Da Silva, adhère à toutes les règles nécessaires. La thèse sera évaluée et notée par un examinateur à la fin du cursus.

En donnant votre accord, vous autorisez la chercheuse à utiliser les interviews pour son étude. La participation est toujours volontaire, et cela même après avoir donné votre consentement. Vous aurez toujours la possibilité de refuser de continuer l'interview, ou retirer votre accord à n'importe quelle étape de la recherche.
Durant le processus de la recherche, toute donnée personnelle vous concernant (informations personnelles, interviews etc.) sera protégée et ne sera pas divulguée à des individus non autorisés. Nous allons stocker les enregistrements, et autres informations de manière confidentielle. Toute donnée collectée sera avant tout rendue anonyme, codée et transcrite à l'écrit. Cela sera effectué immédiatement après l'interview à fin de rendre impossible l'identification de votre participation à la recherche. Ce formulaire de consentement sera conservé dans un endroit verrouillé à l'Université de Stockholm de façon à ce que celui-ci ne soit pas associé à vos données personnelles. Lorsque l'étude sera complétée, et la thèse soumise à évaluation, nous détruirons toutes les données collectées.

Les résultats de cette recherche seront publiés dans la thèse de façon à ce que l'identité des participants ne soit pas révélée. L'étude adhère aux directives du code d'éthiques en recherche ainsi qu'aux législations communes (Suédoises et Européennes). Pour en savoir plus, voir informations en bas de la deuxième page (en anglais).

Pour compléter cette recherche, votre consentement est très important. N'hésitez pas à nous contacter pour obtenir des renseignements complémentaires.

Rebecca Ye (directrice de thèse)
Email : rebecca.ye@edu.su.se
Isabel Maria Machado Da Silva (étudiante en master)
Email : im.machadodasilva@gmail.com
Téléphone : +33 (0)6 68 19 95 02

Stockholms universitet

Formulaire de consentement

J'ai pris part aux informations concernant cette étude, je donne mon consentement pour y participer et accepte que mon interview soit enregistrée et stockée :

☐ Oui

☐ Non

Nom de l'élève, date et signature :

Nom en majuscule :

Nom du tuteur légal/de la tutrice légale, date et signature :

Nom en majuscule :

Further regarding guidelines and legislation related to the study
The personal data essential for carrying out the study are regulated according to the requirement of consent (samtyckeskravet) in the Swedish legislation (the Personal Data Act, in Swedish) Dataskyddsförordningen. Stockholm University is responsible for personal data. According to the law of protection of Personal Data Act (dataskyddsförordningen f.o.m. 25 maj, 2018) you are entitled free access to all information involving you and if needed, to have incorrect information amended. You also have the right to request deletion, limitation or objection to the use of personal data, with an opportunity to lodge a complaint to the data security officer at Stockholm University at dpo@su.se alternatively the Swedish Data Protection Authority at https://datainspektionen.se/kontakta-oss/. Please approach the supervisor or student for further information.

Appendix B: Consent form template provided by Stockholm University

Template of Consent form (please amend to suit the needs of your study) remove red text

SU Letterhead

Master's Programme in International and Comparative Education (year)

Consent form

We hope your are willing to take part in the study investigating XXXX. The study aims to xxxx. The implications of the study are to (state who/what will benefit). In order to carry out the study we need to collect the following data xxx during the period of xxx We will use the results for xxx in order to collect xxx

The study forms part of the compulsory program curriculum and is supervised by one of the assigned supervisors of Dept. of Education at Stockholm University, who will ensure that students adhere to all the necessary rules. The resulting thesis is assessed and graded by an examiner at the end of the course.

We ask for your approval to use the data collected for the study. Participation is always voluntary. In order to collect data for the study, we need your signed consent on the second page of this form. Even in the case that you sign the form at this point, it is still possible for you to withdraw from participation at any time without giving a motivation why.

During the course of the student working on the study your personal data are protected and will not be disclosed to unauthorized persons. We will store recordings and other details in a safeguarded manner. Any photographic/video/sound collected in the first phase will be anonymized, coded and transcribed as text. This will be done immediately upon transmission in order to disable any potential for detecting that you have participated. The consent forms will be kept in locked storage at Stockholm University so that they may not be linked to our recording. When the study is completed and the thesis has passed assessment, we will destroy the original data that has been collected (e.g. film/sound files, or digital survey).

