

Creating a culture of belonging in a school context

Second Issue

Editorial

In the editorial of 36(2), 2019 for *Educational and Child Psychology*, the first issue on School Belonging, it was noted that one in four pupils do not feel they belong to school (OECD 2017). By and large we can anticipate which young people these are likely to be – those who do not excel in academic subjects and are seen as lowering the average standard scores, those with additional educational needs, those who are non-compliant or hard to manage, and those who are ultimately excluded from their school settings.

Gill and colleagues (2017) note that school exclusion in England signals a critical concern for our communities. “Excluded children are the most vulnerable: twice as likely to be in the care of the state, four times more likely to have grown up in poverty, seven times more likely to have a special educational need and 10 times more likely to suffer recognised mental health problems” (Gill et al for IPPR, 2017 p 1).

It appears that the figures for formal school exclusion are under-estimated. Despite only 6,685 reported exclusions, over 48,000 children were being educated in off-site units that cater for excluded students.

The report for The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (OFSTED) in May 2019 (YouGuv, 2019) on *off-rolling* students highlights issues with modern education in the U.K. Off-rolling is arguably a subversive form of exclusion and the informal removal of students. It might be suggested to parents that the school do not have the resources to meet their child's needs. It is difficult to estimate how many young people come into this category, but the report finds as many as one in four teachers state that off-rolling occurs in their schools. It is more prevalent in circumstances where parents are less likely to know their rights and schools are struggling with both poor behaviour and low academic achievement.

In an educational climate of school exclusion and off-rolling, notions of school belonging have never been more important. School belonging is critical to psychological wellbeing and those who feel rejected from school may well seek to belong elsewhere (Allen & Kern, 2017). This

may be in places that thrive on 'exclusive' belonging where the solidarity of the group is maintained by a demand to demonstrate loyalty to leaders, possibly by violent or criminal action, members are positioned as superior to others, and outsiders may be dehumanised. The evidence of this is apparent both in gangs and extremist groups (see Roffey, 2013, Roffey & Boyle 2018). The Timpson Review of Exclusions (Timpson, 2019) reinforces the point that excluded students are more vulnerable to criminal gangs and proposes over 30 recommendations to help keep pupils in school.

Positive action is needed to foster inclusive belonging for students at school (Allen et al. 2018, Allen et al. 2016). This goes beyond football teams and school uniforms and happens in the day-to-day interactions that either make a student feel welcomed and valued or a drain on the school's resources. Positive relationships across the school are the crux of this endeavour. As we can see by the work described in many of the articles in both special issues on school belonging including the articles before us in this present issue, there are educators and schools doing their best to ensure that every student believes that they matter, often against a backdrop of incongruent policy demands.

The current issue, 36 (4) includes seven articles that explore school belonging. It is this deeper dive into the research in this area that will provide solutions and opportunities to best create positive educational climates for all students.

The social experiences and sense of belonging in adolescent females with Autism in mainstream school by Myles and colleagues investigates social experiences and sense of school belonging in females with Autism Spectrum Disorder. This study revealed that females with autism experience specific social difficulties in school, and their sense of school belonging can be improved through key friendships and social competencies. The study also found that the female participants in the study seek social connections and form friendships in the same manner as females who are not diagnosed with autism.

School Belonging in Adolescents: Exploring the Associations with School Achievement and Internalizing and Externalizing Problems by Arslan aimed to examine the psychometric properties of the School Belongingness Scale (SBS) and determine how sense of school belonging affects achievement and mental health outcomes among elementary school students.

The findings of the study indicated that the SBS is an effective and robust assessment tool for measuring elementary school students' sense of school belonging and showed that school belonging is a strong predictor of school achievement and youth mental health.

Fostering a sense of belonging at an international school in France: An experimental study by Dunleavy and Burke evaluated the effectiveness of a classroom-based peer intervention on 55 fourth and fifth grade students' sense of belonging and wellbeing. Using the Psychological Sense of School Membership (PSSM) and the Multidimensional Students' Life Satisfaction Scale (MSLSS) the study revealed significant improvement in participants' sense of school belonging and life satisfaction.

Wellbeing in International Schools: Teacher Perceptions by Wigford and Higgins explored teacher perceptions of wellbeing in international schools using a mixed methods approach. Results showed that international schools provide a unique lens to understanding wellbeing and that appreciation, relationships and belonging were found to be effective in counteracting negative factors such as weak leadership, workloads and lack of resources.

My Class Needs My Voice: The Desire to Stand Out Predicts Choices to Contribute During Class Discussions by Gray, Yough, and Williams (2019) discussed the role of standing out in a classroom and provided evidence that the desire for distinctiveness can lead to positive achievement behaviors. The findings of this study urge educators to encourage opportunities for distinctiveness and diversity through appropriate teaching strategies.

'How do I know that I belong?' Exploring secondary aged pupil's views on what it means to belong to their school by Shaw investigated student perceptions of belonging through semi-structured interviews and quantitative means. Findings of the study revealed that students primarily associate belonging with familiarity and identification with others and the school as well as reciprocity of relationships. This study reaffirmed the complex and multi-faceted nature of belonging. It also highlights the importance of listening to students' views in order to effectively promote a sense of belonging to school.

And finally, *Agency and Belonging: Transformative actions that schools can take to help create a sense of place and belonging for children and young people* by Riley discussed the findings of

two qualitative studies about belonging and exclusion. Findings showed that fostering trust, agency and positive community perspectives are key to developing a sense of belonging in schools. Involving young people as student-researchers can help develop their sense of agency, belonging and connection to the community.

Taken together, it is clear that research on school belonging is critical for positive outcomes for students. It is recognised that the various forms of metricisation of schools indirectly contributes to poorer wellbeing in students as finite school resources are taken up by concentrating on exam results (Hardy & Boyle, 2011). Students being supported in school so that their needs are met despite the complexities of school infrastructure (Anderson & Boyle, 2014; Boyle 2007) is a laudable goal. What the articles in this second special issue on school belonging and contemporary belonging research highlight is that not only is this area of psychology under researched but the importance of belonging in school can sometimes be underplayed.

Just as recent groups in the UK and elsewhere around the world have called for a ‘climate emergency’, the Editors of this special issue suggest that with such a large portion of students not feeling a sense of belonging to school, it is time to declare a ‘Belonging Emergency’ and allocate resources appropriately to ensure that the school experience for children and young people is positive and inclusive.

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Special Issue Guest Editors

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