Belonging, identity and safety in London schools

Research and Policy Briefing on behalf of London's Violence Reduction Unit

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"Belonging is knowing that you're seen, knowing that you're noticed, knowing that you matter"

School Improvement Leader, Multi Academy Trust

Executive Summary

With rates of persistent absence and school suspension rising in London and across the country, understanding the drivers of inclusion is a key educational priority. This University of Bath report shares finding on students' views about school belonging and safety, pointing to both enablers and barriers.

Findings highlighted the fundamental importance of a secure sense of belonging and safety to students' inclusion in education. Students identified respect, fairness and being listened to as vital features of the caring, nurturing relationships needed to feel included in school. Students' sense of identity was fundamental to their feelings of belonging, both in terms of feeling able to be themselves and having opportunities to explore and develop the skills and abilities they felt proud of.

Key barriers to belonging and safety were also relational. Students highlighted pressure around academic attainment that undermined their sense of feeling known or noticed as individuals. Relationships were seen to be the central foundation through which belonging is generated, underpinned by values of care, and nurture.

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Introduction

In November 2023, the University of Bath was commissioned by London's Violence Reduction Unit (VRU) to undertake a piece of research on inclusion and belonging in schools across all London boroughs.
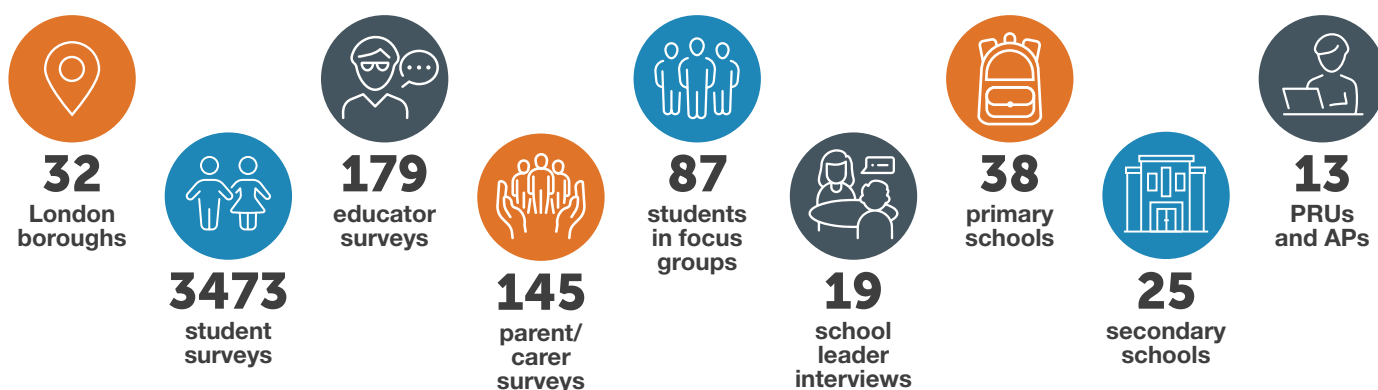
The primary aim was to capture students' perspectives on what they need from education to feel the sense of belonging and safety necessary to be included and succeed at school. Equally important were the views of education leaders, practitioners and parents on what schools need to be more inclusive. The research informed key principles for inclusive education that led to the VRU's development of London's Inclusion Charter.

Our findings point to a set of principles, values and impacts underpinning school inclusion. This report starts by sharing the findings from students, before introducing a model of the four principles, the values that enable these to be effectively implemented, and the impacts for students of belonging, safety, identity building and affirmation, central to *London's Inclusion Charter.*

Between November 2023 and January 2024 we asked

"What really matters to help students feel a sense of belonging and safety at school?"

We heard from:

32 London boroughs

3473 student surveys

179 educator surveys

145 parent/ carer surveys

87 students in focus groups

19 school leader interviews

38 primary schools

25 secondary schools

13 PRUs and APs

Key Findings

Do you feel a sense of belonging at school?

- **66%** of primary-aged students and **56%** of secondary-aged students – 'yes, usually' or 'yes'
- **27%** of secondary-aged students and **24%** of primary-aged students – 'yes a bit' or 'I don't know.'
- **5%** of primary-aged students, **8%** of secondary-aged students – 'no'
- **4%** did not want to answer

What helps you feel safe in school?

