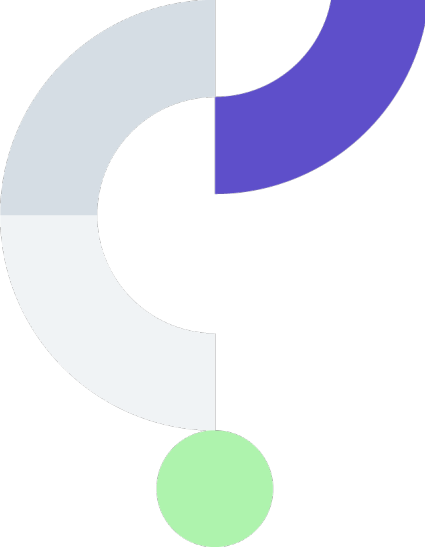




Reframing Belonging:

From How Students Feel to What K–12 Schools Build

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Why Belonging, Why Now?

In recent years, *student belonging* has emerged as a central concept in K–12 education. The term now appears frequently in district strategic plans, school climate initiatives, research–practice partnerships, and national conversations about student well-being and engagement. This growing attention reflects both a strong body of research linking belonging to student outcomes and a broader shift in how work that ensures all students learn and thrive in schools is framed in education policy and practice.



As terms such as *diversity*, *equity*, and *inclusion* and *culturally responsive and sustaining education* have become increasingly contested in public and policy discourse, many schools and systems have adopted the language of belonging as a more accessible and broadly resonant way to address and improve student experience, school culture, and inclusion. In many cases, this shift has opened up productive conversations about relationships, safety, voice, and participation. At the same time, it raises important questions about what happens when belonging becomes disconnected from broader conversations about power, opportunity, and inequity.

This paper proposes that belonging matters not simply because students need to feel connected but also because belonging shapes whether students are able to participate fully in the academic and social life of school. While belonging is often discussed as an individual feeling or perception, it is also produced through the environments and classroom norms that students experience every day. These include instructional practices, relationships, representation, access to opportunity, and institutional expectations.

This paper examines why belonging should be understood not only as a feeling to be measured but also as a condition to be intentionally cultivated as educators design inclusive environments characterized by relevant and engaging learning experiences. When belonging is reduced to perception alone, schools risk focusing on whether students report feeling included without examining the conditions that shape those experiences. When belonging is understood more broadly, however, it can serve as a powerful framework for designing schools in which all students are engaged, participating, contributing, and thriving.

This paper does not suggest that belonging is the only driver of student success, nor does it attempt to collapse related constructs such as engagement, connection, motivation, and inclusion into a single concept. Instead, it focuses on belonging because it has become an increasingly influential term in K–12 policy and practice. The question is no longer whether belonging matters but how educators define it, measure it, and act on it.



Belonging and Related Concepts

Belonging overlaps with related constructs such as school connectedness, engagement, motivation, and inclusion, but it is not reducible to any one of them. *Connection* often refers to relationships, *engagement* to participation in learning, *motivation* to persistence and effort, and *inclusion* to access and recognition within a community. In practice, however, *belonging* is increasingly used as an umbrella term that encompasses many of these ideas, often without sufficient clarity about what, specifically, schools are trying to cultivate.

What the Research Says About Belonging

A substantial interdisciplinary research base—spanning psychology, education, and sociology—demonstrates that students’ sense of belonging is strongly associated with positive academic and developmental outcomes.

Foundational studies established links between belonging and academic achievement, persistence, and motivation (Walton & Cohen, 2011; Yeager et al., 2016). More recent syntheses and international studies confirm and extend these findings. Belonging is increasingly understood as an important factor shaping learning, engagement, identity development, attendance, and student well-being (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2023; OECD, 2023).

