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Inclusion, Belonging, and Safety in London Schools

Full report on behalf of London's Violence Reduction Unit

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"One of the biggest responsibilities that we have as educators is to create environments where children have a sense of belonging, where their identity and how they wish to be seen is encouraged and supported"

Executive Head, Multi-Academy Trust

VRU | MAYOR OF LONDON
VIOLENCE REDUCTION UNIT

UNIVERSITY OF BATH

Contents

Executive Summary

The University of Bath were commissioned by London's Violence Reduction Unit (VRU) to research how to improve inclusion across London's schools. Research shows that to be included, students must feel a sense of school belonging. This has two aspects; firstly, feeling individually and socially accepted in school, and secondly, having a secure sense of emotional, social and physical safety. The main aim of the study was therefore, to capture students' perspectives on what they need to feel a sense of belonging and safety in school.

Between November 2023 and January 2024, we surveyed 3,473 students, across all 32 London boroughs and heard from 87 students in a series of focus groups. We also engaged 145 parents and 179 educators through an online survey, and a further 19 school leaders and educators via interviews and focus groups.

This report details the key research findings and what these tell us about the principles and values that should underpin actions to improve school inclusion across London.

Belonging in London's schools is generally good, but not for all groups of children and young people.

Two-thirds of primary aged students (66%) and over half of secondary aged students (56%) feel a secure sense of belonging in school. However, some groups reported a weaker sense of belonging than their peers:

- ***Female*** and ***trans/gender-diverse*** students reported a weaker sense of belonging than males.
- All ***non-heterosexual*** students reported a weaker sense of belonging, particularly ***gay/lesbian*** and ***asexual*** students.
- Secondary school aged students who are ***Black/Black British*** reported slightly weaker levels of belonging.
- ***Sikh*** and ***Atheist*** students reported a weaker sense of belonging at both primary and secondary age. Among primary aged students, ***Muslim*** children also reported a weaker sense of belonging, while for secondary school aged students ***Buddhists*** reported a weaker sense of belonging.
- Students who self-identified as ***neurodivergent, care-experienced, refugees, asylum seekers*** or as having a ***disability/impairment*** also reported weaker belonging at both primary and secondary level.
- ***Socio-economic disadvantage***[1] did not appear to negatively affect students' sense of belonging.

Three key factors emerged as crucial for securing children's sense of belonging at school.

The three key factors that support children's belonging were similar for primary and secondary aged children, and included:

- ***Respect for social identity, acceptance and diversity:*** Respect, acceptance and diversity held the greatest importance for primary and secondary school-aged students' school belonging. Students who had English as an additional language (EAL) emphasised it even more strongly than their peers. Among primary students, it was particularly important for students of all ethnic minority backgrounds (excluding white minorities). For secondary school aged students, it was especially important among those who were socio-economically disadvantaged.
- ***Friendship and peer relationships:*** Friendship (the close and supportive bonds between children) was most important for students who were white and not socio-economically deprived across both primary and secondary, while peer relationships (children's interactions across a broader group of peers) were more important for students who were socio-economically disadvantaged and had a disability/ impairment. Students described friendships as their 'support system' in school, enabling them to 'be themselves;' offering a protection from judgement and a motivator to come to school for those who were otherwise reluctant.
- ***Identity building and affirming:*** While feeling able to be themselves at school was important for all students, some students spoke about this feeling almost impossible, having to hide aspects of themselves to be accepted by peers, and the importance of fitting in. Among secondary-aged respondents, feeling able to be themselves was seen to be particularly important for students who were female, cisgender, and heterosexual.

[1] Using receipt of Free School Meals (FSM) and Pupil Premium (PP), alongside home postcode, students were categorised as either 'socio-economically disadvantaged' or 'not socio-economically disadvantaged.'

Barriers exist within schools and the education system that impede children's sense of belonging.

- Educators, parents and students drew attention to three key barriers to students' sense of belonging and safety in school;
- ***Lack of flexibility to meet the child's needs:*** Unmet learning and emotional needs were key barriers to belonging. A lack of access to funds, external support, and resources were seen by educators to particularly affect mainstream schools, leading to relational challenges between staff and students, and failure to accommodate students with special educational needs and disabilities.
- ***Pressure and stress:*** Students and parents raised the stressor of various pressures in school as a key barrier to belonging and safety. Most pressing on students was attainment-related pressure, where students felt that teachers' over focus on exam results and achievement led to anxiety, lack of self-esteem and a sense of foreboding about the future.
- ***Negative relationships between staff and students:*** The approachability and availability of staff, – particularly those in senior and safeguarding roles, – were key factors in encouraging or discouraging students to reach out when they needed staff support.

Feeling emotionally safe is most important for children, but feeling socially and physically safe is also crucial.

- Emotional safety was most important for feeling safe in school for students of all ages. Fair and respectful staff-student relationships were seen to be the best way for schools to support this. Students from all faith groups rated this particularly highly. Students related feeling emotionally unsafe to times when they felt that they didn't conform to teachers' views of what students 'should be,' and when their learning style, ability and skills weren't respected.
- Social safety was primary school students' second most important aspect of safety. Being confident that the school will effectively deal with bullying and discrimination was identified by students of all ages as the factor that most supported their sense of social safety. This was particularly important for children who were socio-economically disadvantaged, female, and for children of all minority ethnic backgrounds (excluding white minorities).
- Physical safety was secondary-aged students' second most important aspect of safety. No threat of crime or physical violence in schools was highly important for students, particularly for those who were white, Asian/ Asian British and Hindu. While there was little discussion of crime and physical violence in focus groups, students did raise the fear of fights and knife crime within school.

Recommendations

Schools in London can take key actions to strengthen children's sense of belonging, safety and inclusion.

Based on focus group discussions with school leaders, educators and students, we recommend the following actions that schools across London can take to strengthen belonging, safety and inclusion for all children. Specific actions that schools can take are organised under four principles that form the basis of London's Inclusion Charter (London's Violence Reduction Unit, 2024):

- **Embedding equity and diversity** encapsulates initiatives which either celebrate uniqueness and diversity or actively challenge discrimination and prejudice. From classroom displays, to curriculum design and explicitly exploring notions of identity, these actions focus on the right of every student to feel a sense of belonging and safety in school.
- **Students as active citizens** involves actions that engage young people in contributing to and shaping both the school community and wider community. Relational approaches to conflict resolution, and initiatives which foster agency, support students to experience belonging by experiencing participation.
- **Being adaptable and reflective** covers a wide-ranging set of actions, - from organisational approaches to classroom strategies, - that promote professional curiosity and a culture that seeks to understand how to support students' diverse needs. Developing practices that are flexible and responsive as opposed to rigid enables equity, supporting belonging.
- **Beyond academic achievement** involves actions which look beyond academic and formal learning to the broader development of young people. Trips, experiences and non-academic learning tackle exclusion by raising aspirations through identity development, building self-worth, and the social and emotional skills needed to thrive and help students make connections between school learning and the wider world.

For the principles to make a meaningful difference to students' sense of belonging and safety at school they needed to be undertaken in tandem with key values:

- **Relational values**
- **Care and nurture**

Finally, educators called for a greater understanding, - and more explicit discussion of,- the importance of **identity building** and **identity affirming** in the task of supporting school belonging and safety. While interactions, experiences and relationships at school shape young people's sense of who they are and what their futures may hold, the experience of belonging in school shapes young people's aspirations and expectations around belonging in the workplace, at college and in the wider world.

Introduction

Research overview

in November 2023, Ceri Brown, Michael Donnelly, Alison Douthwaite and Yusuf Olaniyan from the University of Bath were commissioned by London's Violence Reduction Unit (VRU) to undertake a piece of research on inclusion and belonging in schools across all London boroughs.

The primary aim was to capture students' perspectives on what they need from education to feel the sense of belonging and safety necessary to be included and succeed at school. Equally important were the views of education leaders, practitioners and parents on what schools need to be more inclusive. To achieve this, we engaged with thousands of students from across all 32 London boroughs. Between November 2023 and January 2024, we asked 3,473 students in London about what would help them to feel a greater sense of safety and belonging at school. Students came from 81 schools that were located across all 32 London boroughs, reflecting the diversity of the city.

We also talked to 87 students directly through a series of focus groups, to enable more in-depth discussion of the things that mattered to them the most. As well as talking to students, we engaged parents and teachers. The views of 145 parents, and 179 educators, were captured through an online survey, and we also carried out interviews and focus groups with a further 19 school leaders and educators.

To enhance the accessibility and inclusivity of our research tools, we worked with the VRU's Young People's Action Group (YPAG) who offered us invaluable guidance and insights. The online survey contained images to support understanding and communication. Similarly, images were used during the focus groups and interviews to support students to express their conceptualization and feelings about school belonging and safety.

In return we offered research methods training with YPAG, which stimulated more critical reflection and informed feedback on our tools and approach, as well as leading to YPAG participation in facilitating focus groups with students, further strengthening the youth voice within our research.

Defining key terms: inclusion, belonging, safety and identity

The focus of our study includes a number of key concepts, which are further explained in the literature review section of this report, in terms of how they have been understood and studied in the educational research (see appendix 4). Drawing from this literature, we provide below brief descriptors for how we can best understand these important ideas.

Inclusion: We understand inclusion to encompass the related concepts of recognition, acceptance, understanding and respect for diversity and difference. This involves both a perceptual level, whereby the individual feels heard and valued for their unique skills, characteristics and perspectives, as well as for their collective membership in terms of their social and cultural backgrounds, groups and communities. Inclusion also has an applied meaning whereby barriers to participation are removed in order that every individual is engaged to participate and where recognition of the value of the individual and social aspects of diversity are a fundamental part of the learning community.

Belonging: A sense of school belonging is defined as:

"That sense of being somewhere where you can be confident that you will fit in and feel safe in your identity, a feeling of being at home in a place, and of being valued," (Riley, 2022b) and,

"The extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others in the school environment," (Goodenow and Grady, 1993)

Belonging is central to self-worth, motivation, and the foundation for learning. School inclusion depends upon students feeling a sense of belonging and connection to the communities that they are part of. Schools have a vital role to support and strengthen students' sense of belonging to the school community, their peers, families, local community and broader society.

Safety: There are three dimensions of safety that enable students to feel a sense of belonging and security in the different communities that they are a part of. Emotional safety is the sense of being accepted for who you truly are as an individual, that your feelings are recognised and that your needs are met. Social safety is about mutual respect and feeling secure in the absence of harassment, discrimination or intimidation. Physical safety is a sense of security in the absence of harm or injury to self or others.

Identity: Identity is multifaceted. Individual identity involves feeling known and valued for our strengths and limitations, and what sets us apart from others as unique and 'special'. Social identity involves feeling recognised and valued for our social characteristics including gender, faith, ethnicity, sexuality, ability, and socio-economic background, as well as the intersectionality between these characteristics (how these different characteristics interact). This social dimension relates to our family, cultural, community, peer group and citizenship identities. Providing opportunities for students to build and affirm their identities is a central way in which schools can strengthen students' sense of belonging and safety

Research methodology [2]

Our survey sample was selected to include the voices of young people from each of London's 32 boroughs and include a mix of primary (Years 4 to 6), secondary (Years 7 to 11) and alternative provision pupils from these age ranges. Parents and carer respondents were invited via networks of parent carer champions across London.

A descriptive analysis of the survey data was carried out. For binary response questions this involved calculating the proportion of respondents indicating different responses, whilst the responses to Likert questions were analysed by calculating mean score and response ranking.

A differentiated analysis of this data was also conducted to explore perspectives on school belonging according to race, ethnicity, gender, socio-economic status, sexuality and other notable characteristics including disability, neurodiversity, refugee status, asylum seeker status, having English as an additional language, being a young carer or being care-experienced. In collecting data on race, gender and sexuality, we used the categories drawn upon by the Office for National Statistics (ONS). To take into account socio-economic status, we drew on the Pupil Premium / Free School Meals data as well as information on respondents' postcodes, to provide a proxy measure of socio-economic status.

The smaller sample sizes, particularly in terms of respondents from certain race, ethnicity and faith based groups, or those with social characteristics such as being refugees, asylum seekers or being care-experienced, mean that we cannot draw conclusions about how representative these experiences may be. For this reason, in terms of race/ethnicity, we report on the broader level ONS categories owing to smaller sample sizes in lower-level category groupings.

Qualitative data was gathered via student and educator focus groups (both in-person and online) to enable deeper exploration of their perspectives and the reasons for these. Thematic analysis of the transcribed conversations enabled the identification of key themes and the links between them.

The last step in the analysis involved us looking at 'what' participants told us was important through the quantitative data and 'why' it was important according to the qualitative data. This report presents both sets of insights.

Participants' demographic information

Setting Type and Location

32 boroughs

24 secondary schools

38 primary schools

13 PRUs and APs

Surveys

3473 Total student surveys

1395 primary-aged students

2078 secondary-aged students

179 educator surveys

145 parent/ carer surveys

Focus Groups

76 secondary-aged students

12 primary-aged students

19 school leaders

[2] See Appendix 6 for more detailed information about the study methodology

Social characteristics of student survey respondents

Socio-economic Status[3]	Socio-economic Status Secondary	N	%
	Not socio-economically Disadvantaged	1361	74.9
	Socio-economically Disadvantaged	456	25.1
	Total	**1817**	**100**

Socio-economic Status Primary (SES)	N	%
Not socio-economically Disadvantaged	524	42.8
Socio-economically Disadvantaged	701	57.2
Total	**1225**	**100**

Ethnicity[4]	Ethnicity Secondary	N	%
	White	897	44.4
	Asian or Asian British	439	21.8
	Black or Black British	224	11.1
	Mixed Heritage	212	10.5
	Other Ethnic Groups	134	6.6
	Prefer not to say	112	5.6
	Total	**2018**	**100**

Ethnicity Primary	N	%
White	305	22.1
Asian or Asian British	451	32.8
Black or Black British	184	13.4
Mixed Heritage	108	7.8
Other Ethnic Groups	102	7.4
Prefer not to say	227	16.5
Total	**1377**	**100**

Faith	Faith Secondary	N	%
	Christian (All denominations)	562	28.2
	Muslim	430	21.6
	Atheist	280	14.1
	Jewish	21	1.1
	Buddhist	18	0.9
	Hindu	106	5.3
	Sikh	36	1.8
	No religion	391	19.6
	Any other religion	27	1.4
	Prefer not to say	120	6.0
	Total	**1991**	**100**

[3] Pupil Premium / Free School Meals data and information on respondent's postcode was used to provide a proxy measure of socio-economic status

[4] The survey used the harmonised ethnic group question recommended by The Office for National Statistics. For a full breakdown of the number of student responses for each Ethnicity subcategory, please see Appendix 5

Faith (continued)	Faith Primary	N	%
	Christian (All denominations)	391	28.9
	Muslim	535	39.5
	Atheist	35	2.6
	Jewish	2	0.1
	Buddhist	8	0.6
	Hindu	103	7.6
	Sikh	52	3.8
	No religion	151	11.2
	Any other religion	19	1.4
	Prefer not to say	58	4.3
	Total	**1354**	**100**

Sexuality Profile - Secondary[5]	Sexuality Secondary	N	%
	Heterosexual	193	36.6
	Bisexual	78	14.8
	Gay/Lesbian	51	9.7
	Asexual	38	7.2
	Queer	36	6.8
	Pansexual	33	6.3
	I don't know	50	9.5
	I don't want to answer	49	9.3
	Total	**528**	**100**

Gender Profile –Secondary[6]	Gender Secondary	N	%
	Male	974	43.0
	Female	926	40.9
	Cisgender	206	9.1
	Transgender	34	1.5
	Gender Fluid	33	1.5
	Non-Binary	31	1.4
	Gender Neutral	30	1.3
	Other	31	1.4
	Total	**2265**	**100**

[5] Note that 1550 respondents did not answer the question about sexuality

[6] The survey asked students to self-identify gender and sexuality. Students were able to choose multiple or individual categories. For instance they could select Transgender and Female, or only Transgender.

