

A guide for teachers

A guide for school leaders

Encouraging a sense of belonging and connectedness in primary schools



A positive sense of belonging at school has fundamental benefits for children and young people and flow-on benefits for their learning and engagement with school. This guide makes recommendations based on the best available research evidence on fostering a sense of belonging in school environments.

Sense of belonging to one's school is referred to as school connectedness and is the extent to which students feel a part of their school and feel valued and cared for by their school community!

Related frameworks

Australian Professional Standards for Teachers

Focus Area 1.2 (Understand how students learn)

Focus Area 4.1 (Support student participation)

Focus Area 4.4 (Maintain student safety)

Focus Area 7.3 (Engage with the parents/carers)

Australian Professional Standard for Principals

Professional Practice 1 (Leading teaching and learning)

Professional Practice 3 (Leading improvement, innovation, and change)

Professional Practice 5 (Engaging and working with the community)

Australian Student Wellbeing Framework

Support: Wellbeing and support for positive behaviour

Inclusion: Inclusive and connected school culture

The Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO) has synthesised the most relevant evidence-based practices using rigorous methods in creating this guide. We have rated these sources of information against our [Standards of evidence](#), focusing on evidence generated in an Australian context wherever possible. Examples are supported by critical reflection questions and snapshots of practice to extend your knowledge and practice.

Some examples presented may not apply in all contexts, may be more suitable for lower primary students than upper primary students (and vice versa) and may look different across different content areas. Please make reasonable adjustments where necessary to ensure full access and participation for all students.

Using this guide in your classroom or school

We recommend you integrate the practices discussed in this guide into everyday classroom and whole school practices rather than treat them as standalone practices. You can support belonging in all interactions with your students using a variety of approaches presented in this guide. These approaches are designed to be both incorporated into and complement instructional practice, recognising that learning and wellbeing are mutually reinforcing.

You and your school may already implement many of the evidence-based practices presented in the guide. Integrating further practices will support the work you are already doing to ensure students are best able to learn. To make the most of recommendations, align your classroom and whole-school practices.

Using this guide as a school leader

If you are a leader in your school, you can use this guide to promote collaborative discussion and reflection within teaching teams. The practices described can serve as a point of conversation to build shared understandings of how to enhance students' sense of belonging and build greater cohesion in the use of these practices at both the classroom and the whole school level.

You can also use the reflective questions to encourage teachers to collaboratively compare the approaches within this guide to existing classroom and whole school practices. Through reflection, teachers can identify which strategies are well-established and set common goals for strengthening or embedding practices that require further consideration.

Benefits for students

A positive sense of belonging at school has fundamental benefits for students, including feeling that:

- their teacher and peers like, value and accept them
- the curriculum is interesting and relevant
- they are capable of succeeding at school
- their cultural identity is welcome and valued
- they can 'be themselves' within appropriate boundaries.²

A positive relationship with the school community can shape a student's emotional, behavioural, and cognitive engagement with schooling and influence academic outcomes.³ Students who experience positive peer relationships in school are up to 2 months ahead in their NAPLAN scores 2 years later than those who don't experience positive peer relationships.⁴ Benefits for learning and engagement at school include:

- lower absenteeism
- higher levels of effort, interest and motivation
- positive homework behaviour
- being more likely to like school
- trusting and respecting their teachers
- enjoying challenging learning activities
- being concerned about and helping others.

Evidence review

The practices outlined in this guide have been classified using AERO's Standards of evidence. Our review of the research and approaches in this guide includes a mix of papers with medium, high and very high confidence.

Our systematic review of available research found strong evidence of the practices that support students' connectedness to school. Positive relationships with teachers and peers improve students' sense of belonging. Studies showed that school structures and policies can facilitate connectedness between students and the school. The research also indicates that school leadership's commitment towards improving students' belonging is vital.

Research into practices that improve the wellbeing of students is relatively new and not as well explored as other learning areas. It also includes a larger focus on qualitative and international research. Further research is required to test whole school practices and their impact on belonging and connectedness for students and how these practices translate into improved academic and learning outcomes. The evidence base would also benefit from more studies with larger sample sizes to further understand the impact of belonging on students' learning outcomes.