The results of the study will be published in the thesis in a manner that will not reveal the participant's identity. The study adheres to the guidelines on research ethics and common laws. You may read more about these at the bottom of page 2.

In order to complete the study, it is very valuable for us to receive your consent. Please contact us in case you need further information.

Supervisor's name
Email: xxx@edu.su.se
Telephone 08-1207 xxx
The student's name
Email
Telephone

Stockholms
universitet

Date

Edit the Template to suit your needs

Consent Form (name subject e.g. teacher/adult etc)

I have taken part of the information of the study and accept that the material is recorded and stored for use in the master's thesis.

□   Yes

□   No

The name of the informant, date and signature………………
Print name……………..
(in case of a minor) Legal guardian's/parent's signature…….
Print name…………………
(in case of officials) Official's/administrator's signature…….
Print name………………….
(in case needed) Principal's/Leadership signature…………….
Print name…………………

At bottom of page
Further regarding guidelines and legislation related to the study
The personal data essential for carrying out the study are regulated according to the requirement of consent (samtyckeskravet) in the Swedish legislation (the Personal Data Act, in Swedish) Dataskyddsförordningen. Stockholm University is responsible for personal data. According to the law of protection of Personal Data Act (dataskyddsförordningen f.o.m. 25 maj, 2018) you are entitled free access to all information involving you and if needed, to have incorrect information amended. You also have the right to request deletion, limitation or objection to the use of personal data, with an opportunity to lodge a complaint to the data security officer at Stockholm University at dpo@su.se alternatively the Swedish Data Protection Authority at https://datainspektionen.se/kontakta-oss/. Please approach the supervisor or student for further information.

Appendix C : Interview guide (in English)

Interview guide

Introduction

Firstly, I introduce myself, then I remind the interviewees of the purpose of the research, thanking them for participating in it, reminding them their rights.

Do you have any question?

Ask them for the consent form that should have been signed by themselves and their parents for the interview to take place.

Which class are you in?

General information

If you were in a new country, where no one knows who you are and where you come from, how would you introduce yourself?

Which schools were you attending before?

In general, how would you describe your relationship with school/education?
⇨ How would you describe your schooling experiencing up until now?

General impressions

How would you describe your transition from middle school to high school under the context of COVID-19?

How does it feel to be a high school student in this school? And how does it feel like to be a student in this school under covid-19? What are your feelings?

Can you describe a typical school day (under covid)?

How do you feel about all the measures implemented to prevent the transmission of covid-19 in your school?

Can you describe the classes you had online?

How did you experience online learning? (environment…) How do you feel about that experience? How was it challenging?

Which type of online class you still managed to feel engaged?

Belonging experience

How's your relationship with your peers? How did covid measures and online learning impacted your relationship with your peers? (precise definition of « peers »)

Did you engage with new people? If so, how did you engage? How intensively did you engage with them?

How's your relationship with your teachers? How did covid measure and online learning impacted your relationship with teachers?

Have the teaching practices change with the covid-19 measure? If so, how? How do you feel about those changes?

How supported do you feel by the pedagogical staff?

How comfortable do you feel at school? With your classroom? In the online classes?

How comfortable do you feel when interacting with peers and teachers when having online classes? When having classes on site?

At which extent do you feel comfortable to interact with your peers during online classes? During on-site classes? (same questions regarding teachers)

Have you experienced challenges in engaging with others? What kind of challenges? Reasons for challenges? How do you deal with those challenges?

What does belonging mean for you?

Do you feel that sense of belonging when at school? Why? Do you feel that during remote learning?

What does your school need in order for you to feel a sense of belonging?

Do you think that the context with COVID-19 impacted your belonging? How? Why?

Final

Would you like to add anything more? (any reflections)

Do you have any questions?

Do you want to receive the transcript of the interview? Follow up the evolution of this research ?

Final words reminding the interviewees of their own rights within this research and thanking them for their participation.

Appendix D: Interview guide (in French)

Introduction

M'introduire, rappeler l'interviewer le propos de la recherche, remercîments, rappeler leurs droits.

