



STATEMENT ON THE IMPORTANCE OF ‘BELONGING’ IN EDUCATION

May 2026

Purpose

The **Belonging in Education Research Network** has produced this statement to share insights from evidence and practice about the potential of whole school approaches to promote ‘Belonging’ in order to address some of the key challenges facing the education system. As this is a rapidly evolving field, we will update the statement annually and welcome feedback on it.

Our network was created to share, review, and catalyse research on the potential for schools, often the most consistent and universal service in a child’s life, to be designed in a way that offers protective stability for children experiencing an uncertain world; and to better equip them with the skills they need to flourish.

In producing this statement, we have taken as our starting point approaches that promote belonging. This is because a sense of belonging is regarded as a fundamental human need and determines the way in which both interpersonal relationships and broader communities function¹ and because there is evidence – which we summarise below – that children who feel they belong in school do better across academic, psychological, and social domains. However, feelings of belonging in education have been declining overall (especially in England and in the post-Covid era) particularly for children who face adverse circumstances.

As a network, we intend to develop these insights into a Framework for Belonging in Education that will offer common, evidence-based principles and approaches to promote belonging that can be embedded (with flexibility for local adaptation) into local practice. We encourage national policy makers and others with expertise to [contact us](#) if they would like to make a contribution to this work.

Summary of key points

1. The increasing focus on ‘Belonging’ in educational policy and practice documents, including proposals for reform, is welcome and consistent with the evidence.
2. The current evidence shows that children who feel they belong in school do better across academic, psychological, and social domains, with these benefits extending into adulthood; and that there are also benefits for teachers and other professionals where schools address belonging as a ‘whole school’ strategy.
3. More disadvantaged children – including children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), children with experience of children’s social care, children living in poverty, and children from certain ethnic minority backgrounds are both over-represented in school absence figures and more likely to say they feel like they are outsiders at school, feel unsafe in school, to be experiencing poor mental health, or to have experienced childhood trauma.

4. Approaches to promoting belonging need to:

- Be based on a clear and consistent definition of belonging, ideally drawing on that developed by our network.
- Involve ‘whole school’ approaches based on supportive and inclusive school environments which include high behavioural and academic expectations, but recognise these need to be supported through strong relational practice, which supports effective engagement, wellbeing, and learning.
- Start with an understanding that pupil disengagement and challenging behaviour are a response to some of the systemic factors that the evidence suggests are contributing to some of the challenges faced by the education system, such as: high stakes accountability, pressure for testing and inspection regimes, and high levels of unmet need as a result of experiences of trauma, SEND, and mental health challenges.
- Avoid a misplaced reliance on ‘behaviourist’ approaches which rely on compliance and severe escalation pathways. These strategies may be counterproductive if they fail to address the underlying systemic drivers of pupil anxiety and disengagement.

What isn't working?

All children, and especially those experiencing adversity, face an escalating crisis in education that impacts negatively both on their needs being met and on their sense of belonging in school or other education settings.

The global number of children not attending school has declined by nearly 40% since 2000 but this progress has stagnated especially since the Covid-19 pandemicⁱⁱ; and research shows that low or no sense of school belonging are linked to absenteeism and dropout from schoolⁱⁱⁱ. England is one of the countries most affected^{iv}, with recent research showing a 20-percentage point drop in pupils' sense of belonging in schools^v. England, compared to other jurisdictions of the UK has the most individualising approaches to social and emotional learning in schools^{vi}. This contrasts with what young people themselves think is important: a more holistic conceptualisation of mental health and wellbeing as collective, as well as individual, and in which identity plays an important role.

Some overlapping groups of children are particularly over-represented in school absence figures: including children with SEND, children with experience of children's social care, children living in poverty, and children from certain ethnic minority backgrounds^{vii viii}. These same children are particularly likely to say they feel like outsiders at school^{ix}, that they are unsafe in school, to be experiencing poor mental health or to have experienced childhood trauma. At the same time all children are facing a more uncertain and frightening world, in which they are less clear of their place, and in which a sizeable minority are exposed to online harm and radicalisation^x.

The perception that pupil behaviour is a growing challenge has been met with an increased focus on school behaviour policies with stricter rules and the enforcement of conformity in many schools. But this has not been accompanied by improved outcomes, especially for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children.

