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School belonging case studies

Research report

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Executive summary

Background and methodology

This research explores how mainstream primary and secondary schools in England embed belonging practices while maintaining high standards of attendance and attainment. Commissioned by the Department for Education, the study involved in-depth case studies of 16 schools selected for their intentional focus on belonging and strong performance indicators. Data collection at each school included interviews with senior leaders and parent governors, focus groups with staff and pupils, structured observations, and analysis of publicly available documents about the schools' policies and practices.

Key findings

Conceptualising belonging

School leaders, staff, and pupils understand belonging through five interconnected dimensions:

- Safety and security – both physical and psychological safety as foundational
- Inclusion – universal participation and opportunity for all pupils
- Collective identity – shared culture and pride in the school community
- Individual recognition – every pupil being genuinely known and valued
- Positive relationships – interconnected networks of support

Schools prioritise belonging not as an add-on but as foundational to their core purpose, seeing it as essential for learning, mental health support, preparation for life beyond school, and educational equity.

Embedding belonging

Belonging emerges through seven interconnected facilitators:

- **School culture** providing clear, lived values and shared language
- **Senior leadership** creating conditions to support belonging and protecting against competing pressures
- **All staff** practicing and considering belonging in their daily school life, with staff belonging as a necessary requirement for pupil belonging
- **Pupils** as active creators of belonging through peer support and genuine agency
- **Physical spaces and resources** that are welcoming and remove barriers
- **Community partnerships** extending belonging beyond the school gates
- **Parent** engagement with the school as integral to children's sense of connection

Context fundamentally shapes, but doesn't predetermine, a school's belonging journey. While all schools can successfully embed belonging, their pathways vary significantly by circumstance. For example, small rural primaries may develop belonging organically through close relationships, whilst large urban secondaries require deliberate structures. The evidence shows successful belonging work requires schools to understand their unique context and select appropriate practices, rather than importing approaches wholesale from elsewhere.

Core practices

Six types of practices emerged across the schools:

- Relational practices – investment in relationships at every level (e.g., staff, pupils and families)
- Pupil voice and agency – genuine pupil influence leading to visible change
- Celebrating diversity – ensuring that every pupil sees themselves reflected and respected across the curriculum and daily school life
- School identity – unifying characteristics that create collective pride while avoiding exclusion
- Individualised support – holistic approaches meeting each pupil's specific needs
- Belonging beyond school – connecting pupils to community and future pathways

Strong school identities around characteristics (e.g., faith, subject specialisms) can powerfully unite communities but risk alienating pupils who do not share these traits. Successful schools navigate this tension by embedding universal values (e.g., respect, kindness, community) within their identity framework that resonate with all pupils regardless of personal alignment with the school's defining characteristic. Across the case study schools, the clearest message is that these values only create belonging when they are genuinely lived out in daily practice not simply stated in policies. This requires continuous dialogue about diversity and deliberate efforts ensuring every pupil finds their place within, not despite, the school's identity.

Belonging, attendance and attainment

The research reveals a powerful reciprocal relationship where belonging, attendance, and attainment reinforce one another, with leaders, staff, and pupils seeing them as intertwined. Pupils who feel they belong want to attend school; regular attendance enables deeper engagement with learning; academic success reinforces belonging. This creates a virtuous cycle rather than competing priorities.

Key tensions exist between belonging practices and systemic pressures including staff capacity constraints, punitive attendance policies, narrow academic focus, and budget limitations. However, schools demonstrate these can be navigated through deliberate

leadership choices, such as framing CPD and resource provision as belonging investments rather than costs.

Perceived impacts and measurement

School leaders, staff, parents and pupils perceive that pupil belonging is linked to a range of outcomes:

- Attendance – pupils explicitly link their desire to attend with feeling valued and connected
- Attainment – pupils, staff, and leaders create the emotional safety needed for learning risks and help-seeking
- Wellbeing – belonging is seen as foundational for resilience, confidence and future life success
- Aspirations – senior leaders, staff and parent governors describe belonging as helping to develop young people into citizens who feel capable of participating fully in society

Measurement remains challenging as belonging is difficult to isolate and quantify. Schools use multiple indicators including attendance data, wellbeing surveys, pupil voice engagement, and family participation alongside academic outcomes.

Key Recommendations for Schools

- Start with context – Deeply understand your specific community before selecting practices
- Begin small and be patient – Choose a few foundational principles and align all practices to them
- Make it everyone's responsibility – From leadership through all staff to pupils themselves
- Prioritise staff wellbeing – Invest in staff belonging first - their wellbeing, professional development, and sense of being valued
- Create genuine agency – Move beyond consultation to give pupils real influence over their daily school life
- Protect and sustain – Build structures and systems (e.g., policies and monitoring frameworks) that outlast individual champions
- Measure what matters – Use multiple indicators to track progress over time

Conclusion

From the perspectives of those involved in the research, building school belonging is both essential and achievable, requiring neither enormous resources nor revolutionary change, but rather thoughtful, sustained attention to relationships, culture and practice. When authentically embedded, school leaders, staff, pupils and parents all speak to how

belonging creates conditions where pupils want to attend, engage with learning, and achieve their potential while developing capabilities for life beyond school. This research demonstrates that investing in belonging is not a distraction from education's core business but is part of its essential foundation.

Introduction

Aims and objectives

Ipsos, in partnership with TONIC, Professor Kathryn Riley and the Anna Freud Centre, were appointed by the Department for Education (DfE) to deliver qualitative case study research on school belonging. The research explores how mainstream primary and secondary schools in England successfully embed belonging practices while maintaining high standards of attendance and attainment. The research was commissioned by the DfE's Pupil Wellbeing and Experience Analysis and Research team, in support of the government's Opportunity Mission and its ambition to help every child achieve and thrive at school.

The study draws on an in-depth case study design across 16 primary and secondary schools, selected to capture diversity in school type, phase, geography and pupil population. Within each school, data was collected through senior leader interviews, parent governor interviews, staff focus groups, pupil focus groups, structured observations and document analysis – providing a layered picture of how belonging is understood and enacted across different levels of school life.

The research has three core objectives:

- to identify schools that successfully support high belonging alongside strong attendance and attainment
- to explore how these schools embed belonging-supportive practices into their particular context and ethos
- to understand how belonging practices intersect with schools' approaches to attendance and attainment.

The findings are intended to inform upcoming DfE guidance on pupil engagement.

Policy context and rationale

School belonging or the extent to which pupils feel personally accepted, respected, included and supported within their school environment has declined in England over the last decade.¹ Between 2014 and 2022, the Health Behaviour in School-Aged Children (HBSC) survey recorded a 28-percentage point decline in school belonging among adolescents in England.²

¹ Goodenow, C., & Grady, K. E. (1993). The relationship of school belonging and friends' values to academic motivation among urban adolescent students. *Journal of Experimental Education*, 62(1), 60–71.

² Brooks, F. et al. (2023). *Health Behaviour in School-Aged Children (HBSC) England National Report 2022*. Available at: https://hbscengland.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/2022_FULL_REPORT_final_21.11.23-1.pdf

More recent DfE survey data showed some improvement, with 69% of secondary pupils reporting they felt they belonged at school most or every day in May 2025, up from 57% in May 2024.³ However significant gaps persist, with pupils eligible for free school meals (FSM), those with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), and female pupils all reporting lower levels of belonging than their peers.

Longitudinal evidence links strong belonging in adolescence to reduced likelihood of not being in education, employment or training (NEET) in young adulthood.⁴ Research also suggests that belonging in adolescence has lasting effects on psychological wellbeing into adulthood.⁵ A 2024 literature review by the National Children's Bureau describes a cyclical relationship between belonging, attendance and academic achievement.⁶ Students who feel connected to their school attend more regularly, engage more fully with learning, and achieve higher academic outcomes, which in turn reinforces their sense of belonging.

Against this backdrop, school belonging has been placed at the centre of national education policy. The Every Child Achieving and Thriving white paper, published in February 2026, explicitly identifies belonging as a priority, setting an ambition for more children to feel a strong sense of belonging in school, and committing to a new Pupil Engagement Framework to support schools in measuring and improving pupil engagement.⁷ It is within this context that the DfE commissioned this research, with findings from this study intended to directly inform the development of that framework and the accompanying guidance for schools.

Key objectives

The research is structured around three overarching objectives, each with a set of associated research questions.

Objective 1: Identify mainstream primary and secondary schools in England which successfully support high school belonging alongside high pupil attendance and attainment

³ Department for Education (2025). *Pupil experiences in school: academic year 2024 to 2025. Findings from Department for Education's omnibus surveys with pupils and parents*. Reference: RR1585. Available at: <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/692745719c1eda2cdf034145/Pupil-experiences-in-school-2024-to-2025-academic-year.pdf>

⁴ Parker, P. et al. (2022). School belonging predicts whether an emerging adult will be not in education, employment or training (NEET) after school. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 114(8), 1881–1894.

⁵ Heath, M.L. and Keptner, K.M., 2024. Impact of belonging and discrimination on psychological wellbeing among transitioning adults: Study using panel survey for income dynamics transition supplement. *Current Psychology*, 43(3), pp.2062-2073.

⁶ Goldsmiths, University of London on behalf of National Children's Bureau (2024). *School Belonging: A Literature Review*. National Children's Bureau. Available at: <https://www.ncb.org.uk/belongingmatters/literaturereview>

⁷ Department for Education (2026). *Every Child Achieving and Thriving*. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/every-child-achieving-and-thriving/every-child-achieving-and-thriving-html-version>

- What criteria, measures or indicators can be used to define "success" in supporting belonging, attendance, and attainment?
- How do school trajectories (consistently high performing vs having recently improved) relate to their approaches to embedding belonging?
- What different types of overarching cultures or ethos support schools to achieve high belonging, attendance, and attainment?

Objective 2: Explore how these schools embed belonging-supportive practices into their particular context and ethos

- Why have the schools chosen to focus on belonging?
- What interventions and practices have schools adopted in relation to belonging and why?
- How do schools operationalise belonging across the key domains of: pupil voice and agency; relationships with peers and adults; school culture, ethos and environment; pedagogical approaches to teaching and learning; links with community and family; and other child-centred approaches?
- What role do contextual factors (e.g., demographics, geography, history, size) play in shaping schools' choice and implementation of belonging practices?
- How do schools embed these practices within their own contexts and ethos?
- What are the common barriers and facilitators to implementing these practices, both across and within particular contexts?
- What do pupils, staff, parents, and leaders perceive good and ineffective practice to be?
- What do pupils, staff, parents, and leaders perceive the impact of belonging practices to be, including on pupil attendance and attainment?

Objective 3: Understand how school belonging practices intersect with practices to support attendance and attainment

- How do belonging practices intersect with schools' approach to attendance and attainment?
- What practical strategies do schools use to successfully support high pupil belonging alongside high attendance and attainment?
- What challenges do schools face in balancing belonging practices with practices aimed at improving standards?
- What patterns of practice emerge across different school types and contexts that could inform transferable guidance?

Methods

This section provides a brief description of the research methodology and its limitations across the 16 case study schools.

Research design

This study employed a qualitative case study design to explore how schools successfully embed belonging-supportive practices within their particular context and ethos. A qualitative approach was selected as the research questions are concerned with understanding processes, perceptions and practice. Case studies were the most appropriate unit of analysis given the need to capture the rich dynamics of school-level factors, contextual conditions and the perspectives of multiple stakeholders within each setting. Fieldwork was conducted across 16 mainstream primary and secondary schools in England between 9 February and 23 March 2026.

School selection and sampling

The primary objective for the school selection process was to identify schools that already had strong belonging practices. As there is no publicly available data on levels of pupil belonging in schools, schools were instead identified through a demonstrated *intentionality* towards creating a strong sense of belonging.

This intentionality was identified through schools taking part in one of the following programmes or initiatives:

- UNICEF Rights Respecting Schools⁸
- Schools of Sanctuary⁹
- Youth Sport Trust member schools¹⁰
- #BeeWell participating schools¹¹
- Attendance and Behaviour Hub Schools¹²
- Trauma Informed Schools¹³

⁸ UNICEF UK. (n.d.). *Rights Respecting Schools Award*. Retrieved June 2026, from <https://www.unicef.org.uk/rights-respecting-schools/>

⁹ Schools of Sanctuary. (n.d.). Retrieved June 2026, from <https://schools.cityofsanctuary.org/>

¹⁰ Youth Sport Trust. (n.d.). *Well Schools*. Retrieved June 2026, from <https://www.youthsporttrust.org/well-schools>

¹¹ #BeeWell. (n.d.). *Home*. Retrieved June 2026, from <https://beewellprogramme.org/>

¹² Department for Education. (2026, May 12). *Schools leading attendance and behaviour hubs*. GOV.UK. Retrieved June 2026, from <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/rise-attendance-and-behaviour-hubs-programme-lead-schools/schools-leading-attendance-and-behaviour-hubs>

¹³ Trauma Informed Schools UK. (n.d.). *Home*. Retrieved June 2026, from <https://www.trauma-informed.uk/>

- Further schools were included based on recommendations from the consortium's network, who identified schools where a strong sense of belonging was clearly embedded in practice

Schools were then reviewed against three years of publicly available performance data. This included average Attainment 8 scores, percentage of pupils meeting KS2 expected standards, overall attendance, persistent absence rates, suspension rates and permanent exclusions. A shortlist of schools was created that offered a diverse range of belonging indicators and demonstrated strong attendance and attainment trends. Schools were considered to demonstrate strong attendance where overall absence and persistent absence rates were below the phase median over the last three years or showing steady improvement. Schools were considered to demonstrate strong attainment where Progress 8 scores (secondary) or percent of pupils meeting the expected standard (primary) were above the phase median over the last three years or showing steady improvement. Those schools were then invited to take part in a case study visit.

From the schools that submitted an expression of interest, a final sample of 16 was selected. The sample was designed to ensure an even split of primary and secondary schools and meaningful representation of schools with above-median pupil premium funding.¹⁴ Although the research was intended to focus on mainstream schools, the experience of pupils with SEND was deemed an important factor to consider in the design of the research. The intention was to include at least two schools with SEN units; however, none of the shortlisted schools expressed interest in taking part. However, the final sample did include schools with high proportions of pupils with SEND, and SEND inclusion was frequently discussed by staff.

Table 1: Primary Sampling Criteria

Criterion	Category	Quota	Achieved
Stage	Primary	8	8
Stage	Secondary	8	8
Pupil premium	Above the median	At least 4	4
SEN provision	Includes a SEN unit	At least 2 (one primary, one secondary)	0 for SEN Units; however, the average proportion of pupils with SEN provision (either SEN Support or an EHC plan) was

¹⁴ Pupil premium funding was used as a proxy indicator of socioeconomic disadvantage, to better capture schools serving pupils across a range of socioeconomic backgrounds. It also accounts for variation in financial resources, as some schools may use pupil premium funding to support initiatives that support belonging, attendance and/or attainment.

Criterion	Category	Quota	Achieved
			13% for primary schools and 11% for secondary schools.

Secondary criteria – including single sex schools, urban and rural settings, faith schools and geographic spread across Government Office Regions – were applied to further enhance diversity and capture variation in context and practice.

Table 2: Secondary Sampling Criteria

Criterion	Category	Quota	Achieved
Single sex schools	All boys / all girls	1 of each	1 all boys; 1 all girls
Area	Urban	At least 6	11
Area	Rural	At least 6	5 ¹⁵
Religion	Faith-based schools	At least 2	5
Geographic region	At least 1 school per Government Office Region (9 regions)	Met	3 London, 2 North East, 2 North West, 2 South East, 2 South West, 2 Yorkshire and the Humber, 1 West Midlands, 2 East Midlands

Data collection and fieldwork

Prior to each visit, a researcher conducted a short briefing call with a school contact to clarify expectations including the data collection activities, consent processes and safeguarding arrangements. Each case study school took part in each of the data collection activities described below (further detail on the data collection tools used can be found in Annex A). Where possible, data collection was done in-person in a single school visit, but in some instances, interviews with school leaders and parent governors were conducted virtually either before or after the visit.

Document analysis. Prior to each school visit, a desk-based document analysis was conducted using publicly available materials including Ofsted reports, school websites,

¹⁵ Note: The rural quota was not fully met, reflecting the number of rural schools that met the sampling criteria and agreed to participate.

published policies and enrichment offers. Document analysis provided an initial picture of each school's stated ethos, values and belonging-related practices.

Senior leader interviews. One semi-structured interview was conducted with a member of the senior leadership team (SLT) in each school – typically the headteacher, deputy head or assistant head with responsibility for pastoral matters or pupil experience. Interviews lasted 45-60 minutes and explored the school's overarching ethos and values, strategic approaches to embedding belonging alongside attendance and attainment priorities, and the contextual factors shaping their approach.

Parent governor interviews. One interview was conducted with a parent governor in each school, lasting 30-45 minutes. These interviews looked at the strategic oversight of school policy and provided insight into how belonging practices are perceived by families, how the school communicates its ethos to parents, and how parental engagement is fostered.

Staff focus groups. One focus group was conducted with school staff in each case study school, lasting approximately 60 minutes. Groups included a minimum of three to five participants in primary schools and five to seven in secondary schools (average: four per group in primary schools and six in secondary schools). A diverse range of roles were represented where possible. A card sort exercise on school belonging, developed by Professor Riley, was used to structure discussion and prompt reflection on what belonging means in practice, this can be found in Annex A.

Pupil focus groups. Two focus groups were conducted with pupils in each school, structured by age to ensure developmentally appropriate engagement. Each group included a minimum of five to six pupils. In primary schools, pupils were invited to draw contrasting pictures of belonging and not belonging as a prompt for discussion (see Annex A for tool).

In secondary schools, body mapping was used – an arts-based method in which participants use large body map outlines to visually represent their experiences of belonging across different aspects of school life. The body maps are then used as stimuli to discuss their experiences.

