

SCHOOL BELONGING

This dimension of education experience is an area where many schools are making great strides towards effective inclusion for all their students. The reason for such success lies in the fact that ‘school belonging’ directly relates to the way students *feel* in their school environment. In other words, it is the end point of successful inclusion in a school environment.

What is it, and how can it be created in schools?

Belonging in any social setting is generally viewed as a basic human motivation. We all like to be part of a larger group, be recognised for our participation and valued for our contribution. Feelings of being known, accepted and supported by others predominate. Belonging leads to social bonds, self-confidence, well-being and psycho-social development. The first group to which we aspire to belong is typically our family. If schools recognise the importance of enhancing students’ sense of belonging it becomes a powerful influence on students’ engagement academically and socially. Cedena (2010) outlines four components within any group or community that can affect our sense of belonging. These include: membership needs relating to our affiliation and identification with a group; the discourse or ‘talk’ of being part of a group; fulfilment of personal needs relating to levels of care, trust and support among group members; and shared emotional connections (p. 5).

Belonging at school

Schools are complex and dynamic social and cultural environments (Bones 2010) that play a key role in establishing a sense of school belonging through their social networks and relationships (Allen & Bowles 2012; Pesonen 2016). One of the first things you try to do at a new school is to establish social bonds in order to foster personal connections and a sense of belonging within the school environment (Vaz et al. 2015). The school’s environment is viewed as the *heart* and *soul* of the school where a caring, safe and supportive learning environment enhances students’ sense of school belonging (Pesonen 2016). Turner et al. (2014) describe the school community as ‘what we are and what we do as a school’ (p. 331), encompassing the school’s environment, school climate and school culture (Dehuff 2013). School climate is based on teachers’ philosophies towards diverse learners, the extent to which students receive appropriate supports and importantly, how students experience belonging within this framework (Pesonen 2016).

La Salle et al. (2015) outline four dimensions of school climate: safety, teaching and learning, relationships, and environmental structures including buildings and resources. School culture is made up of artefacts, values and assumptions. Artefacts contain visible, tangible characteristics of the school community (Carroll et al. 2011) such as behavioural norms (Carroll et al. 2011; La Salle et al. 2014), language and communication use

(Santos 2014) as well as shared values, traditions and beliefs (Carroll et al. 2011). Soto-Chodiman and colleagues (2012) conclude that shared values, beliefs and traditions underpin school stakeholders' behaviours, attitudes and expectations (Konecni-Upton 2010). These shape the interrelationships among students, staff and school leaders and support the sense of school belonging and attachment for all concerned (Dehuff 2013).

This network of relationships is founded on trust and care and where adults within the school community care about learning, show interest in students' work and have high expectations of them both academically and socially (Allen & Bowles 2012; Vaz et al. 2015). Cedena (2010) adds that school belonging can also be a *sense of place* within the school environment. Teacher support, friendship, engagement, discipline and active participation have been noted as factors that contribute to school belonging (Allen & Bowles 2012; Cedena 2010). School belonging has been linked to greater academic engagement, motivation and commitment within the school community (Murphy & Zirkel 2015; Washburn 2009). In contrast, a lack of school belonging has been associated with negative psychological factors such as staff and student stress, higher levels of emotional distress, feelings of alienation and loneliness, absenteeism and disengagement (Allen & Bowles 2012; Cemalcilar 2010), which can impede school success for teachers and students (Moore-Southall 2016).

It is important to understand that school success and student success academically are not the precursors of school belonging, but the result of it. Students' school belonging is the degree to which students become personally invested in the school, compliant with school rules and expectations, engaged in classroom activities and believe in the value of education (Moffa et al. 2016; Santos 2014; Sassen 2015). Students' sense of school belonging can be achieved when the student feels an emotional connection to the school community (Cedena 2010) and this enhances their intrinsic motivation and their future goals, aspirations and learning outcomes (Jose et al. 2012). Critically, school belonging supports students at a time in their lives when they are vulnerable and searching for their own sense of identity.

How can school belonging be established and maintained?

Monash University researchers (Allen & Kern 2019) suggest five key strategies:

- 1 *Teacher and school staff establish positive relationships with students.*
Schools should ensure that students have at least one supportive adult in their environment: a person they know and like and with whom they feel safe and can build a relationship. This may not always be their class teacher but includes other school staff.
- 2 *Create a positive peer culture of belonging.*
Create a school culture where belonging is expected as normal and offer a range of activities and experiences where the school's values and traditions are represented. Supportive leadership is critical to these outcomes. Teaching about behaviours that promote belonging is also important.
- 3 *Value learning.*
Value learning for its academic, social and personal outcomes within a framework that has reasonable expectations of students and their diversity and enhances their self-confidence.
- 4 *Take proactive steps towards mental health.*
School staff undertake professional development to enhance their ability to offer experiences that are responsive to students' diverse belonging needs and have basic skills to allow them to proactively recognise, prevent or refer them to alternative pathways, if needed.

