



Ollscoil Chathair
Bhaile Átha Cliath
Dublin City University

World Café Report: Belonging at School

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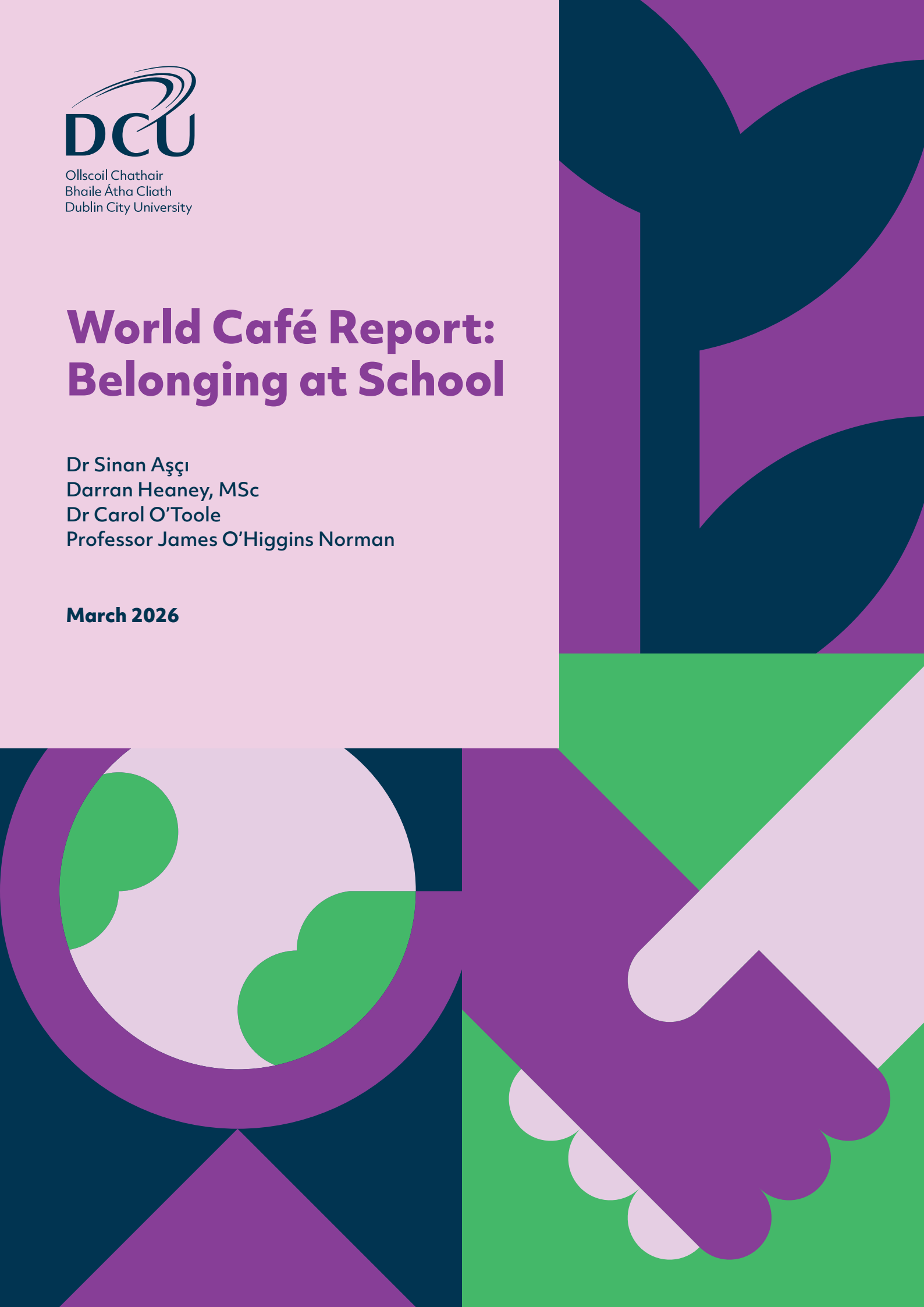


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DCU Anti-Bullying Centre

DCU Anti-Bullying Centre is a university-designated national research centre located in DCU's Institute of Education. It focuses on advancing research on bullying in educational and workplace settings with the development of resources on the prevention and intervention of bullying related issues among young people and professionals. The work of the Centre builds on 30 years of research in which we were the first in Ireland to undertake studies on school, workplace, homophobic, cyber bullying and many other related topics.