- **69%** of primary-aged students – **teachers being respectful to all students**
- **67%** of primary-aged students – **knowing teachers will stop all kinds of bullying or unkind behaviour**
- **67%** of secondary-aged students – **no threat of physical violence at school**
- **67%** of primary-aged students and **53%** of secondary-aged students – **having school rules that are fair**
- **59%** of primary-aged students – **teachers accepting me for who I am**

What helps you feel a sense of belonging in school?

- **60%** secondary-aged students and **69%** primary aged students – **having friends they trust**
- **67%** of primary-aged students and **43%** of secondary-aged students – **being treated with as much respect as everyone else**
- **52%** of primary-aged students and **40%** of secondary-aged students – **feeling able to be myself at school**

What stops you feeling a sense of belonging and safety?

- **44%** of secondary-aged students and **39%** of primary-aged students – **feeling under pressure**
- **36%** of primary-aged students and **27%** of secondary-aged students – **not feeling able to be myself in school**
- **43%** of primary-aged students and **30%** of secondary-aged students – **worrying about bullying (or unkind behaviour)**
- **28%** of secondary-aged students – **teachers not understanding me**

To what extent do London students feel a sense of belonging in school?

When asked if they feel a sense of belonging, it is encouraging that over half of students said *'yes, usually'* or *'yes, a strong sense,'* but over a third of secondary-aged students and almost a quarter of primary-aged students gave less certain responses on belonging at school, saying *'yes, a bit'* or *'I don't know.'* A significant minority of those taking part said they *'do not feel any sense of belonging at school'* (5% primary-aged and 8% secondary-aged students). While these percentage figures may appear low, they represent a cohort of students who could benefit from deeper understanding and targeted actions to build school belonging.

> "in our school, we're really good at including people and we have loads of people from different countries and backgrounds and teachers talk to us a lot about that and I think it just really helps."
> PRIMARY-AGED STUDENT

What factors support students' sense of belonging?

The survey asked students to select 5 factors that were most important to help them feel a sense of belonging at school.

Both secondary-aged (60%) and primary-aged (69%) students said that having friends they could trust was most important. They told us that friendships were a motivator to come to school, because people your own age understand you in a way adults cannot.

The second most important factor was *'being treated with as much respect as everyone else'* (selected by 43% of secondary-aged students and 67% of primary-aged students). When students spoke about the importance of respect, they referenced times when they were not listened to, or when their needs were ignored or mislabelled.

Over half of primary-aged students (52%) and 40% of secondary-aged students selected *'feeling able to be myself at school'* as a top factor, highlighting identity affirmation as an important aspect of school belonging. They spoke about the importance of having a wide range of activities to discover their passions, having learning needs recognised and self-expression through clothing and presentation.

> "friendships are the support system."
> SECONDARY-AGED STUDENT

> "if you're not treated with the same level of respect, how are you going to form positive relationships with everyone."
> SECONDARY-AGED STUDENT

> "(what's important is) being able to come to the school and have that environment where you're able to express your interests and explore your hobbies productively, because obviously everyone will have an aspiration of sorts that they'll want to work to."
> SECONDARY-AGED STUDENT

What factors help students feel safe in school?

We asked students about the 5 most important factors that made them feel safe at school.

Among primary-aged students, the top factor was *'teachers being respectful to all students'* (69%), closely followed by *'knowing teachers will stop all kinds of bullying or unkind behaviour'* and *'having school rules which are fair'* (both receiving 67%). Having school rules that are fair was also the second most important factor for secondary-aged students (53%). At secondary level, the most important factor was having *'no threat of physical violence at school'* (67%).

The way schools deal with bullying and discrimination was mentioned as contributing significantly to students' feelings of safety at school. They found it helpful when staff took time to understand their viewpoints if conflicts arose and supported them to resolve problems.

Fairness was also raised by a large proportion of both primary-aged (48%) and secondary-aged students (38%). In conversations, students questioned when teachers focused on issues such as school uniform not being worn correctly, above more important issues such as bullying or discrimination. Relational factors were most significant for their sense of safety. Respect, fairness, being listened to and feeling cared for, were all important to help students to feel safe in school.

> "some teachers are really good at picking up on if you're upset or uncomfortable… and come up and check on you."
> PRIMARY-AGED STUDENT

> "I feel like they care more about what I'm wearing than what's going on and why so worried about my jacket?"
> SECONDARY-AGED STUDENT

> "(its good to) know the root of the problem …(to) find out why it happened in the first place."
> SECONDARY-AGED STUDENT

What are the barriers to belonging for students?