Observations. Structured observations were conducted in all schools, focusing on three key settings: school infrastructure and physical spaces, assemblies, and unstructured time during break and lunchtime. Observations were designed to surface belonging practices that participants may not articulate directly in interviews or focus groups such as their routines. Observation notes were recorded in a pro forma and no personal data was recorded.

Analysis

All interviews and focus groups were audio-recorded and transcribed with participants' consent. Visual data generated through pupil drawing exercises and body mapping activities were photographed and stored securely in line with the project's data management protocols. Observation data was recorded into a pro forma and notes were revised and organised within 24 hours of the visit. Interview, focus group, and observation data were entered into a thematic framework organised by research question and the domains of the analytical framework.

Analysis proceeded in two stages:

In the first stage, data was triangulated at the case study level. For each school, findings from observations, interviews and focus groups were compared and contrasted to identify converging and diverging themes. This process validated practices reported across interviews and focus groups against observations. Researchers also compared the ethos and values described in documents and policies to the experienced reality of belonging practice.

In the second stage, a cross-case analysis was conducted once all individual case analyses were complete. Using a structured analytical framework, findings were compared across schools to identify patterns and commonalities, as well as approaches and situations that are more context specific.

Analysis workshops were held after the first four case study visits were completed and after the final visit was completed with DfE staff in attendance at both.

Limitations

The findings from this study should be interpreted in light of a few methodological limitations.

The case study schools were identified through a belonging-intentionality indicator, rather than objective measures of pupil belonging. As such, school selection should not be interpreted as schools definitively having high levels of pupil belonging – but instead that the school has made a concerted effort towards this. Further, case study schools were recruited on an opt-in basis. Schools that chose to participate may differ systematically from those that did not – for example, being more confident in their belonging practice or more engaged with research generally. The findings should therefore not be read as representative of all high-belonging schools in England, but rather as an in-depth exploration of practice across a diverse and purposively selected sample.

Within schools, there is a risk of positivity bias in participants' accounts. Staff, leaders and pupils may have presented their school's practices in a more favourable light than the full picture warrants, particularly in the presence of colleagues. There is also a risk of selection bias, given that the staff and pupils included in each school were selected for participation

by a school staff member who coordinated the visit. To mitigate this, findings from interviews and focus groups were triangulated with observational data and document analysis wherever possible. It should also be noted that this study does not objectively measure the causal impact of practices on belonging, attendance and attainment. The links described in this report reflect perceived relationships as reported by participants, rather than objectively measured effects.

Finally, while the sample was designed to capture meaningful diversity across school type, phase, geography and pupil population, 16 schools cannot fully represent the range of contexts across the English school system. Further, the research was limited to mainstream schools, so does not represent practice in special schools.

Findings

The findings from the qualitative case study research across 16 mainstream primary and secondary schools in England reveal how these schools understand, embed and sustain belonging. They show how this is achieved alongside high standards of attendance and attainment. They demonstrate that belonging is not a single initiative or programme, but rather an interconnected system of beliefs, practices and relationships that are a part of every aspect of school life.

The findings are organised to address the study's three core objectives. The first section establishes how belonging is understood by staff and pupils and examines schools' rationales for prioritising it. How belonging is conceptualised by staff and pupils is explored across five core dimensions: safety and security, inclusion, collective identity, individual recognition, and positive relationships. Schools' rationales for prioritising belonging includes its direct impact on learning, role as mental health support infrastructure, preparation for life beyond school, and function as a mechanism for educational equity.

The second section explores the ways in which schools embed belonging through seven interconnected facilitators: school culture, senior leadership, all staff, pupils, space and resources, community, and parents. It then considers how context influences the choices schools make in choosing practices and priorities.

The third section looks at the more granular practices that schools adopt, which fall under six thematic areas:

- Relational practices
- Pupil voice and agency
- Celebrating diversity and challenging discrimination
- Cultivating strong school identity
- Individualised support approaches
- Fostering belonging beyond the school gates

The complex interplay between belonging, attendance, and attainment is explored in the fourth section, which highlights alignments and tensions. The final section then documents how schools measure belonging and its perceived impacts on wellbeing, academic outcomes and pupils' future aspirations. Throughout, the perspectives from pupils, staff, senior leaders, and parent governors are presented to provide a multi-dimensional view of what makes belonging work in practice.

Rationale and Defining Belonging

This section explores how schools conceptualise belonging, detailing the five core dimensions that school leaders, staff, and pupils use to frame their understanding. It then delves deeper into the pupil perspective, exploring their lived experiences of belonging and how and where it is felt. Finally, the section outlines the rationales schools shared for prioritising this work, linking a strong sense of belonging to academic success, positive mental health, and long-term preparation for life.

How belonging is conceptualised

Across the case study schools, belonging is rarely described as a distinct focus that schools set out to deliver. In some schools, neither staff nor pupils use the language of belonging spontaneously; pupils in one school simply describe it as "we just all belong", and some leaders note that "belonging" had only recently entered their vocabulary as a term. When asked to define belonging, senior leaders and staff often describe it through a set of five interconnected concepts, which are both elements of what belonging means in practice and as necessary conditions for its development. For example, 'safety and security' functions both as an essential component of the belonging experience itself and as a foundational prerequisite that must be established before deeper aspects of belonging can emerge. When pupils are asked to describe how they understand belonging, these same five concepts also emerge, but with variation based on age and school phase, which is explored more deeply in the following sub-section.

Safety and security

Physical and psychological safety are described by pupils as foundational for belonging, but this is understood differently by pupils as they mature. Primary pupils' articulate safety through immediate physical protection and knowing adults are watching over them. Secondary pupils' concerns shift to psychological safety, describing the importance of having 'peace of mind' and the freedom to make mistakes without judgment. School staff also put emphasis on routine and predictability as key to helping pupils feel safe and like they belong.

For a lot of our kids, certainly in my class, we are a constant. We don't change. Home can be really up and down, whereas here the expectations stay the same, our responses stay the same. That makes them feel like they belong. – *Staff, Primary school*

It's important that these children still attain and achieve because in both cases, they're very able to. But nothing's going to stick if the child doesn't feel safe and secure. – *Senior Leader, Primary school*

Inclusion

Across both adults and pupils, inclusion is often included in definitions of belonging – ensuring all pupils have a place and an opportunity to be involved. School leaders and staff see this as a fundamental belonging principle that schools demonstrate in different ways.

Primary schools create this sense of inclusion through buddy systems and mixed-age play, while secondary schools offer multiple pathways to success beyond just academics. For example, pupils describe feeling a sense of achievement and belonging through leadership roles like being a student librarian, receiving awards for non-academic contributions such as kindness, or finding their community in a wide range of extracurricular clubs for sport and the arts.

The inclusion of different age groups is also a deliberate strategic choice. Staff and governors see the mixing of year groups as a way to build a cohesive school community, with older pupils given formal opportunities to care for younger ones.

The older children look after the younger children. Now that's not by accident, that's through the way in which the pupil council is set up with responsibilities that the key stage two children might have out at lunch times on the playground. – *Parent Governor, Primary school*

For pupils, the feeling of inclusion is experienced most directly through their friendships. Primary pupils focus on play and invitation, being asked to join games, having someone notice when they are alone. Conversely, they define 'not belonging' almost entirely through experiences of social exclusion, such as being left out or having no one to play with. Secondary pupils describe seeking deeper connections and valuing friends they can confide in rather than just socialise with. They particularly appreciate cross-year friendships developed through clubs and activities, describing how shared interests create connections.

Collective identity

Many participants describe belonging through a shared culture and identity, though the expression varies by phase. In primary schools, both pupils and staff frequently describe themselves as a 'family'. This is reinforced through shared rituals such as whole school assemblies, and collective celebrations (e.g., Christmas performances and Eid events). In secondary schools, this language shifts to concepts of 'pride' and 'community'. Pupils describe house systems as their "second family" and fostering connection through inter-house competitions or representing the school in external competitions.

While pupils rarely mention it, staff identify uniform policy as another tool for shaping this collective identity. This was not about enforcing simple conformity, but about using the uniform to reinforce school values. For instance, one school integrates uniform standards

into a "commitment framework," framing it as a visible sign of a student's dedication to the community. Others focus on ensuring their uniform policies were actively inclusive, accommodating religious and cultural diversity to ensure the collective identity did not exclude anyone.

This collective identity also extends beyond pupils to their families and the wider community. Parent governors describe this as nurtured through proactive communication and large-scale events that bring everyone together, making the school feel welcoming from the very first interaction.

They're really good about belonging as part of your community. It's not just the people. It's not just the school. It's about taking care of everybody.
– *Parent Governor, Primary school*

Individual recognition

School leaders and staff describe the importance of ensuring every pupil is genuinely known by multiple staff members, not just their class teacher. Staff across both phases see this as a core professional responsibility that drives whole-school approaches with a direct impact on belonging and attendance. In primary schools, this is achieved through relational continuity, with staff following cohorts across years.

In secondary schools, recognition is structured through multiple touchpoints: form tutors maintaining five-year relationships, different staff knowing pupils through academic, pastoral and co-curricular lenses. This distributed knowledge ensures no pupil falls through unnoticed and creates a sense of being seen as a whole person.

I feel like it's let me grow into my own person... I can voice whatever I want. I feel like rather than just being a student, I'm also a person. – *Pupil, Secondary school*

Staff and leaders recognise that belonging requires both fitting in and standing out. The principle that pupils cannot belong without being themselves drives practices celebrating individual identity alongside collective culture. This is powerfully articulated by pupils themselves, who view belonging as the freedom to be authentic.

I think to belong in an environment means to feel safe where you can be yourself. – *Pupil, Secondary school*

Positive relationships

For both adults and pupils, belonging is described as emerging from interconnected relationships rather than single connections. This is experienced differently across the school phases. For primary pupils, this is often centred on immediate peer support,

whereas older pupils seek a more nuanced, genuine connection with teachers beyond just academic support.

If you have friends and everybody supporting each other, you feel like, I'm not just doing this alone, we're all in it together. – *Pupil, Primary school*

I think we just want a human connection. Obviously, teachers are our superiors, but just to go in and have five minutes at the start of a lesson talking about what you did at the weekend is really nice. It's almost like talking to a friend. – *Pupil, Secondary school*

Furthermore, staff describe their own relationships as a critical and foundational layer of belonging. They believe a collaborative and supportive staff culture is essential, as pupils observe these adult interactions and replicate them in their own behaviour. This makes positive staff relationships a direct enabler of pupil belonging.

It then instils that culture in the children as well, because they see us obviously being able to communicate together and then obviously, they then copy the behaviours. – *Staff, Primary school*

Pupil experience of belonging

A key priority of the focus groups with pupils was to explore deeply their lived experience of how, when, where and with whom they do or do not feel a sense of belonging. This subsection covers the pupil experience in more detail, beginning with some key age-related differences.

Primary pupils: Concrete and immediate understanding

Primary pupils define belonging through tangible, observable experiences and simple fairness principles. Their understanding centres on immediate social dynamics and practical inclusion, with definitions focusing on everyone having turns and people caring for you.

Belonging for this age group is fundamentally about being included in play and activities. For these pupils, the logic is very direct, if you are included in an activity, you feel like you belong. Physical comfort features prominently, with pupils describing belonging through access to calm-down boxes and sensory spaces with bean bags and coloured lights.

Pupils in all phases were asked to indicate on a scale how much they feel they belonged at school (see Annex A for tool). Most primary pupils place themselves at the top of the scale. When asked about their rating, they offer immediate, assured responses, like "I feel like I belong here". When asked to provide examples of not belonging, many struggle to answer. Their examples tend to describe common, everyday social situations, such as temporary disagreements with friends or being left out of a game.

We're all a big family. Everybody knows each other...you always have somebody there. Like you could be sitting alone on the yard, or in the field, or in your classroom, and somebody will go up to you. – *Pupil, Primary school*

Secondary pupils: Abstract and complex conceptualisation

Secondary pupils define belonging through more sophisticated and abstract concepts. Where primary pupils talk about actions (being included in a game), secondary pupils speak about internal states, like feeling 'confident', 'important' and having a sense of 'pride' in their school. They also identify two core principles, 'security and freedom' – the security to be themselves and freedom to make mistakes without judgement.

Secondary pupils are very aware of identity and representation, describing the importance of seeing their cultures, interests, and identities reflected in school life. One pupil describes feeling "boxed in" when known as 'a music person', highlighting a desire to belong to multiple communities, not just one.

During the rating exercise, most secondary pupils place themselves at the second-to-top point on the belonging scale, with thoughtful reasoning for not selecting the highest point.

People who make you feel like you belong can be anyone. At the same time, they can also be the people who make you feel like you don't belong. Like your friends, they could always make you feel like you're added in everything, but at the same time, sometimes they make you feel like you're being excluded. – *Pupil, Secondary school*

Other pupils gave similar reasons as the quote above, explaining their choice by noting that belonging can be conditional on having a good day, pointing to specific friendship difficulties, or acknowledging that while they feel they belonged in some areas of school life (like a music club), that feeling did not always extend to the entire school community.

Secondary pupils also articulate the relationship between belonging and their engagement with school. They explicitly connect belonging to learning, attendance and wellbeing.

You're not going to learn at your best if you're not enjoying yourself at school. If you're dragging yourself in every day to an environment where you're not happy, you're not going to be focused in lessons or want to engage. – *Pupil, Secondary school*

When you belong, it feels really good because nobody judges you for anything and they include you in things. When you feel you belong it can really improve your attendance and commitment, because it encourages you to work and come to school more often to see your friends. – *Pupil, Secondary school*

Where pupils feel belonging

Pupils of all ages share that outdoor spaces are fundamental to their sense of belonging. For primary pupils, the playground, Forest School, and field are spaces for playing together and learning to navigate friendships. For secondary pupils, outdoor spaces offer a sense of freedom and social autonomy.

Most people feel very comfortable in the playground because everyone has like their allocated spots where they're all just there all the time and everyone's doing their own thing, and you forget you're at school because you're spending time with your friends. – *Pupil, Secondary school*

Pupils across both phases mention calm and low-stimulation spaces, such the library, 'quiet rooms', and sensory rooms, as places where they belong. Pupils describe these areas as a 'safe space' or 'haven' where they can escape noise or process emotions. For libraries in particular, primary pupils speak of using them as quiet alternatives to the playground, whilst secondary pupils describe them as multi-purpose hubs where the presence of student librarians creates a sense of peer ownership.

Pupils of all ages also speak about the importance of spaces that allow for socialisation and being active to foster belonging. These spaces include the gym, other sports facilities, breakfast club, and the hall. They value these spaces for providing opportunities for unstructured activities with friends.

For some secondary school pupils, creative spaces like music, drama, and art departments hold particular significance. Pupils describe them as spaces where they can express themselves.

I take part in a lot of music after school... It feels like you have a place where you feel you belong... For me it's the music department and the practice rooms. It gives you a skill which you can develop...those departments are very well funded and helps your personal development. – *Pupil, Secondary school*

Among primary pupils, the classroom is also mentioned as an area where they feel a sense of belonging. The reasons range from the presence of a trusted teacher there, to it being the space where all their friends are, to it feeling like a consistent, familiar and safe place.

You're in there every day and it's basically like a protective zone. – *Pupil, Primary school*

When pupils feel belonging

Lunchtime emerges as an important time for pupils to feel they belong across both phases. Primary pupils describe this unstructured time as a way to gain energy and have

fun. For secondary pupils it is a valued time for social connection and freedom of choice. This is illustrated by the importance pupils place on the playground and field, key belonging spaces that are central to this unstructured social time.

This sense of belonging also extends into when they take part in structured activities, both within the curriculum and beyond it. In primary schools, pupils describe classroom belonging through "working together at classroom tables" and teachers adapting to different learning needs. Outside of the classroom, primary pupils particularly value clubs that lead to competitions or performances.

You can share your ideas with each other, because we all probably in this room have different opinions... but you work together and share ideas. –

Pupil, Primary school

Secondary pupils describe finding deeper belonging through voluntary commitment and subject passion, with teachers "making subjects come alive." Across phases, there is a clear shift in how pupils experience belonging. Across primary pupils, there is a theme around general participation, whereas for secondary pupils, the theme evolves into a more autonomous form of belonging found through sustained, passionate engagement in chosen activities.

When you feel like you belong, it makes you feel like you want to learn more. When you do not feel like you belong, you feel intimidated to speak up. – *Pupil, Secondary school*

With whom pupils feel belonging

Friendships anchor belonging across all schools. Primary pupils talk about needing friends for practical and emotional support, helping when they are stuck and making them laugh. Secondary pupils speak about how they value friends as confidants, with relationships deepening from shared activities to emotional support. Friends become the main reason for wanting to come to school, making school something to look forward to even on bad days.

You always have somebody. You could be sitting alone in the yard or in the field or in your classroom, and somebody will come up to you. – *Pupil, Primary school*

Pupils also talk about opportunities to create connections beyond just friendship groups. Primary pupils speak warmly of playing with and looking after younger pupils during lunchtimes. Secondary pupils describe house systems as their "second family" and speak about how cross-year friendships formed in clubs offered valuable guidance and support from older students.

The teacher's role in pupil belonging evolves with age. For primary pupils, they describe teachers as a direct source of support, providing safety and help when struggling with

classwork. In secondary school, the role becomes more complex. Teachers offer a direct personal connection by showing interest in pupils' lives outside the classroom, making them feel seen as individuals. At the same time, they act as critical indirect facilitators of peer belonging by running clubs and extracurriculars where friendships are formed.

Rationale for embedding belonging

Across both primary and secondary phases, school leaders and staff articulate clear, interconnected rationales for fostering belonging. In general, belonging is seen not as an additional initiative but as foundational to the school's core purpose. Across contexts, five central reasons for embedding belonging were apparent.