In 2018, with the support of the Department of Education and Youth, the DCU applied for and was awarded the UNESCO Chair on Bullying and Cyberbullying. The Centre also hosts the peer-reviewed International Journal of Bullying Prevention, which is published four times per year by Springer Publications. The Centre hosts a national anti-bullying website www.tacklebullying.ie and supports the Department of Education and Youth in implementing Cineáltas, Action Plan on Bullying. From 2020 to 2025, research from the Centre was cited in 106 policy documents across 18 countries. In 2025, DCU was awarded the HEA Impact Award for the Centre's work on bullying prevention in schools. DCU Anti-Bullying Centre is committed to embedding student voice within research and practice, recognising young people as experts in their own experiences.



Acknowledgements

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We would also like to thank the teachers and school staff who supported students' participation and facilitated their involvement on the day. Appreciation is extended to DCU Anti-Bullying Centre researchers and staff who acted as facilitators and note-takers, helping to create a safe, respectful, and engaging space for dialogue. We acknowledge the support provided by Caroline Gardner of Quality Matters who led the session discussions. We also extend our thanks to Angela Kinahan from DCU Anti-Bullying Centre for managing the event with exceptional professionalism, ensuring everything ran smoothly and efficiently.

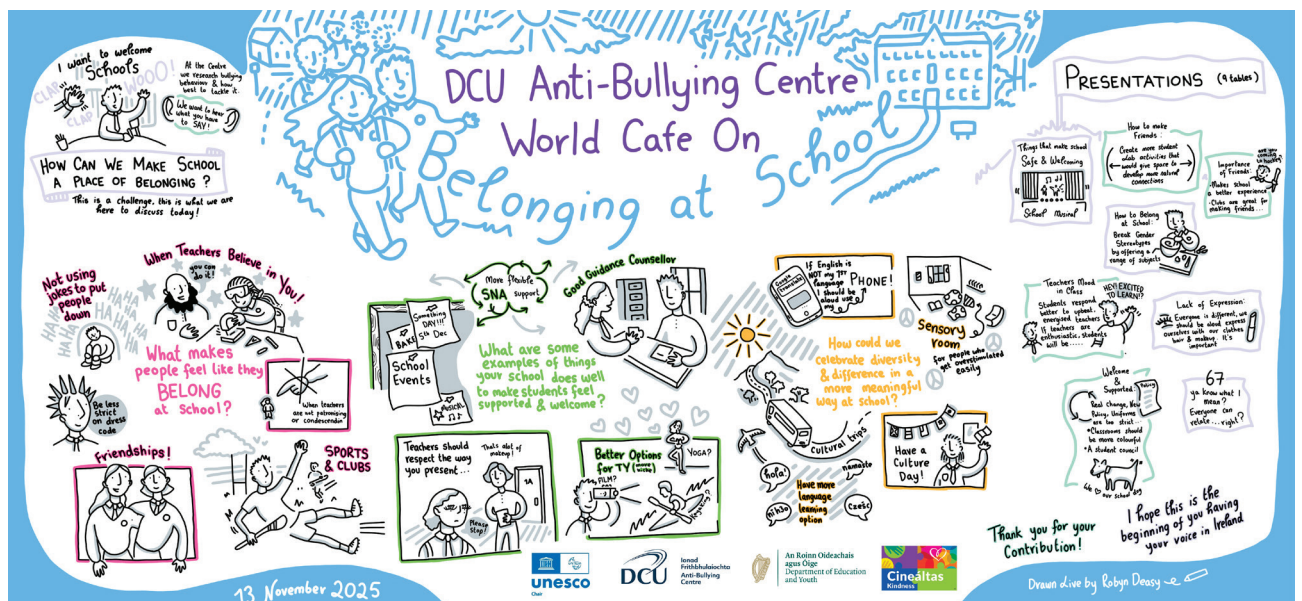
DCU Anti-Bullying Centre is grateful to our funders and partners for their continued support of our work on bullying, well-being, and school climate. Finally, we acknowledge the wider ABC team whose research, practice, and commitment to amplifying youth voice continue to inform and strengthen this work. This World Café was made possible by the support of the Department of Education and Youth under Cineáltas: Action Plan on Bullying.

