

Teachers play a key role in helping students feel they 'belong' at school

August 3 2018, by Megan Pedler



A low sense of belonging is associated with negative behaviours including misbehaviour, drug and alcohol use at school, violence and dropping out of school. Credit: chuttersnap on Unsplash, [CC BY](#)

The [Australian Council for Educational Research](#) (ACER) released a

[report](#) on Australian students' sense of belonging in school in May. It described as "disturbing" some of the differences in Australian students' sense of belonging between male and female students, students from high and low socio-economic backgrounds, and Indigenous and non-Indigenous backgrounds.

ACER [stated](#): "While the majority of Australian students feel a sense of belonging at [school](#), there is a solid core of students who do not feel this way – roughly one in five, or five students in the average classroom."

The report analyses the Programme for International Student Assessment's (PISA) [data](#) collected from 36 countries, including Australia. The assessment asks 15-year-old students to answer a number of questions regarding their sense of belonging in school.

Prioritising belonging within school culture is essential. If done effectively, educators can support students' emotional and social development and enhance their motivation, effort and achievement throughout secondary school.

What is a sense of belonging and is it important?

A [sense of belonging](#) in school is the degree to which students feel respected, accepted and supported by [teachers](#) and peers. It has been linked to students' attention and effort in class, their persistence and completion of learning activities.

An understanding of belonging is important for educators. It allows them to plan effective practices to support students in the classroom and school-wide.

According to international [research](#), when students feel they're part of a school community, they will actively engage in academic and non-

academic activities.

Improving feelings of belonging in school can support both student engagement and achievement. [Research](#) shows students who report a high sense of belonging in school generally put in more effort and are more motivated.

A low sense of belonging is associated with negative, possibly antisocial or delinquent, behaviours. These could include misbehaviour, drug and alcohol use at school, violence and dropping out of school.

Sense of belonging decreases in secondary school

A [study](#) from the US found students' sense of belonging declines from year 7 through to year 11. With it, students' educational aspirations also decrease.

This decline may be due to a mismatch between secondary school students' need for autonomy and interaction, and their learning environment. They may experience less supportive and caring teacher-student relationships, increased teacher control, and limited opportunities for autonomy.

Similarly, a [study](#) in Finland found students' sense of belonging weakened significantly, specifically at the end of year 8. This might be because secondary students need to adapt to a larger social network and a larger number of teachers, so they may not know their peers or teachers as well.

There have been similar findings in Australian secondary schools. [Research](#) in NSW found students' engagement in learning decreases in the middle of secondary school. This is referred to as the "year 9 dip". This dip is also present in students' reported sense of belonging.

Teachers are an important piece of the puzzle

[Teachers play an important role](#) in nurturing students' sense of belonging. If a student considers their teacher to be caring and accepting, they're more likely to adopt the academic and social values of their teacher. This can influence how students feel about school work and how much (or how little) they value it.

The teaching practices the teacher adopts in the classroom are key. Approaches to teaching that foster belonging include:

- prioritising high-quality teacher-student relationships
- creating a supportive and caring learning environment
- offering emotional support to students
- being sensitive to students' needs and emotions
- showing interest in students
- trying to understand students' point of view
- offering respectful and fair treatment
- fostering positive peer relationships and mutual respect among classmates to establish a sense of community
- executing positive classroom management

Other significant [approaches](#) include giving students a voice, working with community partners to meet students' needs, [student](#) participation in extra-curricular activities, and developing a culture of high standards and behaviours across the whole school.

Teachers and schools must plan for at-risk students

Importantly, [some groups](#) of students may feel lower levels of belonging. This includes students with different cultural or language backgrounds,

students with disabilities or students who identify as [LGBTQIA+](#).

For example, students from an [immigrant background](#) have more positive attitudes and greater academic motivation if their teachers care about them, give academic feedback and guidance, and help them when necessary.

[Research](#) suggests school strategies that increase a sense of belonging in at-risk students could reduce school drop-out rates and lead to improved academic achievement.

In addition to the strategies previously mentioned to support students' emotional, behavioural and social development, school policies to support at-risk students should:

- promote respect for ethnic diversity
- be intolerant of discrimination
- support teachers to implement fair classroom practices
- encourage parent involvement in school to build social connections between home and school
- create a school culture of acceptance

Teachers and schools can take steps to improve students' sense of belonging in school, which is important for all students and especially those identified as being at-risk.

This article was originally published on [The Conversation](#). Read the [original article](#).

Provided by The Conversation

Citation: Teachers play a key role in helping students feel they 'belong' at school (2018, August

3) retrieved 25 April 2024 from

<https://phys.org/news/2018-08-teachers-key-role-students-school.html>

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