PiXL

IGNITING LEADERS
CHANGING LIVES

'Optimism'
Pearl resources

January 2024

Hope and optimism are related.

This resource is designed as a reflection resource to help you think and get back to being hopeful, optimistic and realistic too!

Brené Brown in her book 'Atlas of the Heart' says, 'we need hope like we need air'. It is important to have it, to feel it and to think about it, even focus on getting it.

Brown states that hope is a way of thinking – a cognitive process. The researcher C R Snyder says that hope is made up of a 'trilogy of goals, pathways and agency'. We experience hope when:

1. **We have the ability to set realistic goals. (In other words, I know where I want to go.)**
   In my experience, setting realistic goals is easier to do when you're not exhausted. Our ability to set realistic goals is tied up with being able to have a realistic expectation of what is possible, knowing what we are capable of and being honest about our emotional and cognitive ability to pull it off. When we set unrealistic goals, we feel hopeless before we start. Perhaps check out your to do list and ask 'is this realistically possible today?' and if not, edit it!

2. **We are able to work out how to achieve those goals including the ability to stay flexible and develop alternative pathways. (In other words, I know how to get there, I am persistent and I can tolerate disappointment and try new paths again and again.)**
   Part of being flexible is developing alternative pathways, knowing that whatever happens, there will be an alternative route and being determined to find a way round any barrier. It helps in managing the disappointment that comes if you only have a plan A, and that plan fails. It's why the pre-mortem works; pre-mortems bring hope that you can see ahead, be flexible, make plans and find alternative paths. Tolerating disappointment, without losing hope, is something we need to be good at. Things that seem permanent often are not if we break them down into manageable chunks.

3. **We have agency – we believe in ourselves. (In other words, I can do this.)**
   "I can do this" are words we need to speak to ourselves all the time as a reassurance. Not only do we need to be able to say this and believe it but our job as leaders and teachers is to ensure that we encourage that agency in others too. The hero in every story faces a crisis moment when they think they can't, until they realise they can. When confidence is low, when we are tired, when we lose perspective, it is easy to think 'I can't do this'. When that happens, we need to recharge our sense of agency. Here are some ways of doing that:

   - Look back on the last two years and list what YOU have achieved.

   - List the things about **your** leadership and approach that made that happen.

- Think of an example of when you thought you couldn't and then you did.

- Reduce whatever it is you feel you can't do into the first step – and do that. What is that?

- Start a pre-mortem to identify barriers so that 'I can do this' becomes tangible and not unsubstantiated hope.

- Reframe: 'I have done this before, I will do it again'.

If we want to have hope, we have to embrace the struggle. Brown says 'hope is a function of struggle' because we develop hope not in the easy times, but when we face discomfort and adversity. When we are tested, hope is forged. When we battle, hope is learned. When change is possible, hope lives. You have experienced tests, battles and change before, probably all of it this week. Don't lose hope, however you feel right now. Know where you want to go, know how to get there and know you can do it, because you have done it before and you will do it again.

To consider	Reflections
What am I seeing at the moment as permanent, pervasive and personal? Are they really permanent?	Write down those things here:
Which of the things that I have written down are actually temporary, contained and external but feel terrible at the moment?	Write down those things here:

The Stockdale Paradox talks about facing the brutal facts and having hope. What are the brutal facts about the situation?	
What is the hope that you have? What would it look like and feel like if this thing was different?	
What is your first step?	

CREATING BELONGING

Why is this important?

As human beings, belonging really matters. We are built for connection and for belonging and at certain points in our lives this really matters, especially at the point of transitions. Children and young people want and need to feel that they belong, and we know from our work in schools some of what happens when they feel they don't belong and the negative impact it has when they find belonging in the wrong places. Brendan Cox, the husband of murdered MP Jo Cox, said at a PiXL meeting shortly after her death that 'we need to out organise the organisers of hate'. He was talking about how certain groups who seek to exploit a need in our young people do belonging very well, and that can seem very attractive for some of our children and young people who are not finding that anywhere else. He explained explicitly how they are being targeted. He asked us to think about how we can do things differently in our schools. That was before the pandemic – now we have a bigger problem with attendance, attitude, lack of opt-in from some young people, and a whole host of anti-social behaviour and some extreme ideologies being pedalled. All of this is not a problem we can solve easily, if even at all, BUT… if young people do not feel they belong in our communities we will face all kind of problems IN school, as well as outside of it.