World Café Overview

On November 13th, 2025 DCU Anti-Bullying Centre hosted a World Café-style event in consultation with Transition Year (TY) students, focusing on the theme of belonging at school. The World Café methodology was used to encourage open, reflective, and collaborative discussion on specific theme related questions. The consultation involved 44 Transition Year students from three participating schools and was facilitated by 9 DCU Anti-Bullying Centre facilitators, supported by 9 note-takers. The event brought together post-primary school students, who took part in small-group conversations to explore what belonging means to them, how it is experienced in everyday school life, and what helps or hinders a sense of inclusion, safety, and connection within school communities. Students had the option to participate voluntarily and were free to withdraw from the experience at any time without penalty.

Across multiple rounds, students rotated between café-style tables, allowing ideas to build and deepen as perspectives were shared. Participants were encouraged to write, draw, and annotate directly on the table coverings, capturing thoughts in their own words and images. At the end of the session, students returned to their original tables to reflect on the collective discussions and identify key messages to share.

This participatory approach reflects DCU Anti-Bullying Centre's commitment to embedding student voice within research and practice, recognising young people as experts in their own experiences.



Report Overview

This report presents a thematic analysis of data generated during the World Café on Belonging at School, with the explicit aim of centring student voice while situating young people's experiences within established research on belonging, school climate, and bullying prevention.

The analytical approach was informed by interdisciplinary scholarship that conceptualises belonging as relational, emotional, and socially produced rather than fixed or individualised (Halse, 2018; Yuval-Davis, 2006). In line with the literature, belonging is understood not simply as "fitting in", but as feeling accepted, valued, and safe to be oneself within a community. Research consistently demonstrates that a strong sense of belonging is closely linked to positive school climate, student well-being, engagement, and reduced involvement in bullying, both as a target of bullying and as an individual engaging in bullying behavior (Goodenow & Grady, 1993; Osterman, 2000; Riley, 2019).

Data from the World Café was analysed using a qualitative thematic analysis approach, drawing on principles outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). This approach involved familiarisation with the data, identification of recurring patterns and meanings across tables, and the development of themes that captured shared experiences while remaining sensitive to nuance and difference. Notes and visual materials produced during discussions were also reviewed to ensure that themes reflected students' own language, priorities, and interpretations.

The analysis was also guided by research on school climate and bullying, which highlights the importance of everyday interactions, peer relationships, and adult practices in shaping students' sense of safety and belonging (Søndergaard, 2012; Thornberg, 2015). Rather than treating belonging as an abstract concept, attention was paid to how students described belonging as something that is actively created, or undermined, through classroom culture, peer dynamics, inclusion practices, and responses to difference.

In keeping with DCU Anti-Bullying Centre's commitment to listening to and learning from young people, this analysis prioritises students' perspectives and experiences as central to understanding belonging at school. Direct quotations are used throughout the findings to illustrate key themes and to reflect students' own words. While the report highlights common patterns across discussions, it also recognises that experiences of belonging vary and are shaped by identity, relationships, and school context.

The themes presented in this report should therefore be understood as interconnected rather than discrete, collectively illustrating how belonging operates as a protective factor within school communities and as a key foundation for bullying prevention and positive school climate.

Thematic Findings

The thematic analysis below integrates and synthesises data across all nine World Café tables, drawing on facilitators' notes, student quotations, and visual materials.

Experiencing Belonging as Being Seen, Valued, and Safe

Across all tables, students described belonging primarily as a felt and relational experience rather than something created through rules or policies. Feeling noticed, acknowledged, and respected in everyday interactions was central to this sense of belonging.