Other Notable Social Characteristics	Other - Secondary	N	%
	English is not my first language	311	19.0
	Neurodivergent	231	14.1
	Young Carer	117	7.2
	Have an impairment	60	3.7
	Refugee	56	3.4
	Living with a different family in a different home	43	2.6
	Asylum Seeker	29	1.8
	Others	201	12.3
	I don't want to answer	586	35.9
	Total	**1634**	**100**

Other - Primary	N	%
English is not my first language	261	20.5
Neurodivergent	92	7.2
Young Carer	135	10.6
Have an impairment or disability	42	3.3
Refugee	44	3.5
Living with a different family in a different home	65	5.1
Asylum Seeker	23	1.8
Others	125	9.8
I don't want to answer	485	38.1
Total	**1272**	**100**

179 educator surveys

19 educators in focus groups

Educator roles	
Teacher	26.8%
Deputy/Assistant Headteacher	16%
Headteachers	11%
Subject Lead	6.7%
Teaching Assistant/HLTA	6.1%
Pastoral Lead	5.6%
SLT	5%
Inclusion Lead	2.8%
Safeguarding Lead	2.8%
Support Worker	3.9%
Support Worker	3.9%
SENCo	1.7%
Mentor	1.7%
Wellbeing Lead	1%
Other	5%

145 parent/carer surveys

Parent/Carer roles	
Parent	93.9%
Carer	2.3%
Guardian	1.5%
Other family member	2.3%

Who feels a sense of belonging in London schools?

Over half of students reported that they feel a secure sense of belonging in school (see Figure 1). Among those secondary-aged, 56.4% of students report a secure sense of belonging (16.8% feel a 'strong' sense of belonging, while 39.6% 'usually' feel a sense of belonging). This is higher among primary-aged students where 66.3% report secure belonging (33.4% report a 'strong' sense of belonging and 32.9% report 'usually'). This echoes the literature that suggests that school belonging declines within adolescence (Newman et al 2007).

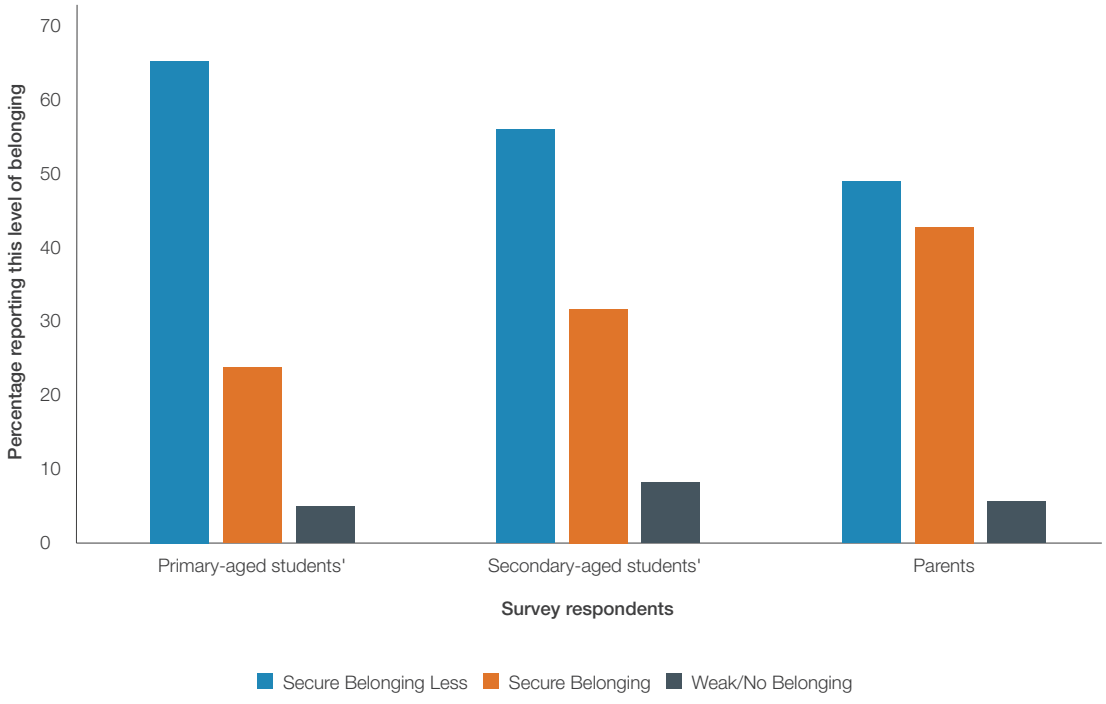
A third of secondary-aged students and almost a quarter of primary-aged students gave less certain responses ('*yes, a bit*' or '*I don't know*'), suggesting an ambivalent sense of belonging, while a significant minority said they '*do not feel any sense of belonging at school at all,*' (5.2% of primary-aged and 7.8% of secondary-aged students). This is a cohort of pupils who would benefit from deeper understanding and targeted actions to build school belonging.

Parents/carers perceived that their children experienced more difficulties in feeling belonging than pupils themselves reported (see figure 1). 49.6% of parents felt that their child had a secure or usually secure sense of belonging, in comparison to 66.3% of primary-aged and 56.4% of secondary-aged pupils. While reports of an enduring sense of not belonging were similar (6% of parents as compared to 5.2% of primary-aged and 7.8% of secondary-aged pupils), parents tended to report an ambivalent sense of belonging (44.2% of parents as compared to 24.1% of primary-aged and 32.1% of secondary-aged pupils).

Who feels belonging at secondary school age: A differentiated analysis

This section presents findings from secondary-aged pupils according to some of their key characteristics, including sexuality, ethnicity, faith, gender, socio-economic status (SES) and other key factors. Survey and focus group findings from pupils aged 12 and above in mainstream schools, special schools, alternative provisions and pupil referral units gave further insights into who feels a sense of belonging and how this was distributed across the school population.

Figure 1: Who feels a sense of belonging: comparing primary-aged students, secondary-aged students and parents' views



Socio-economic status

Using receipt of Free School Meals (FSM) and Pupil Premium (PP), alongside home postcode, students were categorised as either '*Socio-economically disadvantaged* or *'Not socio-economically disadvantaged*.' Deprivation level did not account for observable differences in pupils' sense of school belonging (see Figure 2).

A lower percentage of the *'Not socio-economically disadvantaged'* group (15.7%) report a strong sense of belonging compared to the *'Socio-economically disadvantaged'* group (20%) (see figure 2). Conversely, the largest proportion of pupils in both groups, '*Not socio-economically disadvantaged* '(39.5%) and '*Socio-economically disadvantaged* '(40.4%), 'usually' feel a sense of belonging, indicating a generally similar level of belonging regardless of socio-economic status (SES).

Figure 2: Do you feel a sense of belonging (secondary-aged students according to socio-economic status)

Do you feel a sense of belonging?	Not Deprived		Deprived	
	N	%	N	%
Yes, a strong sense of belonging	213	15.7	91	20
Yes, usually	538	39.5	184	40.4
Yes, a bit	305	22.5	94	20.6
No	112	8.2	31	6.8
I don't know	143	10.5	41	9.0
I don't want to answer	50	3.7	15	3.3
Total	**1361**	**100**	**456**	**100**

While there are differences in the percentages, the overall pattern suggests that students from both socio-economically disadvantaged and non-socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds have more similarities than differences in their feelings of belonging in school. This indicates that factors other than socio-economic status play a significant role in shaping students' sense of belonging. This reflects the findings of a recent study suggesting that school belonging is weakly correlated with traditional measures of disadvantage such as socio-economic status (Philp et al. 2022) and advocating for greater attention to other aspects of pupils' identity that might intersect with socio-economic status to better understand the factors impacting school belonging.

Gender

Important differences start to emerge when examining secondary-aged responses by gender. Pupils who identify as Non-binary, Gender neutral, Female, Transgender and Gender fluid struggle the most with their sense of belonging at secondary school (see figure 3). There is also a discrepancy between the proportion of Female (12.4%) and Male (22.2%) students reporting a strong sense of belonging. 17% of students who self-identified as cisgender express a strong sense of belonging. In contrast, Transgender (14.7%), Gender Fluid (15.2%), Non-binary (9.7%), and Gender-Neutral (10%) students report notably lower percentages of strong belonging. The lowest percentage is seen in the 'Other 'category (6.5%), suggesting these groups may face more challenges in feeling fully integrated into the school community.

It is notable that students who self-identified as Transgender, Gender Fluid, Non-binary, Gender Neutral show a substantial percentage of students feeling no sense of belonging (22.6% and 36.7%, respectively), showing significant feelings of alienation.

Figure 3: Do you feel a sense of belonging? (secondary-aged participants according to gender identity)

Do you feel a sense of belonging?	Overall Cohort	Female	Male	Cis gender	Trans gender	Gender Fluid	Non-binary	Gender Neutral	Other
	N 2265	N 926	N 974	N 206	N 34	N 33	N 31	N 30	N 31
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Yes, a strong sense of belonging	16.8	12.4	22.2	17	14.7	15.2	9.7	10	6.5
Yes, usually	39.6	40.2	39.9	42.7	20.6	30.3	22.6	26.7	38.7
Yes, a bit	21.9	23.5	16	16	17.6	9.1	16.1	6.7	29.0
No	7.8	7.7	7.3	7.3	23.5	27.3	22.6	36.7	16.1
I don't know	10.2	11.6	8.5	11.7	8.8	6.1	9.7	6.7	3.2
I don't want to answer	3.7	4.6	2.4	5.3	14.7	12.1	19.4	13.3	6.5
Total	**100**	**100**	**100**	**100**	**100**	**100**	**100**	**100**	**100**

Qualitative data: Gender

In focus group discussions, both pupils and staff referred to the Department for Education's publicised forthcoming transgender guidance for schools, expressing fears around the impact this may have. One young person worried that the guidance would mean schools would "out trans kids to their parents if they told the teacher that they were trans or gay" and felt "it isn't right, because you don't know if their parents are abusive." ML, Student, Alternative Provision.

This may offer some insight into factors underpinning the reduced sense of school belonging among these pupils. Young people who are exploring their gender identity or identify as trans/gender-diverse may be fearful about how open they can be about this aspect of their identities in schools, now and in the future when the guidance is published. It also hints that acceptance at school may be especially important for those young people whose families and communities are not accepting of gender difference.

Illustrating and illuminating the barriers to school belonging faced by this cohort, this young person's viewpoint was immediately challenged by a peer who argued:

> "This is education, this is not like talking about boys, girls, black and stuff... if you want to like learn about sexuality, gay, whatever, go to like one of those talks things, learn on Google."

This suggests that this cohort of students may well hear, both from fellow students, and in the media, that their needs and identities are deemed unacceptable, unwelcome or irrelevant by others in the school context. In this instance, there was a perceived conflict of rights, between the right of the transgender student to be able to explore and learn about their identity, and the right of their Muslim peer who felt this went against their faith.

Educators also expressed concern that government guidance around gender identity "*and how you support those children isn't that helpful*," SE, Headteacher, Secondary and Director, Multi-Academy Trust. Mentioning that it is "*hot in the press*", another teacher commented,

> "We have children here, pupils here, that are exploring if you like. I think education always has to have an open dialogue and for children to know that they're able to talk about these things without being judged, without punishment... there could be a reason why that child is not telling their parents for whatever reason."
>
> AA, SUBJECT LEAD, SPECIAL EDUCATION

This school leader expressed a tension between a parents' right to know about their child and the young person's right to privacy and protection.

In light of recent research highlighting the importance of an accepting and supportive school climate to perceptions of school belonging for trans/gender-diverse students (Ullman 2022), the reduced levels of school belonging reported by this cohort in our study may perhaps result from their feeling a lack of acceptance from some peers and a lack of clarity from staff and in educational policy about how best to support them.

Boys reported higher perceived levels of belonging than girls via the survey; the issue of sexism was raised several times within focus group discussions. An executive head explained that they have "*done a lot of work around equity... in terms of kids and their identities and things and the challenge of racist behaviour, sexist, homophobia, transphobic sort of stuff*." Students too talked about "*young people being like homophobic or racist or like sexist,*" and mentioned hearing "*a lot of like... like Andrew Tate and stuff,*" particularly in the "*younger years*" and expressed worry about that.

Given that recent research has shown that perceptions of stereotypical gender beliefs are negatively correlated with belonging across different social contexts for girls (Barth et al. 2022), deeper understanding of where girls are experiencing prejudicial attitudes within schools, whether in classroom interaction, particular curriculum areas or peer interactions for instance, could help in effectively countering this. It was notable that when girls specifically referred to boys' actions encroaching on their sense of safety or belonging, it related to rough physical behaviour. One girl explained, "*we had an issue previously when boys would just go around slapping each other's heads... crossing a boundary... and then they end up doing it to other people.*" Another girl described how "*you'll see aggression, even just like pushing in the corridors because it gets really packed sometimes so you just feel that sometimes you're about to get knocked over.*" This implies that fear of physically rough interactions may be an additional factor inhibiting a sense of belonging for girls.

Sexuality

Sexuality perhaps represents a greater cause for concern in terms of secondary-aged participants' sense of belonging, with larger discrepancies identified here between groups. Heterosexual students collectively exhibited a stronger sense of belonging, with 54.4% selecting *'yes, usually' or* '*yes, a strong sense of belonging.'* However, Gay/Lesbian (33.3%), asexual (23.7%), and queer (19.4%) students show greater levels of ambivalence[7] in their responses, with more choosing to respond '*yes, a bit*' or '*I don't know*.' Definite negative responses are notably higher for non-heterosexual students, particularly among asexual (31.6%) and Gay/Lesbian (27.5%) students, underscoring the challenges they face in feeling a sense of belonging in their school environment.

It is notable that less than a quarter of students answered the sexuality question. While between 1991 and 2265 students responded to questions about other aspects of their identities, only 528 answered the sexuality question, with 50 of those selecting '*I don't want to answer*.' This suggests more work is needed to better understand the factors impacting school belonging for secondary students of different sexual orientations.

Figure 4: Do you feel a sense of belonging (Secondary-aged students, according to sexuality)

Do you feel a sense of belonging?	Overall Cohort	Hetero sexual	Bi sexual	Gay/ Lesbian	Asexual	Queer	Pan sexual	I don't know	I don't want to answer
	N 528	N 193	N 78	N 51	N 38	N 36	N 33	N 50	N 49
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Yes, a strong sense of belonging	16.8	15.5	7.7	5.9	7.9	5.6	9.1	6	4.1
Yes, usually	39.6	38.9	42.3	25.5	21.1	41.7	30.3	42	32.7
Yes, a bit	21.9	21.8	15.4	25.5	10.5	8.3	6.1	12	22.4
No	7.8	10.9	15.4	27.5	31.6	22.2	27.3	16	18.4
I don't know	10.2	6.2	7.7	7.8	13.2	11.1	15.2	16	8.2
I don't want to answer	3.7	6.7	11.5	7.8	15.8	11.1	12.1	8	14.3
Total	**100**	**100**	**100**	**100**	**100**	**100**	**100**	**100**	**100**

Qualitative data: Sexuality

Our secondary-aged student survey findings echo recent research findings that students from different sexuality-based groups are disproportionately impacted by bullying at school, may have lower attendance level and be overrepresented in alternative provisions and exclusions (Kutsyuruba et al. 2015). Focus group discussions with students in our study suggest that their reduced sense of school belonging may be due to both prejudice from peers and a lack of support in schools to counter this. For instance, one student commented of their mainstream secondary school:

> "there's quite a toxic culture of like young people being like homophobic or racist or like sexist just because they're not being taught about it properly... usually most schools just put on like another assembly, that half the kids go off in, so there needs to be a better way of like actually educating kids."
>
> SW, STUDENT, SECONDARY.

As with gender, school climate and culture may be hindering school belonging for LGBTQ+ students, with prejudice from peers being ineffectively, or tokenistically addressed. This was reiterated by other students who mentioned that "*people will say things that are just blatantly homophobic... and nobody will do anything*." Discrimination not being challenged during exchanges in the school day and infrequent instances of addressing homophobia in the curriculum were the factors mentioned by students in our focus groups.