After more than a decade of the promotion of resilience-building policies and initiatives in schools, mental health figures have not improved^{xi}. There is preliminary evidence to suggest that schools with higher exclusion rates tend to outline more severe escalation pathways for minor infractions while restorative, trauma informed and vulnerable-learner-focused policies are more common in schools with lower exclusion, suspension, and absence rates^{xii}. And there is evidence that worsening behaviour may in part be driven by experiences of trauma, growing levels of anxiety, high levels of unmet need, and challenges in accessing timely assessments and support, and that behaviour management policies which fail to address these underlying factors may exacerbate them^{xiii}.

The SEND high needs block and children services funding is spent^{xiv}, and secure accommodation places are difficult to access^{xv}. Youth Offending Teams are at capacity, raising multi-agency concerns about the school-to-prison pipeline. The sharp end of services and support are in crisis, and our research has suggested this support needs to happen ‘upstream’ as a preventative intervention^{xvi}. While there have been some attempts to identify the costs of some elements of this crisis - e.g. cost of school exclusion^{xvii xviii} - the full economic impact on children and young people has yet to be calculated.

The increasing systemic pressures such as complexity of unmet needs that may be contributing to worsening pupil behaviour also have impact on the education and wider workforce. Teachers and school staff are experiencing burnout due to a range of systemic issues including excessive workloads, demands from assessment and targets, and intense pressure from Ofsted inspections with resulting increases in staff turnover^{xix}. Against this backdrop, there is an imperative to develop evidence-informed approaches to promote belonging of both pupils and adults which are appropriately targeted on systemic factors, not just individual behaviours.

What do we mean by Belonging in Education?

The Network has produced a working definition of ‘Belonging in Education’ which draws on a recent review of literature by the National Children’s Bureau^{xx} and developed further in line with subsequently published research and with practice insights from Network members. We will continue to update our definition taking account of further research and learning from practice.

“Belonging in education refers to the dynamic processes by which schools and other learning settings create the conditions to ensure everyone in their communities:

- *feels physically and psychologically safe, supported and included, and protected from discrimination;*
- *feels known, valued, and that they matter and can develop and express their authentic selves in a way that celebrates difference;*
- *can make, maintain, and mend positive relationships and navigate rupture and repair;*
- *can develop their learning aspirations and be enabled to achieve them; and*
- *is empowered with meaningful opportunities to actively participate, shape, and contribute to an increasingly inclusive, equitable, and anti-discriminatory environment that values difference.”*

This concept builds on, but is not the same as, educational inclusion which some argue refers to the narrower set of practices that ensure all pupils, regardless of background, have access to the same educational opportunities and support^{xxi}.

Why belonging matters (and to whom, where)

In preparing this statement, we are grateful to researchers from the National Children’s Bureau (NCB) who summarised for us the key points from a recent [school belonging literature review](#) undertaken for them by Goldsmiths, University of London. We have extended this review - hereafter referred to as the NCB Review - with a search of more recent evidence published since 2024. We have also drawn on literature provided by Network members. At present, belonging is largely measured through self-report surveys, usually using measures based on the work of Goodenough and Grady^{xxii} or the Belonging Scale adopted by the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). More recent publications have advocated for updated measures which have been informed by young people’s own definitions of belonging^{xxiii xxiv}. Where possible we have drawn on existing literature which has explored young people’s interpretations of belonging in developing the proposed definition in this statement, but this is an area where more co-production with young people is needed and so we expect further iterations in future.

Evidence that belonging influences outcomes

There is extensive and consistent evidence that increased belonging is associated with significantly improved outcomes for children and young people. It describes belonging as a robust predictor of positive academic, social, and emotional outcomes, highlighting strong associations with higher attainment, greater engagement, and improved attendance. The evidence also demonstrates that pupils with a stronger sense of belonging experience better mental health and wellbeing, including lower levels of anxiety and emotional distress.

- The NCB Review describes the evidence base as strong, consistent and international.
- Findings are replicated across large-scale and longitudinal studies.
- Belonging is described as a robust predictor of multiple outcomes.
- Evidence suggests belonging functions as a protective factor, particularly for mental health.