Students spoke about the importance of being recognised as individuals and not treated solely as students or learners. Small moments of acknowledgement were described as having a strong emotional impact. Students described these moments as producing feelings of confidence, pride, and positive energy, suggesting that belonging is closely tied to emotional well-being rather than formal inclusion measures.

Belonging was strongly associated with schools as environments where friendships are made allowing for emotional safety and authenticity. Students repeatedly described being able to be themselves around friends and feeling protected from isolation and exclusion when part of a supportive peer group.

"We feel comfortable being ourselves because of our friends."

"You feel like you are a person and have your own life outside of school."

Friendships were also described as informal sources of protection, reducing vulnerability to exclusion and bullying by providing emotional and social security. Students also linked belonging to emotional safety, particularly the ability to speak or participate without fear of judgement.

"Being able to talk without having to fear you are going to get judged."

Students described belonging as the ability to "[...] express your opinion" without fear of ridicule. Several students noted that belonging often goes unnoticed when it is present but becomes highly visible when it is disrupted through tension, hostility, or judgement. Where students experienced tension, hostility, or judgement, their sense of belonging diminished significantly, even when inclusion initiatives were present.

Peer Relationships as the Core of Belonging

Friendships emerged as the single most important factor shaping students' sense of belonging. Across schools and year groups, students consistently described friends as providing safety, confidence, and protection from exclusion.

"When everyone is friends with everyone, you feel like you belong."

"If you have lots of friends, you feel like you belong."

While friendships were seen as central to belonging, students recognised that access to friendship groups was not equal for all students. Students emphasised that belonging was easier at schools where peer groups were open rather than cliquey.

"A sense of community is important; I don't like it when school is cliquey."

At the same time, students acknowledged that peer belonging was not guaranteed. Once friendship groups became established, particularly beyond first year, integration became more difficult.

"Once groups are established, it's really hard to interact."

"[...] hard to make friends after the first year."

This dynamic reinforces social hierarchies within year groups, where belonging becomes tied to group membership rather than individual qualities. However, students were not suggesting that everyone must belong to a close friendship group in order to feel they belong; rather, they were distinguishing between friendship and friendliness, highlighting the importance of peer cultures that are open, socially permeable, and non-exclusionary. In this context, belonging was associated less with universal friendship and more with a culture of approachability, inclusion, and low relational risk.

Classroom Culture, Teachers, and Everyday Power

Students repeatedly emphasised that teachers play a decisive role in shaping classroom climate and students' sense of belonging. Teachers who listened, showed empathy, and treated students with respect were associated with positive experiences.

"The ones that make me feel like I belong listen to you when you talk."

"If my teacher respects me, I feel like I belong."

"You can have teachers that teach really well, but they need to be kind to their students as well."

Students emphasised that effective teaching was closely linked to relational practice, with kindness, approachability, and emotional awareness viewed as essential to positive classroom climate. Students also valued kindness alongside competence.

Conversely, students described instances where teachers were perceived as shouting at students, which undermined feelings of safety and respect.

Students referred to the need for teachers to recognise shifts in classroom mood, identifying when someone is upset, and noticing relational tensions before they escalate. Students noted that teachers often struggled to recognise bullying or emotional distress.

“They [teachers] think that everyone [students] is okay, but they’re not.”

Students were highlighting that emotional distress and relational bullying are often invisible unless teachers actively check in or observe peer dynamics carefully. Students suggested that limited awareness of emotional distress and relational bullying contributed to feelings of being overlooked or unsupported within the classroom.

Spaces, Environment, and Regulation

Students highlighted the importance of physical and social spaces in supporting emotional regulation and belonging. Guidance counsellors’ offices, libraries, and quiet or sensory spaces were frequently described as places of comfort and safety.

“The guidance counsellor’s office feels different from the rest of the school... they just comfort you, give you a cup of tea, make you feel safe.”

Spaces were valued not only for support but for enabling emotional regulation and recovery during the school day. Students emphasised that a clean and welcoming environment contributed positively to belonging.