Almost all students who referred to sexuality during focus group discussions called for schools to do more in terms of challenging discrimination and educating about difference. However, we also heard from a student who felt that *"school is to get an education, it's not for us to like learn about our sexuality. It's not their business what everyone is, if you're gay, bisexual, whatever, that's not school's business."* This may reflect a section of students who are not sympathetic to the experiences of students with non-dominant sexualities, or alternatively a fear about the way that sexuality status may be responded to by the school.

[7]Ambivalent belonging refers to responses 'Yes, a bit' and 'I don't know;' responses which indicate a hesitancy or uncertainty about their sense of belonging.

Ethnicity

White, Asian/Asian British, and Black /Black British students show a relatively consistent pattern, with 56-58% responding, 'Yes, *usually'* or '*yes, a strong sense of belonging'*. Mixed Heritage students have a similar trend, although slightly lower at 53%. Students who self-categorised as 'Other'[8] indicate lower levels of belonging while those who selected the 'Prefer not to say' category contain a significant number of students choosing not to disclose their feelings on belonging, hinting at possible complexities or sensitivities in their school experience. While the percentages of students who report not feeling a sense of belonging are relatively small across all groups, they are notably higher in some groups, for instance Black or Black British (9.8%) and those of 'Other' ethnic backgrounds (9%).

Figure 5: Do you feel a sense of belonging? (secondary-aged participants according to race)

Do you feel a sense of belonging?	Overall Cohort	White	Asian or Asian British	Black or Black British	Mixed Heritage	Other	Prefer not to say
	N 2018	N 897	N 439	N 224	N 212	N 134	N 112
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Yes, a strong sense of belonging	16.8	17.3	17.5	16.5	15.6	12.7	17.9
Yes, usually	39.6	41.0	39.0	38.8	37.7	39.6	36.6
Yes, a bit	21.9	21.0	21.6	24.6	23.6	25.4	17.0
No	7.8	7.4	8.0	9.8	7.5	9.0	5.4
I don't know	10.2	10.1	10.9	8.0	11.8	10.4	8.9
I don't want to answer	3.7	3.2	3.0	2.2	3.8	3.0	14.3
Total	**100**	**100**	**100**	**100**	**100**	**100**	**100**

Faith

A significant proportion of Christians (all denominations) and Muslims report a strong sense of belonging (16.5% and 19.1%, respectively); which is significantly higher than is the case for Jewish secondary-aged participants (9.5%). The 'No' responses are particularly high among Buddhist (16.7%), Jewish (9.5%) and Atheist students (13.2%). The '*I don't know*' responses, representing uncertainty about belonging, are notably higher among Sikh (16.7%) and Jewish (14.3%) students compared to others.

Figure 6: Do you feel a sense of belonging? (secondary-aged participants according to faith)

Do you feel a sense of belonging?	Overall Cohort	Christians All denom	Muslim	Atheist	Jewish	Buddhist	Hindu	Sikh	No religion	Other	Prefer not to say
	N 1991	N 562	N 430	N 280	N 21	N 18	N 106	N 36	N 391	N 27	N 120
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Yes, a strong sense of belonging	16.8	16.5	19.1	17.5	9.5	-	17.0	22.2	15.1	3.7	18.3
Yes, usually	39.6	39.7	39.5	40.7	33.3	27.8	42.5	36.9	40.7	22.2	40.0
Yes, a bit	21.9	23.8	20.5	18.2	28.6	38.9	20.8	13.9	22.5	36.9	24.2
No	7.8	7.8	6.7	13.2	9.5	16.7	2.8	11.1	5.6	37.0	0.8
I don't know	10.2	9.4	10.7	6.8	14.3	16.7	11.3	16.7	12.0	3.7	10.8
I don't want to answer	3.7	2.7	3.5	3.6	4.8	-	5.7	-	4.1	14.8	5.8
Total	**100**	**100**	**100**	**100**	**100**	**100**	**100**	**100**	**100**	**100**	**100**

[8] Of the 134 'Other' responses, 41 self-categorised as 'Arab' while the remainder identified 47 different nationalities or ethnicities, mostly spanning European, Middle Eastern, African and South American countries.

Qualitative data: Ethnicity and Faith

Discussion in focus groups drew attention to the complex ways in which ethnicity and faith may impact on school belonging. Three issues emerged: the value of contact with others from your own ethnic group; the need for schools to educate and support students to understand and respect difference, and the importance of ongoing curriculum responsiveness.

Students highlighted the important role that contact with others from their own ethnic background played in their sense of belonging. One girl commented that;

> "having a more diverse group of students is really nice because, for example, me, when I was younger, everyone around me they used to straighten their hair and then, like now, I'm friends with people who are more, you know, expressive with their culture and their hair so, you know, it just makes me feel more comfortable to do so."
>
> AL, STUDENT, SECONDARY.

This suggests that the ability to visibly present and explore your ethnic identity, rather than feeling a need to conform by altering your appearance to fit in with a majority or prototype image, is an important factor for students. Another student referred to the way that uniform policies can restrict this ability to '*express yourself... especially like culturally*.'

Conversely, the way monocultural groups may negatively impact belonging for some was also explored. One student at a diverse mainstream secondary commented:

> "I feel like there needs to be more like lessons on actually like different cultures and stuff because... I came to the school (from) a catholic school, so there's only really like one religion and stuff, so I came here not really knowing much... I feel there needs to be more like diversity in the classes and stuff, like even about races, cultures, religions... because a lot of people like, they fear the unknown."
>
> BL, STUDENT, SECONDARY.

Finally, in terms of avoiding a tokenistic approach to tackling racism and celebrating different ethnicities, students felt more regular, ongoing approaches would support belonging. For instance, one student commented:

> "When it comes to black history month... you shouldn't only focus on it in one month (per year)... if they do it like yearly, consistently, I think that would... utilise diversity and like culture throughout."
>
> CL, STUDENT, SECONDARY

Other key characteristics

Neurodivergence, young carers, children with impairment or disability, asylum seekers, refugees, and children who are care-experienced or have English as an additional language.

Students who self-identified as being neurodivergent, young carers, care experienced or as having an impairment or disability reported the lowest levels belonging (see figure 7). The response 'No' is notably higher among neurodivergent students (16.9%), those with an impairment or disability (13.3%) and young carers (12%). Fewer neurodivergent students responded 'Yes, a strong sense of belonging,' comparative to other groups. This pattern, showing elevated 'No' responses (10.3%) and lower strongly positive responses (13.8%), is reflected among asylum seekers, however, the sample size for this group is very small.

Figure 7: Do you feel a sense of belonging? (secondary-aged participants according to other key characteristics)

Do you feel a sense of belonging?	Overall Cohort	English as additional language (EAL)	Neuro-divergent	Young Carer	Have an Impairment or disability	Refugee	Living in care	Asylum seeker	Other	I don't want to answer
	N 1634	N 311	N 231	N 117	N 60	N 56	N 43	N 29	N 201	N 586
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Yes, a strong sense of belonging	16.8	15.1	13.4	20.5	16.7	17.9	16.3	13.8	13.9	15.7
Yes, usually	39.6	44.7	31.6	29.9	41.7	35.7	37.2	44.8	42.8	36.0
Yes, a bit	21.9	21.9	24.7	24.8	13.3	16.1	23.3	13.8	21.9	23.2
No	7.8	7.1	16.9	12.0	13.3	8.9	7.0	10.3	7.5	7.3
I don't know	10.2	7.1	11.7	8.5	11.7	17.9	14.0	17.2	10.9	12.3
I don't want to answer	3.7	4.2	1.7	4.3	3.3	3.6	2.3	0.0	3.0	5.5
Total	**100**	**100**	**100**	**100**	**100**	**100**	**100**	**100**	**100**	**100**

Qualitative data: Other key characteristics

For these groups, findings from focus group discussions suggested that their comparatively lower sense of belonging in school may relate to not having their needs understood and met in the school environment. Neurodiverse students often spoke about the emotional impact of this. One girl described her experience of the mainstream environment as *'traumatising'* and explained, "*I feel like a lot of the time in mainstream we're on this path of becoming what we're forced to be rather than who we are*." An inability to be herself is linked here to her negative experience at school.

Others mentioned the need for additional support in terms of facilities and staff attention as things that would support a sense of school belonging for neurodiverse students, implying the lack of these may underpin their weakened feelings of belonging. For instance, one boy commented, "w*ith kids who have ADHD and autism and stuff like that, who have outbursts, who can't manage their emotions... there needs to be more facilities and stuff*."

Examples of fidget toys and sensory rooms were identified by these secondary students as resources that could help them to regulate their emotions. Another student suggested:

> "I think they (schools] should do like one-to-ones and stuff like that and sessions where they're always monitoring and checking on certain students because certain students are more vulnerable and like have more outbursts in their emotions compared to other students."
>
> LL, STUDENT, ALTERNATIVE PROVISION

Insufficient help to manage their emotions and avoid *'outbursts'* may therefore be factors linked to neurodiverse students' sense of school belonging.

Educators also spoke about school not meeting the needs of students with additional needs and disabilities. Some suggested that a lack of funding and access to support service and lack of joined up working led schools to actively avoid being inclusive. Describing her efforts to enable a physically disabled student with complex medical needs to return to school following an operation, one Executive Head of a Multi-Academy Trust described the problem as a "*system-wide issue*", referencing; "*huge issues around staffing and training and securing agency staff who can support her to be in school and be safe.*" For these students, she explained *"it's not just schools and leaders and policies and practice, it's social care, it's health that don't necessarily all sing from the same song sheet about wanting to create the best possible environment for the myriad of children that come through our doors." Due to this, she explained "most schools run from that and they say they're inclusive, but they're not... because {the) child is disabled, it's 10 times harder and people are more reluctant."*

As well as a lack of resources and support, students spoke a lot about bullying of those with additional needs. For instance, one student commented,

> "I feel like a lot of jokes are made around especially SEN and then people... feel like they should like, ha ha, laugh at it as well."
>
> CL, STUDENT, SECONDARY

Another student suggested more needed to be done to challenge prejudice:

> "I feel like, with certain disabilities and some sexual orientations, people are kind of like ignorant on the topic and I feel like teaching in more lessons and being open to talk about that and allow everyone to express their opinions and also if their opinion is like, offensive, maybe teach them like how they're wrong, I feel that's important."
>
> BL, STUDENT, SECONDARY

Although students themselves did not discuss the school belonging experiences of young people who are asylum seekers or refugees, educators referenced the belonging challenges these groups face. Here it was suggested that a lack of staff training in trauma and insufficient access to specialist services, may be relevant to their reduced sense of school belonging. A recent study of school belonging among secondary students with refugee backgrounds flags Educational Psychologists as a key resource for this cohort (Sobitan 2022).

One educator commented:

> "a sense of belonging is the most fundamental need for any human being and none more so than for children and particularly where you have quite a large number of children who may have experienced trauma. If you are leading schools where you have a number of children who are, whether it's deprivation, whether it's domestic violence, whether it's substance use, whether it's refugees, asylum seekers, those children who have experienced trauma evidently need a sense of belonging more than anything."
>
> SE, HEADTEACHER, SECONDARY AND DIRECTOR, MULTI-ACADEMY TRUST

Another talked about the need to "*train ALL of our staff in attachment, ACEs (Adverse Childhood Experiences) and trauma informed practice*" to support young Asylum Seekers and Refugees.

Who feels belonging at primary school age: a differentiated analysis

We now examine how our primary-aged participants differed in their sense of belonging according to key characteristics, drawing contrasts with the secondary-aged respondents, to assess how belonging is unequally distributed across groups at the primary level.

Socio-economic status

As was the case for secondary-aged participants, those at the primary level experienced similar levels of belonging regardless of deprivation levels (see figure 8). In the '*Not Socio-economically disadvantaged*' group a significant proportion (29.8%) report a strong sense of belonging, while an even higher percentage (35.4%) of the '*Socio-economically disadvantaged'* group report a strong sense of belonging. A high proportion across both groups usually feel a sense of belonging, with 36.8% in the '*Not Socio-economically disadvantaged'* and 31.2% in the *'Socio-economically disadvantaged'* group. This reinforces the impression that deprivation alone may not influence students' sense of school belonging.

A smaller yet notable percentage of students feel a more ambivalent sense of belonging to a lesser degree ('Yes, a bit'); 14.3% in the 'Not Socio-economically disadvantaged' and 13.1% in the 'Socio-economically disadvantaged' category. This subset of students in both groups experience a more moderate connection to their school environment. A minority in both groups report not feeling a sense of belonging (4.6% of 'Not Socio-economically disadvantaged' and 5.3% of 'Socio-economically disadvantaged' children). This suggests that the minority of pupils who do not feel a sense of school belonging are not coming entirely from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, and other factors are at play here. This echoes the findings of a recent study which suggested that socio-economic status alone does not impact school belonging. This study called for intersectional approaches to research that can help us understand how socio-economic status interacts with other aspects of young person's social identity in impacting their sense of school belonging (Fernandez et al 2023).

Figure 8: Do you feel a sense of belonging? (primary-aged students, according to deprivation levels)

Do you feel a sense of belonging?	Not Socio-economically Disadvantaged		Socio-economically Disadvantaged	
	N	%	N	%
Yes, a strong sense of belonging	156	29.8	248	35.4
Yes, usually	193	36.8	219	31.2
Yes, a bit	75	14.3	92	13.1
No	24	4.6	37	5.3
I don't know	61	11.6	75	10.7
I don't want to answer	15	2.9	30	5.3
Total	**524**	**100**	**701**	**100**

Ethnicity

In contrast with the secondary-aged participants, there is a greater commonality in reported school belonging across ethnic groups. In the 'White' group, 31.5% of students report a strong sense of belonging. This is slightly lower than in the 'Asian or Asian British' (35.0%) and 'Black or Black British' (37.5%) groups. The 'Mixed Heritage' group shows a similar pattern to the 'White' group, with 30.6% experiencing a strong sense of belonging. The category '*Yes, usually*' is consistent across all groups, with around one-third of students in each ethnic category reporting they usually feel a sense of belonging. The majority of students across different ethnic backgrounds appear to generally feel included in their school environment. A smaller percentage of students across all groups, ranging from 12.0% to 17.6%, are more ambivalent in their sense of belonging. As with the secondary-aged cohort, Black/Black British students reported the highest levels of feeling no sense of belonging at school (7.6%).

Figure 9: Do you feel a sense of belonging? (secondary-aged participants according to race)

Do you feel a sense of belonging?	Overall Cohort	White	Asian or Asian British	Black or Black British	Mixed Heritage	Other	Prefer not to say
	N 1377	N 305	N 451	N 184	N 108	N 102	N 227
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Yes, a strong sense of belonging	33.4	31.5	35.0	37.5	30.6	30.4	32.2
Yes, usually	32.9	33.1	35.5	26.6	37.0	32.4	30.8
Yes, a bit	13.3	13.1	12.6	12.0	17.6	13.7	14.1
No	5.2	5.6	4.4	7.6	3.7	2.0	6.2
I don't know	10.8	14.1	8.2	10.9	11.1	14.7	9.3
I don't want to answer	4.4	2.6	4.2	5.4	-	6.9	7.5
Total	**100**	**100**	**100**	**100**	**100**	**100**	**100**

Faith[9]

At the primary level, a lower percentage of students who declared themselves to be Atheist report a secure sense of belonging at school compared to other groups. For Christians, a substantial 36.8% report a strong sense of belonging, which is closely mirrored by the 'Other' category (also 36.8%). These percentages are comparatively higher than among Muslim (31.6%) students, suggesting that feelings of belonging may vary significantly across different religious identities. Interestingly, the Atheist students are the group which reports the highest percentage (14.3%) of not feeling a sense of belonging, followed by Sikhs (7.7%) and Muslims (5.2%). A notable proportion of students in each group are unsure about their sense of belonging choosing '*I don't know'*, with Atheists reporting the highest percentage (17.1%). A small percentage of students across most groups chose not to answer the question about their faith (6.9%). A comparatively high percentage of the students who preferred not to answer this question responded '*No,'* (12.3%)

Figure 10: Do you feel a sense of belonging? (primary-aged students according to faith)

Do you feel a sense of belonging?	Overall Cohort	Christian	Muslim	Atheist	Jewish	Buddhist	Hindu	Sikh	No religion	Other	Prefer not to say
	N 1354	N 391	N 535	N 35	N 2	N 8	N 103	N 52	N 151	N 19	N 58
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Yes, a strong sense of belonging	33.4	36.8	31.6	25.7	50	37.5	39.8	30.8	29.1	36.8	31.0
Yes, usually	32.9	33.0	32.3	31.4	-	50	36.9	36.5	33.8	42.1	22.4
Yes, a bit	13.3	11.3	14.6	2.9	-	12.5	11.7	13.5	19.9	10.5	13.8
No	5.2	4.1	5.2	14.3	50	-	1	7.7	5.3	-	12.1
I don't know	10.8	11.0	11.2	17.1	-	-	5.8	5.8	9.9	10.5	13.8
I don't want to answer	4.4	3.8	5.0	8.6	-	-	4.9	5.8	2.0	-	6.9
Total	**100**	**100**	**100**	**100**	**100**	**100**	**100**	**100**	**100**	**100**	**100**

[9] The sample size for Jewish participants is too small to report here.