Direct impact on learning

School professionals link belonging directly to academic success, perceiving it as the catalyst for optimal learning. This relationship is seen as non-negotiable, with multiple schools positioning academic outcomes as a natural consequence rather than the primary driver of their belonging work. For instance, one trust explicitly sequences wellbeing, engagement, and belonging as the necessary foundation for learning.

Pupils themselves articulate a clear causal link, framing belonging as a precondition for feeling able to ask for help and take risks in the classroom. One primary school focus group explains that belonging gives you the confidence to ask teachers for help when you are stuck, whereas if you do not belong, you might feel intimidated to speak up. Pupils also describe it as feeling safe enough to attempt challenging work and to make mistakes. This increased confidence and self-belief, from a secure sense of belonging, is what pupils say motivates them to engage more deeply and work harder.

When children feel safe and that they belong, their attendance and their academic performance improves. – *Head Teacher, Primary school*

Because when you're learning and you feel like you belong, it makes you think you're better, you're stronger, it makes you believe in yourself. It makes you, like, work harder. – *Pupil, Primary school*

Mental health as foundation

Schools' focus on mental health has increased, with schools reporting that belonging practices have become essential support infrastructure. Primary school staff describe working with "little people with big feelings," implementing provisions like calm corners in classrooms and sensory rooms with dedicated support. This need for emotional support infrastructure evolves in secondary schools to address complex wellbeing challenges. Secondary schools offer dedicated spaces like student services or reflection rooms, which pupils describe as creating "peace of mind." Leaders and staff see these spaces as

fundamental to belonging. They signal to pupils that their entire self, including their struggles, is accepted within the school community. In both phases, these practices position emotional support as a core part of the school's offer.

We know that children who feel safe and secure and feel a sense of belonging do thrive, you know, not just academically, but emotionally. –
Senior Leader, Primary school

Preparing for life beyond school

Senior leaders and staff frame belonging as preparation for life beyond education. This long-term perspective positions school belonging as developing "future citizens" rather than simply producing academic results. In primary schools, the focus is on building foundational life skills, such as resilience and confidence. Secondary schools extend this through explicit preparation for adulthood, with one trust embedding "game changer"¹⁶ content across the curriculum, which focuses on building resilience, confidence and innovation, to signal purpose beyond examinations.

We're not raising these children just to get good grades... We are raising children to become adults and serve our community. – *Staff, Secondary school*

Levelling the playing field

Leaders and staff identify belonging as essential for addressing educational inequity, positioning it as a mechanism for social justice rather than merely school improvement. They state that the responsibility to 'level the ground' for children facing multiple barriers is taken seriously, with practical implications for every aspect of school life.

For pupils with diverse needs, belonging takes on particular significance, moving beyond simple integration to true inclusion. This extends to pupils from all backgrounds, as leaders and staff describe aiming to ensure a pupil's socioeconomic status, language or cultural heritage do not mean they experience barriers to belonging.

A key part of this is a conscious effort driven by school leaders to broaden the definition of success beyond academic performance to include effort, progress, and character growth. This creates an environment where every pupil can feel successful and valued for their unique contribution, with an emphasis on celebrating involvement from all pupils, rather than just highlighting the top performers. This equity work requires what leaders describe as 'institutional courage', trusting that if you do the right things for the student, good outcomes will follow, even if they can't be proven by conventional metrics.

¹⁶ This term is specific to the ethos of one of the trusts involved in this research.

Alignment with school culture

School staff consistently describe belonging as emerging from deeply embedded culture. The distinction between genuine culture and surface-level statements is critical. Multiple schools describe values that must be 'lived and breathed' rather than simply posted on walls.

The culture is impossible to fake. Children immediately sense whether adults genuinely believe in the stated values or are merely performing them. – *Senior Leader, Primary school*

Building belonging culture requires years of consistent work. Schools describe the development process as both deliberate and organic: ethos designed and planned over years, values purposefully built through daily actions, and self-reinforcing cycles building trust. Once established, schools describe cultural momentum that becomes increasingly powerful, creating what staff call a cycle of deepening belonging.

Embedding belonging

This section begins by detailing how schools operationalise and embed belonging through a variety of roles and resources. Then, it explores the contextual factors that shape the practices that are adopted.

How schools operationalise or embed belonging

Embedding belonging is not a single practice but a system of practices that work together. Across the sixteen schools in this study, leaders and staff describe belonging as something that must be deliberately built, consistently maintained, and protected from drift. Schools describe organising their work around related ideas, most often inclusion, wellbeing, and a values- or faith-based ethos, supported by strong relationships, with belonging understood as the outcome these produce rather than the starting point. Several leaders described belonging as something that is "woven through" everything rather than a standalone initiative, and as an organic result of many smaller supportive actions rather than a single programme.

Seven interconnected factors emerge across the data as the facilitators through which schools embed belonging; these facilitators are:

- School culture, ethos and values
- Senior leadership
- All staff
- Pupils
- Space and resources
- Community and alumni
- Parents

Each is examined in turn below. The specific practices that sit underneath each facilitator are explored later in the next section. The focus here is on how schools embed belonging as a sustained way of working, rather than as a set of separate activities.

School culture, ethos and values

Senior leaders and staff describe a clear, anchored culture as the operating system within which all other belonging practices sit. Culture, in the way schools talk about it, is a consistent and enduring pattern of behaviour, enacted daily, tested when things go wrong, and sustained across changes in staff and leadership. Schools that embed belonging most effectively translate a clear vision into a small number of non-negotiable principles, give everyone a shared language for those principles, and build structures that hold the culture in place beyond any one leader.

Holding to a few core principles

A consistent feature of schools where belonging is most deeply embedded is that leaders maintain a small number of clear, foundational principles and ensure every practice, structure and decision aligns with them. The specific content of these principles varied across the case study schools, from a Catholic ethos to a sports-focused identity, but the critical factor was that the culture, whatever its focus, was genuinely shared and consistently applied. This consistency, applied across teaching, behaviour, communication, recruitment and pastoral practice, is what allows the culture to be felt by pupils and families rather than merely stated. Senior leaders describe holding firm on these principles even under pressure, whether from the demands of external accountability, challenging parents, or internal voices pushing for different priorities, because the culture only embeds when pupils and staff see it upheld without exception. Senior leaders also describe embedding fewer practices well as more effective than spreading effort thinly across many practices at once.

If I was advising another school how to enhance belonging, I would be saying, don't rush it because it's not something you can just attach to the rest of your systems. It has got to be part of every system you've got. –
Senior Leader, Secondary school

Shared language as a primary transmission mechanism

Shared language is a main way that culture is passed between people day-to-day. Schools that embed belonging effectively have a common vocabulary for what the school stands for and what is expected. This vocabulary is understood and used by staff, pupils and families and travels between classrooms, corridors and homes, increasing consistency for pupils. This is achieved through a range of practical mechanisms: the language is consistently modelled by staff, reinforced through reward systems, made visible on school displays, and repeated in key structural moments like assemblies and tutor time. It may also take the form of a values framework woven into daily language, a learning or behaviour vocabulary that pupils carry from lesson to lesson, or whole-school phrases that carry meaning without further explanation.

The distinction that matters is between language that is genuinely co-created and internalised, and language that is imposed from the top and 'performed' across the school community. Staff are clear that the first embeds belonging, while the second is felt as institutional branding and tokenistic by staff and pupils alike. Where it is co-created, staff describe values as "living and breathing," carried between adults and children. The children can say that because we have the same language.

It's a shared language. Therefore, as we go on, it becomes a shared vision that each of us say to each other that I see the value in you. – *Staff, Primary school*

Frameworks and accreditations as structural anchors

External frameworks can give belonging culture an institutional structure and a reference point that outlasts individual leaders. UNICEF Rights Respecting Schools, School of Sanctuary and #BeeWell are the most commonly named across the schools in this study.¹⁷ These frameworks serve several functions at once: they provide a shared language everyone can use; they create accountability structures that remain in place across leadership changes; they connect the school to a wider network doing similar work; and they make the school's belonging commitment visible and outward facing.

Structural identity anchors in large schools

In larger secondary schools, embedding belonging at the level of culture also involves giving pupils a named, smaller identity within the institution. House systems, tutor groups and dedicated year-group spaces are described by leaders, staff and pupils as belonging structures rather than just organisational features. They create human-scale communities within a large school, so that smaller groups of pupils are reliably known by named members of staff.

Challenges and barriers

The main challenge to culture as a vehicle for embedding belonging is that it is difficult to sustain through staff and leadership changes. Culture built over time can erode quickly when leadership changes. A second risk identified in the data is that shared language can feel performative if it is imposed rather than co-created. At that point, it stops embedding belonging in the way it is intended to.

Senior leadership

Across all schools, effective belonging practice begins with deliberate, visionary leadership. Senior leaders describe treating every decision about people, structures and systems as a belonging act, creating the conditions, culture and accountability structures within which belonging can be embedded and sustained. The themes below describe how senior leadership teams operationalise this in practice.

Knowing the community first

Senior leaders describe prioritising a deep understanding of the specific community each school serves and adapting practices to fit that context. This includes understanding the needs of pupils, families, the wider community, the local context, and the school's own history. Long serving headteachers describe this contextual knowledge as accumulated over time and difficult to shortcut and identify it as a key reason why tenure is associated

¹⁷ It is important to note that schools were selected for the study based on their participation in these specific programmes, so their prevalence in the findings is a direct result of the sampling strategy. They are presented here as illustrative examples of how external frameworks can be used, not as an endorsement of these programmes over other approaches.

with deeper belonging practice. New leaders describe deliberately investing in community listening before making changes, using methods like parent events, targeted coffee mornings and building partnerships with community groups, treating this as a prerequisite rather than something to do in parallel with other work.

One of the most important things is to really seek to understand your context and your cohort and your community... The more questions you ask, the more you understand the complexity of every school population, the more you will seek to serve them more effectively by designing what they need as a community. – *Senior Leader, Secondary school*

Values-led recruitment and management

Shared values and a commitment to school ethos emerges as a primary criterion for senior leaders in recruiting the right people. Mechanisms for this include individual show-rooms to assess candidates as people, information evenings before appointment to establish values in advance, and explicit questions about how candidates will contribute to the school's ethos. A challenge identified by some leaders is that these approaches depend on having a viable candidate pool, which is constrained in rural and under-resourced contexts and can limit values-based selection in practice.

Beyond recruitment, where staff practice does not align with the school's values, senior leaders describe being prepared to have difficult conversations and, where necessary, to make changes to the team to protect the belonging culture for pupils and staff alike. Continuing professional development (CPD) initiatives are often framed as belonging practices by wider staff teams, who describe staff wellbeing and development as valued and prioritised by senior leadership.

I have worked hard on our staff handbook to reflect my expectations. –
Senior Leader, Primary school

Distributing ownership rather than centralising it

Effective senior leadership teams give staff, pupils and the wider school community genuine ownership of belonging practices, rather than keeping delivery in the hands of one person or team. Values are co-created with staff rather than handed down, and accountability is relational, built on mutual trust and shared goals, rather than punitive. Staff are given autonomy to design how practices are implemented within a clear strategic direction. Pupils are given real agency to initiate and lead ideas, as described in the 'pupils' section later in this chapter.

The starting point is always trust... staff have to feel safe too. If they feel safe, they thrive because they know they're not at risk. They can take a risk and not be devoured by leadership because they make a mistake. –
Senior Leader, Secondary school

Being present and modelling the culture

Senior leaders embed belonging practices by being visibly present at the school gate, in corridors, on duty and in clubs. This is consistently described by senior leaders and staff as a relational act rather than a supervisory one. The headteacher's manner and presence sets the tone for the whole school, described by one school as 'making the weather'. Examples of how heads model specific practices include running clubs, teaching, leading mentoring groups, and doing practical tasks alongside staff. Heads describe these as deliberate belonging signals rather than incidental activities. Senior leaders are often described as 'one of us' by staff and as approachable by families.

Embedding belonging into systems and structures

Senior leaders describe backing relational intent with formal mechanisms that sustain belonging practices without depending on individual memory or goodwill. Three findings stood out.

The first is the systematic monitoring of belonging and wellbeing. Senior leaders, staff and governors describe pastoral data systems, regular structured meetings, and termly surveys that keep individual pupils visible and identify gaps between cohorts before they widen. Examples include vulnerability indices distilling complex data into a usable daily tile for teachers, weekly pastoral scrums to discuss vulnerable pupils, photograph boards in staff rooms, and engagement and wellbeing surveys benchmarked nationally and disaggregated by pupil group.

The second is ownership of belonging at every level of the school's structure, including governance. Governors are named as part of this mechanism, both modelling the standards expected of the school and reflecting the community served. Examples include governors actively linking with families through language-specific coffee mornings, and governing bodies deliberately recruited to include heritage backgrounds that mirror the pupil population.

The third is the active protection of belonging practices from being crowded out by external pressures. Senior leaders describe deliberately shielding staff and pupils from the demands of Ofsted preparation, attainment targets and other accountability pressures, so that belonging remains the operating frame rather than a competing priority.

Curriculum design as a belonging mechanism

What is taught, and how, embeds belonging by signalling whose knowledge matters and who the school is for. Curriculum design is described by leaders as a belonging practice as well as a pedagogical one. This includes deliberate curriculum choices that reflect pupils' backgrounds, identities and communities, including Black British history, migration, multilingualism and locally rooted content that connects learning to pupils' lived experience. Breadth of offer is itself a belonging mechanism. Protecting arts, music and sport alongside academic subjects ensures every pupil finds something in the school that

is genuinely for them. Curriculum design can also reduce the belonging cost of absence. Some schools structure lessons around predictable sequencing and routines. These include knowledge organisers, recaps, or retrieval activities at the start of each lesson. This helps returning pupils see where the class had reached and rejoin easily rather than facing a wall of missed content. This is reinforced by a supportive classroom culture where pupils could ask friends or teachers for help so that time away did not turn into longer-term disengagement.

We're planning our curriculum to fit these children, so this curriculum couldn't really be picked up and moved to [another school], because it's for these children. – *Staff, Primary school*

Challenges and barriers

The main challenge for senior leaders seeking to develop and maintain belonging is that the deep contextual knowledge underpinning it accumulates slowly and can be easily lost when staff leave or new staff join. Values-led recruitment is similarly constrained where candidate pools are limited, particularly in rural and under-resourced contexts. A further challenge is that external pressures, such as Ofsted preparation and attainment targets, can take priority over belonging practices unless leaders actively shield staff and pupils from them.

All staff

Belonging is described consistently across the findings as a whole-staff responsibility, not the role of a pastoral team or individual alone. Embedding belonging effectively requires every adult in the building to understand themselves as a belonging practitioner, regardless of role. This begins with staff themselves feeling that they belong and is cultivated through how they are inducted, supported and held to account.

Staff belonging as a precondition for pupil belonging

Staff must feel they belong before they can embed belonging practices for pupils. As one staff member put it, 'the first step is making sure that your staff feel like they belong.' Decisions made by senior leadership about workload and CPD are the upstream conditions for staff belonging, which is in turn a pre-condition for embedding belonging practices for pupils. The staff team's own relational culture, how staff support each other, communicate, and solve problems together, is observed by pupils and reproduced in how they treat each other. Staff describe a vocational culture in which collective investment in the work creates a belonging environment for staff as well as pupils.

We work really well together as a staff. [The head] is great at keeping us okay... being mindful of workload, talking to each other. It's not just the children, it's all of us. – *Staff, Primary school*

You have to have happy staff and happy children to achieve anything. –
Senior Leader, Primary school

Knowing every child

Knowing pupils individually, their lives, their patterns, what they are like on a difficult day, is described as a professional expectation of all, rather than a personal quality of only a few teachers. Similar to school leaders, physical presence at the threshold, teachers on the door of classrooms and staff at the school gate, is described as a relational belonging practice rather than a supervisory function. In smaller primary schools, staff describe knowing every child individually. In larger secondary schools, the form tutor carries this function for their group, supported by heads of year and pastoral teams.

Knowing them is a big part of what we do outside the classroom. When they feel seen, attendance will improve – they don't feel like 'I just have to go because of attendance figures alone. – *Staff, Secondary school*

I feel comfortable with all my teachers. I can voice whatever I want. Like, I feel like rather than just being a student, I'm also just a person. – *Pupil, Secondary school*

Carrying and transmitting the culture through daily conduct

Staff embed belonging practices through their daily behaviour, the language they use, how they respond to pupils and families, and whether they participate in the wider life of the school. This is cultivated through shared language, induction, CPD and staff stability. Long-serving staff carry and reinforce the practices, while new staff need active induction into them. Staff demographic diversity is named as a belonging resource. A staff team that reflects the pupil community provides role models pupils can identify with, and staff who share relevant lived experience can create instant connection with specific pupils. Staff participation in extracurricular life, pastoral practice and communal events is framed as an embedding practice, not an optional extra. In secondary schools, this is often formalised as directed time. In primary schools, it tends to be voluntary but culturally expected.

Specialist and pastoral staff as belonging infrastructure

Dedicated non-teaching roles form the structural backbone of belonging practice. Emotional Literacy Support Assistants (ELSAs), wellbeing practitioners, pastoral managers, family support workers, receptionists and librarians are all named as active belonging practitioners. The ELSA programme is the most consistent cross-school pattern in the data, present across primary and secondary schools, delivered by trained support staff, and named by pupils across both phases as a meaningful source of support. The receptionist and front-of-house role is named across multiple schools as the first face families see, and how this role is filled embeds belonging before any teaching staff are involved. In larger schools, especially secondaries, pastoral roles are increasingly separated from teaching roles, giving dedicated staff the time and capacity to embed

intensive belonging practices with individuals and families. In smaller schools, especially primaries, teaching assistants and pastoral leads tend to be multi-function belonging practitioners working across teaching, emotional support and family engagement within smaller, more integrated teams.