Outcomes associated with higher levels of belonging

A substantial body of research demonstrates that a strong sense of belonging within school communities is associated with a range of positive outcomes for pupils across academic, psychological, and social domains. Academically, pupils who feel that they belong in school tend to demonstrate higher levels of attainment and academic performance, along with greater motivation and engagement in learning^{xxv xxvi xxvii}. Belonging is also associated with improved attendance, fewer suspensions and permanent exclusions, and reduced intentions to drop out of school^{xxviii xxix xxx}. These findings suggest that when pupils feel accepted, valued, and included within the school environment, they are more likely to participate actively and persist in their education.

Belonging is also closely linked to mental health and wellbeing. Pupils who experience a strong sense of belonging report greater psychological safety and feelings of acceptance, alongside higher overall wellbeing^{xxxi}. At the same time, stronger belonging is associated with lower levels of anxiety, depression,

and emotional distress^{xxxii xxxiii}. Supportive school relationships and inclusive climates can therefore play an important protective role in promoting pupils' emotional health. Conversely, a systematic review of the impact of disciplinary behaviour management strategies in schools suggested that pupil mental wellbeing and class behaviour could be made worse by these more punitive approaches^{xxxiv}.

Recent UK studies focused on trauma- and attachment-informed approaches in schools suggest that such approaches can lead to improvements in factors such as trusting teacher–pupil relationships and emotional safety, which in turn have been found to support greater pupil wellbeing, engagement, and a stronger sense of belonging in schools. These strategies are relevant for all pupils but additionally provide an essential foundation for the inclusion of pupils with experience of adversity, who may need additional specialist support^{xxxv xxxvi xxxvii}. Practice experience from Network members is that increase in trust helps increased reporting of safeguarding concerns.

In addition, belonging is associated with positive behavioural and social outcomes. Pupils who feel connected to their school community tend to demonstrate fewer behavioural difficulties, including being less disruptive in class, and show lower engagement in risk-taking behaviours^{xxxviii xxxix}. A stronger sense of belonging is also linked to more positive peer relationships and greater social connectedness within the school environment^{xl xli}.

Importantly, some of these benefits extend beyond schooling into adulthood. Research suggests that pupils who experience stronger belonging during their school years are more likely to engage in higher education, experience more positive employment outcomes, report better adult mental health, and show lower levels of substance misuse^{xlii xliii}.

Evidence also indicates that belonging is important for adults within school systems. Teachers who experience supportive relationships with colleagues and strong support from school leadership are more likely to feel engaged, motivated, and committed to their profession^{xliv xlv xlvi}. Positive collegial relationships can also buffer against workplace stressors such as heavy workloads, teacher experiences of challenging pupil behaviour, and administrative pressures^{xlvii xlviii xlix}. In this way, fostering belonging within school communities has the potential not only to support pupil outcomes but also to address teacher attrition and burnout by strengthening professional wellbeing and commitment^{li lii}. Practice experience points to the benefits of working relationally with parents and carers to move away from stigma and blame and towards a more supportive and collaborative approach to understanding and addressing underlying needs of learners^{liii}.

Evidence about who is more (or less) likely to feel like they belong

There are clear differences in which groups of pupils are more likely to report a strong sense of belonging. While evidence-based interventions often focus on average effects and what works for most children, it is equally important to consider those for whom these interventions may not be working. Evidence suggests^{liv} that belonging tends to be higher among pupils with stronger peer relationships, positive relationships with staff, and higher levels of perceived support within school. Conversely, belonging is often lower among pupils experiencing disadvantage, poorer mental health or weaker social connections. The findings of the NCB Review reinforce those of the BeeWell survey^{lvi}, which also highlights demographic differences, noting variations by gender, socioeconomic background, and other contextual factors, while suggesting a more pronounced difference for those with SEND.

Overall, belonging is shaped by both individual characteristics and the quality of relationships and school climate, with more socially connected and supported pupils being significantly more likely to feel that they belong. Key findings from the NCB Review and our wider reading were:

- *Pupils more likely to feel like they belong at school:* primary school pupils; children without SEND; pupils from higher income families who perceive stronger relationships with teachers and greater academic efficacy; those with higher social and emotional competency. Girls report higher ‘school connectedness’ and more positive relationships with teachers than boys (although more recent research suggest that in England at least, progression from the end of primary school and through secondary school is a period of declining emotional engagement at school, especially for girls^{lvii}).
- *Groups reporting lower belonging include:* pupils experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage; pupils with SEND; pupils experiencing poorer mental health; pupils with weaker peer or teacher relationships; those with immigrant backgrounds, from low-income families, and in vocational education programmes. There is limited research in the UK on the relationship between school belonging and ethnicity, but evidence from the BeeWell survey found that those from minoritised ethnic groups reported significantly lower belonging compared to White pupils^{lviii}.