Research also shows that belonging is especially consequential for students who have historically experienced exclusion or marginalization in school settings, including students of color, Multilingual Learners, students with disabilities, and students from low-income backgrounds. These students are more likely to experience identity threat, exclusionary discipline, limited representation, or



institutional messages that signal they are less capable or less valued within academic spaces (Steele, 1997; Walton & Brady, 2017).

Across the literature, belonging is commonly defined as students' feelings of being accepted, respected, included, and supported within a school environment (Goodenow, 1993; Osterman, 2000). At the same time, more recent research emphasizes that these feelings are shaped by broader social and institutional contexts, including classroom norms, instructional practices, relationships, and cultural signals about who belongs and who is expected to succeed (Binning et al., 2020; Murphy et al., 2020; Rattan et al., 2012).

Taken together, the research suggests that belonging is experienced individually but shaped collectively. Students' feelings of belonging emerge from the conditions of the environments in which they learn. This distinction has important implications for how schools measure belonging and how educators respond to what students report.

A Critical Gap: Belonging as Feeling vs. Belonging as Condition

A critical gap lies not in recognizing that belonging matters, but in how it is measured. Although research increasingly understands belonging as a condition shaped by context, most measures continue to treat it primarily as an individual feeling reported by students.

Recent scholarship underscores that belonging is produced through social, cultural, and institutional conditions, including norms about competence, behavior, and identity (Gray et al., 2018; Murphy et al., 2020). These conditions are not neutral. They influence who is recognized as capable, whose identities are affirmed, whose voices are valued, and who is positioned as an outsider within school communities (Nasir et al., 2013).



Yet many measurement tools and practical applications of belonging continue to emphasize students' reported feelings of acceptance and connection more than the instructional, cultural, and institutional conditions that shape those experiences (Gray et al., 2018; National Academy of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2023). As a result, they may give less attention to

- the cultural norms and expectations embedded within school environments,
- the distribution of voice and participation within classrooms,
- the pressure on students to adapt or assimilate in order to feel included,
- the role of access to rigorous learning opportunities in shaping belonging, and
- the relationship between belonging and broader patterns of students' access to opportunity.

Importantly, these issues are not absent from the educational research base more broadly. A substantial body of scholarship documents how disciplinary practices, representation, instructional norms, and institutional structures shape students' experiences of inclusion and exclusion. For example, research on exclusionary discipline demonstrates how school policies disproportionately marginalize Black students (Morris, 2016; Skiba et al., 2011). Studies on teacher diversity show how representation influences students' sense of recognition and academic opportunity (Gershenson et al., 2018). Scholarship on culturally responsive and sustaining pedagogy similarly highlights how dominant cultural norms shape whose ways of knowing and participating are valued in schools (Delpit, 1995; Paris & Alim, 2017).

Although recent scholarship increasingly situates belonging within broader social, instructional, and institutional contexts, these insights are not always fully reflected in how belonging is conceptualized, measured, and acted upon in educational practice (Allen et al., 2017; Gray et al., 2018; National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2023).



Survey Measures as a Starting Point

Belonging and school climate surveys can provide valuable insight into students' experiences of connection, safety, support, and inclusion. They can help schools identify patterns across student groups and surface important concerns about school culture. However, survey data are most useful when treated as a starting point for deeper inquiry into how a school's structures and practices influence belonging rather than as a complete picture of student experience.

When interpreted at face value, aggregate belonging scores from surveys can flatten complex realities and obscure important differences across contexts and student groups. Two students may report similar levels of belonging for very different reasons. One student may feel valued and empowered to participate fully in school life, while another may report belonging because they have learned how to navigate dominant expectations by suppressing aspects of their identity.

Used thoughtfully, perception data can help schools ask more meaningful questions: Who reports a strong sense of belonging and under what conditions? Who does not? What aspects of school culture shape these experiences? How do classroom norms, instructional practices, relationships, and access to opportunity influence belonging? Addressing these deeper questions requires moving beyond surveys alone to include interviews; focus groups; classroom observations; and analyses of data on participation, access, and opportunity. In this sense, measurement should function as an entry point into understanding the conditions that shape belonging—not the endpoint of the work.

