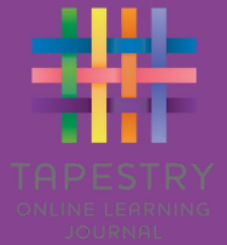




Siya
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A BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO **BELONGING**

This free document has been created to support childminders, nurseries and schools in having necessary conversations about belonging.

A BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO BELONGING

CONTENTS

What is belonging?

3

What is school belonging and how is it measured?

4

Children and young people's views of belonging

5

School belonging and Race

6

Activities that help foster a sense of belonging

8

References

10

A BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO BELONGING

WHAT IS BELONGING?

Belonging can be understood as a process that leads to a feeling of being connected to others, safe and well understood.

Psychologists who study 'attachment' see belonging as a need that is shaped by the quality and nature of early relationships. These relationships are said to heavily influence the emotional dynamics children experience at home, at school and later in life. Others feel this is a deterministic view, which pigeonholes children into a style of relating. Instead, they view belonging as a motivating force; one which prompts us to find our place in the world, whether that place is safe or not. Most definitions of belonging agree that it is a dynamic process interacting with someone's identity, their social context and their view of how accepted they are by others. For children who feel that they sit outside of the 'norm' finding a sense of belonging can be complex and inequitable.

Slee suggests that 'At the heart of inclusion...lies the principle of belonging' (2019). As the word belonging becomes routinely used in policy and practice, it is more important than ever to explore how settings can foster a sense of belonging for all children.

A BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO BELONGING

WHAT IS SCHOOL BELONGING AND HOW IS IT MEASURED?

The most common definition of school belonging suggests it occurs when children feel 'accepted valued, included and encouraged by others (teachers and peers) in the classroom ... feeling oneself to be of importance to the life and activity of the class' (Goodenow, 1993). After this definition was developed in the early 90's, researchers began to measure belonging in education settings. Most measures of school belonging aim to understand:

- How respected and accepted children feel by school staff
- The extent to which children feel they are a part of the wider school community; e.g., how much they are involved in extra-curricular activities
- The level of acceptance they feel from peers
- Whether children feel like outsiders within their school
- Whether children feel they can do well academically at their school
- How comfortable children feel in asking adults for help

Children who feel they have a high sense of belonging, also tend to score highly for academic self-efficacy (how good they feel about themselves as learners), self-esteem and academic motivation.

Measures of school belonging, such as the 'Psychological Sense of School Membership Scale' are often used for whole classes, cohorts, or schools. This kind of measure can be useful in understanding general trends within a setting and outlining blind spots, enabling schools to take relevant action.

A BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO BELONGING

CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE'S VIEWS OF BELONGING

The views of children who are marginalised can often be missed within large data sets such as those described above. Smaller scale studies have found that varying aspects of acceptance are important for a range of children. Within the following studies, children themselves have discussed what makes them feel a sense of belonging:

- Children who have experienced school exclusion and are attending a new setting, particularly girls who have attended pupil referral units, felt that they needed adults to be sensitive when trying to understand their past experiences. The children in this study felt that they had been 'labelled' and that this followed them, especially within 'paperwork'. To develop a sense of belonging, these children needed to know adults were genuinely curious about understanding them, from a place of neutrality (Nind, Boorman & Clarke, 2012)
- In a study across primary and secondary schools, children with a range of special educational needs (SEND) discussed their relationships with adults and children in school as an important theme; especially noticing moments where they felt a sense of acceptance (Midgen et al., 2019)
- Secondary aged children who were International New Arrivals discussed the importance of having their culture and religion accepted in their new school (Cartmell & Bond, 2015)
- In a multi-lingual early years setting, children felt that language practices could serve as a tool for inclusion. Children identified 'low-language' activities such as eating together and playing ball as ways that children with varying degrees of speech could find community (Whiting et al., 2021)

A BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO BELONGING

SCHOOL BELONGING AND RACE

Racial identity is an important factor that impacts school belonging. Research has shown that racial centrality (the extent to which a child feels their race is a central part of their identity) is a large predictor of school belonging. In one study, children who identified strongly with their blackness found they could identify with other children of a similar background, enhancing their feelings of connection (Boston & Warren, 2017). This kind of benefit is of course, highly contextual. Racial diversity within a school could offer more opportunity for children to create these bonds; but regardless of the homogeneity of the school population, belonging interacts with race in complex ways.