Some research from S Vaz, M Falkmer, M Ciccarelli and A E Passmore in their paper, 'Belongingness in Early Secondary School: Key Factors that Primary and Secondary Schools Need to Consider' (2015), found that:

'Findings of the present study offer an empirical foundation for the need for school-based initiatives aimed at increasing belongingness in secondary school. The literature suggests that among youth in transition, those who are able to develop a better sense of belonging in school are more likely to have better outcomes, both in school and beyond'.

It appears that belonging is not just important for individuals and communities – it is also impacting life chances and outcomes in school and beyond. 'Belonging' is not something 'fluffy' that we can decide to invest in or not – it directly impacts on so many areas of what schools do and how people feel within our organisations.

What do we know about belonging and how to create it?

Daniel Coyle, author of 'Culture Code', makes the following points about culture and belonging in an organisation:

1. Cultures are not predestined; they are a set of living relationships orientated towards a common aim.

2. Belonging cues are non-verbal signals that we use to create safe connections in groups. 1) Energy invested in the exchange 2) Individualisation: valuing every individual 3) Future orientation: signalling that this relationship will last in the future.

3. We create psychological safety and help the brain realise there is connection when we repeat these belonging cues.

4. Successful organisations capitalise on threshold moments which send clear messages to people about togetherness and harmony as well as welcoming new members as well as existing members.

5. The NAVY Seals do After Action Reviews (AAR) where they dissect each mission in great detail and model future behaviour. This creates a feeling of belonging and people feel clear and valued.

6. Belonging is formed on groups having 'moments'.

7. The two most important 'moments' for belonging are the first vulnerability and the first disagreement – they set the tone of whether people are safe or not.

8. Consistent and repeated narratives help belonging.

9. Great organisations set up organisational practices which function as an organisational lighthouse, aligning everyday behaviour with the bigger organisational purpose.

HOW CAN WE CREATE BELONGING IN SCHOOLS? HOW CAN THIS THEORY TURN INTO PRACTICE?

What could we do to foster this sense of belonging?

1. Make it very clear what we stand for – make this tangible in slogans, videos, prospectus, lived and breathed and talked about all the time.

2. Check the reception area – does it communicate what you stand for or are warning notices the first thing visitors see?

3. Make every effort to SEE and know each child – are they all having the chance to speak with an adult? (Do you know this? Some research says that some children don't speak to an adult all day, even in school.) At the start of a new year and throughout, keep knowing things about them, ask them what they want us to know.

4. Create tutor identities even within the bigger culture – what do we 30 young people stand for, what do we want to achieve, how will we behave with each other?

5. Contract with each class, each meeting, each leadership team: how do we behave in this group when we disagree, when we are offended, when we feel uncertain?

6. Plan for 'moments' of connection and belonging, little moments of surprise e.g. ice pops in summer, taking staff a cup of tea and a biscuit, tea in the staffroom twice a week (with mugs provided and washed up!). This doesn't have to be expensive.

7. When things go wrong, create After Action Reviews with staff as well as young people: what have we learned, what are we pleased with, what needs to change? Listening and asking creates belonging.

8. When young people give feedback, turn it into something like a word cloud or something else that captures what they think.

9. At every opportunity, repeat the messages around belonging, use the word 'we' and establish what that means. 'We believe', 'we behave', 'we have achieved' – you may literally paint things on the walls, pictures, slogans, words. Catchphrases work really well to signal belonging.

10. Link past to the present to the future – celebrate those who came before and talk about what they have gone on to do. Talk about those future members of your community who are not with you yet. In Canada, when they welcome immigrants or refugees, they refer to them as 'new Canadians' – they are not labelled as outsiders. Belonging is spoken about from the start.