They're much more than a behaviour team. They're actually a support system. – *Pupil, Secondary school*

Challenges and barriers

Several challenges and barriers are identified that can undermine belonging across whole school systems. These include:

- inconsistent implementation of belonging practices across staff teams
- individual staff attitudes including harshness, judgment, or preconceived views about pupils that undermine belonging practices in specific classrooms, even where school-wide culture is strong
- staff turnover, which disrupts relational continuity and cultural transmission
- the vulnerability of non-teaching pastoral and support roles to budget pressures, despite their central role in sustaining belonging for the most vulnerable pupils
- the personal cost to staff of sustaining relational practice in depth, particularly in schools with high proportions of pupils who are vulnerable

Pupils

Pupils are not just recipients of belonging practices but active contributors to embedding belonging. The most consistent finding across pupil focus groups is that belonging is located primarily in peer relationships and in pupils having a genuine stake in the school community. What adults design and provide is important, but what pupils experience most directly is each other. Schools that embed belonging most effectively harness this by giving pupils structured roles in creating it.

Friendship and peer-to-peer belonging

Friendship is named as the most fundamental source of belonging by pupils across every school and every age group, without exception. In secondary schools, pupils show greater awareness of the instability of friendship, naming social comparison, peer judgement and exclusion as threats schools need to address.

Schools that embed belonging effectively treat friendship formation as something to be actively supported, rather than left to chance. They also create structured opportunities for pupils to include and support each other beyond their immediate friendship groups. In primary schools, this tends to be embedded through staff modelling and informal expectation setting for pupils, alongside more formalised roles such as Young

Interpreters¹⁸ and reading partners. In secondary schools, peer support is more often formalised through named roles: anti-bullying ambassadors, peer mentors, sixth form mentoring of younger pupils, and cross-year clubs and activities. Helping others creates belonging for the helper as well as the helped. This reciprocal dynamic is named explicitly by pupils and is one of the reasons peer-based belonging practices are particularly effective.

It just felt really good to help and to show him what I had learned. – *Pupil, Primary school.*

It's vice versa, because we just have fun and it's like we respect each other mutually. – *Pupil, Secondary school*

Roles, responsibilities and co-creation

Pupils describe belonging most strongly when they have a named role or responsibility that gives them a visible stake in the school community: being given something to do and to be answerable for. In primary schools, this tends to be embedded in daily routines, classroom jobs, lunchtime responsibilities and running activities for younger children. In secondary schools, formal leadership roles are named with specificity and evident pride, including student commissioners, prefects, house captains, peer mentors, sports leaders and open evening ambassadors. The most powerful belonging experiences are things pupils have shaped or built themselves. Examples pupils provide include a production written from their own experiences, a club they proposed, a policy they changed, or a team they created. Embedding co-creation requires adults who are genuinely willing to cede control, not just to consult. Schools that do this most effectively have clear structures for taking pupil ideas seriously and acting on them.

Pupil voice, being heard and seeing real change

Formal pupil voice mechanisms are present across all case study schools and across both phases. These include school councils, form representatives, student commissioners, suggestion boxes, QR codes for feedback, worry boxes and class charters. What embeds belonging through these mechanisms is not their existence but the evidence that something actually changed as a result of pupils speaking up. In schools where pupil voice leads to visible change, pupils describe stronger belonging. Examples of tangible change named by pupils include uniform criteria changes, canteen queues restructured, a girls' cricket club created, a culture day introduced, timetabling changed around exams, and lunchtime clubs started.

They're working on making a quiet outdoor space because that's what students asked for. – *Pupil, Secondary school*

¹⁸ Young Interpreters were seen in one of the case study schools, where pupils are trained in body language and communication using picture lanyards. They are then matched with new arrivals who speak the same language and also help to read to and calm younger children in Nursery and Reception.

Being known and seen by adults

Pupils name being known individually by adults as one of the primary ways belonging practices are felt: adults who know their name, notice when something is wrong, and treat them as an individual. Pupils name the quality of listening, not just its existence, as what creates belonging. Staff who listen without immediately trying to fix or redirect are described as qualitatively different from those who go through the motions. This was articulated particularly clearly by secondary pupils. Non-teaching staff are named spontaneously and warmly across both phases as key belonging practitioners, including midday assistants, ELSAs, librarians, safeguarding teams, behaviour teams and sixth form office workers.

Sometimes you just want someone to listen and not be like, you should have done this. – *Pupil, Secondary school*

Primary to secondary transition

The transition from primary to secondary school can be a significant belonging rupture. The loss of established friendships and known adults is a risk moment that requires active investment to manage. This is recognised across many schools, both primary and secondary, and identified as a key priority to embed belonging as pupils move from the primary environment into secondary. The specific transition practices schools use is explored in the next section.

Challenges and barriers

The main challenge to pupil-led belonging is that peer relationships can be double-edged: friendship is the most fundamental source of belonging pupils name, but the same dynamics can generate social comparison, judgement and exclusion, felt most acutely in secondary schools. A second risk is that pupil voice mechanisms can erode belonging rather than build it where pupils speak up but see no resulting change. Belonging is also disrupted at the primary to secondary transition, a recognised rupture point where established friendships and known adults are lost and belonging has to be actively rebuilt.

Space and resources

Schools describe the physical environment and material provision as active mechanisms for embedding belonging practices. Decisions about space, resources and daily routines are not purely logistical matters, but are in themselves belonging acts that signal to pupils, staff and families what the school values, who it is for, and what it takes seriously.

The physical environment as a belonging signal

The physical environment is central to how belonging is embedded. Entrance areas, corridor design, furniture and the openness of spaces such as the front office all send signals to pupils and families about whether the school is for them. What is displayed on

the walls, including pupils' cultures, languages, achievements and identities, is one of the primary ways schools embed the message that they value the diversity of their community. Schools describe deliberately making the environment beautiful, calm and high-quality as an embedding practice, acting on the belief that the quality of the physical environment communicates to pupils they are valued. Inclusive signage, culturally representative displays and achievement boards celebrating a wide range of successes, not just academic ones, are consistent features of schools that embed belonging most effectively.

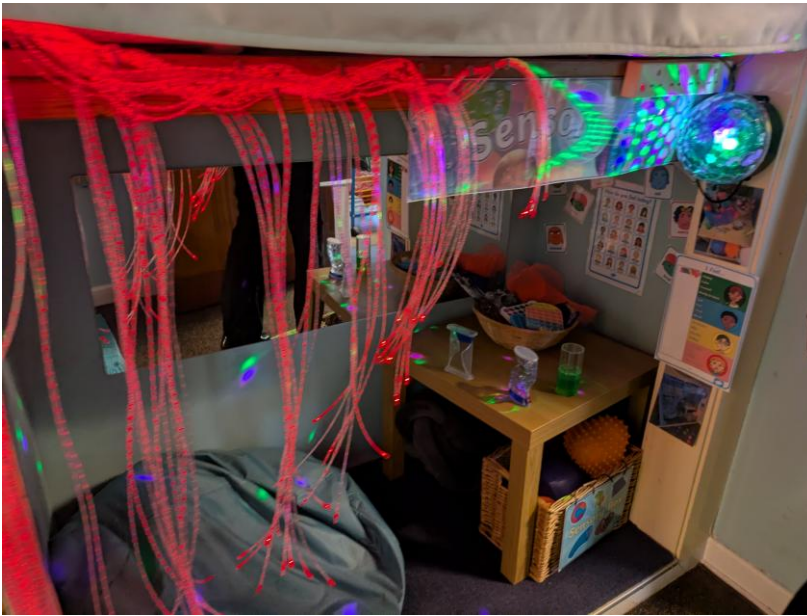
Figure 1: Dedicated classroom reading corner in primary school



Spaces for regulation and retreat

Schools embed belonging by creating named, known spaces where pupils can step back without stigma, normalising the need for regulation and retreat as a universal rather than a remedial practice. In primary schools, these tend to be located within classrooms and outdoor areas as a universal offer, including quiet corners with cushions, calm-down boxes with contents chosen by pupils, sensory areas and sensory gardens. In secondary schools, dedicated spaces are accessed on self-referral or pastoral referral and tend to be more formally named and staffed, including welfare hubs, pastoral offices, timeout rooms and libraries. The rationale is consistent across phases: embedding regulation as something any pupil might need, rather than something that marks a pupil out as struggling.

Figure 2: Dedicated sensory and quiet area in primary school



Resources that remove barriers to belonging

Material provision embeds belonging by removing the practical barriers that would otherwise mark a child out as different or unable to participate fully. Senior leaders, staff and governors describe framing this as belonging provision rather than welfare provision. The distinction matters because targeted welfare can stigmatise; while belonging provision aims to make full participation feel normal and equal. Examples include school pantries, daily art boxes, stationery sent home, and Breakfast Club open to all rather than targeted at pupil premium pupils. Remote access technology also enables pupils to attend lessons when physically unable to be present, maintaining continuity of participation.

Extending reach of belonging practices through technology and external partnerships

Technology and external partnerships extend the reach of belonging practices beyond what is possible through people and space alone. Digital platforms, such as apps capturing daily school and learning activities and regular email newsletters, give families a daily window into school life, and anonymous feedback systems create safer channels for pupil voice. External partnerships extend the belonging offer into domains the school cannot provide internally, including cultural institutions, professional sports clubs, universities, outdoor education providers and international partner schools. Both technology and external partnerships communicate to pupils that belonging is not bounded by the school's walls.

Transitions and routines as belonging moments

Schools embed belonging by treating transitions – school arrival, between lessons, and at key life stages – as deliberate belonging practices. Daily routines create the predictability that belonging depends on. Morning greetings, classroom and lesson greetings, calm

corridor practices and consistent structures across all staff signal care and create a sense of safety.

It is a non-negotiable that the teacher will be on the door, greeting children with a smile, noticing a haircut or new glasses. – *Senior Leader, Primary school*

Challenges and barriers

Physical infrastructure constraints, including buildings designed for smaller numbers, cramped conditions and poor acoustics, limit some schools' ability to embed the spatial belonging practices that better-resourced schools can implement. This is an unequal barrier across the system. However, creating a space is not the same as embedding a practice around it. Quiet and sensory spaces that are not actively introduced and normalised in daily practice may remain underused. Schools describe being dependent on a combination of grant funding, pupil premium funding and leadership creativity to make material belonging provision possible.

Community and alumni

Many schools describe belonging as extending beyond the school gates and embed their practices accordingly. The wider community and the people who have passed through the school are active partners, extending belonging both outward into the community and inward as alumni and partners contribute back to school life.

Alumni as living proof of belonging

Alumni returning in professional roles, as coaches, staff members, volunteers or visiting speakers, create a visible connection between present experience and future possibility. In many schools, there are examples of long-serving staff who were themselves former pupils or parents, creating a thread of community continuity that pupils can see and identify with.

Community and school as mutual belonging partners

Schools embed belonging by treating the community as an active partner rather than a backdrop. Volunteering programmes, partnerships, care home visits and food bank contributions are some examples of how to extend pupils' sense of belonging into the wider community. The most deliberate schools position themselves as community hubs, with spaces, programmes and events that serve families and community members beyond current pupils. Community belonging is embedded as a reciprocal practice: pupils volunteering in the community creates belonging for them; community members invited into school creates belonging for families. The two directions reinforce each other.

Challenges and barriers

Community partnerships are geography-dependent. Urban schools typically have richer partnership opportunities than rural ones, though this is not always the case. The school-as-hub model is most needed in communities with the highest levels of disadvantage but requires sustained investment in community relationship management that resource-stretched schools may not be able to provide.

Parents

Schools describe parent belonging and child belonging as connected. Embedding belonging practices for children requires actively embedding them for parents, too. When parents feel welcomed, known and trusted by the school, children's belonging is strengthened and reinforced across home and school.

Parent belonging as a precondition for child belonging

Schools embed parent belonging by treating family engagement as integral to their belonging strategy, not a separate concern. When parents understand how the school works and feel part of it, they reinforce belonging practices at home. Schools describe a three-way partnership model – school, parents and child – as the architecture through which belonging practices are most effectively embedded. Where one side of this triangle is missing, the practices are less stable. A single negative interaction between a member of staff and a parent or child can affect the whole family's relationship with the school. Embedding parent belonging, therefore, requires consistency across all points of contact, not just designated family-facing staff. Multi-generational belonging – families where parents were also pupils – is described as a community asset that deepens the belonging practices available to current pupils.

It doesn't just feel like you're sending a child to school and leaving [them] at the gates and picking [them] up at the end of the day, but actually it's very much a partnership between school and home for us. – *Parent Governor, Primary school*

I've been welcome since day one... everyone's just so, you know, they are really friendly. – *Parent Governor, Secondary school*

Active outreach and proactive communication

Schools embed parent belonging by going to families rather than waiting for families to come to them, treating family engagement as something to be actively created. Examples include home visits, gate handovers where teachers walk out with children and share positives as well as concerns, persistent and personalised contact with hard-to-reach families, and tailored sessions for specific groups such as parents or carers of children with SEND. How schools communicate is itself an embedding practice. Tone, frequency and personalisation all signal to families whether they are valued partners or peripheral

recipients of information. For example, in one school, a personalised headteacher letter to every incoming Year 7 pupil sets the tone for the family relationship before it has formally begun.

Challenges and barriers

Parent belonging is hardest to embed where it is most needed. Families with negative prior experiences of education, language barriers, high levels of poverty or low institutional trust require the most sustained investment and are harder to reach by standard engagement mechanisms. Active outreach is resource-intensive and emotionally demanding for staff, particularly pastoral staff who carry significant family engagement work alongside their core roles. Some schools have a specific family support worker to absorb this demand.

The role of contextual factors in shaping schools' choice and implementation of belonging practices

Context does not determine whether belonging can be embedded, but it shapes which practices are needed, which are available, and how quickly they can take hold. Four contextual factors emerge across the sixteen schools as particularly significant in shaping how belonging practices are chosen and implemented:

- geography and urban or rural setting
- school size
- demographics and community
- school identity, including religious, single-sex and sport-focused identities

These factors interact rather than operate in isolation. A small rural primary, for example, will face a different set of belonging conditions to a large urban secondary, even where the underlying principles of inclusion and acceptance are shared.

Geography and urban or rural setting

Geography shapes both the nature of the belonging challenge and the resources available to address it. Small rural primary schools describe belonging as developing more naturally through close relationships and high staff stability. The challenge in these settings is sustaining belonging across years and managing pupils' sense of belonging through the transition to secondary school. Large rural secondary schools face a different challenge. With pupils arriving from a wide catchment of primary schools, often without knowing anyone on arrival, belonging has to be deliberately engineered at scale through structured programmes, house systems and tutor groups.

The sphere of influence of the school is incredibly large...something like 70 primary schools feed in. – *Staff, secondary school*

Urban schools describe belonging as more actively contested. Higher pupil mobility, greater diversity and a wider range of competing community identities mean that belonging requires more deliberate work. At the same time, urban schools often have access to richer community partnerships, including galleries, professional sports clubs, universities and cultural institutions. Rural schools tend to report stronger community cohesion but fewer external partners. Geography, therefore, shapes which belonging practices are most needed and which are most readily available.

The benefit is you're in a village where there is a real community spirit anyway, so actually the school sort of just filters into that. – *Parent Governor, Primary school*

School size

Size shapes the belonging challenge fundamentally and is referenced consistently across the case study schools. Small primary schools describe belonging as relational and diffuse, with everyone knowing everyone and the class teacher carrying most of the belonging function. Structural anchors such as house systems are present but less central. Large secondary schools describe belonging as a different kind of challenge. A pupil in a school of more than 1,000 needs a named, smaller identity within the institution, which is why house systems, tutor groups and year-group spaces exist as distinct belonging structures.

With 1,500 pupils...I'm a mini community, and I don't know every child. If it was 700 or 600 strong, I probably know all the kids and I wouldn't need the rigid structures I've got, because I could control it through the family conversation. But because I don't know everybody, I need to keep things calm and keep children safe. – *Senior Leader, Secondary school*

The transition from a small primary to a large secondary is identified as a moment of particular belonging risk, precisely because the conditions that made belonging feel natural in primary no longer apply. Schools serving this transition therefore invest deliberately in belonging practices that compensate, including structured programmes, named adults, and dedicated spaces designed to create a smaller-scale belonging community within the larger institution.

Demographics and community

The demographic context of a school shapes which belonging practices are prioritised and how they are designed. Schools with high proportions of pupils with English as an additional language describe specific practices built around language inclusion. These include multilingual signage, young interpreter schemes, staff who speak community languages, translation of materials, and engagement activities tailored to specific community groups.

We have 32 different languages spoken...and we've got 18 young interpreters. – *Staff, Primary school*

Schools with high levels of deprivation describe material belonging practices as foundational. Food, uniform and equipment provision become belonging practices in their own right, as they reduce the visible markers of poverty and difference before relational practices can take effect.

There is also what we call the boutique, where children can come in and say, oh, I have got a hole in my shoe, or I need some new trousers. – *Staff, Primary school*

You walk around this local area and you see how tough some of these families have got it... a lot of these kids have literally got nothing. – *Staff, Secondary school*

Schools with significant asylum seeker and refugee populations describe School of Sanctuary frameworks as particularly meaningful. In these settings, belonging is framed as an ethical stance as well as a pastoral one. Schools serving communities with strong cultural or religious identities describe belonging as requiring active cultural intelligence, including working with community leaders, adapting to cultural expectations, and earning trust in ways that standard engagement models do not anticipate.