Non-diverse schools in and of themselves do not impact children's experiences of belonging, however the way that racist incidents are managed and followed up can impact how connected children feel to their setting. Within a large study that explored the experiences of children from a range of racial and ethnic backgrounds, the perception children had of the fairness across these groups was a key factor in how they developed a sense of belonging (Cline et al., 2002). Having clear and well-understood policies to handle race-related incidents, informed by the community of the school, is a start.

Within schools where suspension and exclusion rates are higher for black students, the black school population report significantly lower scores for school belonging. This is pertinent for UK settings across the age ranges, as black students are disproportionately more likely to experience fixed-term and permanent exclusion.

A BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO BELONGING

SCHOOL BELONGING AND RACE CONTINUED

Settings can support a sense of belonging within black populations by understanding the risk of Adultification bias. Adultification bias is the psychological process of positioning black children as more culpable and less vulnerable than their white counterparts, often resulting in harsher disciplinary outcomes. This bias occurs from the early years, through primary and secondary stages (Wright & Ford, 2016; Goff et al., 2014; Davis, 2022). Black children have discussed the policing of their physical appearance in schools and how this reduces their feelings of belonging. Auditing appearance policies to honestly explore how these may impact different children within the school population, is another start.

The wider societal context can have a top-down influence on the climate within schools and amongst children. This wider context can include:

- Racist rhetoric in the media
- Hostile debates around migration and identity
- Polarised political views in families and communities

Within contexts such as these, teenagers have expressed preferences for schools who can go beyond celebrating diversity and who can move toward helping children to understand social inequity and begin thinking about actions to dismantle this inequity (Schwarzenthal et al., 2022). This dismantling is what Friere referred to as critical consciousness.

A BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO BELONGING

ACTIVITIES THAT HELP FOSTER A SENSE OF BELONGING

Gathering children's views on belonging:

A good starting place is understanding what children within your setting feel about belonging. Within the early years, practitioners have used puppets and role play to ask children their views about belonging. To reduce the demand of language, some practitioners use photo-elicitation, which asks small cohorts of children to take a photo diary of the objects and activities that make them feel connected to school. They also use questionnaires to score and assess groups of children such as the School Belongingness Scale or the Classroom Belonging Scale. Other schools have developed their own measures of school belonging, relevant to their context.

Working towards meaningful representation:

EYFS classes have creatively worked to think about representation by having home-corners that reflect the communities of the children in their setting, enlisting the support of parents. Reflect on the nature of how children's race, culture and religion are reflected within session and lesson plans.

Increasing feelings of safety:

Children will experience varying levels of interpersonal conflict as part of their developmental journey. What matters when protecting a growing sense of belonging, is how adults and the wider school community are seen to act upon the concerns of children, particularly those from marginalised backgrounds who feel repeatedly victimised.

A BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO BELONGING

ACTIVITIES THAT HELP FOSTER A SENSE OF BELONGING CONTINUED

Involving children's views when changes happen to the school:

For many children, belonging is also related to the physical environment. When big changes occur within the school environment and children feel they are part of the decision-making process, this can support them to see how they are part of the community.

Working on our own responses:

Children's perceptions of how their teachers view them is a key aspect of belonging. When observing a child who is marginalised or struggling to connect, adults can use self-reflection questions such as: What is my general response to this child? What might this child feel about their interactions with adults in school? Does this child have an opportunity to share their gifts and talents? How might this child experience belonging at home?

A BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO BELONGING

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