Gaps in belonging between certain groups of pupils reflect broader inequalities and relational differences, indicating the need for targeted as well as universal approaches.

Understanding and improving belonging

What do we know about factors which promote belonging?

The NCB Review highlights that belonging is shaped primarily by the quality of relationships, school climate, and inclusive practices, and therefore can be strengthened through deliberate whole-school action. It emphasises that belonging is not improved through isolated interventions but through consistent relational practice, inclusive policies, and supportive environments.

Evidence suggests that schools can increase belonging by creating a school culture where everyone in the school community, including pupils, staff, and families feel known, valued, and heard. This involves prioritising strong staff–pupil relationships, fostering positive peer connections, and promoting inclusive classroom practices. Importantly, the NCB Review indicates that targeted support may be required for disadvantaged pupils and those experiencing emotional difficulties, as these groups are less likely to report high belonging.

Overall, the implications are that belonging should be treated as a core school improvement priority, embedded across leadership, teaching practice, and pastoral systems rather than addressed through stand-alone programmes.

The strongest message from the report is that belonging improves when schools:

- Embed belonging across systems, not just programmes;
- Prioritise relationships (building, maintaining, navigating, and repairing);
- Create inclusive and equitable environments;
- Monitor and respond to group disparities.

There is evidence^{lix} to support the following practical strategies to promote belonging:

School-level factors

- *Whole school climate*: relational and equitable policies applied consistently; clear shared values and rituals that build identity;
- *Teamwork*: involvement of non-teaching staff; genuine pupil consultation mechanisms; involvement in decision making; feedback loops showing action taken; opportunities for peer connection (clubs, non-academic events and activities);
- *School infrastructure*: updated learning facilities; maintenance of the school environment;
- *Support beyond classroom*: proactive action against bullying and discrimination; sex education; mental health support.

Teacher level practices

- *Teacher attributes*: being empathetic and engaging; showing a genuine interest in pupils;
- *Learning support*: offering assistance; strengths-based approaches; opportunities for collaboration;
- *Strong staff–pupil relationships*: tutor systems that prioritise relational check-ins; staff training in relational and trauma-informed practice; visible, approachable leadership;
- *Wellbeing support*: checking in on pupils; understanding their life outside school;
- *Positive peer relationships*: cooperative learning approaches; peer-mentoring or buddy systems; explicit teaching of social and emotional skills;
- *Inclusive and equitable practice*: monitoring belonging data by pupil group; targeted pastoral support; culturally responsive teaching; ensuring representation and inclusion in curriculum content, with alternative and accessible curriculum where appropriate.

What do we know about implementation barriers?

Research highlights several barriers that can make it challenging to implement policies and practices aimed at strengthening pupils' sense of belonging. One key challenge relates to the broader policy context in highly marketised education systems. In systems characterised by high-stakes accountability, testing, and inspection regimes - such as in England - schools and other education settings often operate in competitive environments where performance indicators and inspection outcomes strongly influence reputation and viability^k. In this context, school leaders may prioritise initiatives that are directly assessed or linked to measurable outcomes, making it harder to gain traction for relational or belonging-focused practices that until recently have been less visible within accountability frameworks^{lxi lxi}. In addition, Network members highlighted the need to address misconceptions that prioritising belonging and inclusion implies lower expectations for behaviour or academic achievement, when in practice these approaches aim to create the relational conditions that support effective engagement, wellbeing, and learning.

Belonging needs to be developed through relational practice and adaptive approaches to teaching and pastoral care, rather than behaviourist approaches which rely on a culture of compliance and even fear. In a relational practice context when instances of conflict arise it is important to recognise that, just as in a behaviourist approach, there are consequences. These need school leaders, teachers, children and young

people to reflect on what occurred, what consequences need to apply, and how in the future they can make better choices and decisions. This approach has implications for school leadership cultures where reflection and openness need to be regularly and consistently reinforced. It also needs policy to acknowledge the need for local professional decision making and autonomy.