Other key characteristics

Neurodivergence, young carers, children with impairment or disability, asylum seekers, refugees, and children who are care-experienced or have English as an additional language.

Similar to the patterns identified at secondary-level, being neurodivergent, having a disability or impairment, being care-experienced, or an asylum-seeker negatively impacted on primary-aged participants' sense of belonging. Asylum Seekers have the lowest percentage of strong belonging (17.4%) and the highest percentage of not feeling belonging (17.4%), however the sample size is very small for this group. Students with a disability or impairment also report lower levels of belonging, with 14.3% responding '*No.'* This is very similar to findings at Secondary level where 13.3% of this cohort responded '*No.'*

Among neurodivergent students, a smaller percentage (25.0%) selected '*Yes, a strong sense of belonging,*' suggesting that this group in particular face additional challenges with feeling a sense of belonging. It is notable that neurodivergent students report higher levels belonging at Primary level, with 25% responding '*Yes, a strong sense of belonging'* compared to 13.4% at Secondary level. The levels of neurodivergent students responding '*No'* also reflects a decreasing sense of belong for this cohort between the two education phases. At primary level 13% responded '*No,'* compared to 16.9% at secondar level. This suggests that aspects of the secondary school experience, including factors such as an increased pressure around academic attainment and a move to multiple rather than single teachers, may negatively impact a sense of belonging and safety for these students.

The sense of belonging is slightly lower among those living in care, with a higher percentage not feeling belonging (10.8%).

Figure 11: Do you feel a sense of belonging? (Primary-aged students according to other key characteristics)

Do you feel a sense of belonging?	Overall Cohort	EAL	Neuro divergent	Young Carer	Have an Impairment or disability	Refugee	Living in care	Asylum seeker	Other	I don't want to answer
	N 1272	N 261	N 92	N 135	N 42	N 44	N 65	N 23	N 125	N 485
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Yes, a strong sense of belonging	33.4	36.0	25.0	37.8	33.3	29.5	29.2	17.4	28.2	28.9
Yes, usually	32.9	33.0	26.1	31.9	23.8	27.3	24.6	30.4	39.2	34.2
Yes, a bit	13.3	15.7	17.4	14.8	16.7	20.5	23.1	17.4	14.4	13.6
No	5.2	2.7	13.0	6.7	14.3	6.8	10.8	17.4	5.6	3.7
I don't know	10.8	10.3	14.1	7.4	9.5	15.9	9.2	17.4	8.8	12.0
I don't want to answer	4.4	2.3	4.3	1.5	2.4	-	3.1	-	3.2	7.6
Total	**100**	**100**	**100**	**100**	**100**	**100**	**100**	**100**	**100**	**100**

Factors that promote belonging

This section presents the factors that survey responses indicate are most important for young people in promoting a sense of belonging in school. This is followed by an analysis of focus group data from students and educators, which is organised by theme.

Overall ratings of all belonging factors by secondary-aged pupils' survey

It is striking that the highest-rated factors concern relationships (friendships, getting along with each other) and identity (respect, representation, validation).

The factors that mattered comparatively less to secondary-aged students included families/carers getting involved in school, taking part in clubs/activities, and having the chance to make a difference to people's lives. It is notable though that even the lowest rated factor achieved a mean overall cohort rating of 2.77 (where 2 is quite important, and 3 is important), suggesting students still see these as playing a part in supporting their sense of school belonging.

Figure 12: How important are these things in helping you feel a sense of belonging in school
(mean scores for all secondary-aged student responses)

Factors Promoting Belonging	Mean (X)
Being treated with as much respect as everyone else at school.	4.26
Having a friend or group of friends in school that I trust.	4.25
People from all backgrounds (e.g. ethnicities, family income levels, sexualities) feeling welcome and heard in school.	4.01
Feeling confident to plan for my future.	3.88
Getting along with other students at school.	3.82
Seeing different backgrounds (e.g. cultures, religions, races etc.) represented in school displays and celebrations.	3.76
Feeling able to be myself at school.	3.67
Having a space where me and my friends can hang out in school.	3.64
Positive relationships between staff and students.	3.57
Having a say in decisions about the school.	3.48
Talking about important things that are happening in the world (e.g. Climate Change, Wars, Black Lives Matter, MeToo).	3.48
Having someone I trust to talk to at school if I have a problem.	3.36
People noticing when I am good at something.	3.34
Having the chance to get involved and make a difference to other people's lives.	3.29
Taking part in activities, clubs, trips and events at school.	3.09
Families/parents/carers feeling welcome to get involved with what goes on in school.	2.77

Overall ratings of all belonging factors by primary-aged pupils' survey

The primary-aged student survey was shorter and asked them to consider fewer factors promoting belonging. However, there is a striking similarity in the two groups responses. '*People from all backgrounds feeling welcome in school'*, '*being treated with respect'* and '*having friends I can trust'* feature in the top 5 for both age groups.

Similar factors were also considered to be less important: clubs/activities; talking about things that are happening in the world, and people noticing when they are good at something. Again, it is worth noting that these were still seen to have value, with the lowest rated factor '*people noticing when I'm good at something at school*' achieving an overall cohort mean of 2.95 (where 2 is quite important, and 3 is important).

Figure 13: How important are these things in helping you feel a sense of belonging in school?
(mean scores for all primary-aged student responses)

Factors Impacting Belonging	Mean (X)
People from all backgrounds (e.g. culture, religion, skin colour) feeling welcome in school.	4.45
Being treated with as much respect as everyone else at school.	4.34
Having a friend or group of friends in school that I trust.	4.15
Feeling able to be myself at school.	3.96
Having a space in school where me and my friends can feel comfortable.	3.81
Getting on well with people in school.	3.72
Having someone I trust to talk to in my school.	3.68
Families/parents/carers feeling welcome to get involved with what goes on in school.	3.62
Taking part in clubs, trips, and events at school.	3.13
Talking about things that are happening in the world out of school (e.g. in the news or local area).	3.08
People noticing when I am good at something at school.	2.95

Overall ratings of all belonging factors by educators and parents

Figure 14: How important is this to strengthening students' sense of belonging in school?
(mean scores for educator and parent responses)

Factors Impacting Belonging	Mean (X) Educators	Ranking Educators	Mean (X) Parents	Ranking Parents
Making sure students feel cared for and supported by school staff	4.94	1	4.79	3
Building positive relationships between students and staff.	4.93	2	4.8	1=
Accepting students for who they are	4.9	3	4.65	8
Teachers having positive expectations for all students' futures	4.88	4	4.69	7
Building positive relationships between students	4.85	5	4.73	5
Flexibility in differentiating to meet the needs of different groups of students (e.g children with SEMH, SEND, EAL etc)	4.8	6	4.7	6
Supporting students to settle into school	4.79	7	4.8	1=
Giving students clear guidance on how to navigate the school system and rules	4.69	8	4.48	13
Making sure that students from a wide range of social groups are represented in school decision-making	4.66	9	4.63	10
Helping students with making and maintaining friendships	4.66	10	4.59	12
Supporting parents to help their children with building and maintaining healthy relationships	4.49	11	4.62	11
Tailoring learning support assistance to the needs of each child (e.g. Teaching Assistants)	4.41	12	4.77	4
Working with support services and external agencies to understand the belonging needs of particular groups	4.35	13	4.27	17
Providing equipment so that all students can learn and play	4.25	14	4.64	9
Exploring ideas about place and belonging with children collaboratively	4.24	15	4.46	15
Emphasising group work and student collaboration	4.18	16	4.48	13
Drawing on local links to strengthen students' connection to the community	4.13	17	4.35	16
Weighted Mean	**4.60**		**4.60**	

Minimum = 0, Maximum = 5

Both educators and parents see staff-student relationships as highly important to a sense of school belonging. '*Building positive relationships between students and staff*' received the second highest mean rating from educators (4.93) and the highest mean rating from parents (4.8). Both groups identify '*Making sure students feel cared for and supported by school staff*,' as an important feature of positive staff-student relationships (4.94 educators; 4.79 parents).

While the two groups appear to have common views on the priority of emotional and relational aspects of school support, parents rate practical aspects of support (resources, equipment, learning support staff) as more important than educators. For instance, parents give a much higher priority to '*Supporting students to settle into school,'* than educators. Although the mean ratings from the two groups are similar (4.8 and 4.79 respectively), for parents, this is their joint highest rated factor, meaning they rate this as more important than nearly every other factor in terms of school belonging. In contrast, teachers rated this seventh highest.

This is reflected in the ratings of two other factors: *'Tailoring learning support assistance to the needs of each child'* which was rated fourth by parents and twelfth by educators, and '*Providing equipment so that all students can learn and play,'* which was rated ninth by parents, and fourteenth by educators.

The importance of institutional flexibility in meeting students' need was considered to be important, being ranked sixth by both parents and cares. However, the divergence of their views on other aspects of support is interesting. While parents clearly value the concrete support of providing learning support assistance in line with students' needs, it may be that there are other specific school actions that enable flexibility in differentiating which educators view as more significant for school belonging. Budgetary and resourcing factors that can constrain schools' capacity to provide learning support assistance may perhaps impact educators' perceptions of the relative importance of this. Further investigation of the relative impact of different aspects of institutional flexibility on school belonging would be valuable to better understand this.

Educators and parents rated similar factors as least important to school belonging. '*Drawing on local links to strengthen students' connection to the community,*' '*Emphasising group work and student collaboration'* and '*Exploring ideas about place and belonging with children collaboratively'* received the lowest mean ratings from both groups. This echoes the factors identified as of lesser importance by students. However, it is important to note that these factors received mean ratings between 4.13 and 4.48 across both groups; a rating of 4+ still reflects a view that these factors are 'very important.'

Key themes across the belonging data set

Focus groups with students and educators offered an opportunity to explore their views on the factors promoting school belonging in greater depth. As well as illuminating the survey data by illustrating what these factors look like in terms of day-to-day experiences in school, the focus group responses also elaborate on the survey data by pointing to potential reasons why these factors are considered important by students and educators.

This section focuses on developing a fuller picture of the seven factors rated as most important across the two student surveys. It is organised thematically to facilitate understanding of the links between the individual factors.

Each thematic section starts with an overview of the mean ratings of the relevant factors from groups of students with different social characteristics. This more fine-grained view sheds light on areas of particular importance for different cohorts, suggesting where further research may usefully focus. This is followed by a discussion of the relevant focus group data, offering insights in participants' own words into how and why these factors impact students' sense of belonging in school.

Belonging theme 1: Friendship and peer relationships

Factor 1: Having a friend or group of friends in school that I trust

Factor 2: Getting along with other students at school

Having a friend or group of friends in school that I trust

As outlined in the research and policy briefing report, *Belonging, Identity and Safety in London Schools* (Brown et al., 2024) *'having a friend or group of friends I can trust'* was rated the highest by secondary-aged students when asked to identify their Top 5 factors supporting school belonging. Subsequent differentiated analysis of the importance that different groups of students attributed to each factor calculated a mean score using their responses from 0 to 5. Using this approach, the factor '*having a group of friends I can trust'* achieved the second highest mean rating across the whole secondary-aged cohort (4.25: see Appendix 1a).

Some groups of secondary-aged students rated this factor as especially important. *'Having a group of friends I can trust'* was rated highly students who are:

- socio-economically disadvantaged students (4.28) not socio-economically disadvantaged (4.26), white (4.34), female (4.36), heterosexual (4.28) cisgender (4.26), young carers (4.34) and by those who indicated having no religion (4.33).

Among primary aged students this factor was ranked as the highest factor when asked to rate their top 5 factors (see Brown et al. 2024 p3). The differentiated analysis of each factor's rating from 1 to 5 at primary level saw it rated third highest with a mean of 4.15.

For primary aged students this factor was particularly important for those who are:

- not-socio-economically disadvantaged (4.26), mixed heritage (4.39), white (4.22), from certain faith denominations including; Hindu (4.27) and those who indicated having no religion (4.22) or who have English as an Additional Language (4.21).

Educators and parents share young people's views that friendship is a highly important factor in supporting school belonging. '*Helping students with making and maintaining friendships*,' received overall mean scores of 4.66 from educators and 4.59 from parents. However, for educators and parents, helping students with friendships was ranked tenth and twelfth respectively out of 17 factors, lower than other school actions to support belonging. This contrasts with the very high importance students place on friendship, suggesting that greater understanding of how schools can support students' friendships may be valuable when designing actions to build school belonging.

Getting along with other students in school

The factor '*getting along with other students in school'* also relates to peer relationships; it was also a top factor, achieving the fifth highest mean across all cohorts in the secondary survey (3.82). There is similarity between the groups that rated this factor highly, and those that rated *'having a group of friends I can trust*' highly:

- females (3.92), cisgender (3.83), heterosexual (3.94), white (3.86), Christian (3.84), Hindu (3.87), students with no religion (3.87), young carers (3.85), socio-economically disadvantaged students (3.86) and non-disadvantaged students (3.84)

Among primary school students, '*getting along with other people in school'* was rated the 6th most important (3.72) across the overall cohort. This factor was rated particularly highly for all the same groups at primary school who rated '*having a friend I can trust'* highly, furthermore, including mixed heritage (3.79) and white (3.81) students.

Interestingly, all the identified ethnic groups rated this factor particularly highly including Asian/Asian British (3.73) and Black/Black British (3.73) relative to students from 'other' ethnic backgrounds, and those who preferred not to identify their ethnicity.

Students from all faith denominations (except for Muslims) also rated this factor highly, including, those who are; Christian (3.79), Atheist (3.74), Buddhist (3.78), Sikh (3.86) Hindu (3.87) and those who indicated having no religion (3.75).

Interestingly, three further groups emphasised the importance of this factor (relative to the overall cohort), these were; refugee children (3.74), those with a disability or impairment (3.9) and socio-economically disadvantaged students (3.79). This is interesting because relative to the rest of the cohort, socio-economically disadvantaged students rated getting along with others higher than the overall mean, while those who were non-disadvantaged rated the friendship factor more important (relative to the overall mean).

This suggests that for certain groups, such as those with a disability/impairment and those who are socio-economically disadvantaged, peer relations with the whole pupil population in school may be more important for their belonging than individual friendship groups. This echoes findings from Fernandez et al (2023) who found that 'perceived similarity' or a sense of fitting in with or sharing similar experiences to others in their educational setting was a more important aspect of belonging for certain social groups, including those from socio-economically more disadvantaged backgrounds. Further research could usefully enhance understanding of the ways in which social group characteristics shape school students' perceptions about what it means to belong and how they experience, or not, school belonging.

Educators and parents rated '*building positive relationships between students*' as fifth most important factor with overall mean rating of 4.85 and 4.73 respectively. This suggests that they agree with students' perceptions that support for peer relationships is an important factor in school belonging.