We're a School of Sanctuary and a Rights Respecting school. Everybody's welcome here. – *Senior Leader, Primary school*

School identity

School identity is where the most distinct differences in approach appear, although the same underlying principles of inclusion and acceptance apply across all schools. Faith schools describe identity itself as the primary belonging anchor, built around shared values, rituals and a common narrative that all staff and pupils are actively inducted into. Critically, faith schools describe deliberately ensuring that the faith identity functions as a unifying frame rather than an exclusionary one, meaning that staff and pupils who do not share the faith are explicitly included in the school's belonging structures. For example, schools described using assemblies to teach about different festivals such as Ramadan and Easter, holding whole-school events for both Eid and Christmas, and providing supportive spaces for pupils observing religious practices like fasting. The headteacher in one such school describes actively managing staff induction into the faith culture, regardless of personal background, so that the identity is held consistently across the staff team.

The word Catholic means universal. And again, therefore, everything that happens has to be universal, has to be inclusive. – *Senior Leader, Secondary school*

Sport-focused schools describe physical activity and collective challenge as the belonging framework, with every child included in every event regardless of ability. The identity is built around participation rather than performance, with personal best recognised alongside team participation. In one such school, identity is rooted into Olympic values that runs through uniform, attendance, behaviour and celebration. Inclusion is central to how this framework is operationalised. Leaders describe deliberately designing programmes – swimming for all year groups, sports-for-all afternoons, and adapted formats so pupils of all abilities can participate – so that no child is excluded by ability, condition or cost.

Children should leave here not just academically fit but physically and emotionally fit. – *Senior Leader, primary school*

Academically selective schools describe a particular belonging tension that the school works actively against. Where the school's identity is bound up with selection, belonging risks becoming contingent on academic performance. Schools in these contexts describe deliberately protecting arts and broader curriculum offers, using mentoring and community engagement, and resisting accountability pressures that would narrow the offer to ensure belonging is not solely tied to academic success. One parent governor at a selective school describes the shift away from academic-only identity. She notes that high-achieving environments place students under additional pressure that can affect their mental health, and that the school's deliberate response had been to broaden its focus.

Now they focus on the whole child, the wellbeing of that child. – *Parent Governor, Secondary school*

Summary

Context does not dictate whether belonging is embedded, but it shapes the work required to embed it. Some contexts make belonging easier to develop naturally, while others require more deliberate engineering. Some contexts open up resources and partnerships, while others limit them. The schools in this study show that effective belonging practice begins with understanding context, choosing practices that fit, and adapting implementation to the specific community the school serves.

Belonging practices

The previous section outlines the roles involved in deeply embedding a sense of belonging in schools, as well as contextual factors that may shape the approach. This section now explores the more granular practices adopted by schools. From the data, six overarching types of practice emerge: relational practices, pupil voice and agency, celebrating diversity and challenging discrimination, cultivating a strong school identity, individualised approaches for supporting pupils, and fostering belonging beyond the school gates. In this section, each are described, alongside the rationales shared by schools for focusing on each area, and the types of interventions and practices schools' use.

Relational practices

Relational practices help to create and reinforce the school culture and directly reflect the values stated within it. Schools aim to create relationships that are respectful and trusting and create an inclusive and supportive school environment, where all individuals feel valued and part of a community. Practices range from those that focus on establishing positive relationships from the outset to those that are ongoing, developing and maintaining relationships over time.

There are four areas of relational practices which schools discuss: amongst pupils, between staff, between staff and pupils, and between the school and families.

Relationships amongst pupils

Relationships between pupils are seen as a critical component of creating a supportive school environment and reduces isolation while increasing collaboration. By promoting empathy, collaboration, and inclusivity, schools aim to prepare students not just academically but also socially, equipping them with the skills needed to thrive beyond their school years.

Positive relationships are encouraged through creating ways for pupils to meet and engage with each other beyond the classroom, teaching skills such as how to resolve conflicts and encouraging a culture of being non-judgemental and supportive.

Schools encourage positive relationships between pupils in the same classes and year group as well as between pupils in different year groups and across the school as a whole.

The approach to fostering relationships varies between phases. Primary schools focus on fostering inclusivity and cooperation through activities that encourage play-based interactions and social skill development. The smaller class sizes in primary schools allow for personalised and nurturing interactions, ensuring each child feels part of the community.

In contrast, secondary schools emphasise the development of independence and self-agency. This is reflected in practices such as peer mentoring programs, where older students are given roles to support and guide younger peers. Secondary schools also encourage pupils to explore diverse social groups through clubs and extracurricular activities, which helps students build broader peer networks and develop a sense of social identity.

Example practices

- **Establishing buddy systems for new pupils** to form immediate connections and help them navigate their new surroundings.
- **Creating peer support programs** where pupils can offer assistance and guidance to each other. Often this includes getting older pupils to support or mentor their younger peers.

For the Wellbeing mentorship, we've got a programme that is really run by our pastoral team and the students in Year 11, 10....they get trained as ambassadors for wellbeing and they can work on that counselling or that coaching or that mentoring programme with students who may feel they need to speak to somebody. They might not want to speak to an adult about it, but they might just want to speak to some, speak to an older peer. – *Senior Leader, Secondary school*

- **Facilitating relationship-building between age groups** through activities such as joint assemblies, extracurricular clubs, and cross-year group projects encourages pupils to make connections beyond their year group.
- **Fostering collaborative and supportive learning** with paired working, group work and collaborative projects to foster teamwork and cooperation. Teachers also role model for pupils how to be non-judgemental and supportive with each other.

And throughout the whole of our curriculum, we have this collaborative approach. It's like 'your partner's really struggling with that? That's okay, I'm going to help them,' and they nurture and support one another. And that's, that's done intentionally from our teachers, that's built into their curriculum with their pairings, with their groupings, the way it's modelled to them. That collaboration and that support of each other is all built into our curriculum. – *Senior Leader, Primary school*

- **Teaching relationship skills** to pupils through the curriculum or structured programmes. These include conflict resolution, effective communication and empathy.

We have kind of had friendship issues. People feeling as though maybe they're not belonging within their class... we use Girls on Board... It's basically designed to try and kind of teach them empathy so that they can deal with friendship conflict themselves in a more empathetic way... Further down the school, we've used interventions like Friendship Terrace, which is kind of building social skills so that they can all feel as though they belong. – *Staff, Primary school*

- **Adapting physical spaces for socialisation**, such as quiet zones and a range of indoor and outdoor playgrounds or common areas.
- **Providing extra time outside of classes for socialising**, for example, early morning opening, breakfast clubs and extended lunch times.

You know, we open the school early now. More recently, I've been working with schools, for example, where I found that that doesn't necessarily happen, but we know that if we open the gates at 8 o'clock, the kids will start to come into the school. They love playing sports. Sense of connection straight away. – *Senior Leader, Secondary school*

We have a one-hour lunch, that's deliberate. You know, it sounds, like, really silly and little, but I don't go out to many schools that have a one-hour lunch. It's 35 minutes, it's 40 minutes. Lunch is time for children to decompress, I don't want them feeling stressed. [They] need time with their friends, need time with their peers. They need time to play sports, need time to exercise. They do clubs at lunch and then that can help them. – *Senior Leader, Secondary school*

Relationships amongst staff

Schools with a strong sense of belonging cultivate relationships between staff that are collaborative, supportive, based on mutual respect and open communication, and where staff learn from each other. This relational culture is deliberately modelled for all staff by senior leaders. Staff and leaders say these positive relationships are important for many reasons, such as increased job satisfaction and reduced stress, but also because it creates a sense of belonging for staff that then spreads through the whole school community. When staff feel they belong, they are better able to ensure pupils feel they belong. When staff members feel supported and valued, they are more likely to engage positively with students and families.

I think if you're happy in yourself and you're happy you want to come to work, that again, radiates down with the children. – *Senior Leader, Secondary school*

It then instils that culture in the children as well, because they see us obviously being able to communicate together and then obviously, they then copy the behaviours. – *Staff, Primary school*

Example practices

- **Implementing peer mentoring** programmes where experienced staff mentor new teachers to foster a sense of community and mutual growth.
- **Organising regular social events and team-building activities**, such as informal gatherings and professional development workshops, to strengthen interpersonal relationships and create a cohesive staff community.
- **Establishing systems for staff recognition and appreciation of staff**, such as thank you cards, public shout-outs, and a 'staff spotlight'.

We have things like thank you cards, we've got a little post box in the staff room, people write thank you cards all the time. I've literally emptied it this morning, put it into people's pigeonholes. We do 'Thank a Teacher' Day, all that kind of stuff.... We have the staff spotlight every week as well. – *Senior Leader, Secondary school*

- **Holding collaborative planning meetings** to encourage teamwork and align on strategies. This practice facilitates open communication and shared problem-solving among staff members.

Relationships between staff and pupils

Positive relationships between staff and pupils are seen as fundamental. Schools aim to build relationships that are reliable, consistent, inclusive, and where pupils feel respected, valued and listened to and create a sense of trust.

I think the key, the key that underpins anything in school, is the relationships that you have with the students. – *Senior Leader, Primary school*

Staff and leadership feel that when pupils feel connected and supported by staff, and have a good rapport with them, it creates a safe environment where they are comfortable expressing themselves, communicating openly and asking for help. This creates better engagement, including in the classroom, which leads to more effective learning and academic outcomes, but also better student mental health and wellbeing.

Developing these relationships is something that all staff in the school do, including both teaching and non-teaching staff, and regardless of how much interaction they typically have with pupils. As with staff relationships, headteachers and senior leaders have an important role in modelling this.

I say to staff: the children in your class are not just your children. Every child in this school is our child. Even our dinner ladies, our cooks — whenever these children engage with us, especially children with needs, they need that consistency. So, we all know about the Education Health Care Plans, the support plans. Everyone knows how to be consistent in speaking and talking to each child. – *Senior Leader, Primary school*

An important element of the relationships between staff and pupils is that all pupils are known individually and feel valued. However, it is acknowledged that this is harder in larger schools with high pupil numbers, but still the effort is made by all staff to acknowledge and interact with each pupil.

I know them all [pupils] by name; all of my staff would. And so, you can touch base, you can have those corridor conversations and you'll see it from the very first moment of the day when they walk on site, they are welcomed by staff. – *Senior Leader, Secondary school*

And it's not that every member of staff knows every pupil, but every pupil is known by a significant number of staff really well. So you can walk around the school and there'll be so many people that could name hundreds of other people and information about them, backgrounds. It's that holistic knowledge of the individual. – *Staff, Secondary school*

Staff have high ambitions for pupils and recognise that demonstrating belief in students' abilities significantly contributes to their confidence and self-esteem. Staff report that this relational working approach, where staff actively inspire and encourage pupils, motivates pupils to take on challenges. High ambitions can also influence pupils' future aspirations and career goals, equipping them with the mindset and skills necessary for success beyond school.

I think we all share in the belief that the high standards and the high expectations that are set upon the students at the school directly correlate to high aspiration, which is crucial in the sense of belonging. – *Senior Leader, Secondary school*

Example practices

- **Visiting pupils before they join the school** in order to begin establishing relationships and helping the move to a new school feel less overwhelming.
Before a child actually steps through the door 2nd of September, they've had eight different moments of contact with the school, and in-person contact. – *Senior Leader, Secondary school*
- **Welcoming pupils at the school gate and classroom door** each morning to create a positive start to the day. This practice was observed or spoken about in both primary

and secondary schools, where all staff are encouraged to get involved, often with senior leaders modelling this practice. In primary schools, where many pupils are brought to school by family members, this practice also helps develop family relationships.

At the start of the school day, we want everyone to be by the door, at the gates and welcome the children in... In the mornings individuals will be stationed at different points so that as the children are coming in there's another adult, 'Oh, hello, how are you today?'. So, that's been very, very deliberate because I think that that creates a sense of actually, we're glad to see you; we're happy that you're here. – *Senior Leader, Primary school*

[The headteacher's] at the end of the driveway or, if she's not, it's the deputy. You know, somebody is always there and not just standing there, I mean, they say good morning, but they name the child.... It is important for children, that is literally how they start the day. They are welcomed in as an individual, not just en masse coming through the gates. – *Parent Governor, Primary school*

- **Using personalised greetings and interactions** as staff see pupils throughout the school day, such as in the playground and as they are walking through corridors. Staff often have something specific to comment on or ask about that shows that pupil that they know them well and listen to them.
- **Maintaining an open-door policy** for pupils to create a culture where pupils feel safe and comfortable approaching staff with concerns. This is demonstrated through both literally having open doors as well as staff being receptive to any other staff member, family member or pupil who approaches them with something at any time.
- **Assigning a consistent key contact to pupils** (e.g., mentors or advisors) to provide continuous support and guidance. This can be in a variety of forms, such as form tutors or care assistants who stay with the pupils each year of school or teaching assistants assigned to specific pupils and leading on communications with their families.

Relationships between the school and families

Relationships between schools and families play a vital role in creating a supportive educational environment for pupils. Schools aim for relationships with parents that include open communication, mutual understanding, trust and that are collaborative. The goal is to create a united community that supports pupils, where families are not only engaged but feel respected and integral to the school community. Ensuring parents feel a sense of belonging to the school supports the children's ability to feel they belong too.

If a parent feels connected to the school... then the child would feel connected to the school via the parent, if not through themselves, the parent will be encouraging the child. – *Parent Governor, Secondary school*

We call it the triangle of communication.... we have the child, the family and us, and if one part of that goes, it just can't connect properly. So we always foster that with the parents. We make the parent feel like they belong as much as the children. – *Senior Leader, Secondary school*

Primary schools tend to emphasise personal interactions and family involvement, often fostering a more intimate community feel. Parents in primary schools are typically more involved in day-to-day activities and may have more frequent informal interactions with teachers. Conversely, secondary schools focus on structured communication and events, acknowledging the increased autonomy of older students, while still striving to maintain an engaged and supportive relationship with families.

Contextual factors such as school size and community demographics shape the nature of these relationships. Larger schools may leverage formal communication systems and dedicated family liaison roles to handle family interactions, whereas smaller schools often maintain more personal connections. Additionally, schools tailor their engagement strategies to fit the cultural and socioeconomic context of their communities, ensuring inclusivity and responsiveness to diverse needs.

Example practices

- **Building relationships before pupils start at school** through meetings, introductory events and home visits to build relationships with not only the pupils but also their families.
- **Keeping families regularly and consistently informed** about school activities, student progress, and opportunities for involvement in school life through newsletters, emails and school apps.
- **Hosting family engagement events** such as open houses, workshops, and cultural celebrations, which can be about actively involving families in the school community, as well as supporting families.

The more you can come to events that are put on and be part of what the children are part of, I think that then embeds the children's feeling of belonging. – *Parent Governor, Primary school*

- **Appointing designated staff members to act as liaisons**, facilitating communication between the school and home, addressing family concerns, and encouraging collaboration.

- **Setting boundaries for respectful relationships** through clearly communicating the expectations for behaviour and interactions, ensuring staff and families agree on the standards for respectful and supportive engagement.

If your child's with you and you're speaking to a member of staff in a disrespectful way, you're actually saying to them that that's okay to speak to people like that. So probably about two years ago now, we went through a bit of a phase of, you know, this is not acceptable, you are not speaking to my staff in this way. And I wrote to them about respectful behaviour and how we expect you to behave when you speak to the staff at school. And that, you know, if you can't do that, I will basically evict you from sight because you are their role model. – *Senior Leader, Primary school*

Pupil voice and agency

Schools describe pupil voice as central to fostering a strong sense of belonging. Under this theme, they emphasise practices that not only give pupils an avenue to share their views but encourage pupils to see themselves as influential members of the school community, trusted with responsibilities that give them purpose and agency. By providing meaningful roles both within school and in the wider community, pupils experience themselves as valuable contributors rather than passive recipients of school life. This sense of being an integral 'cog' nurtures pride, confidence, mutual respect between pupils and staff, and a shared commitment to school values.

It's not just dictatorship, and you know, being dictated what to do, it is very much so about being a part of those changes and those decisions that happen. – *Parent Governor, Secondary school*

Schools offer a wide range of opportunities for pupils to voice their opinions on school life, lead initiatives and clubs, contribute to key decisions, act as ambassadors, and take on daily responsibilities that demonstrate the school's trust in them. These opportunities reinforce to pupils that their actions matter, and that those actions can lead to actual change. Schools speak about how this can help pupils feel appreciated and acknowledged. Furthermore, staff say that opportunities to represent the school to families or the wider community further strengthen pupils' sense of pride, ownership and belonging.

If they come up with an idea and I can facilitate that idea, they feel that they've made a difference to our school community. For example, if there's litter out on the street, they'll come to me saying, can we get litter pickers out? Can we write to the parish council? They want our community to be a better place and they drive that improvement... I think it gives our children the power to implement change themselves. – *Senior Leader, Primary school*

Both primary and secondary schools highlight the importance of providing multiple avenues for pupils to share their opinions and perspectives, both collectively and individually. Schools describe working to embed agency beyond formal structures, such as school councils. They aim to ensure that everyday interactions create an environment where all pupils feel empowered to express preferences, raise concerns, and shape their own journey through school. Together, these formal and informal practices cultivate a culture where pupils feel confident, respected, and invested in their school community.

I can voice whatever I want. Like, I feel like rather than just being a student, I'm also just a person. – *Pupil, Secondary school*

It feels like we belong when everyone listens... Feeling listened to feels really nice. – *Pupil, Primary school*

Across settings, staff emphasise that agency is not only about being heard but about having the power to make a tangible difference. Schools recognise that empowerment must be authentic, stressing the need to avoid tokenistic approaches and to ensure that feedback is acknowledged, acted upon, and communicated back to pupils. Both staff and pupils say that when pupils see that their input leads to change, or understand why certain changes are not possible, trust and mutual respect can deepen.

It's not just about capturing that student voice. You've got to do something with it... you have to do things when you get those responses, you can't just collect the data and then sit on it. – *Senior Leader, Secondary school*

We used to have a break in the middle of our exams and then we forgot everything. We asked if we could have the break after and they did... it really made me feel heard. – *Pupil, Secondary school*

While some secondary schools note challenges in sustaining informal, relational mechanisms at scale, they also observe that ownership and autonomy become increasingly important as pupils grow older, building on foundations laid in primary.