Des questions ?

Formulaire de consentement.

Quelle classe ?

Informations générales

Si tu venais d'arriver dans un pays étranger, où personne ne te connais et ne sait d'où tu viens, comment est-ce que tu te présenterais à quelqu'un dans ce pays la?

Dans quels établissements scolaires étais tu inscrit.e avant le lycée ?

En général, comment tu décrirais ta relation avec l'école ou l'éducation ?
⇨ Comment tu décrirais ton vécu dans le système scolaire jusqu'à mtn ?

Impressions générales

Comment tu décrirais ta transition du collège vers le lycée avec le context COVID ?

Comment ressens tu le fait d'être un.e lycéen.nne à X ? Et qu'est-ce tu ressens d'être une lycéen à X avec le covid ? Quels sont tes sentiments ?

Est-ce que tu peux décrire une journée typique au lycée maintenant avec le COVID?

Comment tu te sens par rapport à toutes ces mesures misent en place pour empêcher la transmission du covid-19 dans ton lycée ?

Tu peux décrire tes classes en lignes ?

Comment est-ce que tu as vécu/vis les cours/apprentissage en ligne ?
⇨ Comment tu te sens par rapport a ce vécu?
⇨ Qu'est qui était « challenging »?

Quel est le type de cours en ligne ou tu arrives à peu près à être engagé.e?

Sentiment de bien-être/appartenance

Comment est ta relation avec tes collègues ? Comment les mesures anti-covid et les cours en lignes ont eu un impact sur tes relations avec tes collègues ?
(préciser la signification de 'collègues' : en général, mais aussi personnes proches)

Est-ce que tu as interagi avec de nouvelles personnes (collègues) ? Si oui, comment/de quelle façon ? Avec quelle intensité tu as interagi avec ces nouvelles personnes? (Communications sur réseaux sociaux?) Tu en penses quoi ?

Comment est ta relation avec tes professeurs ? Comment les mesures anti-COVID ont impacté tes relations avec les profs ? (COVID en général + cours en ligne)

Est-ce que les pratiques pédagogiques/enseignement ont changé avec le COVID ? Si oui, comment ? (DM, Tablettes) Comment tu te sens par rapport à ces changements ?

Comment est le suivis pédagogique ?

A quel point te sens tu à l'aise/confortable au lycée ? Avec ta classe ? Dans les cours en ligne ?

A quel point te sens tu à l'aise/confortable d'interagir avec tes collègues et professeurs lors des cours en ligne ? Et quand tu as cours au lycée ?

Est-ce que tu as eu des difficultés à interagir avec les autres ? Quels types de difficultés ? Quelles sont les raisons ? Comment tu as fait face à ces difficultés ? Sentiments ?

Qu'est-ce que ça signifie pour toi un sentiment d'appartenance ? De te sentir à ta place ? Se sentir le bienvenue ? Sentir que tu appartiens ? J'appartiens.

Est-ce que tu ressens ça dans ton lycée ? Sentiment d'être à sa place/appartenance ? Pourquoi ? Est-ce que tu ressens ça durant les cours en ligne ?

Qu'est ce qu'il faut au lycée pour que tu te sentes plus y appartenir ?

Est-ce que tu penses que le context Covid a eu un impact sur ton sentiment d'appartenance au lycée ou pas ? Comment ? Pourquoi ?

Questions finales

Est-ce que tu voudrais ajouter quelque chose ? Réflexions.

Est-ce que tu as des questions ?

Est-ce que tu voudrais que je t'envoie la retranscription de cette interview ? Et te tenir au courant de l'évolution de mon étude ? (qui sera écrite en anglais).

Mots de fin : rappeler les droits de l'élève dans cette recherche et remercier pour la participation.

Appendix E: Initial mind map

MIND MAP

School Belonging

"Hybride" System

Covid general outlook
- distancing
- masks
- positive
- negative

friendship
classmates
teachers
online teaching
- positive
- negative

relationships
staff
self perception
communication
Being a High schooler
perception of school

social interactions

Learning athmosphere
- feelings about the HS
- perception on subjects
- teaching practices
- School climate

transition to HS
- Difficult experience
- continuity
- positive experience