Without this deeper inquiry, efforts to improve belonging risk responding to surface-level perceptions while leaving the underlying structural barriers to belonging for all students unaddressed.





The Risk: Belonging Without Transformation

When belonging initiatives focus only on helping students feel included without examining the conditions that shape inclusion, they can unintentionally reinforce inequitable systems rather than transform them. In some environments, students may report belonging because they have successfully adapted to dominant norms—not because schools themselves have become more responsive and inclusive. The following patterns illustrate how belonging efforts can fall short when they are disconnected from deeper questions about culture, participation, opportunity, and power.

Assimilation as Inclusion

Students may experience belonging only to the extent that they conform to dominant expectations about behavior, communication, identity, or academic participation. In these cases, belonging becomes conditional rather than transformative. Foundational work in culturally relevant and sustaining pedagogy warns against this dynamic by emphasizing that students should not have to suppress or replace their cultural identities in order to succeed academically (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Paris & Alim, 2017). More recent research similarly highlights that inclusion without institutional change can reproduce inequities rather than disrupt them (Philip et al., 2019; The Education Trust, 2022).

In practice, this issue can emerge when schools celebrate belonging rhetorically while continuing to privilege narrow definitions of participation, professionalism, language, or achievement. Students may report positive relationships with adults while still feeling pressure to minimize aspects of their identity in order to be viewed as capable or compliant.

Psychological Safety Without Access to Rigor

Belonging initiatives sometimes emphasize emotional safety and positive relationships without equal attention to academic challenge and opportunity.



Research suggests that belonging and rigor are not competing priorities. Students are most likely to thrive when they experience both strong support and meaningful intellectual challenge (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020; Hammond, 2015). Yet studies of instructional practice show that students—particularly historically marginalized students—continue to experience limited access to grade-level, intellectually demanding work even in environments described as supportive or welcoming (TNTP, 2021).

A focus on comfort alone can unintentionally lower expectations. True belonging requires that students be not only cared for but also recognized as capable of engaging in complex and rigorous learning.

Masking Structural Inequities

High levels of reported belonging can coexist with inequitable systems. Schools may report strong climate or belonging data and still maintain disproportionate discipline patterns, unequal access to advanced coursework, exclusionary practices, or curricula that marginalize certain identities and perspectives. In these situations, positive perceptions can obscure deeper inequities in participation, opportunity, and access.

As Nasir et al. (2013) argue, learning environments are shaped by racialized and cultural meanings that influence who is seen as competent and who belongs in particular academic spaces. Belonging, therefore, cannot be understood apart from broader opportunity structures.

These examples underscore a central limitation of approaches that rely on perception data alone: Improving how students feel is not sufficient if the conditions shaping those experiences remain unchanged.





Reframing Belonging: From Perception to Condition

Addressing these limitations requires reframing belonging not simply as an individual feeling but also as a condition intentionally cultivated through the design of learning environments. Belonging is produced through the interaction of relationships, instructional practices, participation structures, cultural norms, access to opportunity, and institutional expectations. So, rather than asking only whether students feel they belong, schools must also ask whether their environments make belonging genuinely possible for all students.

This paper defines the concept of belonging for all students as

a condition in which students are able to participate fully in the academic and social life of the school, maintain and express their identities, and engage in rigorous learning within environments that actively work to remove barriers to opportunity and participation.

Each element of this definition is important:

- **Full participation** means students are recognized as legitimate contributors to classroom and school communities.
- **Identity affirmation** means students do not need to suppress important aspects of themselves in order to belong.
- **Rigorous learning** ensures that belonging is connected to intellectual growth and expanded opportunity, not comfort alone.



- **Attention to barriers and inequities** recognizes that belonging is shaped by institutional structures, not only interpersonal relationships.