5 *Don't forget parents.*

Parent involvement is critical in school communities and their beliefs about school and education influence their children's attitudes. Hence, schools need to communicate to parents the importance of school belonging and the reasons behind the schools' approaches to presenting values and student support strategies that promote acceptance and belonging. Not all parents will engage in school activities, but they should be invited to such activities and at least be able to understand why the school undertakes an approach directed towards a sense of school belonging for students.

Students' sense of school belonging has been taken for granted in some schools and even neglected in others. Recent research has identified that school belonging enhances student academic and social development and creates an environment in which all stakeholders, teachers and students can learn and work inclusively in an environment that is supportive, diverse and productive.

Apply your knowledge

How might you determine the outcomes of your plans for the inclusion of a child from a different culture in your class and school? What kinds of observations, discussions, data or other procedures would you use to determine outcomes:

- behaviourally
- emotionally
- cognitively?

GROUPS OR INDIVIDUALS?

Finally, inclusion should not be viewed as only being about groups or categories of individuals who are considered to be disadvantaged in some way—for example, about students with behavioural challenges or those from a non-English-speaking background. It is essentially about individuals, and individuals are multilayered. We know that within groups that may

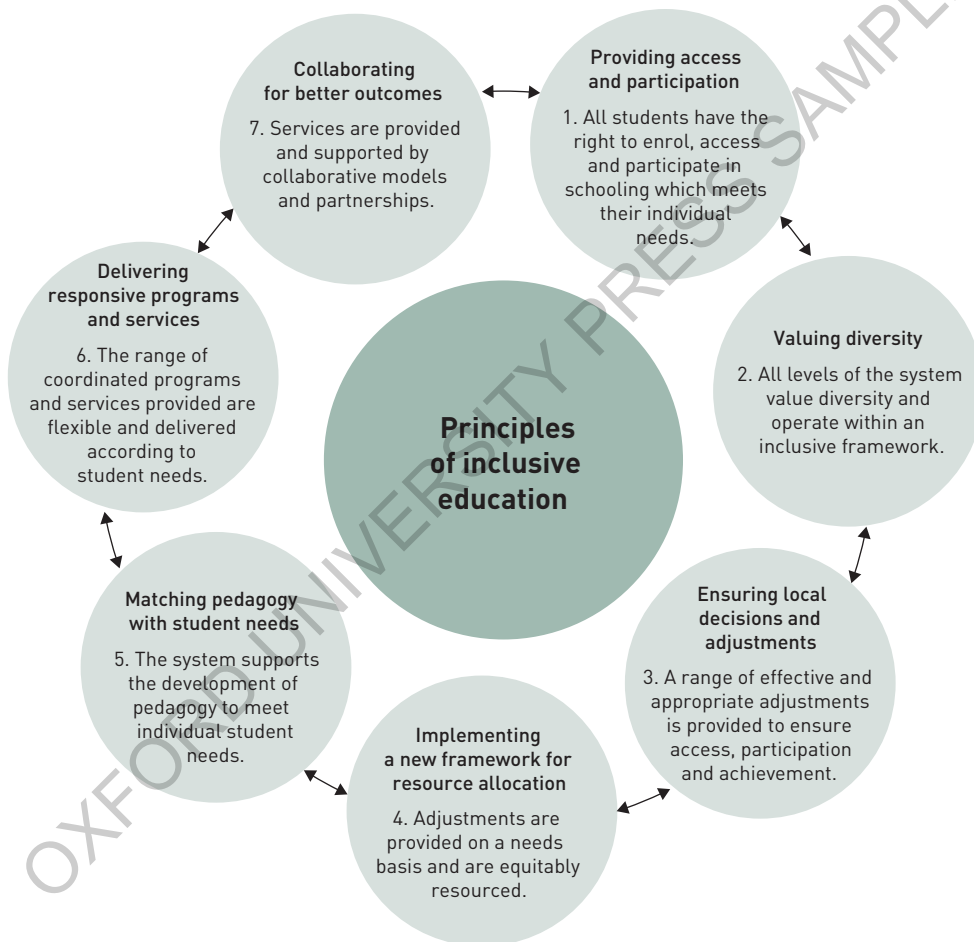
FIGURE 19.2 Learning through sharing



share some characteristic that is potentially a disadvantage, there will be great variability in the manner in which this characteristic influences their identity and their capacity for inclusion. Some may not be influenced at all, while others may demonstrate a significant loss of access, opportunity or equity of outcome. It is, therefore, always important to consider inclusion from an individual perspective, as it is only the individual who truly feels accepted, belonging and engaging actively in social and academic events. We can all understand this from our own experience.

The Western Australian Government (DET WA 2016) provided a typical and effective model of inclusion that showed the various processes at work and identified seven principles of inclusive education (Figure 19.3).

FIGURE 19.3 The seven principles of inclusive education



Source: Department of Education and Training (DET WA) (2004).