“A clean environment helps you feel like you belong.”

In contrast, students described a lack of informal social spaces, leading them to congregate in unsuitable areas.

“People just hang out in the bathrooms.”

“We need more spaces without surveillance.”

“Physical space depends on who you are with.”

This suggests that belonging is shaped by relational context as much as physical environment; while the same space can feel safe or unsafe depending on peer dynamics, the absence of informal student-friendly spaces further limits opportunities for safe social connection.

Students were describing how the presence of a school dog created a calming atmosphere and offered non-judgmental comfort during stressful moments.

“He [the school dog] makes you smile.”

This example illustrates how school environments can be intentionally shaped to signal care, warmth, and emotional safety.

Inclusion, Difference, and Identity

Students linked vulnerability to exclusion with social position, visibility of difference, and perceived deviation from dominant norms within the school community. Students from ethnic minority backgrounds described experiences of cultural invisibility.

“I didn’t feel included in my old school, I was the only non-white person.”

Gender norms and stereotypes were also described as limiting participation and self-expression.

“Girls playing football is seen as weird.”

“[...] hard to be yourself.”

This reflects how social norms within schools can restrict authentic self-expression, particularly when deviation from dominant expectations attracts negative attention. While initiatives such as Culture Day and Stand-Up Awareness Week were often valued, students cautioned that one-off events could feel tokenistic or increase vulnerability.

“Making a big fuss once a year can make people feel like outcasts.”

Students argued that everyday inclusive practices were more effective than symbolic, once-off events in fostering sustained belonging. This echoes earlier themes in the report, where belonging was associated with consistent relational practices, such as caring teachers, peer openness, and everyday friendliness, rather than isolated displays of inclusion.

Belonging, Bullying, and Silence

Students strongly linked experiences of non-belonging with bullying, particularly relational bullying such as exclusion, gossip, and repeated comments often mistakenly framed as jokes or banter. Students described these behaviours as pervasive and difficult to challenge because they are often minimised or dismissed as humour.

“There’s a moment where banter crosses a line and it’s just not funny anymore.”

“Hateful comments stay in the back of your mind.”

Students emphasised that relational bullying can have lingering emotional effects, even when incidents are dismissed as minor. Relational bullying was described as particularly difficult to challenge due to its subtlety and normalisation as humour. Students emphasised that the impact of such behaviour was cumulative and long-lasting, often affecting students’ confidence, self-esteem, and sense of safety long after an incident. This contributed to a culture of silence, where fear of escalation discouraged reporting and reinforced disengagement.

“If you speak up, you become the next victim.”

This illustrates how fear of social retaliation contributes to underreporting and reinforces a culture of silence.

Student Voice, Agency, and Participation

Students consistently linked their sense of belonging to having agency and influence within school life. Opportunities to participate in clubs, student councils, mentoring programs, and student-led initiatives were described as important avenues for feeling involved, recognised, and valued.

“Being involved helped me feel like I belong.”

“School census about belonging.”

Participation fostered a sense of ownership, responsibility, and connection to the wider school community. Students noted that participation was particularly meaningful when it allowed them to connect with peers who shared similar interests, develop leadership skills, or contribute to shaping school culture.

At the same time, students highlighted that mechanisms to give them voice were only effective when they resulted in visible change. Where feedback was collected but not acted upon, students felt discouraged and disengaged.

“Sometimes the student council feels like a placeholder.”

“You feel more valued when your ideas don’t disappear.”

Visible follow-through was identified as critical in maintaining trust and sustaining student engagement. Students emphasised the importance of transparency and follow-through, noting that clear communication about decisions and outcomes helped build trust and strengthen their sense of belonging.

Events, Activities, and Shared Experiences

School events, trips, clubs, and team-building activities were widely valued as opportunities to connect with peers outside academic pressure and routine classroom interactions. Students described these experiences as helping to build friendships, break down social barriers, and create shared memories that strengthened their sense of belonging.

“Sharing a new experience with other people helps you belong.”

“Trips help people bond.”