We were also interested to understand what students saw to be the barriers to belonging in school.

'Feeling under pressure' was the most selected factor by secondary-aged students (44%), but also by a significant proportion of primary-aged students (39%). Students felt the pressure around exam results as being all-consuming and overly deterministic of their futures.

Not having their identities recognised and affirmed emerged as key barrier to belonging and safety. 36% of primary-aged and 27% secondary-aged students selected *'not feeling able to be myself in school'* as a top factor. Students spoke about schools not 'understanding' the 'range of types of people' and about success being narrowly defined.

Being in a school environment where their identities are not valued may have particularly profound impacts for certain groups of students. For example, for students whose family or community views on sexuality or gender limit opportunities to positively explore this aspect of their identities, being able to do this at school was seen to be particularly important.

"an important bit of school is that it's not always focused on grades and doing well in tests, it kind of shows like people are succeeding by doing what they love with the people around them... not just always academic, it's also about building what you actually enjoy doing."
SECONDARY-AGED STUDENT

"I think there's a larger range of types of people than what schools expect."
SECONDARY-AGED STUDENT

"a lot of people are just kind of constantly scared the whole time, they don't really feel safe in themselves because they're taught that, the grade is going to be the thing that determines their entire future."
SECONDARY-AGED STUDENT

Recommendations

Our findings inform the following recommendations to strengthen students' sense of belonging, safety and identity, which are integral to their sense of inclusion in school.

- Support students' friendships and relationships

- Recognise the importance of caring and nurturing staff-student relationships

- Focus beyond academic achievement to reduce pressure associated with attainment targets

- Create opportunities and experiences that respond to the diversity of abilities and aptitudes and promote the holistic development of students

- Develop conflict resolution approaches that focus on dialogue with students and working together to develop shared responsibility and problem-solving

- Collaborate with students and families/carers to develop school rules that everyone is signed up to

- Partner with students in reviewing policies and processes so that changes made make a measurable difference to students' feelings of being heard

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The values principles and impacts of inclusion

These four guiding principles represent the mechanisms by which schools can ensure students' sense of inclusion. They have been developed in consultation with students, educators, school leaders and parents across all 32 London boroughs.
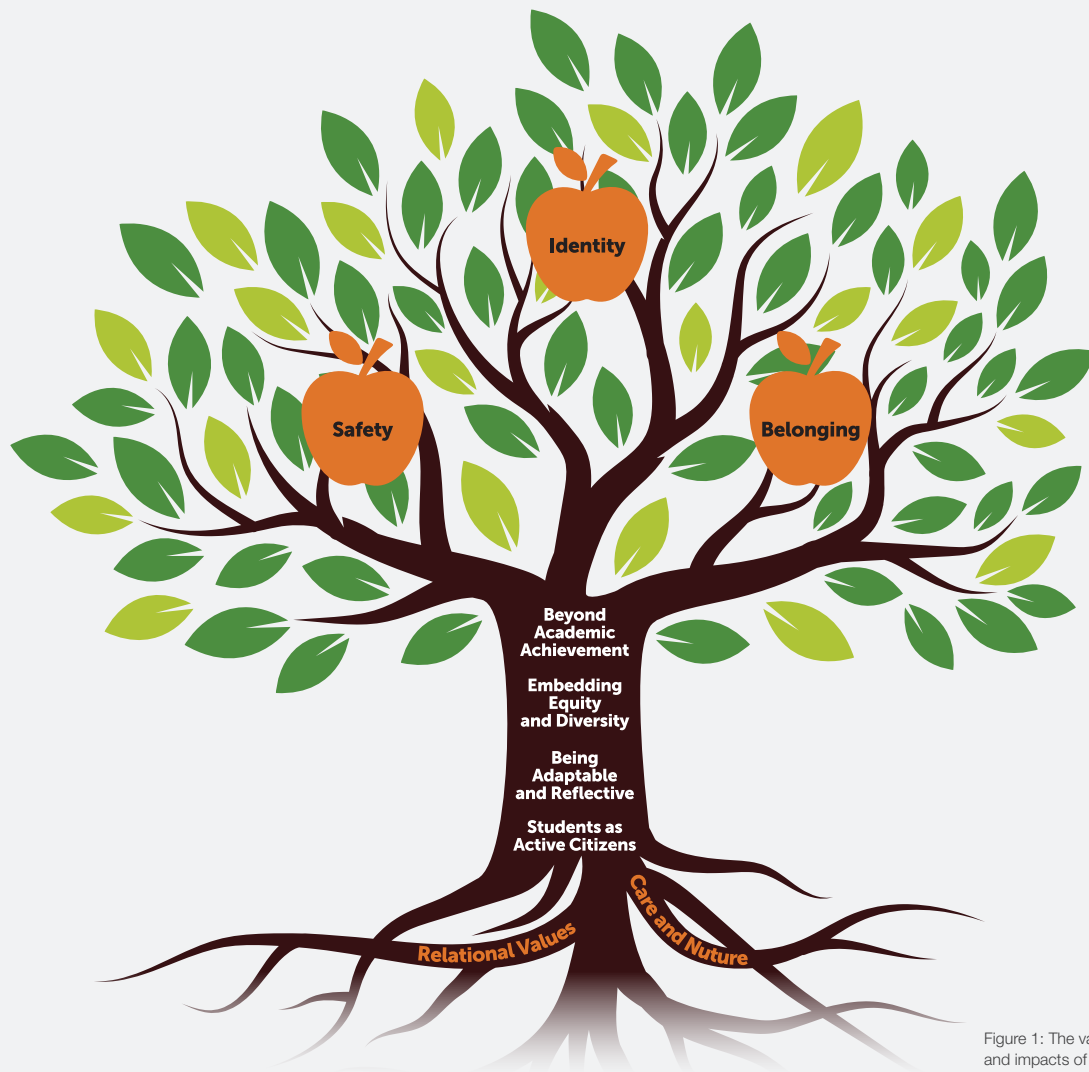

