

'HOW TO...' CREATE BELONGING

THE SCHOOL OF PiXL LEADERSHIP: EXCLUSIVE CONTENT

The aim of these PiXL Leadership Round Ups is to take some of the most challenging issues we face, collate some of the research and leadership thinking on these issues and then turn it into practical ideas you can adopt in school.

CREATING BELONGING (TRANSITION AND INDUCTION)

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 students 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 'The 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 no-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 release – 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 feeling 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 every day 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, prospectuses, lived and breathed and talked about all the time.
2. 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.
3. 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?
4. 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?
5. 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.
6. 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?

7. 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.
8. 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.
9. 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.
10. 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.
11. Overdo thank yous – but mean it. Praise, positivity, seeing people, thanking people all makes people feel seen and understood, in turn, that reinforces belonging.
12. 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, have your school make promises to staff and students, introduce a 'you said, we listened' – both ways, from students to staff and staff to students.
13. 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.
14. 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).
15. 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!
16. Keep a logbook – each day, a couple of lines about what happened in the school – wonderful for future generations to read.
17. 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 year book and see themselves. All helps with generational belonging.
18. Colour in together – give the broad brushstrokes of what 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.

19. Big shows of belonging – when new year groups come to school on their first day, how are they celebrated and welcomed? Could you have a banner, ‘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, reunions, sending ‘we miss you’ cards when someone has been absent for some time... instead of an attendance letter?
20. 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.

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:

*The Culture Code** – **Daniel Coyle**

Belonging – **Owen Eastwood**

*The Power of Moments** – **Chip Heath and Dan Heath**

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

The PiXL logo is displayed in a bold, orange, sans-serif font. The letter 'i' is lowercase and features a white dot above it. The letters 'P', 'X', and 'L' are uppercase. The background is dark grey with abstract geometric patterns, including a grid of diagonal lines in the top left, a grid of rounded rectangles in the top right, and concentric circles in the bottom right.

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