These experiences were particularly valued by students who found everyday classroom interaction socially challenging. Students highlighted school trips in particular as providing relief from exam-focused environments and enabling more relaxed, authentic interactions.

“It’s a good place for people to no longer be strangers.”

“Working towards the same goal.”

Students were describing collaborative events such as sports days, musicals, or group projects where collective effort strengthened social connection. However, students also recognised that not all shared activities felt inclusive. Public performances, such as talent shows or competitions, were described as carrying risks of judgement or ridicule, which could undermine confidence and belonging.

“Talent shows have two sides; most people enjoy it, but some laugh.”

Students emphasised that shared activities were most beneficial when clear norms of respect were established and when participation was supported rather than forced.

Conclusion

This World Café consultation demonstrates that belonging is a central, lived dimension of students' school experiences and a key foundation of positive school climate and bullying prevention. For young people, belonging is not primarily created through policies or isolated initiatives, but through everyday interactions, relationships, and environments that communicate whether they are seen, valued, and safe to be themselves.

Across the findings, peer relationships emerged as the strongest source of belonging, offering protection, confidence, and a sense of being valued and included. At the same time, these relationships can also become sites of exclusion, particularly when cliques form, stereotypes go unchallenged, or subtle forms of bullying are normalised as banter. Students were clear that belonging is unevenly distributed, with those perceived as different, including students from ethnic minority backgrounds, LGBTQ+ students, students with additional needs, and those without strong friendship networks, facing greater risks of exclusion and harm.

Teachers and school staff were identified as having a powerful influence on students' sense of belonging. Small, everyday actions such as listening, showing empathy, recognising effort, and being aware of peer dynamics were described as having a significant impact on classroom climate. Where students felt that teachers were unapproachable, dismissive, or unaware of emotional distress and relational bullying, their sense of belonging and engagement diminished.

The findings also highlight the importance of spaces and supports that allow students to regulate emotions and feel cared for. Access to guidance services, trusted adults, quiet or sensory spaces, and flexible supports signalled to students that their well-being mattered. However, students emphasised that access must be timely, visible, and non-stigmatising in order to be effective.

While school events, clubs, and diversity initiatives were widely valued as opportunities for connection and expression, students cautioned against one-off or highly symbolic approaches. Belonging was strongest where inclusion was embedded into everyday school life rather than confined to specific weeks or celebrations. Similarly, students linked belonging to agency: when young people had meaningful opportunities to influence their school environment and saw tangible outcomes from their input, their sense of belonging was strengthened.

These findings reinforce existing research showing that belonging is both a protective factor against bullying and a cornerstone of a positive school climate. Research has also highlighted how relational bullying is often minimised as humour or "banter", masking its impact on young people's wellbeing (Betts & Spenser, 2017). Similarly, evidence from Irish school contexts underscores the importance of supportive teacher-student relationships and emotionally responsive school environments in promoting student wellbeing (Dempsey & McCoy, 2026), as well as the value of accessible and non-stigmatising mental health supports within schools (Dempsey & McCoy, 2026; Kenneally et al., 2023).

These findings underline the importance of listening to students not only as consultees, but as partners in shaping school communities. By prioritising relationships, everyday inclusion, responsive supports, and genuine student voice, schools can create environments in which all young people feel safe, valued, and able to thrive.

Implications for Policy and Practice

The findings suggest that efforts to foster belonging should prioritise everyday relational practices over isolated initiatives. Policies aimed at bullying prevention and school climate improvement may benefit from focusing on peer culture, classroom dynamics, and relational safety rather than relying solely on awareness events or disciplinary frameworks.

Schools may consider strengthening teacher professional development in recognising relational bullying, responding to subtle peer dynamics, and cultivating emotionally responsive classroom environments.

In addition, ensuring that wellbeing supports are visible, accessible, and non-stigmatising is essential. Students emphasised the importance of timely access to trusted adults, quiet spaces, and mechanisms for meaningful student voice.

Finally, embedding inclusion as an everyday practice, rather than a symbolic event, appears central to fostering sustained belonging.



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