Identity

Safety

Belonging

Beyond Academic Achievement

Embedding Equity and Diversity

Being Adaptable and Reflective

Students as Active Citizens

Relational Values

Care and Nuture

Figure 1: The values, principles and impacts of inclusion

1.

Students as Active Citizens

This is about collaborating to create a sense of shared responsibility and accountability for the whole school community. It involves working together with students, school staff, families and local communities on issues that matter for them. This principle requires adults to seek out the student and community voice and hear their concerns, before taking concrete actions to respond to these issues in shaping school policies, activities and the learning environment. It is about students shaping and actively participating in the life of the school. Ensuring that student, parent and community representation groups reflect the breadth of student composition is also key to engaging students and their communities as active citizens.

Examples include:

- Forums to hear students' views on matters such as school uniform, use of school spaces and policies.

- Feeding back on actions taken, such as 'you asked for…we did,' displays and noticeboards.

- Student responsibility opportunities, for instance participation on the Parent Governor Association groups, eco-committees, student council, or peer mentors.

2.

Being Adaptable and Reflective

This principle is about creating a supportive culture where educators are empowered and enabled to innovate, experiment and refine their practices to meet the diverse needs of all students. Enabling staff to continually reflect on and adapt their practice and provision ensures that all students can access opportunities to realise their goals. This involves developing reflective and adaptable school systems and practices in relation to learning, behaviour, or the way that school staff communicate with students, families and each other. Adaptable and reflective practice is also one way in which schools can ensure that equity and diversity are embedded, by making adjustments for specific students to support them.

Examples include:

- Fostering a culture where staff feel safe to trial new teaching approaches through offering professional development training, and allowing the freedom to try new things, fail and to try something else.
- Adjusting routines to suit learners' needs, for instance through movement breaks.
- Offering different curriculum pathways which better meet the needs of all learners, keeping a focus on positive outcomes, such as achievement.

3.

Embedding Equity and Diversity

This is about integrating into policies and systems approaches to ensure students from all backgrounds feel welcome and valued in school, taking into account different cultures, faiths, beliefs, abilities, aptitudes, attainment levels, gender identifications and neurodiversity. Recognising the disproportionate impact of exclusion on communities in London, this principle involves creating opportunities to explore and value our differences, challenging stereotypes, racism and discrimination and taking action to ensure that they are tackled.