Example practices

- **Embedding pupil voice as a core principle**, using rights-based frameworks (e.g., UNICEF Rights Respecting Schools), to give pupils the language and expectation that they have a right to be heard.

From reception, you're taught that you have the right to certain things, the right to an opinion, as long as it doesn't affect others. You're taught you can say what you want as long as you're not hurting other people. That makes inherently good people. – *School Leader, Primary school*

- **Creating purposeful leadership roles** (e.g., head boy/girl, class representatives, house captains, or ambassadors for themes such as wellbeing, English as an

additional language (EAL) or anti-bullying) where pupils are responsible for promoting, supporting, and gathering peers' views, and presenting these in assemblies or meetings.

- **Empowering influential student councils and parliaments** to shape important decisions on issues such as curriculum content (e.g., more financial literacy), uniform changes, pupil wellbeing support and spending pots (e.g., sports premium). Councils meet regularly with SLT and governors, with feedback leading to visible policy changes.
- **Implementing regular feedback systems** like periodical surveys, follow-up surveys after specific initiatives, and digital tools (including QR codes around the building) to gather ongoing anonymous feedback, which is fed directly to SLT and governing bodies.

One of the best ways to do that is by getting the pupil and parent and staff voice through surveys. That's something that the school has been doing the past couple of terms actually... I think it needs to be ongoing, to hear what families and pupils are saying, to then understand what the gaps are and what the areas for continuous improvement might be. – *Parent Governor, Primary school*

- **Supporting student-led initiatives and clubs** by allowing pupils to design and run clubs (e.g., kindness club, Warhammer, Minecraft, aviation, debate, and DJ workshops) and lead fundraising or charity campaigns, often presenting options to the whole school for voting.
- **Integrating class-level reflection sessions** for pupils to provide feedback and discuss what worked well or less well about lessons.
- **Ensuring individual voice through relationships**, which can be maintained by open-door approaches and strong relational practice so every pupil, especially those not drawn to formal or collective structures, has trusted adults to share concerns, ideas, or needs (see also sub-section on relational practices).
- **Assigning everyday responsibilities** (e.g., taking lunch orders, taking the register, watering plants, handing out books) gives pupils an ongoing sense of responsibility and contribution.
- **Building early confidence** through targeted interventions from reception class for quieter pupils, such as oracy lessons, to develop confidence in speaking and expressing themselves.
- **Providing pupils with choice in their personal journey** to influence aspects of their own school experience, including participation in activities, how their identity is

recognised, what personal information is shared and with whom, and curriculum options.

The students are encouraged to find what interests them, what engages them, what's important to them, and then the timetable is made with great care after that, rather than preloading the timetable and saying, you've got to go here, here and here, and not having that freedom. – *Staff, Secondary school*

- **Demonstrating transparent follow-through** by acting on feedback and reporting back through assemblies, “you asked, we listened” updates, or improvement boards showing changes made.
- **Co-creating class rules** with pupils to give them ownership over expectations and shared commitments.
- **Adopting behaviour approaches that emphasise responsibility** and encourage pupils to model positive behaviour for others.
- **Training staff on how to listen effectively** and create conditions where pupils feel heard and safe to express their views.

I think listening to children is really important. We did a pupil survey, and the children said some staff don't listen to us on the playground when we're speaking to them. So, then we did a piece of work around that, we had staff training... because a child needs to feel listened to and then if they're listened to, they'll feel that they belong because people are listening to them and they feel like what they're saying is important. – *Staff, Primary school*

Celebrating diversity and challenging discrimination

Schools describe belonging as something that is actively created through the celebration and appreciation of diversity, rather than simply the acceptance of difference. Some schools frame belonging as inseparable from equality: pupils feel they belong when their identities, cultures and histories are recognised, valued and reflected across school life. A key message is that this requires more than one-off events or visual displays; it involves embedding diversity meaningfully across the curriculum, policies, staffing, and everyday interactions. When this happens, schools describe all pupils, families and staff, irrespective of their background and culture, feeling respected, understood and represented, which strengthens their sense of connection to the school community.

I think our curriculum is representative of the families that we serve and I think that's really important because that really creates a sense of belonging for our children. – *Senior Leader, Primary school*

School staff also highlight the importance of understanding the needs and experiences of specific groups, including the intersections between them, to provide the best possible support to all pupils. This includes educating staff and pupils about the experiences of particular groups, such as refugees and asylum seekers, to build empathy, challenge misconceptions and foster a culture of welcome, safety and inclusion.

Schools also see the importance of encouraging pupils to explore and express their individual identity and sense of self. This is part of making sure pupils feel seen, understood and celebrated.

Let your light shine. Everything is based around making sure everybody feels valued, everybody is equal, everyone has a place in the school. –
Senior Leader, Primary school

Alongside this, schools describe belonging as dependent on a clear commitment to challenging discrimination. They aim to create environments where pupils feel protected from discriminatory behaviours, and where all pupils can trust that concerns will be taken seriously and addressed consistently. These practices often sit within wider relational approaches but are experienced by pupils as central to feeling safe, valued and able to be themselves.

Several schools acknowledge that this work is ongoing, and that meaningful diversity and inclusion require continuous reflection and improvement. The more embedded and holistic these practices are across school life, the more authentic they feel to pupils and families, helping to avoid tokenism and build a genuinely inclusive culture.

Example practices

- **Embedding an intentionally anti-racist approach** across all school policies and procedures. This includes ensuring that behaviour, uniform and appearance policies are inclusive and non-discriminatory.
- **Implementing a compassionate, zero tolerance approach to discrimination** by promptly addressing incidents and engaging individually with families and pupils that demonstrate discriminatory behaviour. Cultivate an open, safe reporting culture with clear protocols, consistent reactions, and timely follow-ups, ensuring those affected feel heard, supported, and protected, thereby enhancing their sense of belonging.

We have a zero tolerance stamp, racism, sexism, ableism, whatever it is, we have a zero tolerance, regardless of if we see it in society... We will tell them what is right and wrong, and we've had students that have turned around before from the personal development programme and it's, you know, it's given me goosebumps. They said, I've realised that my parents' opinions are wrong... – *Senior Leader, Secondary school*

- **Utilising parents and family members as cultural connectors** to support new families with onboarding, interpreting and signposting.
- **Delivering inclusive Personal, Social, Health and Economic (PSHE) programmes** that promote respect, challenge harmful norms, and build empathy (e.g., emotional literacy sessions on misogyny, allyship and positive masculinity).
- **Participating in initiatives such as the School of Sanctuary Network** to educate pupils about forced migration, foster empathy, and challenge misconceptions. This helps create a culture of welcome for refugees and asylum seekers.
- **Recruiting a diverse staff body and senior leadership team** to ensure they reflect the communities the school serves. This helps pupils and families feel represented.
- **Diversifying the curriculum** to create an inclusive and culturally reflective learning environment, ensuring pupils see their identities, histories and communities represented in what they study. This is seen to strengthen belonging for pupils from ethnic minority backgrounds, while in less diverse schools it broadens pupils' understanding of diversity and the wider world beyond their immediate community.

What we wanted to do is we wanted to use Key Stage 3 to represent the different ethnicities that made up our school. So, we spent a lot of time with staff, training them on how they can be culturally diverse within their curriculum. – *Senior Leader, Secondary school*

- **Embedding everyday visible practices that celebrate diversity**, such as regular assemblies' that recognise different religious and cultural celebrations or ongoing cultural diversity displays.

Figure 3: Diversity display in primary school



- **Hosting events that celebrate identity and culture** (e.g., culture fairs, community meals, Windrush Day, inclusive winter nativities) that encourage pupils to express all parts of their identity.

What is it about Culture Day that really fosters that feeling of belonging? I think students have the freedom to be able to express themselves. That freedom of expression... it really makes you feel like you can be who you are without being judged. – *Parent Governor, Secondary school*

- **Celebrating achievements beyond academic attainment** and recognising that success looks different for every child and valuing all forms of progress. Actively ensure pupils who are not academically driven feel equally valued and recognised.

Cultivating a strong school identity

Many schools cultivate a strong identity around a particular characteristic or ethos, such as faith or sport. These characteristics serve as a central theme which the ethos and values of the school can come from or relate to, but also that the community can rally around, fostering pride, and strengthening a feeling of community. The shared focus encourages pupils and staff to strive towards shared goals, reinforcing a unified purpose and collective identity within the school and therefore a sense of belonging.

One challenge is the potential for a school identity to exclude pupils who do not align with the identity; for example, pupils in faith-based schools who do not practice that faith or

pupils who are not motivated by sport in schools very focused on physical education. Schools with a strong belonging ethos address this tension with repeated conversations on the value of diversity and identifying components of that identity that all pupils can relate to, such as the core value of respect.

It's very much the messaging that you are part of a family now, you know, you are all equally valued wherever you are on your faith journey. And then through all the assemblies, there's a continual kind of holding and encouraging them just to be good humans, you know, and to know their own worth. – *Staff, Secondary school*

Another form of school identity seen amongst schools was framing the school community as a family. This is supported by the building of strong relationships between staff, pupils and their families and knowing them all on an individual level. By embedding this familial atmosphere, schools ensure that all students, staff, and families perceive themselves as vital components of the school.

If you asked any member of staff, parent or child, they would just describe as one big family. And that's how it feels here, yeah, that everyone is just part of one big family. And I think that's, that's the nature of a small school, everyone knows everyone. – *Senior Leader, Primary school*

In schools with larger populations, often secondary schools, there's an added dimension of belonging to smaller communities within the school, such as house systems. These subgroups provide students with additional layers of identity and community, offering a sense of belonging beyond the whole-school identity. This multi-layered approach allows students to connect more deeply with their peers and take pride in their affiliations, further fostering engagement and a sense of commitment to their school community as a whole.

Everything in the school hangs off of our house system and the student [leadership teams]... We hang everything off of it from rewards to sports, music, in house competitions and we keep just adding, chess, all of those kinds of things, because it's fun. There's a sense of connection. – *Senior Leader, Secondary school*

Example practices

- **Adopting a unifying school slogan and shared language** that is consistently used across communication, branding, and within the school to create a sense of unity. Having a shared language, where specific terminology and phrases are regularly used by staff and students, helps embed the school's ethos and ensures that the school community aligns with its core values.
- **Establishing shared school rituals**, such as during regular assemblies, is significant in reinforcing the school's identity and ethos. These gatherings provide an opportunity to celebrate achievements, discuss school values, and build community spirit.

- **Implementing house systems** to create smaller communities within the school that provides students with another anchor for belonging, fostering friendly competition and a sense of team spirit through inter-house activities.

Individualised approaches for supporting pupils

Schools recognise the importance of an individualised approach to supporting pupils. Schools take a holistic, whole person and tailored approach to learning and support in order to meet the needs of all pupils. They are concerned with each pupil's individual progress and track and monitor to ensure they are meeting each of their needs. The aim is to make learning more accessible and effective for every child, promoting both personal development and academic success. As part of this, SEND support is designed to be inclusive, integrating pupils with disabilities into the broader classroom environment and promoting equality in learning opportunities.

Our inclusive practice, so that you wouldn't necessarily notice which children were having support or being scaffolded. They're not taken out unless they need to be for any particular thing, but they're very much part of the team in the classroom. – *Staff, Primary school*

Among the case study schools, there is a big focus on supporting pupil wellbeing. As part of this, many schools have dedicated pastoral roles and triage systems in place. These systems are crucial for identifying students who require additional support, ensuring that all students receive the attention they need.

The school do so much work to try and alleviate any concerns that neurodivergent students might have about their place here...not all children will want to go and be sort of almost labelled or separated out, but there are the areas where they can go if they need to be quiet. There are places where any of the children could go down to student services and get support or just have a chat. – *Parent Governor, Secondary school*

Example practices

- **Using the Emotional Literacy Support Assistant (ELSA) programme** to provide support to students who are facing difficulties in understanding and managing their emotions through targeted sessions. Trained ELSA staff members work one-on-one or in small groups with students to develop their emotional literacy, self-esteem, social competencies, and resilience.
- **Developing personalised learning plans and support** for students, ensuring the curriculum addresses their specific needs.
- **Providing inclusive SEND support** that integrates pupils into mainstream classrooms while providing the necessary support to ensure equal learning opportunities.

- **Systematically and regularly monitoring and reviewing individual pupil progress and needs**, often through data-driven approaches.
- **Employing dedicated support staff** such as SENCOs (Special Educational Needs Coordinators), pastoral leads, or wellbeing practitioners, who are dedicated to supporting students with additional needs. These staff members coordinate efforts to provide targeted interventions and oversee student wellbeing, acting as key points of contact for students requiring extra support.
- **Conducting regular one-on-one check-ins** to establish strong relationships with pupils and staff, offering tailored guidance and ensuring they feel seen and supported within the school environment.
- **Using trauma informed approaches** to help staff understand and respond to pupils in a way that creates a safe and supportive environment. This approach helps in creating an environment that is sensitive to the needs of all pupils, particularly those who have experienced trauma.

Belonging beyond the school gates

Schools speak about how it is their role to embed a sense of belonging that extends beyond the physical and temporal boundaries of school life. SLT, staff and parent governors across both primary and secondary schools all emphasise their collective responsibility to not only nurture a sense of connection within the school community, but to support pupils to feel that they belong in the wider world, across different places, spaces and stages of their lives.

Belonging in and beyond their community

Schools emphasise the importance of strengthening pupils' sense of connection to, and responsibility for, their wider communities. Schools describe wanting pupils to feel that they are part of something bigger than themselves, and to understand their role in contributing positively to the places they live. This includes creating opportunities for pupils to engage with local organisations, participate in community events and develop a sense of purpose and contribution that reinforces their belonging beyond the school gates.

Additionally, school staff speak about helping pupils feel a sense of belonging in places and spaces they may not otherwise encounter. Schools talk about the importance of building pupils' cultural capital by providing experiences, through trips, events and wider opportunities, that expose them to new environments and help them feel comfortable, confident and entitled to be there. SLT and staff see these experiences as crucial for enabling pupils to recognise that they can belong in a wide range of different worlds, not only in the familiar contexts of home or school.

I think confidence is a big thing – to be able to feel like they can compete on the world stage with anybody else from whatever other backgrounds that they are. – *Parent Governor, Secondary school*

Those experiences where children and families may not be able to do it out of school...so we take them...like a theatre or cinema...lots of places outside [the city] that are linked to their curriculum. – *Staff, Primary school*

Example practices:

- **Providing pupils with a wide range of educational school trips and excursions**, for example to theatres, museums and other cultural places of interest and ensuring funding is available to enable all pupils to participate.
- **Developing active partnerships with local organisations** (e.g., community centres, sports clubs, churches) to create meaningful community links.
- **Encouraging and supporting pupil participation in community events** to reinforce pupils' sense of being part of the local area.
- **Using a community hub model** to position the school as a central, accessible space for families and residents.
- **Supporting pupils to choose and fundraise** for local community organisations throughout the year.

Belonging in the future

This outward looking ethos also extends across time. Schools describe actively preparing pupils to feel that they belong in their futures, whether transitioning to secondary school, moving into further or higher education, entering apprenticeships or stepping into work. SLT and staff emphasise the importance of helping pupils develop a sense of self that is rooted in their interests, strengths and aspirations, so they can see themselves as capable to participate in whichever pathways they choose.

And we've got a very rich offer in terms of what we offer outside of the classroom. So the clubs, the teams, the wider sports. What we tend to find is children find something like a hook that inspires them and connects them with their education. – *Senior Leader, Secondary school*

Secondary schools in particular frame this theme within a broader commitment to developing the whole person. SLT and staff describe intentionally nurturing pupils' confidence, independence and sense of capability so they feel able to participate fully in all parts of life, not only in academic or career contexts. This includes valuing non-academic growth, recognising diverse forms of achievement and supporting pupils to become well-rounded citizens that contribute positively to society.

Effectively we're helping young people become happy adults and the more that you can navigate your way in a wider society, I think the better [off] you are... We're preparing them for the future. That's what I think we try really hard to do. – *Staff, Secondary school*

They [the school] do care deeply about the children's personal development and their sense of belonging. And it's not just so that they can get the best academic results out of them... it's more than that. It's actually thinking this is what the children need to be better citizens and to be able to flourish later. – *Parent Governor, Primary school*

Example practices:

- **Maintaining a broad curriculum** to ensure every pupil can find a “hook” that inspires them and connects them to their learning.
- **Protecting the arts and humanities** to ensure pupils have diverse opportunities and are not pushed exclusively towards STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) pathways.
- **Offering a wide range of extracurricular clubs** (sports, arts, music, societies) that inspire pupils and help them discover interests and strengths that resonate. Ensure they are accessible by, for example, scheduling clubs during the school day and subsidising participation for pupils who might face financial barriers. Support pupils to choose and help run some of these clubs.
- **Making learning tangible** by continuously connecting it to real-world applications, local community and social issues.
- **Holding award ceremonies or allocating class and house points** for values such as kindness, listening and positive behaviour, not just grades.
- **Displaying achievements of past and current pupils** across a wide range of sectors, to broaden what “success” looks like and who belongs.
- **Bringing in external speakers**, including alumni, from a range of professions and backgrounds to present or run workshops. This provides diverse role models, broadens horizons and normalises different aspirations.

How belonging, attendance and attainment practices intersect

One of the key aims of this research is to understand how belonging practices intersect with schools' approaches to supporting high attendance and attainment. This section explores the two-way relationship between practices that support belonging and those that are intended to support high attendance and attainment, as well as tensions and challenges that exist. The perceived impacts of a sense of belonging on attendance and attainment are covered in the next section, which addresses the full range of perceived impacts of pupil belonging.