This definition shifts the conversation from simply interpreting student perceptions to examining and improving the environments that shape those perceptions. In practical terms, this means belonging work cannot be limited to climate surveys, relationship-building activities, or motivational messaging alone. It must also include attention to the following:

- who participates and whose voices are heard in classrooms
- which students have access to rigorous learning opportunities
- how discipline policies affect different groups of students
- whether all students see themselves represented in curricula and instruction
- how educators communicate expectations, competence, and possibility
- whether school systems respond to students' cultural and linguistic identities as assets rather than deficits

Understanding belonging in these ways helps position it as a framework for examining whether schools are organized in ways that support full participation and opportunity for all students.

The Central Role of Culture and Climate

Belonging is deeply connected to school culture and climate because students experience belonging through the day-to-day conditions of school life. Research consistently shows that environments supporting belonging tend to share several characteristics:

- psychological safety, which allows students to take academic and social risks without fear of humiliation or exclusion (Edmondson, 1999)



- identity affirmation that recognizes and values all students' cultural, linguistic, and racial identities (Gay, 2018; Paris & Alim, 2017)
- high expectations paired with meaningful support (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020; Hammond, 2015)
- access to rigorous and engaging learning opportunities for all students (TNTP, 2021)
- fair and restorative approaches to discipline for all (Gregory et al., 2016)
- curricula and pedagogy that reflect all students' histories, perspectives, and ways of knowing (Gay, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 1995)

Importantly, schools can appear welcoming on the surface while still creating environments that do not reflect all students' identities, experiences, or ways of participating. A school may foster warm relationships while simultaneously maintaining uneven participation patterns, exclusionary disciplinary practices, or limited access to advanced learning opportunities. For this reason, belonging cannot be understood as something shaped by climate alone. It emerges through the interaction of relational experiences and structural conditions that affect all students. Students are most likely to experience meaningful belonging when they are both supported relationally and positioned to participate fully in rigorous, relevant, affirming, and high-quality learning environments.

Belonging as a Bridge (and a Risk) in the Current Context

In the current national landscape, the concept of belonging can create openings for conversations about ensuring that all students have opportunities for full participation and students experience a welcoming and supportive school culture. It can be a bridge from what schools are to what they want to become—places where all students learn and thrive.



This can be productive. Focusing on belonging can help educators and school systems prioritize relationships, relevance, voice, connection, and inclusion in ways that matter deeply for students.

At the same time, there is a risk that belonging can become narrowed to questions of how students feel about their relationships and experiences in school while school practices and structures in place that keep some students from fully belonging are insufficiently addressed. When belonging is disconnected from issues of representation, participation, rigor, opportunity, and institutional context, it can become a more limited and less transformative framework.

Whether belonging functions as a bridge to the deeper work of ensuring that the school context supports all students to thrive or as a substitute for it depends on how schools define and operationalize the concept. As bell hooks (1994) reminds us, education should be a practice of freedom—one that enables students to critically engage with and transform the world, not simply adapt to it. Whether addressing belonging for all students functions as a bridge or a substitute depends on how explicitly it is connected to questions of identity, power, and opportunity. If belonging is understood as a condition to be designed rather than simply an outcome to be measured, the question becomes how educators and researchers can move from interpreting perception data to examining and transforming the conditions that shape student belonging in practice.

Guiding Questions for Practice and Research

If belonging is understood as a condition to be cultivated rather than simply a feeling to be measured, educators and researchers need practical ways to examine the environments that students experience. The following Guiding Questions are intended to support that work. These questions can inform school improvement efforts, guide interpretation of climate and belonging data, shape leadership reflection, and support research on school culture and student experience.



Belonging to What?

Schools and classrooms communicate expectations about whose voices, identities, and ways of participating are valued. Educators and leaders can ask the following:

- What explicit and implicit norms and expectations define participation in the school and classroom environments?
- Whose identities, histories, and perspectives are centered in curricula and instruction?
- Which students are consistently positioned as leaders, contributors, or “successful” learners?
- Do students experience belonging by being themselves or by adapting to dominant expectations?

