Belonging discussion framework

Belonging is a word that's getting a lot of attention. But how much thought is given to what it means for the adults – particularly the staff – in your setting?

Drawing on three podcast episodes, we suggest a framework for questioning, discussion and action around this topic.

You could use this framework for an Inset session, a team meeting, or self-reflection. If working with a group, participants could listen to one episode in advance, then come together to discuss the different perspectives.

Where quotes from the episodes are used, approximate timings are given in brackets so you can refer to the recording.

Find all the details for each episode at:

- Who Gets to Belong in Schools? With Hannah Wilson (33 mins)
- What About the Adults? Neuroinclusion in Schools | Maisie Cass (35 mins)
- Creating the Conditions to Thrive | Yamina Bibi (25 mins)

If you prefer to read rather than listen, you can use these blog posts as a starting point:

- Belonging in schools: are we asking the wrong questions?
- Why we need to talk about neurodiversity in the workplace
- What gets in the way of belonging for staff?

Episodes and questions

Who Gets to Belong in Schools? With Hannah Wilson

1. Defining belonging: what do you need?

"Have you asked people what they need? Because actually, are you overcomplicating it? Like for me, belonging is like, what do you need for me to help you to belong in our meetings? In our staffroom? We tend to recreate belonging in the way we want to receive it, rather than the way that somebody else needs it.

So if you pay attention to your diversity, your equity and inclusion, you strategise those three spaces, the outcome should be belonging… And if we don't do the DEI, we're putting a plaster on the problem and it becomes very superficial and very shallow." (3.38)

- What do you understand by the term 'belonging'?
- Do you think that there's a risk that belonging becomes a tickbox or bandwagon?

2. Where do you feel safe and seen?

“When I’m running training I do an activity: think about all the different spaces you can occupy within a school, and your rag rating around it. So how do you feel in the corridors, in the playground, in the staff room, in the dining hall? Because some of the space that might be green for you, would be red for me.

It’s an interesting listing exercise when you get different stakeholder and identity groups to give you that feedback. Where do they feel safe and seen, have that belonging and inclusion, and where don't they, and why might that be? And what needs to change to increase those levels?” (06.45)

- How do you feel about the different spaces within your setting? Do you think your responses would differ from your colleagues?

3. Start with the support staff

- Why does Hannah suggest that we ‘start by looking at your support staff’? (9.40) Do you agree that this is a good place to put belonging for staff into practice?

What About the Adults? Neuroinclusion in Schools | Maisie Cass

4. Inclusion for the adults

“There's been so much emphasis out there on how do we better understand our students, how do we support them? How do we make inclusive classrooms? How do we adapt the environment? Which is brilliant, but somewhere along the way that wasn't translated into the adults in the workplace as well.” (4.40)

- How do you feel about the idea that we need schools to be inclusive settings for adults too? Do you think that we focus on the needs of pupils at the expense of the adults?

5. Neurodivergent staff in schools

“We get lots of neurodivergent teachers coming into education. Lots of educational professionals are neurodivergent. There is a really high proportion because it suits them so well, and they have so much to offer and they really connect with the students. But education settings aren't managing to keep them. And that's the biggest worry for me with working in education.” (8.50)

- Do you recognise the picture Maisie paints of education as a setting that attracts neurodivergent staff? Do you think it can be harder for neurodivergent people to stay working in schools?

6. ‘You have to belong to yourself first’

“Belonging is showing up in that authentic way. It's still professional, it's still with respect, but it's in a way that is true to how you show up in the world… You have to belong to yourself first. (30.00)

- Do you agree with Maisie that you have to belong to yourself first, in order to be able to show up authentically and role model that to students? Is ‘fitting in’ detrimental?

Creating the Conditions to Thrive | Yamina Bibi

7. Belonging for staff

"We're talking a lot about belonging for young people, but how far I would say, argue, are we talking about it for staff and staff with protected characteristics?" (6.08)

- Do you agree that we need to talk more about belonging for staff? Are staff with protected characteristics more likely to feel that they don't belong?

8. Who is seen and valued?

"Think about your recruitment practices. So again, it's questions around who is seen, who is valued, and who are we signalling to that they belong in our organisations, through our marketing and communications? Do we make those reasonable adjustments?

…What are you doing to go out into those communities to show people that they belong, whatever their protected characteristic? Have we considered our websites? Who is represented on the marketing materials? Is it diverse, with a variety of protected characteristics?" (8.50)

- Do you think that belonging has a role to play in recruitment? Would it help draw a wider, more diverse pool of people into the sector?

9. Whose responsibility is it?

"What we're doing there is placing the onus on the person themselves with the lived experience, with the characteristic. Whereas actually the Equality Act 2010 makes it a duty upon workplaces, on leaders, and employers to provide those reasonable adjustments." (17.38)

- Do you think that leaders in school should be more proactive in providing reasonable adjustments for staff with protected characteristics? Would that support a sense of belonging?

Reflection and action

- Has anything you've listened to or discussed made you feel differently about belonging?
- Is there any further learning or research you want to do as a result?
- Are there actions you'd like to take or see taken in your setting?

Podcast episode contributors

Hannah Wilson is a leadership development consultant, DEIB strategist and facilitator, a coach and trainer. She's director of Belonging Effect and co-founder of #DiverseEd and #WomenEd. Hannah's latest book is *A Little Guide for Teachers: Cultivating Belonging in Schools*.

Maisie Cass is Founder and Chief Curiosity Officer at Diversity Does, helping schools and organisations to move beyond neurodiversity awareness and make neuroinclusion part of everyday working practice.

Yamina Bibi is a former deputy head and English teacher, a consultant, CPD trainer and author of *A Little Guide for Teachers: Thriving in Your First Years of Teaching*. She is the Chiltern Teaching School Lead for Strategic Partnerships and School Transformation.

Further reading and resources

- When does retention start?
- Using data to get curious about belonging
- Why leadership matters: staff retention

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