For this section in particular, it is important to keep in mind that while the insights in this section are relevant for all schools, the schools invited to take part in this research were selected because they already had high attendance and attainment or were on a steady upward trajectory, while also actively cultivating pupil belonging. Therefore, the intersection of practices and related tensions would likely look different in schools with different attendance and attainment profiles.

How belonging practices support efforts to improve pupil attendance and attainment

Within each of the practice themes described in the previous section, participants in the research are often able to link those practices and the act of building a sense of belonging to broader efforts to improve pupil attendance and attainment. Those links are more common under three of the practice themes: relational practices, individualised approaches, and belonging beyond the school gates. These practices are often seen as a foundation for pupil engagement and learning, which is explored further in this section. Across the case study schools, there are more examples of intersections between belonging and attendance practices, than belonging and attainment practices. Several leaders and staff describe a two-way relationship between attendance and belonging, where pupils who feel they belong want to attend more and when pupils attend more, they feel a stronger sense of belonging. They also see good attendance as the foundation for improved attainment, so there is a stronger focus on ensuring pupils are in school first.

Relational practices

Strong relationships are cited by pupils and staff as the basis for pupil motivation to attend and put in effort at school. For pupils, friendships are both a key part of a sense of belonging and a main factor affecting their desire to attend school. This is true for both primary and secondary pupils and reflected by staff.

If you didn't have any friends, no one would want to come because there'd be no one to play with you. – *Pupil, Primary school*

There was a girl in my class who was quite low mood and you know, like constant conversations with parents about why that might be. And you know, she was actually struggling with friendships, and we've done a lot of work around helping her develop those friendships. And what I have seen is a massive improvement in her attainment. – *Staff, Primary school*

Pupils from both primary and secondary schools say that when they feel safe with and trust their teacher, they are not scared to ask a question or get something wrong. This psychological safety is seen as a direct enabler of learning. Secondary pupils note that a positive relationship with a teacher can also motivate them to work harder.

Sometimes even, see, if you don't really want to revise, but you want to make your teacher proud, you'll sort of have that in the back of your mind. – *Pupil, Secondary school*

Both staff and pupils say that if pupils feel valued and seen by both senior leaders and staff, they are more likely to come to school and engage with their learning, which in turn positively impacts attainment. Pupils describe feeling seen as an individual by staff as important for trying harder and wanting to make their teachers feel proud. Staff describe children who feel cared for as wanting to do well.

The sense of community helps because it feels like the teachers all know who the students are and want you to succeed. They push you forward. They know what you can do even when maybe you do not — they push you beyond what you thought you could do because they know you as a person, not just a face. They know who you are beyond academics. – *Pupil, Secondary school*

Where students feel valued, where they feel seen, where they feel respected, that they can develop, they can grow, they can ask questions, they can be curious... That then allows for academic progress... the more present you are in a lesson, you know, the more you can ask questions and learn, and then that can be applied in these exams and assessments that they are going to have to sit by the end of the year. – *Staff, Primary school*

The importance of relationships to attendance and attainment extends to parents and carers. There is broad agreement among school leaders and staff that when parents and carers feel like they belong to the school community, they are more likely to encourage their children to attend school and support them with their learning. A relational, non-punitive approach between schools and families builds trust, which makes it easier to have supportive conversations about pupil attendance.

If parents see that we're trying to foster that sense of belonging, that sense of community, and they can see that we're supporting them, then that collaboration also increases attendance as well, because parents will want their kid to come to school. – *Staff, Secondary school*

Challenges and barriers

School leaders acknowledge that these relational practices require considerable staff capacity. This creates a tension between the growing needs of pupils and the limited number of staff available. Staff comment on the intense time and emotional resources needed for deep family support. This can risk leading to staff burnout from constant effort and maintaining high visibility with pupils and families.

Both school leaders and parent governors note a key tension around fostering belonging and the legal requirement to enforce attendance through punitive measures. They view these measures as having the potential to directly damage the supportive, trusting relationships with families that are essential for getting children into school. Additionally, they note some school policies on attendance can conflict with family culture, particularly the issue of families taking extended term-time holidays to visit relatives in foreign countries. Leaders manage this by delivering "hard messages" with compassion, a practice they feel fosters belonging even while enforcing rules.

Pupil voice and agency

Pupils state that having roles and responsibility within the school gives them a purpose beyond being a learner that makes them want to come to school and feel more motivated towards their school work. When pupils have their voice heard and see their feedback leading to tangible changes, it makes them feel valued. Staff and pupils agree that feeling valued makes pupils more motivated to come to school. Being heard also gives them confidence which transfers to their work in class.

Giving kids responsibility, makes them feel important and then makes them feel like they want to come in. – *Pupil, Secondary school*

Belonging through celebrating diversity and challenging discrimination

A rich calendar of cultural events creates a vibrant school life that pupils say they are motivated to attend and not miss out on. Practices that make every pupil feel their identity is seen, respected, and protected are crucial for creating the safe environment needed for both attendance and attainment. A clear anti-bullying stance and visible celebration of diversity make school feel safer, removing a potential barrier to attendance. When pupils feel their culture and identity are respected, they are more confident to be themselves and participate in class.

School leaders also describe a focus on ensuring pupils who struggle academically have opportunities to nurture other talents which are also valued, such as arts or sports. Through improvement in other areas, leaders say pupils build up a foundation of self-worth and confidence which then can carry over to the classroom to help them improve academically.

Challenges and barriers

School leaders feel pressure from system level to prioritise academic data, SATs results, and GCSE numbers, which they believe can make pupils who do not achieve higher grades feel inferior. Staff feel that those pupils can feel less valued and compared unfavourably to peers getting higher grades, which can undermine their sense of belonging and in turn affect their own academic progress.

Cultivating a strong school identity

Building a sense of being part of something bigger through shared values and rituals that form the school identity foster a collective pride that motivates both attendance and achievement.

On our PE kits and blazers and everything, we've got the school badge, and it makes you feel like you're part of a bigger community, and you have pride and a feeling that you do belong. And it makes you want to do better because you are not just representing yourself, you are representing everyone around you. – *Pupil, Secondary school*

Individualised approach for supporting pupils

A focus on pupil wellbeing, bespoke interventions and tailoring supports to individuals can remove barriers to attendance and attainment. For example, a pupil with sensory needs can attend because they know a quiet space is available or a one-to-one TA or specific academic support for a struggling pupil enables them to access the curriculum and make academic progress. This individualised approach demonstrates to pupils and their families that the school genuinely cares about them, which fosters the trust and desire to come to school.

They want to come to school because they enjoy the learning, and the reason they enjoy it is because it's purposefully designed for them. – *Staff, Primary school*

Challenges and barriers

School leaders face difficult choices, as providing bespoke, individualised support can be costly and difficult to manage within budgets. At the classroom level, there is a practical tension when balancing the acute needs of one pupil who is dysregulated against the needs of the rest of the class, leaving a teacher feeling torn.

That's an expense, but you can't say in your budget, 'I can't do that.' You have to let something else go to get that right. These are the financial decisions we have to make carefully. – *Senior Leader, Primary school*

The pastoral intensity required for genuine belonging across large numbers of students creates a workload that can feel overwhelming for staff, especially if there are more needs amongst the pupils than there are immediate resources to meet.

School leaders feel a conflict between the wider school system which is perceived as prioritising attainment over the holistic wellbeing of the child. The pressure is especially acute in certain contexts, such as grammar schools trying to balance academic expectations with a broad education, or during "pinch points" like Year 11 mock exams.

Belonging beyond the school gates

Pupils and staff say that extracurricular activities, such as clubs and events, are something to look forward to and a reason to attend. One school used a Friday football club specifically to drive up attendance on a historically difficult day. Clubs are also a primary way for pupils to make friends outside their immediate class group, strengthening the social bonds that make them want to come to school.

If you are doing all these different things you want to come in, because you want to do them. – *Staff, Primary school*

Extracurricular activities also help pupils get into the right mindset for learning. Pupils describe how succeeding in a club builds their confidence and offers an alternative way to feel successful and valued, which they then carry back into the classroom. Staff view this boost to their self-esteem as foundational for all learning. Secondary pupils explain that doing something they enjoy at lunchtime gets them in the right mindset for afternoon lessons, directly impacting their focus and engagement.

Spending the first or second half of lunch doing something you enjoy gets you in the right mindset for the afternoon. – *Pupil, Secondary school*

I used to do debating club, and I really felt included and felt like I belonged there. It gave me a sense of confidence to start speaking up more in class. And I would say that it definitely enriched my learning and made me do better, because I felt brilliant to speak up. – *Pupil, Secondary school*

Visitors, such as from local businesses or alumni, help to bring learning to life and provide pupils with another motivator to be in school. They also provide aspirational stories and role models that make achievement feel 'within reach' and encourage self-belief and ambition they take to their studies.

My youngest son said when he started there was a guy, he was head boy and he was pupil premium and I think he went to Oxford and did medicine or something, and my son said, I want to be him. – *Parent Governor, Secondary school*

Challenges and barriers

Staff identify a logistical tension rooted in the finite length of a school day. They describe the challenge of pupils being in "two places at once," where belonging-focused activities like music lessons or ambassador duties can clash with core academic time, requiring constant communication and harmonising to manage. They resolve this through communication and collaboration, understanding that all the initiatives are "intertwined" and feel that in the long run extracurricular activities, and other initiatives that lead to a sense of belonging, therefore mean pupils are better engaged to learn when they are in the classroom.

How attendance and attainment practices support efforts to improve pupil belonging

In the same way that participants perceive the practices for belonging have direct effects on attendance and attainment, so do they perceive that the practices for attendance and attainment directly impact belonging; however, there are fewer instances of this noted by participants.

In some schools, there are concerted efforts to improve attendance through supportive and bespoke interventions, and staff note that these individualised efforts can lead to pupils feeling seen and cared for as individuals. Examples include staff collecting and transporting pupils to school or where a child is struggling with the morning transition, encouraging them to attend breakfast club for a quieter start to the day. One school rewards pupils for high attendance and describes making adjustments to the attendance criteria for pupils with SEND who have higher medical absences to ensure they are not left out.

I think that's where our attendance procedures really work. It's multi agency, it's supportive and it's encouraging. And it's with that evidence that actually when your child's in school, they're socially making loads of progress, they're academically making lots of progress. – *Senior Leader, Primary school*

One secondary school leader describes an attendance communication approach that is built around relationships and belonging. The pupil's tutor is the first person to call home after an absence with a script that is practiced but still allows for a personal touch. The aim is a 'soft approach' that begins with asking about the pupil and expressing that the pupil was missed by their tutor and their classmates.

Similarly, individualised efforts to support pupil learning contributes to their sense of feeling cared for and belonging in their learning environment. For both staff and pupils, this individualised support is especially important for pupils who experience learning challenges, as this can cause feelings of not belonging. Examples include allowing dictation software for pupils who struggle with long writing or identifying and using pupil interests as a hook to engage them in learning content.

I don't feel like I belong where I do too much work, like in the classroom when I do English. because it's hard and I don't like doing too much. –
Pupil, Primary school

Many schools make an effort to celebrate pupils' achievements and attainment, especially publicly, which can contribute to a sense of belonging through feeling valued and recognised.

Children feel proud of being able to do something like that [the success assemblies] and have a school that can do that for them and acknowledge their success throughout the year. I cannot think of another school in the city that does what this school does for its students in that way. – *Parent Governor, Secondary school*

However, some senior leaders acknowledge the tension between an emphasis on academic success and ensuring all pupils feel valued. They note that attention needs to be paid to pupils who may not have top grades or who struggle academically and ensure messaging around academic success and achievement is not inadvertently making pupils feel unvalued.

And I think as a SEND child you might feel that you aren't as much as the other ones, the ones who are doing well, the ones who are achieving higher grades and getting into top streams and all the rest of it. So making sure that those children feel as valued, as appreciated as the ones who are, you know, clearly the very clever ones. – *Staff, Secondary school*

Summary

Across case study schools, there were a range of examples where belonging practices intersect with practices intended to support pupil attendance and attainment. These largely fell within the belonging practice themes of relational practices, individualised support and extracurricular activities. These approaches make pupils feel seen, cared for and valued, increasing their desire to be at school and engage in the classroom. However, there is a central tension between these resource-intensive, holistic approaches and conflicting systemic pressures, such as the strain on staff capacity, punitive attendance policies, and a narrow focus on academic data. While attendance and attainment-focused interventions can also make a pupil feel cared for, an overemphasis on high grades can inadvertently undermine a sense of belonging for pupils who are not top academic performers.

Perceived impacts and measurements

This section outlines the perceived impacts of fostering school belonging, as well as the range of indicators schools use to track their progress.

Perceived impacts

Attendance and attainment

School leaders, staff and parent governors often describe a powerful relationship between pupil belonging, attendance and attainment. In their view, they are not just correlated; there is a direct causal relationship.

A sense of belonging means that pupils want to be at school and feel part of the community, which in turn drives attendance and then attainment. – *Parent Governor, Secondary school*

A sense of belonging is considered both a motivator and enabler to pupil attendance, particularly for those who are struggling. Senior leaders and staff explain that a feeling of belonging includes within it feeling happy, safe and motivated and reduces anxiety and dysregulation, creating 'emotional safety' which helps pupils overcome barriers that ordinarily may prevent them from attending school.

When children feel safe and that they belong, their attendance and their academic performance improves. – *Senior Leader, Primary school*

This is echoed by pupils, who explicitly state that their desire to attend school is directly linked to their sense of belonging.

I feel like I'm always listened to when I speak. So that encourages me to, like, go to school more because I feel more valued. – *Pupil, Secondary school*

Conversely, when pupils feel they do not belong, they are clear that they do not want to come to school.

When you don't really feel like you belong, say you've had a bad day, someone's been mean to you, you feel a bit like, I don't want to talk and I just want (to sort of) the ground to swallow me up. Because you just feel like you don't want to be there. – *Pupil, Primary school*

If you don't feel, like, happy or you don't feel like belonging, you might start to feel ill and you won't want to come to school, but you don't feel like it's a safe place for yourself. – *Pupil, Secondary school*

Further, parents' own sense of belonging or their perception of their child belonging to the school is seen by school staff as particularly important for improving attendance. Where parents feel they belong and are valued members of the school community, school staff say they can work more effectively with them to address any challenges that may be impacting pupil attendance.

If parents see that we're trying to foster that sense of belonging, that sense of community, and they can see that we're supporting them, then that collaboration also increases attendance as well, because parents will want their kid to come to school. – *Staff, Secondary school*

School staff say that achieving high attendance is a key first step towards high attainment, but not sufficient on its own. School leaders, staff and governors feel belonging is central and a fundamental prerequisite for learning. When pupils feel a sense of emotional safety, they are consequently more engaged with learning. They are more likely to take responsible risks and be more creative, because they feel secure to 'give things a go'.

When they're able to let their guard down, they're able to feel comfortable and they're able to feel like they belong. That's when I think they're more open to like being able to study and being able to work hard. – *Parent Governor, Secondary school*

If they don't have a sense of belonging, it doesn't matter how bright that child is—they're not going to attain; they're not going to attend. So it's intrinsically linked. You know you've got to start with making sure that child is safe, valued, feels mentally okay to be at school because they can't learn until they are like that. – *Staff, Primary school*

Pupils agree that a feeling of belonging has a positive impact on their ability to study, engage and learn. They explain that feeling like they belong means they are happy and increases their self-belief and concentration. They feel part of a supportive and collaborative environment where they are confident in asking for help from their friends or staff. Pupils see a lack of belonging as a distraction that makes it harder to focus and learn.

Because it helps us in our learning. Because if we feel like we belong, if we're stuck, we know our partners and our friends can help us. – *Pupil, Primary school*

Feeling that I belong... it really boosts up my motivation so that like I really feel like I want to learn about new stuff. Because if I belong then I really have that motivation and confidence telling me that I can do it and that I got this. – *Pupil, Primary school*

I think if you're happy you should learn more because, like, you're more able to concentrate. But if you're sad, then you won't really concentrate that much. – *Pupil, Primary school*

I'm excited to go to school... it just makes me happy to be here. – *Pupil, Secondary school*

School leaders feel this is especially important for pupils with SEND or who are vulnerable. For pupils with conditions like ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder) and autism, or those who have experienced trauma, achieving a state of regulation and safety is the non-negotiable first step toward any academic engagement.

As with attendance, parents also play a pivotal role and are often directly involved in learning at home, which links to the attainment and academic success of their children. Developing a sense of belonging among parents is central to them supporting their children at home.

Impact of belonging on wellbeing

A core focus for both primary and secondary schools is the emotional wellbeing of their pupils. There is broad consensus that belonging is central to multiple dimensions of wellbeing, particularly resilience, confidence, and self-worth. The feeling of belonging at school is seen also as a foundation for pupils' future wellbeing, helping them to become happy and well-adjusted adults. Essentially, a strong sense of wellbeing at primary and secondary school is seen by school staff as preparing pupils for their adult lives and equipping them with the resilience and confidence required to navigate the world beyond the school gates.

Because I want our children to go out into secondary school, to university, to the rest of the wider world, working world with that foundation that they've had here around resilience, confidence, being valued, feeling worth. – *Senior Leader, Primary school*

Both staff and senior leaders assert that where there is an inclusive and welcoming school environment and culture, pupils feel a sense of emotional safety and belonging, which has a positive impact on their overall wellbeing.

Primary school aged pupils describe how their sense of belonging to the school community positively impacts their emotional wellbeing. They describe belonging as a source of happiness and positive feelings, and reflect on how strong friendship groups, provide a safe space to talk openly about how they are feeling. They express a particularly strong association with not belonging and negative impact on wellbeing, describing senses of sadness, hurt, anger and loneliness.