Qualitative data on friendship and peer relationships

The importance of friendship was strongly emphasised within focus group discussions across both primary and secondary aged students, with children universally agreeing that it should be a 'top five' factor that was important to belonging;

> "So I also agree with E that 'having a friend or a group of friends in school that I can trust' is one of the top five because if you're in trouble, if you get in trouble or you need help with something, your friends could help you and if you didn't have a lot of friends that you can trust in school, you would always be cautious about your surroundings, about other people doing stuff that you wouldn't like and if you had friends, they can help you feel okay with it and make sure that you're comfortable in school."
>
> SR, STUDENT, PRIMARY

This echoes views expressed in secondary-aged discussions that "*friendships are the support system*," with some students voicing the opinion that going to teachers for help with personal problems is a "*last resort*," for when things are "*getting really, really serious and you kind of need to go.*"

The nature of the belonging enabled by friends was described by students as being a feeling of comfort, a protection from others' judgement and an enabler to express yourself and develop socially:

> "With friends, when you're comfortable around friends and you can say what you want, knowing that they're not going to judge you."
>
> BW, STUDENT, SECONDARY

> "if you meet someone nice in school they help you fit in in school and like introduce you to their friends as well which creates like, it's kind of like a protective barrier from all the bad things in school and like they help you in general with your social skills and like becoming friends with other people."
>
> MO, STUDENT, SECONDARY

Friendship was noted to be a motivator to come to school for some students who otherwise felt reluctant or compelled to come to school;

> "It's mostly friends that make me want to come to school every day. But I'm also being forced to go to school. I don't have a choice."
>
> SR, STUDENT, PRIMARY

> "I don't necessarily like coming to school but I think my friends definitely make it better."
>
> JC, STUDENT, SECONDARY

> "Well because let's say you had no friends at school, you're not going to want to come to school because you've got no one to speak to you. So, friends make school."
>
> JD, STUDENT, SECONDARY

For some of these students, interacting with friends was seen to be the main point of school attendance and they perceived that staff had different priorities in this regard:

> "School revolves around like friend groups like friendships. Most teachers see it as being grades and like teaching, but most people see it as like another social life"
>
> JC, STUDENT, SECONDARY

In trying to explain why friendship was so important to school belonging, many students described how without them you would be *'alone'* and '*have nothing.*' Being seen eating alone or walking around alone at break was something that made many students feel *'judged*.'

However, children themselves acknowledged that it is the quality of friendships that matters. Poor quality friendships were acknowledged to dampen or even obstruct a sense of belonging;

> "I think friendships are your support system and... if you're by yourself it's fine, but I think if you have friends, you're comfortable because when you're by yourself everybody does need company with them, so friendships are important. In terms of like influencing yourself I feel like you should just be around people who don't peer push you because it depends on who you spend your time with. Yes, so you should really build quality friendships."
>
> HC, STUDENT, SECONDARY

> "I feel like all of this chatting about friendship it's not really that important because let's be real yeah, let's be real, like often your friendships at school are fake and like not really your true self because you're scared to show it, so I feel like the school should push for you to love who you are and just be confident with that even if that means you're by yourself, you should still be happy without friends."
>
> BC, STUDENT, SECONDARY

These students alluded to a more negative view of school belonging; fitting in or conforming with peers at the expense of one's individual identity. While certain students prioritised individual identity concerns, for others social identity concerns took precedence. More research is needed to unpick this.

In our focus groups, neurodiverse students alluded to this pressure to socially conform and have friends. They referenced the dangers of being a '*people pleaser*' or *'masking'* in order to have friends. Some described being happier spending time with teachers or '*floating between people*' rather than having a set friendship group.

For these students, getting on with others and friendliness were less important than people respecting each other:

> "And getting along with other students at school, I would definitely put that at the bottom, only because getting along with someone isn't as important as just having them respect you. Like you don't have to conversate with everyone that you meet. Especially like in an environment where there's people of different age groups as well, like so you don't have to get along with everyone, you don't have to be best friends with everyone, you don't have to talk to everyone. But just in the sense that like if you guys have a disagreement, you can talk it out respectfully and you guys have a respectful conversation. But getting along with other students to me isn't as important."
>
> FT, STUDENT, ALTERNATIVE PROVISION

Teachers and school leaders also recognised the importance of friendship and positive social relationships for children and saw their role in supporting children to navigate friendship disputes and disharmony to be crucial in strengthening their sense of belonging;

"I think we need to be helping children deal with relationships and, like H says, the thing about friendships is sometimes they cause conflict and it's not what happens, it's how you deal with it that makes the difference"

RR, HEADTEACHER, PRIMARY

The impact of this support was viewed as going beyond a sense of belonging only in school, to provide young people with a foundation for belonging in society and future success. In this respect, some school staff echoed students' views of friendships, and more broadly relationships, as a key purpose of school:

"I would put something specific about being able to maintain successful relationships, for me that's a critical factor."

JN, HEADTEACHER, PRU

"they have the opportunity daily to connect in a way that is away from parents so they get to test out for the first time, especially those that don't have siblings, how to share, how get on, how to repair relationships when you fall out... that is going to be that kind of model, if you like, for how they'll go on in later life."

CE, SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT LEADER, SECONDARY

Concluding thoughts on the importance of friendship and peer relationships to belonging

Positive friendships and peer relationships are central to young people's sense of belonging in school. While adults (parents and educators) saw the school's role in supporting general peer relationships to be of greater relative value, students of all ages saw having trusted and quality friendships in school as even more important than getting along with others.

Belonging theme 2: Respect for social identity, acceptance and equity

Factor 1: Being treated with as much respect as everyone else at school.

Factor 2: People from all backgrounds (e.g. ethnicities, family income levels, sexualities) feeling welcome and heard in school.

Respect, acceptance and equity emerged as a key theme across the dataset. This relates to two factors in the primary and secondary student surveys; *'being treated with as much respect as everyone else at school*' and *'people from all backgrounds feeling welcome and heard at school'*.

Overall, secondary-aged students rated '*being treated with as much respect as everyone else'* as the top factor for school belonging with an overall cohort mean of 4.26 (see Appendix 1b) and primary-aged students placed it as the second most important with an overall cohort mean of 4.34 (see figure 13). Another factor relating to equity and respect, '*people from all backgrounds feeling welcome and heard in school',* was rated top by primary-aged students (4.45) and third most important by secondary-aged students (4.01).

Being treated with as much respect as everyone else

Among secondary-aged students, certain groups rated *'being treated with as much respect as everyone else*' particularly highly, including those who are:

- socio-economically disadvantaged (4.34), female (4.44) and cisgender (4.34). A strong desire for inclusivity and diversity is apparent among students of certain faiths and ethnic backgrounds.
- from certain faith groups including those who are Christians (4.3) Hindus (4.28), those who report no religion (4.33)
- from certain ethnic backgrounds including groups including for white (4.27), Black/ Black British (4.27), as well as among those for whom English is an Additional Language (4.27)

Among primary-aged students this factor was rated particularly highly by students who are:

- not socio-economically disadvantaged (4.37) or young carers (4.41).
- of all non-majority ethnicities including students who are; Asian/ Asian British (4.37), Black/Black British (4.42), and of mixed heritage (4.42).
- from certain faith groups including those who are; Hindu (4.42) and Sikh (4.37), and those who have English as an Additional Language (4.37).

People from all backgrounds feeling welcome and heard in school

Among secondary-aged students, similar groups indicated that '*people from all backgrounds feelings welcome and heard in school'* was important to those who also rated being treated with respect highly. This included children who are:

- socio-economically disadvantaged (4.08), female (4.28), cisgender (4.12), white (4.02), Hindu (4.38), those who indicated no religion (4.03) as well as those with English as an Additional Language (4.05).

However, some further groups rated this factor particularly highly (whose ratings for being treated with respect were lower than the rest of the group) including children who are:

- Asian/Asian British (4.06) and Atheists (4.08).

There was also a close symmetry between primary school groups who rated '*people from all backgrounds feeling welcome and heard in school'* particularly highly and those who indicated '*being treated with as much respect as everyone else*' including students who are:

- Asian/Asian British (4.54), Black/Black British (4.54), and of mixed heritage (4.58).

Indeed, these groups rated '*people from all backgrounds feeling welcome'* even higher than they rated the factor of respect, suggesting again that children from ethnic minorities may prioritise these aspects of feeling included and listened to in school.

This factor was also rated particularly highly both by students who are:

- socio-economically disadvantaged (4.49) and not socio-economically disadvantaged (4.49).
- from certain faiths including those who are Hindu (4.38) Atheists (4.08) those of no religion (4.03) and those for whom English is an Additional Language (4.05).

Qualitative data on respect, acceptance and equity

When discussing the ranking of factors in focus groups, students repeatedly prioritised respect and welcoming of diversity and difference.

> "You don't have to like someone in order to respect them, and as long as everyone has respect for everyone, then that positive relationship is there regardless of whether or not you disagree with each other's opinions."
>
> FT, STUDENT, ALTERNATIVE PROVISION

> "So long as you can get through the day with respecting each other and without getting into fights, again you don't need to have any interactions with them, completely avoidable."
>
> MT, STUDENT, ALTERNATIVE PROVISION

As explored in the previous section, some students viewed respect as more important than friendliness or getting along with peers. Rather than illustrating this with examples of times when they felt they were treated with equal respect, or describing specific experiences of disrespect from their peers, students tended to describe the emotional impact such experiences would have.

Others described how it might harm their sense of social identity and lead students to alter aspects of self in order to achieve peer acceptance:

> "you want to be accepted by everyone so you feel you have to change this about yourself, change that about yourself, like S was saying, when she was younger, and everyone had straight hair so she felt she had to have straight hair but she didn't even like having straight hair but just to prevent being like by herself. You feel the need to fit in."
>
> DL, STUDENT, SECONDARY

This highlights the powerful impact that peer relations can have on school belonging, specifically how peers' acceptance of cultural and ethnic identities can support or harm school belonging for adolescents. A primary student who had English as an additional language explained:

> "I think one of the most important things is pupils from all kinds of backgrounds feel welcome in school because I think in society it's really important to know people from different ethnicities and backgrounds, to immerse yourself in cultures... people might not feel like they belong if you don't take an interest in where they come from or things like that."
>
> AR, STUDENT, PRIMARY

These views echo Sobitan's (2022) findings that students from refugee backgrounds felt safe when others showed interest in their culture and religion, and that this plays a significant role in their sense of school belonging. Being among peers who are interested in, and respectful of cultural and religious differences is likely to impact the school belonging of certain groups of students to a greater extent, and this is reflected in our survey findings which saw this aspect rated more highly amongst students from particular ethnic and faith-based cohorts.

Similarly, some students spoke about how differences in their approach to learning could make students feel alienated from their peers. For instance, one student commented:

> "If you get placed in a group... like even where you're sitting with people you wouldn't talk to or like just generally don't have like the same energy as you, maybe... you wouldn't participate as much and that could affect you."
>
> AC, STUDENT, SECONDARY

This shows how the feeling that you work at a different pace, or in a different way to your peers can make group work a struggle and how this can negatively impact an individual's sense of belonging in terms of their contribution to, or participation in, classroom learning.

As explored in the first section on *who* feels a sense of belonging in schools, certain groups were referenced as being visibly treated disrespectfully by peers. Students spoke of a "t*oxic culture of like young people being like homophobic or racist"'* They describe "*jokes made around especially SEN*" and a pressure to laugh along with it. Ignorance around *"certain disabilities and some sexual orientations,"* were also highlighted by students.

Finally, a lack of welcome and peer acceptance of newcomers was another notable factor impacting students' sense of school belonging according to both students and teachers. For instance:

> "we seem to have a very big problem with people, a certain dominance over new kids, because they feel like this is their environment and they shouldn't let other people come in... especially the boys when they come in, they get pressured... like they look at you, assume that you are a threat to their reputation in school, and so they tend to bully or get onto you."
>
> GT, STUDENT, ALTERNATIVE PROVISION

A Primary head described the challenges new students joining from Turkey experienced when joining the school where the majority of students are of Bangladeshi or Somali heritage.

> "I know the older brother in particular has found it really, really difficult. The children haven't been accepting... they've come in as refugees actually after the earthquake,... it's like, because they're not in the immediate community and they haven't been going to our school, it isn't a cultural thing at all, actually, it's ... you are not part of this community, and they struggle to be accepted actually."
>
> SN, ASSISTANT HEADTEACHER, PRIMARY

Concluding thoughts on respect, acceptance, and equity

Survey data highlights that respect, acceptance, and equity was the single most important factor impacting school belonging for primary and secondary students. Students with English as an Additional Language and those from all ethnic minority backgrounds (excluding white minorities) rated it as particularly high. Here it is notable that in many schools in London, students from ethnic minority backgrounds represent the majority among pupil cohorts (and indeed as represented within our overall primary survey dataset). While these students may be particularly sensitive to the importance of respecting the diversity and cultural plurality of the school, there are also instances as highlighted within the qualitative data, that students from ethnic minorities that may join the school outside of normal entry and exit points (such as refugee children) require particular support and attention to their cultural backgrounds in order to support their sense of being heard and respected and their participation in school. In summary, this theme highlights the complex interplay of factors impacting on students' feelings of being welcome, acceptance and equity. Individual learning needs and disabilities, cultural, ethnic, faith and social background, community cohesion and newcomer status can all play an important part in students feeling a sense of belonging and acceptance.

Belonging theme 3: Individual identity building and affirming

Factor 1: Feeling able to be myself at school

Factor 2: Feeling confident to plan for my future.

The third theme that emerged across the dataset was the importance of individual identity building and affirmation for a sense of belonging in school. This theme will firstly be discussed in relation to two relevant factors that were identified as important through the student surveys. '*Feeling able to be myself in school* 'was rated as the fourth highest factor for primary school students (overall cohort mean 3.96: see Appendix 1c) and seventh most important factor at secondary school (overall cohort mean 3.67). '*Feeling confident to plan for my future'* was not included in the survey for primary school students but emerged as fourth most important factor for secondary school students (overall cohort mean 3.88).

Feeling able to be myself in school

For secondary school students, *'feeling able to be myself in school* 'was rated particularly highly by students who are:

- socio-economically disadvantaged (4.03), female (3.88), cisgender (3.75), heterosexual (3.68), bisexual (3.88)
- from certain ethnic backgrounds including Black/Black British (3.8), mixed heritage (3.69
- from certain faith groups Christian (3.73) Muslim (3.68), Hindu (3.85), and Sikh (3.86).

Among primary school students, '*feeling able to be myself in school'* was rated particularly highly by children who are:

- socio-economically disadvantaged (3.97) and not socio-economically disadvantaged (4.01).
- from certain ethnicities and faiths groups including students who are Black/Black British (4.13), mixed heritage (4.01), Hindu (4.1), and Christian (3.97) and those for whom English is an Additional Language (3.98).

Feeling confident to plan for my future

The factor '*feeling confident to plan for my future'* was rated as particularly important for certain groups of secondary-aged students including for those who are socio-economically disadvantaged (4.03), female (3.93) and heterosexual (3.91), as well as for students from certain ethnic and faith backgrounds including students who are:

- Black/Black British (4.02), Asian/Asian British (3.91), Buddhist (4.06), Hindu (4.07), Muslim (4.06) and Christian (3.96).

It was also rated particularly highly by children who had English as an Additional Language (4). For both Black/Black British students and for Muslims this factor was rated the third highest of all factors, while for Buddhists it was their highest rated factor overall suggesting the particular importance for these groups of planning for their future as central to a sense of belonging in school.

Educators' and parents' survey data on individual identity building

Educators also recognised individual identity building and affirmation as central to school's support for students' sense of belonging. Educators rated the factor of *'accepting students for who they are*' as fifth out of 16 school actions to support belonging, with an overall cohort mean of 4.79 (where 4 is very important, and 5 is extremely important). Parents similarly recognised the importance of '*accepting children for who they are*' as indicated through rating this factor as the 8th most important out of 17 factors, with an overall cohort mean of 4.65.