What future evidence is needed

While the current evidence base on school belonging is promising, there are a number of things we do not yet know and where the Network believes further research would be beneficial, drawing on gaps identified in the literature. Scholars have identified the need for clearer theoretical frameworks and improved measurement tools that reflect the updated definition of belonging set out in this statement, and which allow for more consistent comparison across studies^{lxiii}. In addition, there remains limited understanding of which strategies or interventions most effectively foster a culture of belonging across different cultural and national contexts^{lxiv}.

Methodologically, the field would benefit from more longitudinal (both retrospective and prospective approaches) and experimental research designs. Much of the existing literature is cross-sectional, which limits the ability to establish causal relationships between belonging and pupil outcomes. Future research should also broaden the outcomes considered. While studies have often focused on academic attainment and behavioural indicators, there is a need for greater attention to wider psychological and socio-emotional outcomes, including identity development, self-esteem, and overall wellbeing. Researchers have also called for more investigation into the material and contextual conditions that shape belonging within and beyond school settings.

Important gaps also remain in terms of populations and settings studied. Much of the current research focuses on adolescents, with comparatively little evidence relating to early years or primary school contexts or with children and young people not in school (who by definition are excluded from school-based belonging surveys). Further work is also needed to understand the effectiveness of whole-school approaches to belonging and to identify which elements of these approaches are most influential. At present it is difficult to disentangle the relative contributions of classroom-level and school-level factors^{lxv}. Future research should therefore develop and evaluate more distinctive, multi-tiered interventions that operate across different levels of the school system^{lxvi}, while also examining the influence of wider policy conditions such as workload intensification, leadership practices, and structural inequalities^{lxvii}. A specific focus on which models of learning encourage belonging, how these are best implemented, and how best they can be reflected in curriculum design would be particularly welcome. Better evidence is needed about which practical approaches are most effective in promoting belonging to explore how professional development on belonging practice and approaches can be most effective for teachers and other staff working with children and young people^{lxviii}. There is also a need to have stronger evidence on ways in which teachers and other staff can feel a strong sense of belonging in settings which promote inclusive practices. A rigorous analysis of cost, ideally including economic modelling, would help policymakers better understand the potential return on investment associated with initiatives designed to strengthen belonging in education.

Finally, researchers have highlighted the need for more practice-relevant evidence that reflects the lived experiences of children and young people themselves. Future studies should explore how belonging

relates to pupils' own priorities and definitions of success, rather than focusing solely on outcomes defined by education systems or policymakers^{lxix}. Greater inclusion of pupil voice is needed - especially the perspectives of those who are frequently marginalised or excluded - to understand what it feels like not to belong^{lxx}. It would also be valuable to test whether effects on belonging are compounded for children with multiple risk factors, in the same way as has already been evidenced for school exclusions.

Role of the Belonging in Education Research Network

This Statement has been developed and reviewed by the **Belonging in Education Research Network**, recently established by the Rees Centre at the University of Oxford's Department of Education in partnership with Anewarc Ltd, Association of School and College Leaders, Local Government Association, and National Association of Head Teachers. The purpose of the Network is to build an evidence base for why belonging in education matters and how it can work effectively in practice, and to use this to advocate for change at national and local levels.

In producing this statement, we took as our starting point the NCB Review and we are very grateful to the research team there for providing a further summary using the headings we provided. We updated this with a search and review of literature published in 2024 or later and on specific topics of interest including literature on trauma-informed practice and belonging in schools. Our definition of Belonging in Education was developed in collaboration with Network members at a workshop in January 2025, using the Goodenow and Grady 1993 definition but amended to reflect more recent literature and practice experience. The full statement was scoped through a working group, developed further by the research team, and has undergone an iterative process of review by the Network. As part of this process, we used ChatGPT (University of Oxford EDU) to review our notes from the literature and working group discussions to generate a first draft of the sections relating to implementation barriers and future evidence. The summary text produced was checked against the original notes for accuracy and further amended by the researchers following the subsequent rounds of review. ChatGPT was also used to identify literature on trauma-informed practice and belonging in schools and produced a short summary of this existing research which we amended having accessed the source materials.

Members of the Research Network are currently working on a shared Practice Framework to promote belonging in education through relational approaches, and on a common approach to analysing existing data to provide an initial assessment of effectiveness. If you are interested in joining the Research Network as a researcher or practitioner or have evidence to contribute, please fill in this [contact form](#).

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