Belonging and connectedness in practice

AERO evidence reliability key:

● = Medium confidence

● = High confidence

● = Very high confidence



Classroom approaches

● Fostering relationships between students

Peer support can play a significant role in students' sense of belonging by supporting the need for relatedness and acceptance and reinforcing a sense of trust in others.⁵ For primary school students, developing relationships with their peers can occur through informal interactions or during the learning process.

Informal gatherings such as shared lunches, where students bring their meals and eat together have been shown to improve relationships between students and have also improved students' sense of belonging.⁶ This time allows students to learn about each other's personalities and recognise their abilities, strengths and positive qualities.⁷

Games centred on value-sharing and recognising others' experiences facilitate bonding, fostering student relationships and improving their sense of belonging.⁸ Examples of these games include:

- 'Find me out' where students need to find someone with a named similarity (for example, height) and then ask them a pre-set question about themselves (such as if they have a pet).⁹
- 'Values bingo' where students fill in bingo cards with their values such as love, belonging, power, fun and freedom. Students then look for other like-minded individuals in the room, recognising those with similar values to them.¹⁰
- 'Someone like me', where the student in the centre of the circle reveals something about themselves and other students who have had a similar experience move to take someone else's spot (including the person in the middle) before the game starts again.¹¹

● Providing activities where students have ownership and say

Student-centred activities can foster connectedness for students as they promote mutual reciprocity, understanding and gaining insight into the personalities of others, recognising their strengths and positive qualities.¹² 'Real-life' curriculum activities such as Kids café, where students prepare, sell and serve healthy food to the school community, are some examples that have been shown to contribute to inclusive participation and increased acceptance of diversity for students.¹³

Reflection questions for teachers

- What does belonging look like for students in your classroom? How do you adjust your practices for students if they need more support?
- How can you or your colleagues assess the quality of your interactions across the school year?
- How can you build connections with students outside your classroom?
- How will you support students' transitions into school or across year levels to foster connectedness and belonging?
- How will you incorporate the practices from this guide, in a way which does not undermine learning?



Whole school approaches

● Taking part in activities that encourage peer connection

Activities encouraging peer connection have improved students' belonging at school.

Peer mentoring, for example, can improve levels of cohesion, encourage students to engage with different groups at school and help them develop skills for social interactions, each of which can foster a sense of belonging.¹⁴ To be most effective, mentoring should be high dosage (meeting at least once per week), long-term (lasting at least one year) and include a mix of social and academic activities.¹⁵

● Ensuring supportive school structures and policies

School structures and policies can impact how secure a student may feel at school and how connected they feel to their environment.¹⁶

Acceptance of diversity, which describes the student's perception of the school as accepting and fair to all students, is linked to school belonging.¹⁷

Schools can demonstrate an acceptance of diversity by:

- having **fair expectations** towards students where every student is treated equally
- recognising, celebrating, and valuing students' differences.

Support for learning, whereby students feel supported by adults at the school, also increases students' connectedness.¹⁸ This helps meet students' needs for competence and promotes motivation and engagement.¹⁹ Schools can support students by promoting values of learning, such as encouraging them to try their best.

● Fostering relationships across the whole school community

Whole school community activities can promote interactions between staff, students and parents, developing mutual reciprocity and encouraging students to get to know each other better. Key elements of these activities are being economically inclusive, owned by the school community, a fun and special occasion, informal and relaxed, well-organised, and involving food or community members eating together in a shared activity.²⁰

Social, celebratory activities of something valued in the school (for example, student art exhibitions) can encourage participation in the school environment, celebrate students' achievements and promote the connection between the school and families.²¹

These activities can help school community members to gain insights into each other's personalities and can be particularly useful for school staff to get to know students better.²² Additionally, these informal events and student interactions can be significant in developing acceptance of diversity, a key factor of connectedness.²³

Reflection questions for leaders

- How can you assess students' sense of belonging across the school year and adjust your policies or practices in response?
- How can you assist staff in understanding the importance of school connectedness to students' wellbeing, academic outcomes and behaviour management?
- How can your school policies, processes and structures foster belonging for students from different backgrounds?
- How will you build relationships with the broader school community to help children feel they belong?