Qualitative data on building and affirming individual identity in school

As well as having individual learning differences and styles acknowledged, as discussed in the previous section, educators spoke about how important and under recognised identity building and affirming is for students' sense of school belonging:

> "I think that schools don't necessarily recognise the importance of that and leaders in education don't necessarily recognise how central and fundamental a sense of belonging is and that sense of identity and inclusivity and diversity in all of its different manifestations actually."
>
> SE, HEADTEACHER, SECONDARY AND DIRECTOR, MULTI-ACADEMY TRUST

> "it's about what your identity is and it's about helping you to understand what your identity is because my identity is still developing. I'm 57, but a teenager, they haven't got a bloody clue, who they are at that point. So being explicit about how you develop that and that journey that you're on to sort of try and work out who you are and how you fit in with everything,"
>
> JN, HEADTEACHER, PRU

Educators spoke about three key school actions relating to promoting belonging through identity building and affirmation: celebrating uniqueness, explicit conversations about identity and prioritising a broad range of experiences and activities.

> "it's more about that celebration of uniqueness and that we are allowed to belong and that we all have a place really wherever we are and that we don't need to conform to someone else's culture or someone else's way, our way is also okay as long as it's not harmful to anybody else."
>
> AA, SUBJECT LEAD, SPECIAL EDUCATION

> "it's our responsibility for not just every child to be known and loved but celebrated. Every child has something about them that is wonderful and should be celebrated and that child should feel special and proud about that feature of themselves, whatever it might be, that facet of themselves."
>
> SE, HEADTEACHER, SECONDARY AND DIRECTOR, MULTI-ACADEMY TRUST

Supporting students as they navigate their way through school, balancing social identity pressures to fit-in with individual identity pressures to develop a confidence and security in who they are as individuals, was repeatedly emphasised. Staff illustrated different ways they do this. For instance, language used in conversations around discipline and discrimination were critical to developing a positive identity and sense of belonging:

> "It is just having those explicit conversations about identity and who they are as well... making sure that identity is top of their agenda and that tolerance is something that you teach rather than just expect."
>
> JN, HEADTEACHER, PRU

> "what's really important around that is that all the interactions with the kids about behaviour aren't labelling them as naughty. And we are very explicit and clear about not saying you are a bad person, but saying, right, this has happened. It's not ideal, but what are the skills you need, how are we going to do it differently next time? What do you need to learn? And sort of taking that approach of being open about the fact that everyone screws

up fairly regularly. So, it's about them not being labelled, again, because a lot of the kids when they come to us, they've been labelled as bad. Their sort of self-esteem is through the floor. Their relationship with education is broken basically. So, it is really important that we approach it from, they are valid human beings who are valuable to us."

JN, HEADTEACHER, PRU

Finally, the role of trips, experiences and clubs in supporting young people in broadening the range of communities and places where they feel they can belong beyond the school, was seen to be supportive of belonging in the longer term;

"Some children naturally go to clubs and they volunteer for things. They stand up in assemblies and talk and they're good at that sort of thing. But we try to look at the steps children have to make to feel brave enough to do something in an assembly. And we do join the community in those kind of public events. Find a way that they feel that they can be supported to do that. We have ambassadors, we have lunchtime ambassadors, we have restorative ambassadors, we have playground ambassadors. So, it's how can you support the community by giving some of your time to do something that also gives them a sense of belonging."

AE, HEADTEACHER, PRIMARY

In focus groups, students spoke about the importance of non-academic experiences for their sense of identity and as a means of injecting enjoyment and alleviating the pressure of the school experience:

"I think sort of the idea of like productive learning in the sense that like everything you do sort of works towards a goal that's like beneficial, not just for like the school,- with results, -but for you as a person as well."

CW, STUDENT, SECONDARY

"I think also an important bit of school is that it's not always focused on like grades and doing well in tests, it kind of shows like, people are succeeding by like doing what they love with like the people around them. So, I think that's also important to have something that's not just always like, academic it's also about building what you actually enjoy doing without stress and pressure."

AW, STUDENT, SECONDARY

"The definition of achievement I don't think should be fully centred around grades because if you spent time doing something, if you had a project or something and you spent a lot of time to make it, I don't know, colourful or really in-depth about something you like but it doesn't score high on a mark scheme, that shouldn't necessarily, they shouldn't be linked because achievement shouldn't always be derived from grades and scores because obviously that's not a sustainable part of life... grades aren't the only thing that you can achieve, that is important."

DW, STUDENT, SECONDARY

Other students spoke about the ways that mentors or non-academic experiences supported them to reconnect with education and feel better about themselves:

"after school clubs where it builds on your mental and physical strength, for example boxing as I know boxing is one of the things that we do here at (PRU name) and quite a lot of students benefit from that because like it helps them not just physically but mentally as well because it gets them stronger and it teaches them life skills that they're going to have for a long time…and that really builds someone as a person,"

NL, STUDENT, ALTERNATIVE PROVISION

This highlights school belonging as a process or journey that some students require additional support to secure. Going beyond just offering extra-curricular experiences, to ensure all students access them, whether by exploring the steps required to get them there, or building it into the curriculum, were highlighted.

"We have two sort of drivers in our school. One's communication and one is experiences actually. So, we actively seek out experiences and funding for them alongside our curriculum. It's really important. It's one of the big things that we do"

SN, ASSISTANT HEADTEACHER, PRIMARY

"Those sorts of things shouldn't be the preserve of the elite, but they're also achievable in state education. So, the reason that invokes me and I find it quite a point is that those different experiences and trips and activities should be everybody's rights and they shouldn't be left to chance. And every school, in my view, should be challenged to lever that into their curriculum and make time for it."

SE, HEADTEACHER, SECONDARY AND DIRECTOR, MULTI-ACADEMY TRUST

Young people often discussed 'being yourself' or expressing yourself in relation to peer interactions and the fear of being judged or laughed at.

"So sometimes you're trying to achieve goals and if you're being yourself like at home then people are just going to make fun of you for doing that."

AH, STUDENT, PRIMARY

"At school there is always like people who will be judging you for what you are doing... I feel like you'll never feel that comfort at school."

EC, STUDENT, SECONDARY (PP/FSM)

"yes, you should be yourself in school, but you've just got to remember boundaries... you can't be too egotistical."

NL, STUDENT, ALTERNATIVE PROVISION (NEURODIVERSE)

Other students spoke about being yourself as an ideal state, something to be achieved or attained. The use of the words 'should' and the description of a feeling of comfort were often used when discussing it:

"I feel like, once you know who you are as a person and you can be yourself, then other people will like you for who you are."

DL, STUDENT, SECONDARY (BLACK/FEMALE)

"I feel like you should be able to feel yourself at school because if you feel like, I want to be alone, then you can be alone and you don't feel you're going to be judged. Some people genuinely they don't like socialising all the time, they just want to think quiet and that's fine."

CL, STUDENT, SECONDARY (BLACK/ FEMALE)

"You shouldn't feel like you're not able to be yourself and people will laugh at you. If you're in a place you're comfortable with then people shouldn't really laugh at you or be mean."

BH, STUDENT, PRIMARY

This reiterates that, while feeling comfortable in your individual identity and feeling able being yourself are important factors in achieving a sense of school belonging, it may feel more or less attainable to different social groups. The social confidence to express yourself, the courage to reveal what you feel to be your authentic self, and a robust sense that others won't laugh at you (or that it doesn't matter if they do) are experienced differently. A recent study of university students' sense of belonging found that students of higher socio-economic status (SES) tended to prioritise authenticity while those of lower SES prioritised being seen to fit in

(Fernandez et al 2023). The exception to this was when students of lower SES were also, for instance, trans/gender diverse, when they then prioritised authenticity. The researchers theorise that having aspects of one's identity that are less accepted at home may make this more of a priority in the education setting. Further research to explore which groups prioritise authenticity as opposed to fitting in is needed. However, our study implies the opposite, with students of lower socio-economic status rating '*feeling able to be myself*' as slightly more important than their peers of higher SES. Our findings point to potential differences in terms of students' ethnicity and religion, suggesting that a fully intersectional analysis may usefully shed light on this area.

Only secondary aged students were asked to rate the importance of feeling confident to plan for their future in relation to school belonging. In discussion, many students queried its relevance to belonging and saw this as more of an individual concern:

> "I think it's good to plan your future, but yeah, I think that it is kind of something you can do by yourself. You can't have people do it for you, you have to do it yourself."
>
> CW, STUDENT, SECONDARY

> "I think that we all think being confident to plan futures, we all think that that's an important part of school life but not necessarily involved with belonging."
>
> AE, STUDENT, SECONDARY

Other students countered that it was relevant. Some felt it was connected, with feeling able to be yourself a pre-requisite for confidence to plan your future. This echoes educators' perceptions that identity building through a range of experiences impacts belonging beyond the school and in future settings.

> "And I feel like, if you are able to be yourself at school, that goes into being able to plan for your future because you need to be yourself before planning for the future."
>
> DL, STUDENT, SECONDARY, (MUSLIM)

> "If you're not confident about your future like you're not going to go anywhere. You need to be self-confident in yourself and what you're going to do later on in life but what's happening now is only temporary, you're only going to be in secondary for five years, whether you have friends or not, you've got to be thoughtful of yourself."
>
> NL, STUDENT, ALTERNATIVE PROVISION

> "I think planning your future is like the main reason you come to school because if you couldn't plan your future then there is no point in going to school. You're going to get the subjects like science or something to become a doctor, and so I think it should be at the top because that is the main purpose of school."
>
> BE, STUDENT, SECONDARY

We did not gather data on students' ages, but it is possible that age may impact on how important students perceive confidence to plan for the future to be. As they get older and moving on from school becomes a more concrete reality, the relevance of this may become more apparent.

It is notable that socio-economically disadvantaged students rated this factor more highly than their peers who are not from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds. In focus groups, some students suggested that the factor 'feeling confident to plan for the future' may be more important to students with fewer resources or whose academic attainment is not so high:

> "I think for some people it works to like plan on your own but I think there are groups of people who struggle like, they don't know where to look to be able to like know, like say for their journey in the future because especially if you don't do as well academically and you don't want to go to like college or whatever, I think you like know where to look for the career that you want to do but it's not as academic."
>
> CL, STUDENT, SECONDARY (FSM/PP)

> "for example like sixth forms as well because obviously you have to do a lot of research into like applying for references and open days and stuff, especially if somebody is from like, a lower income family or doesn't have access to a laptop or like a device, that often makes it a lot harder to do research and be able to plan that. So, if they feel safer like at school, I know I can go here and get the stuff I need, then it will stop them feeling a lot more scared, like they're out of options."
>
> EW, STUDENT, SECONDARY, (FSM/PP)

These students suggest that school belonging can create a sense of hope for more disadvantaged young people by enabling access to guidance and resources to inform their next steps. This echoes the findings of Sulimani-Aidan and Melkman (2022) regarding the role of school belonging in contributing to hope, motivation and aspirations for at risk young people by providing a 'sense of security' or safety to think about and plan their futures.

While neurodiverse students did not rate these factors any more highly than students from other groups, in focus groups those in alternative provision talked about the way their experiences in mainstream harmed their feelings of being able to be themselves, while their experiences in their current setting enabled it:

> "I feel like (my current provision) does it better than most mainstream schools. They help you be who you are rather than what you're meant to be or what you're forced to become. I think in that sense, coming to (my current provision) especially made me realise that it's not a bad place, but a place to start over again. I feel like a lot of time in mainstream we're on this one path of becoming what we're forced to be rather than who we are. So, in that sense, loving, they show us how to love ourselves and be who we are rather than what we're meant to be."
>
> MT, STUDENT, ALTERNATIVE PROVISION

Concluding thoughts on building and affirming a secure sense of individual identity

This section has highlighted that students, educators and parents recognise that identity development plays a crucial role in school belonging. Social identity, and the sense of belonging in terms of fitting in and being accepted by a group, and individual identity and the sense of being authentic and comfortable in your own skin, mean that this aspect of school belonging is experienced differently by different groups. Future research could usefully probe the relationship between both aspects of identity in exploring whether children with more privileged social identities (e.g. white, high SES) may feel more secure in a sense of belonging and therefore more able to express and embody the individual aspects of their identities than their less privileged peers. It is also an interesting line of enquiry to consider the role that identity may play in shaping children's work and future life aspirations in whether feeling more secure in their social and individual identities could also raise students' aspirations for future participation within society.

Factors that promote safety

This section presents the factors that survey responses indicate are most important for young people in promoting a sense of safety in school. This is followed by an analysis of focus group data from students and educators, which is organised by theme.

Overall ratings of all safety factors on primary-aged pupils' survey

'Teachers and adults being respectful to all children' is by far the most important factor for helping primary-aged children feel safe in school. This was closely followed by a group of 3 factors closely rated in their importance: '*knowing teachers will stop all kinds of bullying'*, '*teachers accepting me for who I am*,' and '*having school rules which are fair*.' Compared to these factors, spatial and physical aspects of safety were relatively less of a concern. The lowest rated factor, *'knowing that unwelcome people cannot come in from outside*' scored 3.71, (where 3 is 'important' and 4 is 'very important') suggesting this is still 'important' to primary-aged children's sense of safety.

Figure 15: How important are these things in helping you feel safe in school? (mean scores from primary-aged student responses)

Safety Factors	Mean (X)
Teachers and adults being respectful to all children.	4.42
Knowing teachers will stop all kinds of bullying (or unkind behaviour).	4.24
Having school rules which are fair.	4.19
Teachers accepting me for who I am.	4.18
Feeling that teachers care about me.	3.96
Having a safe space when I need it.	3.87
My learning is not disturbed	3.78
School buildings and spaces where I feel comfortable.	3.76
Knowing that unwelcome people cannot come in from outside.	3.71

Overall ratings of all safety factors on secondary-aged pupils' survey

As in the primary aged survey, '*Teachers and adults in school being respectful to students'* was the most highly rated factor. However, among secondary aged students, physical aspects of safety were rated as much more important than among primary students. '*No threat of crime in school*' (4.1) and '*no threat of physical violence in school'* (3.91) were the second and third most important aspects of safety for this age group. This is indicative of the different set of issues for secondary schools compared to primary.

Comparing responses from primary-aged and secondary-aged students, it is interesting to note that the top factors for safety are broadly similar. Secondary-aged students had more factors to rate. Three of these, '*No threat of crime in the school,'* '*No threat of physical violence'* and '*School deals effectively with discrimination if it occurs*' *all feature in their top five.* Once this difference is accounted for, '*Teachers and adults in school being respectful to students*', '*having school rules which are fair*', '*knowing that bullying is reported, it will be dealt with*' and '*teachers accepting me for who I am*,' are the other top-rated factors. This points to a high degree of commonality in students' views about priorities for feeling safe in school across the two age groups.

In terms of those factors that students have prioritised, their treatment by teachers and staff appears to be a key factor across both age groups. Adult respect, fairness, school staff dealing with discrimination and bullying and being accepted by staff for who you are, are the factors that students point to as having the most impact on their sense of safety in school.

Figure 16: How important are these things in helping you feel safe in school? (mean scores from secondary-aged student responses)

Safety Factors	Mean (X)
Teachers and adults in school being respectful to students	4.12
No threat of crime in the school (e.g. theft, drugs, weapons etc).	4.1
No threat of physical violence.	3.91
School deals effectively with discrimination if it occurs.	3.91
Having school rules which are fair.	3.85
Knowing that if bullying is reported, it will be dealt with.	3.77
Teachers accepting me for who I am.	3.76
A secure school where unwelcome people cannot come in from outside.	3.71
Different points of view can be shared without conflict.	3.66
School buildings and spaces in which I feel comfortable.	3.6
Being able to have a safe space if and when I need it.	3.57
Feeling that teachers care about me.	3.39
My learning is not disturbed.	3.33
Students' behaviour around the school site is monitored.	3.03

Overall rankings of all safety factors from parent and educator surveys

In the parents' and educators' surveys, the concept of safety was broken down into three separate components of safety: emotional safety, social safety and physical safety. They were asked to rank[10] factors within each group to allow for a more nuanced exploration.