Examples include:

- external events for families and the community, such as celebrating world cultures and spiritual festivities.
- curriculum topics such as learning about highly successful dyslexic figures, women who changed the world, black authors.
- day-to-day classroom interactions, like taking time to discuss difference in learning styles, recognising and encouraging students to value their unique strengths and those of others. developing neuro-inclusive school practices to ensure the needs of all are supported and met.

4.

Beyond Academic Achievement

This principle is about enabling students to achieve in the broadest sense, by giving them opportunities to flourish. Providing students with the experiences to develop all their skills, talents and abilities, be they academic, creative, physical, or interpersonal, can ensure their wellbeing both now and in the future. It's not just about what happens in lessons, but also the activities the school offers outside of lessons and the opportunities for stimulating trips and experiences. It is also about having high expectations for all students, supporting them to form high but realistic expectations of themselves and to know and value both their strengths and weaknesses.

Examples include:

- Prioritising trips, activities and speakers that enable students to experience new places and viewpoints.
- Removing barriers (be they physical, social or economic) to ensure that opportunities and experiences can be accessed by all students.
- Celebrating the successes of all students.
- Monitoring and tracking engagement in activities to ensure that all are maximising the benefit, including vulnerable groups such as young carers, looked after student and those from particular ethnic groups.

The Three Impacts that Lead to Inclusion

Our research highlighted that these four principles support inclusion by leading to the realisation of three key impacts. Not only are these impacts seen to be central to the wellbeing of students in the here and now, but they are also seen to have lifelong benefit in leading to a sense of inclusion and participation in society in the future.

Belonging

A sense of belonging is central to self-worth, motivation, and the foundation for learning. School inclusion depends upon students feeling a sense of belonging and connection to the communities that they are part of. Schools have a vital role to support and strengthen students' sense of belonging to the school community, their peers, families, local community and broader society.

Safety

There are three dimensions of safety that enable students to feel a sense of belonging and security in the different communities that they are a part of. E*motional safety* is the sense of being accepted for who you truly are as an individual, that your feelings are recognised and that your needs are met. *Social safety* is about mutual respect and feeling secure in the absence of harassment, discrimination or intimidation. *Physical safety* is a sense of security in the absence of harm or injury to self or others.

Identity building and affirmation

Identity is multifaceted. Individual identity involves feeling known and valued for our strengths and limitations, and what sets us apart from others as unique and 'special'. Social identity involves feeling recognised and valued for our social characteristics including gender, faith, ethnicity, sexuality, ability, and socio-economic background, as well as the intersectionality between these characteristics (how these different characteristics interact). This social dimension relates to our family, cultural, community, peer group and citizenship identities. Providing opportunities for students to build and affirm their identities is a central way in which schools can strengthen students' sense of belonging and safety.

Core Values Underpinning Enactment of the Four Principles to Inclusion

The research highlighted that the spirit in which the principles are implemented is of critical importance. Participants recognised that schools' engagement with the four principles could be on a continuum, with a tokenistic acknowledgement at one end and a more holistic, whole-school approach at the other. They therefore advised that the implicit values that underpin successful enactment of the principles should be made explicit.

Relational values

Relationships are the central mechanism by which a sense of belonging, safety and self-worth can be nurtured within students in school. A focus on relationships has various dimensions. Most central is building relationships between staff and students, where students feel known, understood and valued. Secondly, helping students to build and sustain relationships over time is key to their achievements, future success and wellbeing. Thirdly, relational values extend to the initiation and maintenance of strong partnerships with families and carers, and the local community. Lastly, it is important to recognise that positive relationships are modelled at a leadership level and cascade down via supportive relationships between staff and then to students.

Care and nurture

Aligned with a relational approach are the values of care and nurture as an underpinning feature of school culture. This is where staff go beyond caring about what students achieve to also demonstrating care about who students are and what they need. The important factor is that students feel cared for. This is conveyed in daily interactions between staff and students, reflecting a genuine interest in students' lives and wellbeing. To care involves noticing and responding to students' state of being, needs and achievements. Care and nurture should extend to school policies and practices, such as behaviour management approaches that recognise that behaviour is the communication of a need. Care and nurture involve showing kindness and compassion in the face of need, and recognising student's rights and responsibilities to self and others. Care and nurture values also underpin relations between staff and school leaders, as well as in the schools' communications with and expectations from families and carers.

This report was written by Ceri Brown, Alison Douthwaite, Michael Donnelly and Yusuf Olaniyan on behalf of London's Violence Reduction Unit. For further information, please contact

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