Snapshots of practice



In the classroom

In year 4, Mr C is teaching his class how to write arguments. To provide students with ownership and say, he offers several topics of interest and relevance that the students can choose from to practise writing arguments. These include whether students should have to do homework, wear uniforms, go to bed at a certain time or be allowed to use mobile phones at school. The students show enthusiasm for the task as they can choose a topic they feel strongly about and decide whether to write arguments for or against the topic. The students are also able to fully engage with the task, as they chose a topic that they have adequate content knowledge about. They are eager to share their arguments with the class and contribute to a debate.



Whole school

At Northbridge Primary school, 'buddy time' is a school priority that enables children to build relationships with peers in different classes and year levels across the school. The teachers and school leaders believe this program assists children in feeling connected to peers and teachers within the school community beyond their own classroom. Each Wednesday, the hour before school close, is dedicated to buddy time. Classrooms of different year levels are partnered together, and teachers assist students in finding a buddy that they will work with during the semester. Each week, the teachers plan activities that will interest and engage the students to learn about each other's strengths and interests while working collaboratively. Through the connections formed during buddy time, students can be observed in the playground before and after school, at recess and at lunchtime, greeting, playing with and seeking help from peers in different year levels.



Next steps

Consider which of the scenarios in the table below most closely resembles your current practices for supporting belonging and connectedness.

We're already using some or all of the approaches	We're just starting to think about how we can improve belonging for students	We're using other approaches not covered in this practice guide
<p>That's great – the evidence suggests these are good approaches to try. You could focus on embedding, sustaining and monitoring quality practice. For example, you could:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • explicitly consider implementation barriers and enablers • focus on tailoring your approaches to meet the diverse needs of students • share your approaches, challenges and successes with other colleagues or school leaders – this could include modelling practices for your peers • monitor and review how these approaches are going (for example, by collecting student data and consulting with colleagues and students about what is and what is not working, and what adjustments could be made to improve outcomes). 	<p>Student belonging has been linked with positive outcomes for student learning, so it's great that you're looking for strategies to try. You could:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • select which of the approaches you could first focus on to meet these needs • identify the elements of school connectedness that you already do but could improve, and consider how you can develop staff capacity in these areas • emphasise the importance of a whole-of-school approach to increasing school connectedness to all staff • assist school personnel to engage with the practices covered in this guide – how can school leadership support the integration of these practices into everyday work? • browse AERO's resources. 	<p>Wellbeing covers a range of elements and can involve many different activities. Your approach may not yet have been tested by researchers or may have been tested in studies that did not meet the inclusion criteria for this guide. You could:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • reflect on your approaches and why you are doing them – how do they link to learning? • continue to monitor how your approach is going – is anything not working? Use data to support your understanding • try some of the approaches mentioned in this guide • review the evidence for your approach by using AERO's Research reflection guide.

References

To provide feedback on this guide or view further information, including full references and additional readings, visit [AERO's website](#).

- 1 Rowe and Stewart 2011
- 2 Bagdi and Vacca 2005
- 3 Dix et al. 2020
- 4 Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation 2019
- 5 Kiefer, Alley and Ellerbrock 2015
- 6 Rowe and Stewart 2011
- 7 Rowe and Stewart 2011
- 8 Dunleavy and Burke 2019
- 9 Dunleavy and Burke 2019
- 10 Dunleavy and Burke 2019
- 11 unleavy and Burke 2019
- 12 Rowe and Stewart 2011
- 13 Rowe and Stewart 2011
- 14 Yanhong et al 2020
- 15 Gordon, Downey and Bangert 2013
- 16 Allen et al. 2018
- 17 Yanhong et al 2020
- 18 Yanhong et al 2020
- 19 Kiefer, Alley, and Ellerbrock 2015
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