Both educators and parents rank the factors '*tackle discrimination for other students'* and '*recognise and welcome the cultures and religions of all children'* as highly important for supporting students' emotional safety. This echoes students' priorities in terms of staff dealing with bullying, discrimination and treating students respectfully and fairly.

The divergence between educators' and parents' rankings for '*consistent routines and expectations'* and making sure to '*help students with ways to manage anxiety around tests/ exams'* is notable and represents the most significant difference in the viewpoints of the two groups. Staff prioritise '*consistent routines and expectations,'* an approach that would notionally support fairness; something students themselves prioritise. However, parents further prioritise emotional and wellbeing support to '*help students with ways to manage anxiety around tests/ exams.'*

[10] A modified competition ranking approach was used. When two factors receive identical scores, they are both given an equal ranking and the subsequent ranking position is removed. For example, if two factors tied for 1st place, the next highest-scoring factor does not receive 2nd place but rather 3rd place.

Figure 17: Which of these are most important in terms of helping students feel emotionally safe in school?
(Rankings of emotional safety factors by educators and parents)

Emotional Safety	Educators Ranking	Parents Ranking
Consistent routines and expectations	1	8
Tackle discrimination from other students	2	2
Recognise and welcome the cultures and religions of all children	3	1
Give space and time for children to self-regulate	4	6
Ask for student feedback so they are heard and listened to	5	4
Ensure students see themselves reflected in the curriculum	6	7
Give access to professional support when needed	7	5
Help students with ways to manage anxiety around tests/exams	8	3
Ask students to share their lives and backgrounds	9	9

Note: The table employs a modified competition ranking approach, where identical scores receive the same rank, and subsequent ranks are adjusted accordingly

Educators and parents both rank the same three factors as being most important in supporting young people's sense of social safety at school (see Figure 18.) Tackling bullying, managing behaviour and building strong home-school partnerships were those school actions that both groups agreed were most significant. Teacher training to support staff to recognise and challenge prejudice was also deemed by both groups to be fourth most important.

Figure 18: Which of these are most important in terms of helping students feel socially safe in school?
(Rankings of social safety factors by educators and parents)

Social Safety	Educators Ranking	Parents Ranking
Tackle bullying as part of whole school culture	1	1
Manage student behaviour	2	2
Build strong partnerships with parents/carers to support the child	3	3
Train teachers to recognise and challenge prejudice	4	4
Strengthen bonds between children	5	6
Have classrooms where students can learn without distractions	= 6	7
Have school rules which are fair	= 6	5
Build strong partnerships with the local community	8	8
Build strong partnerships with wider society	9	9

Note: The table employs a modified competition ranking approach, where identical scores receive the same rank, and subsequent ranks are adjusted accordingly

School actions to '*make safe spaces available to students'* and *'policies and procedures to protect children from physical violence*,' were the factors identified by both parents and educators as those most important for supporting a sense of physical safety. A notable divergence of views is that whereas schools prioritised actions to *'make the school site secure from intruders coming in'* parents prioritised '*policies and procedures to protect children from involvement in drugs.'*

Figure 19: Which of these are most important in terms of helping students feel physically safe in school?
(Rankings of physical safety factors by educators and parents)

Physical Safety	Educators Ranking	Parents Ranking
Make safe spaces available to the students	1	=1
Policies and procedures to protect children from physical violence	2	=1
Make the school site secure from intruders coming in	3	6
Policies and procedures to protect children from involvement in gang culture	4	4
Policies and procedures to protect against child grooming and exploitation	5	4
Policies and procedures to protect children from involvement in drugs	6	3

Note: The table employs a modified competition ranking approach, where identical scores receive the same rank, and subsequent ranks are adjusted accordingly

Key themes across the safety data set

Focus groups with students and educators offered an opportunity to explore their views on the factors promoting school safety in greater depth. As well as illuminating the survey data by illustrating what these factors look like in terms of day-to-day experiences in school, the focus group responses also elaborate on the survey data by pointing to potential reasons why these factors are considered to be important by students and educators.

This section develops a fuller picture of the six factors rated as most important across the two student surveys. It is organised thematically to facilitate understanding of the links between the individual factors.

Each thematic section starts with an overview of the mean ratings of the relevant factors from groups of students with different social characteristics. This more fine-grained view sheds light on areas of particular importance for different cohorts, suggesting where further research may usefully focus. This is followed by a discussion of the relevant focus group data, offering insights in participants' own words into how and why these factors impact students' sense of safety in school

Emotional safety theme 1: Respect, and fairness in teacher-student interactions

Safety factor 1: Teachers and adults being respectful to all children.

Safety factor 2: Having school rules which are fair.

Emotional safety factors were most significant for young people of all ages in survey responses. This was further reflected on in focus group discussions.

The factor '*teachers and adults being respectful to all children'* was rated the single most important factor for children's sense of safety in school, by both secondary (4.12) and primary (4.42) aged students (see Appendix 2a). '*Having school rules which are fair'* was rated as the fifth most important factor by secondary aged students (3.85) and the third most important for primary school aged students (4.19).

Teachers and adults being respectful to all children

For secondary aged students, this factor was rated particularly highly by students who are:

- socio-economically disadvantaged (4.19), female (4.28), cisgender (4.15), young carers (4.55) and for whom English is an Additional Language (4.14)
- from certain ethnic and faith groups, notably students who are Asian/Asian British (4.16), mixed heritage (4.21), Muslim (4.14), Buddhist (4.53), Hindu (4.19), Sikh (4.17) and those with no religion (4.15).

For primary aged students, it was rated particularly highly by:

- students who are not socio-economically disadvantaged (4.48).
- It was rated as the highest factor across students from ALL faith groups, but particularly highly by students who are Buddhist (4.75).
- It was rated very highly across the different ethnic groups, including for students who are Asian/British Asian (4.43), Black/Black British (4.49) and mixed heritage (4.59).

Having school rules which are fair

For secondary aged students, this factor rated particularly highly by students who are:

- socio-economically disadvantaged (3.9), female (3.98) and cisgender (3.98).
- from certain ethnic and faith groups, including students who are Asian/British Asian (3.87), Christian (3.86), Hindu (3.94), Sikh (3.91) and those with no religion (3.9) and those for whom English was an Additional Language (3.96).

For primary aged students it was rated particularly highly for students who were:

- both socio-economically disadvantaged (4.2) and NOT socio-economically disadvantaged (4.23).
- from certain ethnic and faith groups, including students who are Asian/Asian British (4.24), Black/Black British (4.22), and mixed heritage (4.36), Hindu (4.46) and Sikh (4.25).

Qualitative data on respect and fairness in teacher-student interactions

In focus groups, students often described times when they felt that teachers and adults were disrespectful or unfair to them as something which made them feel not good enough, or "inferior." The sense of not fitting-in with the school's notion of what a student should be like was often mentioned. For instance, one student commented that teachers "kind of expect you to be a certain way." Another talked about the difficulties faced when you aren't "like a model person."

Both primary and secondary aged students commented on feeling like they have to "act perfect," with one student explaining "our teacher... if he thinks we're not being like top of the school role models, he'll really shout at us sometimes." Her classmate added "instead of just shouting at us, you can tell us in a calmer voice, and you can tell us what we've done before you tell us off." (K, student, Primary). This highlights that feeling that expectations of them are fair and reasonable, and being spoken to calmly, avoiding shouting, helps students to feel respected and included.

A sense of unfairness was also implied by students when speaking about their abilities, skill levels or ways of learning not being equally respected. Experiences of teaching and learning approaches in the classroom were one feature of school life which left certain students feeling unwelcome and not catered for:

> "Not everyone is going to learn the same way or understand the same way, like there's a larger range of people than like what school expects. There are a lot of people that might learn in a visual way, if you're seated and maybe copying it down … you don't enjoy it."
>
> EC, STUDENT, SECONDARY.

Rather than talk in terms of emotional safety, students spoke about things that helped them feel 'encouraged' or 'discouraged.' In classrooms, being checked in on and being helped to catch up with work was seen to be encouraging and promoting a sense of emotional safety. Being shouted at and having your lack of progress viewed as laziness was seen to be discouraging, making students feel emotionally unsafe or disrespected:

> "I think if they encourage you by if you've fallen behind in class, they'll help you more and they'll give you special like things to make it easier for you to learn."
>
> BH, STUDENT, PRIMARY

> "If I'm honest, sometimes our main teacher in Year 6 can be a bit less encouraging and a bit more, I don't know how really to say it... Sometimes he can call people in our class lazy and like compare people to other people in how they learn…Also sometimes when he puts you on the spot it's a bit embarrassing because then he goes oh well you should have been listening but how do you know if I wasn't listening, I might just not have known the answer."
>
> CH, STUDENT, PRIMARY

Students described how certain things can fuel social anxiety, discourage contributions in class and negatively impact on participation and speaking up. The three most commonly mentioned examples were being put on the spot in lessons, having their misunderstanding misrecognised as not listening or being lazy, and being treated unfairly;

> "if someone is like purposely singling you out and they're not treating you with the same respect as everyone else, you're going to feel like a lot more on edge... you're going to keep your hand down in class, you're going to keep your mouth shut because you feel like everyone is kind of judging you with every little thing you say."
>
> CE, STUDENT, SECONDARY

Students comments highlighted how instances of unfair treatment during classroom discipline can negatively impact their self-esteem. Describing instances when teachers instruct some students to move seats due to talking while allowing others to remain seated where they are, one primary student described it as "a bit unfair," and explained "that makes some people feel inferior."

Students valued and recognised how certain styles of teacher-student interaction did not just support emotional safety and a sense of being respected, but could also model how boundaries can be enforced in a way that doesn't compromise emotional safety:

> "I think there can be a good strict and there can be a bad strict. So strict in a way that you're not screaming at the student and criticising them for literally every single thing that they're doing and making sure that you have moments where you're relaxed and, you know, you laugh with the student, or you make a joke or you praise them for something that they've done. But then there's also a good strict which is getting through the lesson and making sure that if a student disrespects you, that firstly you warn them and then make them understand that there will be consequences if you don't respect them."
>
> AE, STUDENT, SECONDARY.

Staff also flagged the importance of staff modelling respect to the students. Specifically, taking care with language to ensure discipline-related issues or transgressions do not reinforce a negative identity for the student, or harm their self-esteem, was something staff highlighted, especially for students who had experienced exclusion or suspension;

> "When students do something wrong, whether they make a homophobic comment or a racial comment, that's bullying, we make sure we alert them. We're not calling them racist; we're not calling them homophobic, but their behaviour and their words or what they said is what's led to them being sanctioned."
>
> SA, PASTORAL LEAD, SECONDARY.

Finally, students regularly spoke about the importance of being heard and listened to for them to feel respected and fairly treated in school. Again, they tended to reference times when their viewpoints or issues were dismissed. We can infer from this that effort to engage with students' perspectives and give them a more equal and active role within the school would support their emotional safety and help them to feel that their emotions and views are respected.

When asked what advice they would give to schools to support students to feel emotionally safe in school, students' suggestions often related to being listened to and having their views heard:

> "Acknowledging the students' emotions for a start."
> LN, STUDENT, PRU.

> "Making sure that our opinions are heard." FT, STUDENT, ALTERNATIVE PROVISION.

> "I feel like they should definitely be more understanding and hearing you out."
> CL, STUDENT, SECONDARY.

> "Speak to the students, so get the students point of view."
> KL, STUDENT, ALTERNATIVE PROVISION.

> "Instead of like just shutting down say an idea, you know, let them say what they think."
> FW, STUDENT, SECONDARY.

> "When you say something to a teacher, like it's something true and they just like say, don't talk back, you're not allowed to talk back."
> AH, STUDENT, ALTERNATIVE PROVISION.

A specific area of school life which appears to be particularly important to students in terms of feeling respected and fairly treated by staff is conflict resolution. Repeatedly students spoke about the importance of getting "to the root of the problem" and getting "the whole story." This importance of fairness in resolving conflict, and the sense of injustice when this is not achieved was particularly keenly felt by students who believed that they had acquired a bad reputation, but was spoken about by a wide range of pupils:

> "I was a person who used to get into trouble a lot like in fights and stuff like that, most teachers didn't want to see my point of view, they didn't want to know my side of the story or why I did this or that, they just wanted to get straight into it, like deal with it and like some teachers would just like blame me or if there was like a noisy lesson or something like that teachers would blame me... which kind of like ruins the point of school as well and like relationships with teachers."
> JC, STUDENT, SECONDARY.

> "I feel like the first thing is kind of to ask what's going on, because a lot of the time they just start leaping onto the problem what they've heard and a lot of the time it's not the whole story. So, then they kind of get the wrong impression and then you're getting in trouble for something that you weren't really doing."
> BE, STUDENT, SECONDARY.

> "I think before scolding anyone or giving out any punishments whatsoever, they should literally just listen to every single person who was involved and let them tell their side of the story before making any assumptions."
> DE, STUDENT, SECONDARY.

> "Yeah, they try and get rid of the whole thing completely but if they just go to the whole root of the problem... get over it and talk again, maybe they would be friends and they would get over but getting rid of it and getting them to go their separate ways isn't really going to help much."
> AE, STUDENT, SECONDARY

> "I think that teachers... should focus on why they acted the way they acted and how they can prevent instead of just saying – like just telling them off or giving them a sanction whatever, they should focus on like understanding their point of view and why they acted that way to prevent it happening in the future... because I think that teachers their main like priority is to resolve it and make it not happen again, but I don't think it's really effective because they don't know the root of the problem. They just focus on the problem but they should find out why it happened in the first place so add more context as well so they can deal with it in a more effective way"
> HC, STUDENT, SECONDARY.

Staff also acknowledged both the importance and the challenge of making school fair and respectful to the full range of students and responding to the range of learning needs, comprehension levels, conflicts and transgressions. These insights are explored in detail in the section on school actions. In essence however, educators echoed the young people's views about the importance of taking the time to deal with conflict effectively, stressing the importance of viewing matters of discipline to be an educational opportunity:

> "If something goes wrong, it's a learning opportunity... behaviours are something that give us an opportunity to teach children and help them learn the skills to manage."
> AE, HEADTEACHER, PRIMARY

It was notable that the topic of the current Palestine-Israel conflict was raised by students numerous times in focus groups. Each time it was raised, students expressed frustration that they felt shut down and unsupported to explore and discuss the topic.

> "when it was like Ukraine, the war in Ukraine at the moment, the whole school, the whole country were all supporting Ukraine and like, they're not the same with Palestine, they should be equal, they should be like the same."
> EW STUDENT, SECONDARY.

> "there's not like a lot of clarity because they kind of just said we're not allowed to wear like badges or anything with like the Palestinian flag but they didn't like, if they kind of explained what was going on in detail and why they have the policies for doing stuff, it would have been better instead of just telling us like, 'don't say anything."
> DW, STUDENT SECONDARY.

> "it's going to cause more of like an argument in school and it won't get round to teachers because obviously they know it's like banned to talk about it."
> DL, STUDENT, SECONDARY.

Their comments implied that students felt that the issue of the Israel-Palestine conflict was a taboo topic, and the implicit ban on speaking about the conflict was frustrating. While some students expressed a sense of unfairness, or injustice as to what they felt to be a double-standard, others expressed a sense that they didn't really understand and wanted to have more detail and understanding. This echoes students' calls for more lessons on

diversity and wanting to be able to explore difference more openly. The final two comments above give some insight into how these issues, or others like it, can compromise students' emotional safety. As they describe it, knowing the topic is forbidden means teachers and staff are not drawn into the conversation, leaving students to discuss it without oversight from adults. The lack of understanding and lack of support from staff appears to compound a sense of insecurity. The final comment suggests that students sense a fear among staff around a topic, possibly leading to students feeling fearful that the staff themselves don't have control of the situation. As one student explained *"so people are going to have their opinions on it like, even if they don't talk about it in school so, the least you could do is be educated on what's going on."*

Emotional safety theme 2: Individual identity and teacher-student relationships

Safety factor 3: Teachers accepting me for who I am

Safety factor 4: Feeling that teachers care about me

'Teachers accepting me for who I am' was rated as the seventh most important factor by secondary aged students (3.76) and the third most important for primary school aged students (4.18). *'Feeling that teachers care about me'* was rated as the twelfth most important factor by secondary aged students (3.39) and fifth most important for primary school aged students (3.96).