11. Identify the lighthouses that point to your belonging culture – that may be routines like all lining up outside before the school day, a piece of music, a rewards system – all of these things are lighthouses shining out all of the time. Make sure they are pointing to the thing you want them to.

12. Reinforce purpose with artefacts: that might be branded mugs, flags, banners, planners, special leavers' hoodies, golden ties, badges, certain colours – anything that is symbolic and a reminder of belonging to this specific place.

13. Overdo thank yous – but mean it. Praise, positivity, seeing people, thanking people all makes people feel seen and understood; in turn, that reinforces belonging.

14. Give everyone a voice: student panels, find the young people who you may NOT hear from, have joint panels with staff and students, involve them in decisions, create a charter, introduce a 'you said, we listened' – both ways, from students to staff and staff to students.

15. Consider a shadow SLT of students – ask them to debate and discuss some of the same things you do and see what they say.

16. Ensure that when you ask them for their opinion, you tell them what you have done with it.

17. Capitalise on threshold moments – end of a key stage, when they have done 10 years in school, 1000 days of school, proms, before exams, end of exams, unifying assemblies when there is a difficult event in the community, connection with others e.g. Christmas and how the school can serve others.

18. Ensure that 'whakapapa' is understood – that we are all connected to each other through the generations and that in reality none of us are judged by how much money we had or our status but by what we did for our 'tribe'. (See 'Belonging' by Owen Eastwood for more on this.)

19. Repeat your identity story in a compelling way: if you are a long-standing school, talk about what the walls could say if they talked, comment on what this school has been through. If you are a new school,

talk about the foundations on which it is built, that these young people are the founding members of this new tribe that will stretch on for generations – their children may come here!

20. Keep a logbook – each day, a couple of lines about what happened in the school. Wonderful for future generations to read and creates community and belonging over time.

21. Hot chocolate with the Head with students and take a picture of them all – goes in the logbook and when their children come to the school, they will be able to find their yearbook and see themselves. All helps with generational belonging.

22. Colour in together – give the broad brushstrokes of 'want to achieve' and then ask others to 'colour it in'. E.g. 'We would like to have a prom that celebrates individuality, respects the environment, is totally unique, is affordable and represents what we stand for. What should that prom look like?' Let the students think and 'colour in' within those lines.

23. Big shows of belonging – when a new year group comes to school on their first day, how are they celebrated and welcomed? For example, having a banner saying 'Welcome to our new Year Xs'; giving a letter to the reception parents as they drop them off on their first day to say that their children are going to love being part of this community; sending cards to Year 13 in September when they have left you to wish them luck as they go to university/ the workplace; reunions; sending 'we miss you' cards when someone has been absent for some time instead of an attendance letter.

24. Buddy systems – Year 11s writing to Year 7s, Year 7s writing to Year 6 to give advice and support or to say that they are looking forward to them joining the school. Build connections across age groups around a purpose. Some schools use 6th formers to help with some intervention lower down the school in the subjects they are themselves studying, which can go on to their application forms for university/jobs/apprenticeships.

25. Bridging worlds – primary teachers visiting secondary schools to see how their students have adapted, keep the connections between sectors going so the transition doesn't feel as bumpy. On the first day of Year 7, having the pictures of all the Year 6 teachers and saying to Year 7 parents and children that you thank them for all they have done for these children and now they are handing over the baton to these Year 7 teachers, and include their pictures. Anything that you can do to make the connections clear will help people feel safe and that they belong.

26. Start the belonging process before they even come to you. When places are allocated to your school, write to the new cohort welcoming them before they even come to you.

Some of these things are not expensive or time consuming but do require vision, planning and intention. If the result is that the members of your community feel they belong and, as a result of that, improve their life chances and outcomes, then surely it is an investment worth making.

The content of this paper is taken from ideas from the following books as well as from ideas from schools within the PiXL network:

- *The Culture Code** – **Daniel Coyle**
- *Belonging* – **Owen Eastwood**
- *The Power of Moments** – **Chip Heath and Dan Heath**
- *The Art of Gathering** – **Priya Parker**

(*Hear more on this book in the PiXL Leadership Bookclub podcast, available on all usual podcast platforms.)

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