Where you don't belong, it feels really, like, bad and sad and stuff. Yeah. It feels like your heart is breaking. – *Pupil, Primary school*

Secondary school pupils also reflect on the positive impact of belonging on their wellbeing. They reflect on the importance of having a large range of different people to connect with through clubs and extracurricular activities. Knowing people in different year groups through clubs makes the school feel smaller and less anonymous. Similarly, older pupils describe how trips and charity events create bonds that would not have formed through lessons alone and how these connections have a positive impact on their overall wellbeing. They also describe the negative association with low levels of belonging and wellbeing, often discussing experiences of social exclusion and peer judgment.

There is mixed opinion across schools, as to whether belonging drives wellbeing or wellbeing drives belonging. Some senior leaders feel a sense of belonging allows pupils to feel relaxed and secure, knowing there is a comprehensive support infrastructure in place for when they struggle. Others see a strong connection whereby belonging influences pupil wellbeing, specifically around mental health, anxiety and dysregulation.

And we see that national dip that girls experience where they go into Year 9 and Year 10 and their sense of themselves itself is not as strong. So the first thing we did was say right, forced fun is about make that line as high as possible. So you get self-confidence by participation, by doing things, by feeling part of something. – *Senior leader, Secondary school*

In contrast, others argue that wellbeing is actually the precondition for everything else, and in these schools, wellbeing is measured as a leading indicator for belonging, attainment and attendance.

Staff wellbeing is also impacted by a sense of belonging and is explicitly described as a leadership priority. Senior leaders explain that if staff feel part of the community and know that they are respected and valued, it positively impacts their sense of wellbeing. Staff explain that if they have a strong sense of belonging to the school community, they become longer-serving members of the team, smile at each other more, support each other and act as good role models for the pupils. Staff wellbeing explicitly connects to a range of initiatives, often led by the senior leaders, such as senior leadership support during illness and Christmas gestures, advent calendars. One member of staff explains:

You do all this amazing stuff for students, but you've got to do the amazing stuff for your staff as well. – *Staff, Secondary school*

Impact of belonging on future aspirations and creating citizens

Staff and school leaders feel that many of the impacts of pupils having a sense of belonging will not be seen until after they have left the school and enter adulthood. Schools explain that a sense of belonging positively impacts the development of well-rounded individuals (beyond being 'a factory for grades'). This holistic approach enables these schools to focus on developing pupils as individuals who will go on to thrive in the adult world:

Here they are all high achieving. They've had to be in order to get into the school and everybody appreciates that and they want them all to achieve their best potential, obviously, and, but they want them to be sort of, they want them to be able to grow into hard working, respectable young women that can, you know, that can go out into the workforce and make big changes. – *Parent Governor, Secondary school*

How schools measure belonging

Both primary and secondary schools utilise a range of indicators to gauge the level of belonging pupils, staff and families feel to the school community. While some use direct quantitative measures of pupil belonging, many say they rely on proxy measures that are chosen based on where they expect to see impact from belonging, such as attendance and wellbeing. Other schools take a more qualitative approach, that includes observation of pupils through daily greetings on the school gates, at the door of classrooms or at other touch points during the school day.

Survey measures of belonging

Some schools in the study directly measure belonging through survey tools. Three of the participating schools take part in the #BeeWell wellbeing survey, which includes a question about belonging at school, as well as questions related to belonging (e.g., relationships with school staff, feeling heard and listened to at school). However, this data was not mentioned by interviewed leaders or staff. Several secondary schools have developed and embedded survey tools that have been designed to collect data on belonging, using an external, evidence-based framework to measure belonging. The main driver for this is to avoid internal bias:

I think not be afraid to ask the questions, but do it through a framework, an external framework because I think otherwise you'll create your own, you'll mark your own homework, you'll end up asking questions that you'll sort of guide you towards some of the things that you do or don't know. – *Staff, Secondary school*

Proxy measures of belonging

Many schools use perceived downstream impacts of belonging as proxy measures. These proxies largely align with the perceived impacts of belonging described in the previous section – attendance, attainment and wellbeing. However, others rely on different types of pupil and family engagement as indicators.

Attendance

Many schools were aware that overall attendance levels were high and point to this as evidence of high levels of belonging. They monitor their attendance closely, paying

attention to attendance patterns in particular groups of pupils while also looking out for pupils who are persistently absent or excluded as indicators there may be individual low levels of belonging.

So, we're above national for attendance. And even in some of our focus group areas like SEND and disadvantage, you know, we're above national and even locally, comparing to like similar schools within the area, our attendance is still quite high. So we've got that sense of belonging there. – *Senior Leader, Secondary school*

Attainment

Attainment is also monitored as a proxy measure of belonging. In some primary schools, literacy and phonics progress are monitored. One secondary school uses progress scores, as the senior leaders feel that these are a more appropriate and realistic indicator of fostering belonging:

So, our Progress 8 scores tend to be really positive, although attainment looks low. But that's because, proportionally, we actually have more lower prior attainers coming into the school. – *Senior Leader, Secondary school*

Wellbeing

Wellbeing is another common proxy indicator of belonging used by schools, measured both informally and formally. Senior leaders and staff in primary and secondary schools informally observe pupils' wellbeing, happiness, confidence and a willingness to try, as key signs of belonging. Interactions at the school gates, during lessons and in school corridors can indicate when a pupil is struggling or feeling isolated.

I can walk down the corridor and I can see your child's face and I can tell if something's wrong... and just because you sense that, of knowing that child. – *Senior Leader, Primary school*

Schools use a range of survey tools to more formally measure pupil wellbeing. Several schools take part in the #BeeWell survey, which covers a wide range of wellbeing domains in relation to school. One uses a validated tool with pupils twice per year, which measures engagement, wellbeing and metacognition. The data is tracked and analysed over time with particular attention to narrowing the gap between pupil premium and non-pupil premium learners. Another uses the Leuven Scale, which measures pupils' emotional state and level of engagement.

Pupil engagement and voice

Given a key theme of belonging practice across the case study schools is fostering pupil voice, several schools use pupil engagement and voice as an indicator of success. Senior leaders and staff informally observe their pupils' willingness to take on responsibilities

across community life (such as volunteering across the school) and their engagement or participation in extracurricular activities and clubs.

School council also provides a meaningful way to evaluate pupils' wellbeing and provides a means for staff to tune in to pupils' current concerns, anxieties and barriers to a feeling of belonging.

Levels of participation in school surveys and anonymous feedback opportunities are another proxy indicator for how comfortable pupils feel expressing their opinions and whether they expect to be heard.

A focus on the student voice, we will look through it. We'll analyse the answers to the questions...we listen, we read, we analyse data, we analyse the student surveys, and then we put those reports to the governors as well...so everybody across the community is involved in what we're trying to do. – *Senior Leader, Secondary school*

Family engagement and voice

Where schools focus on the inclusion of families in communal school life, parent and carers' engagement is also seen as a reflection of a broader sense of belonging to the school community. This is often measured longitudinally through response rates to parent surveys as well as attendance at events over time.

[More] parents come to consultations now than ever before, so they are taking an interest, and they do think that that's important. – *Staff, Primary school*

Staff wellbeing

As staff belonging is viewed by many staff and senior leaders as creating the conditions for pupil belonging, some schools use staff survey data as a leading indicator for pupil belonging. The surveys ask about staff happiness, safety and feelings of belonging, as well as gather feedback on areas for improvement.

Other indicators of belonging

Some schools use more nuanced and informal indicators that include:

- staff choosing the school for their own children
- immigrant families choosing to stay within catchment of the school
- willingness of alumni to return to school
- anecdotal feedback from post-secondary institutions about their former pupils' confidence
- pupils travelling long distances to travel to school

These boys get out of bed at the far side of [CITY], travel for two hours to get here, travel for two hours to leave again, because they love it. They absolutely love coming here. – *Senior Leader, Secondary school*

Challenges with measuring belonging

Senior leaders, staff and parent governors agree that belonging is not necessarily a single, measurable outcome; rather, it is a coincidental and organic result of many different supportive actions across the school, making it hard to isolate and quantify and therefore difficult to measure.

Senior leaders and staff acknowledge that there are challenges with more formal data collection. One senior leader notes that pupil surveys can often reflect a transient mood on a particular day, rather than a consistent state of belonging. Where pupil surveys are anonymised, it is difficult to analyse by additional needs or demographics, and it can be difficult to understand why certain pupils may not feel a sense of belonging. A further challenge is the move away from mobile phones in some schools that has made student voice survey completion harder to coordinate.

Additionally, the relationship between indicators can be complex and requires interpretation rather than straightforward reading. For example, where there is high pupil mobility, data can be skewed by children arriving mid-year; or where there is high SEN concentration in particular year groups, this can create year-on-year volatility in results. Senior leaders suggest that there does need to be considered correlation analysis between various datasets at individual pupil-level.

Another significant challenge in measuring the impact of belonging lies in the use of standard attainment data, which some senior leaders suggest can be a misleading metric for a school with many lower prior attainers, as the data does not reflect their starting point or their significant progress.

Benchmark data and long-term tracking data are seen to provide a more accurate picture of feelings of belonging and downstream impacts across the whole pupil journey, rather than in one moment in time.

Summary

Schools increasingly recognise belonging as a critical factor influencing attendance, achievement, wellbeing, engagement, and community participation. School leaders and staff perceive belonging as difficult to measure directly, so they rely on a range of proxy indicators, including attendance data, academic progress, wellbeing surveys, pupil voice activities, family engagement, and staff experiences. Alongside these formal measures, schools also draw upon qualitative evidence such as alumni involvement, family loyalty, and pupil commitment to attending school. Survey limitations, contextual differences, data interpretation challenges, and the interconnected nature of school experiences all

complicate measurement. Consequently, some schools favour a holistic approach that combines quantitative data, qualitative observations, and long-term tracking to understand pupil outcomes across their educational journey.

Conclusion

This research provides rich insights into how 16 mainstream primary and secondary schools in England successfully embed belonging practices whilst maintaining high standards of attendance and attainment. The findings demonstrate that belonging is not a single initiative or programme, but rather an interconnected system of beliefs, practices and relationships woven throughout every aspect of school life.

Schools across both phases share a sophisticated understanding of belonging that they conceptualise through five interconnected dimensions: safety and security, inclusion, collective identity, individual recognition, and positive relationships.

The rationale for prioritising belonging is multi-faceted. Schools position it as foundational infrastructure for learning, mental health, preparation for life beyond school, and crucially, as a mechanism for educational equity.

Embedding belonging practice

A critical finding is that **building school belonging is an iterative process that takes time**. It begins through small relational steps that shape the direction of travel, gradually building into a wider shared approach. Schools should not feel overwhelmed by the array of practices presented in this report; rather, they should understand that successful belonging journeys start modestly and develop organically over years.

Embedding belonging requires deliberate action across seven interconnected facilitators: school culture and ethos, senior leadership, all staff, pupils, space and resources, community and alumni, and parents. The most effective schools treat belonging as everyone's responsibility, not the remit of leadership or a pastoral team alone. Critically, staff belonging emerges as a precondition for pupil belonging.

Leadership for belonging is distinctive. It is **thoughtful and compassionate leadership** based on envisioning possibilities and bringing the wider school community into developing those possibilities. Senior leaders describe treating every decision about people, structures and systems as a belonging act, creating the conditions within which belonging can flourish.

Belonging practices

Six overarching types of practice emerged from the research, each essential yet interconnected:

- **Relational practices** form the foundation, with schools investing heavily in relationships at every level – among staff, between staff and pupils, among pupils, and with families. The principle that every child should be genuinely known by multiple adults drives whole-school approaches.

- **Pupil voice and agency** proves central to fostering belonging. Importantly, schools recognise that young people are agents of positive change and involving them in change processes is central to keeping them in school and developing their engagement in learning. When pupils see their input leads to tangible change, trust and mutual respect deepen significantly.
- **Celebrating diversity and challenging discrimination** requires more than one-off events. Schools embed diversity meaningfully across curriculum, policies, staffing and everyday interactions, whilst maintaining a compassionate zero tolerance approach to discrimination.
- **Cultivating strong school identity** provides an anchor for collective belonging, whether through faith, sport, or other unifying characteristics. In larger schools, smaller groupings such as house systems, create smaller-scale distinctive communities within the institution.
- **Individualised approaches** ensure every pupil's specific needs are met, with schools taking a holistic, whole-person approach to learning and support.
- **Belonging beyond the school gates** extends pupils' sense of connection into their communities and futures, helping them feel they belong not just in school but in the wider world.

Belonging, attendance and attainment

The research reveals a **powerful, reciprocal relationship between belonging, attendance and attainment**. School leaders, staff, governors and pupils consistently describe these as mutually reinforcing rather than competing priorities. When pupils feel they belong, they want to attend school; when they attend regularly, they engage more fully with learning; when they experience academic success, their sense of belonging strengthens further.

Pupils explicitly articulate this connection. They describe belonging as giving them the confidence to ask for help, take risks in learning, and persist when challenged. Conversely, pupils are clear that when they do not feel they belong, they do not want to come to school and struggle to focus on learning. This relationship is particularly pronounced for vulnerable pupils, for whom achieving a state of regulation and safety through belonging is the non-negotiable first step toward any academic engagement.

Importantly, schools demonstrate that prioritising belonging does not mean compromising on standards. Rather, they frame high expectations and academic rigour as acts of care that signal belief in pupils' capabilities, further reinforcing belonging.

Advice for schools wanting to enhance belonging

Drawing from the experiences of the 16 case study schools, several principles emerge for schools beginning or deepening their belonging journey:

Start with context.

There is no one way of building school belonging. Approaches need to be context and community specific. Begin by deeply understanding your specific community – its needs, assets, history and aspirations. Schools can learn much from each other, but successful belonging journeys have their own distinctive elements that respond to local realities.

Begin small and be patient.

Do not attempt to implement everything at once. Choose a small number of clear, foundational principles and ensure every practice aligns with them. Begin with simple relational practices – greeting pupils by name, knowing their interests, celebrating diverse achievements. These small steps build momentum and create the cultural foundation for larger changes.

Make it everyone's responsibility.

Belonging cannot be delegated to a pastoral team or single initiative. It requires whole-school commitment, beginning with senior leadership modelling the culture, continuing through every staff member understanding themselves as a belonging practitioner, and extending to pupils as active creators of belonging for their peers.

Prioritise staff wellbeing.

You cannot give what you do not have. Invest in staff belonging first – their wellbeing, professional development, and sense of being valued. The professional growth that comes from belonging work is deeply rewarding and supports retention, creating the stability needed for sustained cultural change.

Create genuine agency.

Move beyond tokenistic consultation to give pupils real influence over their school experience. When pupils see their voice leading to tangible change, it transforms their relationship with school. Remember that pupils are not just recipients of belonging practices but active agents in creating belonging for themselves and others.

Protect and sustain.

Belonging practices need protection from competing pressures. This requires leadership courage to maintain focus on belonging even when external accountability measures pull in different directions. Build structural systems – frameworks, policies, monitoring systems – that sustain belonging practices beyond individual champions.

Measure what matters.

While belonging's full impact may not be immediately visible in conventional metrics, schools need ways to track progress. Use multiple indicators including attendance

patterns, wellbeing measures, pupil and family engagement, and staff retention alongside academic outcomes. Consider training and engaging pupils as researchers of belonging, which may help to further increase openness and trust and improve practice.

Final reflections

From the perspectives of those involved in this research, building school belonging is both essential and achievable. It requires neither enormous resources nor revolutionary change, but rather thoughtful, sustained attention to relationships, culture and practice. The schools in this study show that when belonging is authentically embedded, it creates a virtuous cycle: pupils want to attend, engage with learning, and achieve their potential whilst developing the confidence and capabilities needed for life beyond school.

Perhaps most importantly, this work reminds us that education is fundamentally about human connection and community. In an era of considerable focus on academic data and accountability measures, these schools demonstrate that investing in belonging is not a distraction from the core business of education but rather part of its essential foundation. Building belonging is an ongoing activity that demands daily attention to the realities of life for each young person, but the rewards – for pupils, families, staff and communities - are transformative.

Annex A – Data collection tools

Staff card sort exercise¹⁹

What does belonging mean to us in our school? How staff see it.

There are **nine statements** here about belonging. They all begin with the same phrase:

A sense of belonging is important in this school because.....????

No.	Statement	Tick the most important three for YOU	Why did you choose these?
1	.. when you feel you belong you can be more creative, innovative and confident.		
2	.. belonging is about being respected and feeling accepted.		
3	.. it helps you feel part of the community – part of society.		
4	.. when children feel safe and that they belong, their attendance and their academic performance improves.		
5	.. belonging is about feeling that you are valued and are part of a place.		
6	.. it contributes significantly to developing good mental health and a feeling of wellbeing.		
7	.. when staff feel that they belong, it helps retention; they'll stay in the school.		
8	.. when you feel you belong, you can be yourself, you can develop your own sense of personal identity.		
9	.. when you can grow and develop your sense of belonging in school, you learn how to be yourself and fit in elsewhere.		

¹⁹ Tool created by UCL Emeritus Professor Kathryn Riley, Director of the Art of Possibilities

Connectivity tool on school belonging, for both primary and secondary schools²⁰

Which one of these best shows how you *feel* about **school**? Do you feel like you belong a little (the first picture) or belong a lot? (the last picture) or do you feel like you belong at school somewhere in between?"

Underline the two circles that best show how much you feel like you belong at school.



²⁰ Tool created by UCL Emeritus Professor Kathryn Riley, Director of the Art of Possibilities

Contrasting pictures task of belonging and not belonging in primary schools²¹

What does it look like (in my school) when.....

... I feel that I belong?	... I feel that I don't belong?
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© Emeritus Professor Kathryn Riley TheArtofPossibilities, 2023

²¹ Tool created by UCL Emeritus Professor Kathryn Riley, Director of the Art of Possibilities



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