

Belonging in Education: what is the latest research telling us?

This is the first in a series of blogs profiling and critically engaging with current research on the importance of belonging in education. Each quarter, we will draw together emerging studies, consider what they add to the evidence base, and ask what they might mean for policy and practice.

Belonging in education: conceptual clarity

Belonging in education is commonly understood by research as ‘the extent to which [children and young people] feel personally accepted, respected, included and supported by others – especially teachers and other adults in the school social environment’ (Goodenow & Grady, 1993, pp. 60–61). This definition has been [further extended](#) by the [Belonging in Education Research Network](#), and the most recently published article in this summary supports much of our extension. The Wheeler (2026) publication offers a conceptual framework for *belonging-led inclusion*, exploring ideas of social justice across six conditions for lived belonging i.e., *recognition, relationships, participation, curriculum access and identity, agency, and mattering*. Through this framework the study suggests that while many schools may provide children and young people with the procedural conditions for inclusion, this support may not always function ‘as a route into fuller membership or as a structure for managing marginality’ (Wheeler, 2026, p. 3). Their framework offers useful comparability to much of the Network’s work and, by bringing together the concepts of belonging and inclusion, it raises new questions for the way in which belonging may function alongside the current inclusion agenda.

Belonging and attainment: a growing policy interest

Perhaps the most visible publication in the English context is the Department for Education’s *School belonging and attainment at Key Stage 4: linked data study* (Banerjee, 2026). The publication demonstrates the growing prominence of belonging within education research and represents a welcome step towards a stronger evidence base. Using PISA 2022 survey responses linked to National Pupil Database data, the study examines the relationship between belonging and Attainment 8 - while accounting for factors including prior attainment, individual characteristics, and bullying.

The headline finding is encouraging i.e., pupils reporting a stronger sense of school belonging also tend to have higher attainment. But there is an important qualification, as the research does not establish causation, and the strength of the association changes depending on how belonging is measured. The strongest relationship emerged from the simplest measure i.e., pupils’ responses to the statement “*I feel like I belong at school*”. Pupils who strongly disagreed with this statement had lower Attainment 8 scores than those who strongly agreed, after accounting for other factors. By

contrast, the broader six-item OECD belonging index was not significantly associated with attainment once other variables were considered. This six-item index includes: “I feel like an outsider (or left out of things at school)”, “I make friends easily at school”, “I feel like I belong at school”, “I feel awkward and out of place in my school”, “other students seem to like me” and “I feel lonely at school”.

The study also reminds us that belonging is not experienced equally. Broadly, boys reported greater belonging than girls; pupils eligible for free school meals and pupils with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) reported lower belonging; and ‘White students [were] less likely to report they belong at school’ (Banerjee, 2026, p. 9). ‘Black’, ‘Asian’, and ‘students from Mixed ethnic backgrounds’ reported higher rates of belonging; however, the study suggests caution when interpreting these results, due to the subgroup differences not being statistically significant and the broad classifications that ‘may mask heterogeneity in experiences’ (Banerjee, 2026, p. 32). These results were obviously only answered by CYP in school and therefore a large number of CYP weren’t included by design, due to persistent absence, homeschooling, and suspensions and exclusions.

Belonging beyond secondary school

Evidence published this quarter also suggests that these questions do not end when pupils leave school. The Yang et al. (2026) new meta-analysis of 83 studies of postsecondary education found positive associations between belonging and a range of academic outcomes. Interestingly, the relationships were stronger for motivation, academic interest, and self-efficacy than for academic performance itself. Belonging also showed small positive associations related to student retention, academic engagement, persistence intention, and was negatively associated with intentions to drop out. This provides an important interaction with the DfE findings. Rather than thinking of belonging simply as another potential route to improve attainment, the evidence suggests it may also be useful to see it as a motivational and psychosocial resource that supports how students participate in education. This distinction matters because belonging that is valued only when it improves attainment risks overlooking why belonging matters in its own right - and the wider educational processes through which it operates.

Belonging, attendance, and wellbeing

New research published by the National Foundation of Educational Research (NFER) is one of several studies which highlight the potential links between belonging, attendance, and wellbeing (Moore et al., 2026). This contributes to the national narrative of attendance being a ‘top priority’ for schools (Moore et al., 2026, p. 2). However, we caution against a simplistic equation of attendance =

belonging and instead continue to promote the need for a critical understanding of how children and young people actively participate in everyday school life. That said, the NFER study does suggest that belonging is associated with absence, albeit with a lack of significance after controlling for life satisfaction, suggesting that a focus on belonging is unlikely to be the sole solution to attendance issues in schools.

Similarly, a new systematic review and meta-analysis strengthens the idea that belonging is associated with externalising behaviours (Goagoses et al., 2026). Examining belonging alongside externalising behavioural difficulties, it identifies a small but significant relationship between the two which appears in both cross-sectional and longitudinal research. Perhaps most interestingly, the longitudinal evidence suggests that the relationship may operate in both directions i.e., belonging was associated with reduced externalising behaviours, while externalising behaviours were also associated with subsequent reduced feelings of belonging. However, in a similar way to the earlier study, the authors are careful to stress that this does not establish causality.

This association between belonging and behaviour is echoed in recent research on school suspensions (Cahill et al., 2026) where belonging was associated with lower odds of suspension even when controlling for a range of factors. Their study highlights the educational and psychosocial consequences of school suspension while at the same time demonstrating how ‘suspension risk is shaped by structural, relational, well-being, health behaviour and school-level factors’ (Cahill et al., 2026, p. 2).

These studies suggest that belonging is highly contextual, with The Goagoses (2026) review (alongside other new studies, see Sotardi and Rudolf (2026)), pointing towards the way in which teacher and peer relationships are of significant importance. Teacher support also seems to be an important factor especially during periods of transition between school phases (Goagoses et al., 2026) with the studies in this blog often arguing that responses should extend beyond attempts to change individual pupils and consider teaching, disciplinary practices, and the wider school community. These ideas are potentially significant for policy and practice. If a pupil reports that they do not belong, the response cannot only be to ask what needs to change about that pupil. We also need to ask what it is about the environment, relationships, and practices around them that is producing that experience.

From measurement to practice

This quarter's research leaves us with a productive tension. It is clear that there is increasingly consistent evidence that belonging is associated with outcomes we care about e.g., attainment,

motivation, attendance, persistence, and behaviour. Yet the evidence also cautions against reducing belonging to a single outcome measure, treating it as an isolated intervention, or understanding it as a static state which remains unaffected by different contextual factors.

These findings also promote questions for practice whereby if we accept that belonging is relationally produced, we therefore must question what might a genuinely relational pedagogy look like in everyday classrooms? This question is highly relevant to the Network which is currently exploring the feasibility of developing an implementation framework to support educational settings to fully embed meaningful belonging for all pupils, including those facing greatest adversity. Similarly, the newly published *Routledge International Handbook of Relational Pedagogy* aims to shed light on these issues (Ljungblad et al., 2026), offering practice- and theory-based ideas that may help us to continue to explore belonging as a process, rather than only as an outcome, and may provide an important next step. In doing so we shift attention away from simply asking whether a child or young person belongs, towards examining how belonging is continually produced, negotiated, strengthened or disrupted through everyday relationships, interactions, and institutional practices.

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