In practice, these questions encourage educators to examine not only the norms and expectations that are explicitly communicated to students but also the implicit messages embedded in classroom interactions, instructional practices, and school culture. In many cases, barriers to belonging emerge not from stated rules but from unspoken assumptions about whose voices, behaviors, identities, and ways of participating are most valued.

Under What Conditions?

Belonging is shaped by the daily experiences that students have within school systems. Educators and leaders can ask the following:

- Do students have equitable access to rigorous and engaging learning opportunities?
- How do discipline policies and classroom practices affect different student groups?
- What are the barriers that limit full participation for some students?



- How are relationships, instructional practices, and support systems experienced across different groups of students?

These questions can guide analysis of survey data, focus groups, participation patterns, disciplinary trends, and access to advanced coursework.

Toward What Ends?

Belonging should support not only connection but also growth, opportunity, and long-term student success. Educators and leaders can ask the following:

- Does belonging support intellectual growth and rigorous learning?
- Are all students developing confidence, agency, and voice?
- Do school structures expand opportunity and participation for all students?
- Are efforts to improve belonging helping address broader inequities in student experience and outcomes?

In other words, improving how students feel about belonging is not enough without also improving the conditions that shape those feelings.

From Guiding Questions to Action

The purpose of the Guiding Questions is not simply to generate additional data but also to inform concrete improvements in school culture, instruction, and opportunity. When schools identify patterns in belonging data, they can use those findings to strengthen the conditions that support full participation for all students. The following are some examples of how schools might act in response to what they learn from the Guiding Questions:

- If students report that only certain voices are consistently heard in classrooms, teachers might adopt discussion protocols that ensure broader participation, such as structured turn-taking, collaborative learning routines, or student-led discussions.



- If students indicate that they do not see their identities, histories, or experiences reflected in learning, schools might review curriculum materials and instructional resources to increase representation and include a wider range of perspectives and ways of knowing.
- If belonging data reveal differences across student groups, leaders might examine discipline practices, participation patterns, access to advanced coursework, or extracurricular opportunities to identify and address barriers to participation.
- If students report feeling supported but insufficiently challenged, schools might focus on expanding access to rigorous, grade-level learning while providing the scaffolds and supports needed for success.
- If students express uncertainty about whether they are valued contributors to the school community, schools might create new opportunities for student voice in decision-making, advisory structures, peer leadership, or school improvement efforts.

These actions illustrate a broader principle: belonging improves not only when schools strengthen relationships but also when they intentionally examine and redesign the conditions that shape participation, representation, opportunity, and success.

Belonging Is Not Neutral

Belonging is a powerful and necessary component of student success. It becomes meaningful when all students are welcomed into environments that support full participation, affirm identity, communicate high expectations, and expand access to opportunity.

Without attention to culture, participation, rigor, and institutional conditions, efforts to improve belonging may leave underlying inequities unchanged. Realizing the



promise of belonging as an equity-oriented construct requires deliberate action across research, policy, practice, and design.

- **For researchers**, this means continuing to examine how belonging interacts with related constructs such as engagement, motivation, inclusion, and opportunity and developing approaches that connect perception data to analyses of the institutional conditions.
- **For educators and school leaders**, it means designing environments in which all students experience strong relationships alongside rigorous and relevant learning, meaningful participation, identity affirmation, and access to opportunity.
- **For developers and reviewers of educational tools and interventions**, it means asking not only whether products claim to support belonging but how they shape participation, voice, representation, and access within learning environments.

Ultimately, belonging fulfills its promise when schools become places in which students can fully participate, contribute, and thrive as their authentic selves. In this sense, belonging is not simply a goal of schooling. It is a lens for examining whether the conditions of schooling themselves are of high quality, relevant, supportive, fair, and worthy of the students they serve.





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