Teachers accepting me for who I am

For secondary school students this factor was rated particularly highly by students who are:

- socio-economically disadvantaged (3.89)
- bisexual (3.9).
- from certain ethnic and faith groups, including students who are Asian/Asian British (3.91), Black/Black British (4.02), Muslim, (3.81), Hindu (4.09), Sikh (4) and those with no religion (3.8) and students for whom English was an Additional Language (3.86)
- neurodiverse (3.78), young carers (3.82), and those who are care experienced (3.82).

For primary aged school students, it was rated particularly highly by students who are:

- both socio-economically disadvantaged and NOT socio-economically disadvantaged.
- from certain ethnic and faith groups, including students who are white (4.19), Black/Black British (4.34), mixed heritage (4.37), Christian (4.28), Sikh (4.36) and students for whom English was an Additional Language (4.21).

Feeling that teachers care about me

For secondary school students this factor was rated particularly highly by students who are:

- socio-economically disadvantaged (3.55)
- female (3.59).
- from certain ethnic and faith groups, including students who are Asian/Asian British (3.43), Black/Black British (3.96), Christian (3.44), Hindu (3.74) and those with no religion (3.42) and those for whom English was an Additional Language (3.46).

For primary aged students this factor was rated particularly highly for students who are:

- not socio-economically disadvantaged (4.08).
- from certain ethnic and faith groups, including students who are Asian/Asian British (4.04), and mixed heritage (4.37), Hindu (4.14), and Sikh (4.1).
- young carers (4) and refugees (4).

Qualitative data on individual identity and teacher-student relationships

Another key theme to emerge from focus group discussion was the importance of feeling accepted and cared for by teachers in order to feel emotionally safe at school. Students spoke about the things that teachers do which show they care. These tended to be simple moments of interaction where teachers take time to speak about non-academic topics, or ask about students' lives outside of school, or greet them warmly:

> "Ask them how their weekend has been... ask them if they're alright."
>
> BH, STUDENT, ALTERNATIVE PROVISION

> "I feel like sometimes it would be nice for teachers to just step out, not too far, but step out of their professional setting and just talk to you without the conversation being about what you learned in class or what you are doing in class. Like maybe ask how your day's going like or what you did over the weekend. And a lot of the teachers here do that, like especially after holidays. "How's your holiday? Did you do anything special like here?" Like the school I'm at ..I feel like they're fantastic at doing all of these a hundred percent." GT, STUDENT, ALTERNATIVE PROVISION.

> "When you come into class people say hello and teachers say good morning"
>
> DH, STUDENT, PRIMARY.

Students also valued the care demonstrated when teachers notice how they are feeling, or that they are struggling, or pick up on subtle cues that something might be wrong:

> "I think some teachers are really good at picking up on if you're upset or uncomfortable or something like that and I think a lot of them will come and check on you and I think they make us feel really safe."
>
> AR, STUDENT, PRIMARY

> "They might keep an eye on you or come around... see if you are okay and like talking to you."
>
> ER, STUDENT, PRIMARY

Other students described more specific actions and praised the positive impact it had for their sense of safety and being cared for:

> "At our school, if they know something will happen, they'll drop you home. Like they'll try or drop you off up the road, so they know that you won't get in trouble. And they really care about you."
>
> FT, STUDENT, ALTERNATIVE PROVISION.

"Talking about teachers not doing enough. I think that's actually incorrect I disagree with that because basically I used to get in a lot of trouble and like now I've got two mentoring teachers, people I can trust and like the school does a lot, like there's a team, like teachers even came to my house to talk to my parents and I've got a teacher that I'm really close to now her name is I and whenever I'm feeling angry or sad I can always talk to her and the day just gets better."

IC, STUDENT, SECONDARY.

Mentors were repeatedly mentioned as making a significant difference to feeling cared for and personally supported:

"This guy called D, he used to always take me out like one period a week to do some boxing and like... that really helped... he was a really good support... he's a really good person I can talk to now."

BC, STUDENT, SECONDARY (SEND).

The informal aspect of the relationship and interaction seemed to be key to students' sense of being accepted and cared for and essential to building positive relationships.

Another key aspect raised in relation to emotional safety and teacher acceptance was school uniform and school rules around appearance. Some students expressed the view that interactions around uniform could have a negative impact on their sense that teachers care about them:

"I feel like, they care more about what I'm wearing than what's going on … why so worried about my jacket?"

AL, STUDENT, SECONDARY

Students also talked about how self-presentation might link to emotional safety for some people:

"The freedom to sort of express yourself, I think it sort of links to feeling emotionally safe as well, especially like, culturally or like, with certain objects. Obviously, we have rules on like jewellery and stuff but if somebody has something that's like, significant to them and acts as like a comfort mechanism, then it's like important to be able to do that and have that."

DL, STUDENT, SECONDARY

"You should at least like be able to express yourself in different ways without having to wear your own clothes, like you should be allowed to wear like make-up because some people are insecure."

AC, STUDENT, SECONDARY.

There were different views expressed by educators on the issue. While some educators held the view that uniform created a sense of belonging through demonstrating a pride in being visibly part of the school community, others shared students' views that aspects of individual identity and emotional safety were more critical:

"we've stepped right back in terms of uniform. So, we don't challenge people for having nail polish and lipstick and eyelashes and earrings and necklaces because those sorts of things just create conflict. And naturally, if a child wishes to hide behind some makeup and some eyelashes and some fingernails, good luck to them. If that's what helps get them through the door because they feel more confident about their body image, then great. We are not going to challenge them. Things like shoes... uniforms certainly are a big area that helps stop conflict between staff and pupils, helps pupils to have greater sense of identity and ownership about their identity, stops those negative interactions. So, we can work on the positive conversations."

SE, HEADTEACHER, SECONDARY AND DIRECTOR, MULTI-ACADEMY TRUST

Parent feedback also voiced a concern that rigid policies could negatively impact individual identity and expression. For instance, one parent commented:

"Schools with strict rules should be aware how they can change child's uniqueness. Children should feel free to express themselves."

PARENT.

This echoes students' and educator's views about the importance of self-expression and role of identity building in school belonging for young people. This parent suggests that an overly rigid, pre-determined institutional sense of what it means to feel safe and included may risk hampering students' agency to find themselves through school and establish an identity, confident in their uniqueness and individual qualities.

Social safety theme 3: Knowing school will deal with bullying and discrimination

Factor 1: Knowing teachers will stop all kinds of bullying

Factor 2: School deals effectively with discrimination if it occurs (discrimination in unmonitored spaces)

Social safety emerged as the second most significant factor for primary-aged student's sense of safety; they rated the factor *'knowing teachers will stop all kinds of bullying'* as the *second* highest safety factor (4.24: see Appendix 2b). Secondary school-aged students also saw this as important, rating *'knowing teachers will stop all kinds of bullying'* as sixth highest (3.77). The related factor '*school deals effectively with discrimination when it occurs'* was also rated as the fourth highest factor for safety by secondary school aged students (3.91).

Confidence that teachers will stop bullying (if it occurs)

For secondary aged students, the factor *'knowing that if bullying is reported it will be dealt with'* was rated as particularly highly by students who are:

- socio-economically disadvantaged (3.83)
- female (3.92).
- from certain ethnic and faith groups, including students who are Asian/Asian British (3.85), Muslim (3.81), Jewish (3.83) Buddhist (3.94), Hindu (3.99), Sikh (3.83) and those with no religion (3.81).

The only faith groups that rated this factor below the mean rating for the overall cohort were Christians and Atheists.

In contrast with the secondary data, for primary aged students, this factor was rated particularly highly by students who are:

- not socio-economically disadvantaged (4.35).
- by ALL the non-white British ethnicities including for students who are Asian/ Asian British (4.29), Black/Black British (4.32) and mixed heritage (4.33).
- from certain faiths including those who are; Hindu (4.51) and Sikh (4.39).
- by students for whom English was an Additional Language (4.27).

School deals effectively with discrimination (if it occurs)

For secondary aged students, this factor was rated as particularly highly by students who are:

- socio-economically disadvantaged (4), female (4.11), cisgender (3.99), heterosexual (3.96), and bisexual (4.04).
- from certain ethnic and faith groups, including students who are Black/Black British (4.27), Muslim (4.03), Atheist (3.98) and Hindu (3.92).

Qualitative data on bullying and discrimination

When students discussed social safety in focus groups, they spoke about bullying and discrimination, where it happened, what it looked like and what they felt schools could do to keep them safe from it. Reflecting the literature (e.g. Walls and Louis 2023), students spoke about feeling less safe in public spaces where students congregate during unstructured times between lessons or at break times;

> "when you say social safety that's basically keeping people safe from verbal abuse from other people in like open spaces, so the only way to really tackle that is by like keeping them busy where students can have a place to go to where they don't want to be like out in the crowds at lunchtime and things like that so like there's not a lot of social pressure on them if you get what I'm saying."
>
> NL, STUDENT, ALTERNATIVE PROVISION.

This aspect of safety is tightly connected to the spatial dimension of safety and belonging which is explored in the next section, with students' sense of belonging and safety variable across the different places within school.

Staff recognised this, and the importance of ongoing dialogue with students around school buildings and spaces:

> "When we do pupil voice, we always ask where are the places that don't feel safe? Toilets, toilets, toilets." AE, HEADTEACHER, PRIMARY

An interaction in a secondary focus group highlighted that for some students, toilets could provide a refuge, but that this was necessary only due to the lack of other places to go to feel safe:

> "And I think they should open classrooms for people like that because sometimes, I know a lot of the girls sit in the toilets and eat... they don't want to sit alone and now you're only allowed a certain amount of people in the toilets, so they're not allowed in there any more so, then it leaves them like, without anywhere to be."
>
> BW, STUDENT, SECONDARY

This shows that for students facing social anxiety, being visibly alone in public dining areas makes them feel vulnerable so they look for spaces to hide away. Safety from the gaze and judgement or from the unkind treatment of others during break and lunch times appears to be a key priority for students.

Feeling vulnerable to harassment from passers-by or members of the public in areas along the boundary was also raised:

> "Already I think at breaktimes, sometimes the playground areas, they're very close to the gates that lead to the streets outside. But then I feel that people would feel a lot safer if their social areas were moved away from the edge of the school and so that everyone who kind of pass by can't shout at you and you don't feel uncomfortable."
>
> CE, STUDENT, SECONDARY.

Having a safe space to socialise, or be alone, and having somewhere you can go to where you don't feel socially unsafe is an important aspect of safety for students.

Staff also highlighted staff supervision, good visibility and avoiding crowds of students to be really important for students' feelings of safety:

> "Making sure the supervision is in place and making sure the playground is visible. I think when I first arrived, you couldn't see. So, the children know very quickly where staff can't see. They know."
>
> AE, HEADTEACHER, PRIMARY

> "We have built the school with no narrow corridors because we know that a lot of a time physical safety and emotional safety are very much linked. That for a lot of students the thought of going into a busy corridor is a lot..., we know a lot of things can happen so we have central spaces where there are wide spaces where there's no kind of hidden areas and there are always staff present which mean that students aren't fearing transitioning from one classroom next due to fear of what might happen because the logistical element has been taken away."
>
> EY, DEPUTY SAFEGUARDING LEAD, PRIMARY AND SECONDARY.

Students also described the elusive nature of verbal bullying and discrimination, how it can go unnoticed and unchallenged and take forms which are difficult to deal with. The fact that it can go on in plain sight made some students feel uncertain of whether staff had noticed it and were turning a blind eye, or whether they were simply unaware. This seemed to compound their sense of being socially unsafe.

'Banter' and disguising unkindness and prejudice as joking or harmless fun was repeatedly raised, leading students themselves to wonder "is it banter or bullying?" EGAS.

Some described the doubt or concern they felt when hearing prejudiced jokes around the site;

> "I think some people sometimes say comments and they don't actually think about what they're saying because you'll hear like people like two friends, they'll be like, joking and laughing but saying like rude words, like discriminatory words in like a joking manner and then you're thinking, you're saying it to your friend but have you also said it to other people."
>
> BW, STUDENT, SECONDARY.

Others described how it can lead to a lack of certainty over whether to challenge it or defend yourself:

> "I feel like sometimes... some people may not know that what's being done to them is wrong until somebody says something but then nobody in the room like says that it's bad to them, they may feel kind of weird, but they'll shut it down because nobody else has reacted to it."
>
> AL, STUDENT, SECONDARY.

Being told that banter comments are "NTD" or "not that deep" were given as examples of ways in which aggressors could make somebody feel like "they're overreacting."

> "(when) people are saying, it's not that deep, then like, the person who received the comment, their emotional safety could be challenged because like, no one is looking out for me, people are saying it doesn't matter so, they'll just keep it in."
>
> CL, STUDENT, SECONDARY.

Students weren't always confident that they would be supported by staff in the room or vicinity:

> "obviously it should be a teacher's role at that point to be like okay, that's a bit wrong... yeah because obviously with students it's hard and maybe some people don't even realise that something is wrong so, you can't really blame them but as a teacher, you work with kids, you should be able to know that a child is being bullied in that situation."
>
> AL, STUDENT, SECONDARY

> "Be attentive, I feel like you can't just walk through the corridor and be like, oh my next lesson is in this room, I'll just go to this room. I feel like you have to always be watchful what's going on in school because if you're just minding your business and be like, oh our primary goal is to teach these four lessons and then go home, if you don't have like a listening ear and a watchful eye, then you won't get a sense of what the environment is, so then people will feel like, oh this happened to me and the teacher just walked passed, like nothing happens so, I feel like they should definitely be like, more attentive."
>
> EL, STUDENT, SECONDARY

The importance of continually teaching students about the harm of unkind jokes and intolerance of difference was echoed by staff as a priority for students' social and emotional safety:

> "I'd say we have a majority culture here that's very intolerant to difference. And we did a pupil voice this week and a boy who's in year six talked about joking. He's a Somali ethnic child and he said, "I don't like it because people think it's a joke to tease, but it's not a joke." So, his voice came through strong that people, and we got stuff to work on in terms of understanding the impact when someone thinks it's okay to call a name."
>
> AE, HEADTEACHER, PRIMARY.

> "there's quite a lot of racism within the community towards children with darker skin, but also our children who are just different. And so, we've also got a lot of children with high level of autism now or children presenting with that profile."
>
> AE, HEADTEACHER, PRIMARY.

Students valued swift, responsive support in instances of discrimination and bullying where attention was given to the person who had been impacted by it as well as the perpetrator:

> "dealing with things like discrimination like extremely quickly and firmly as well, like make sure the person gets punished and knows their actions and what they've done, if they've acted in like a racist or sexist way."
>
> JI, STUDENT, SECONDARY

> "try and help the person that's been victimised by... it's not so much about just stopping the rumour but more about also giving the person that the rumour is about the assurance that, oh, people know this isn't true, you haven't done this, you've done this and... any extra support they actually need."
>
> DE, STUDENT, SECONDARY.

Staff spoke in detail about impactful ways to tackle this and these are discussed in detail in the section on school actions. In essence, they spoke about ways to help students learn to celebrate and value difference, and even working with families and communities to unpick patterns of prejudice that might fuel discrimination and bullying in schools.

Physical safety

Factor 1: No threat of crime
Factor 2: No threat of physical violence

For secondary school aged students, physical safety emerged to be the second most important factor for feeling safe in school. Secondary school aged students rated *'no threat of crime in school'* to be the second highest safety factor (4.1) and *'no threat of physical violence'* to be the third highest factor (3.91) (see Appendix 2c).

No threat of crime

For secondary aged students, this factor of was rated particularly highly by students who are:

- socio-economically disadvantaged (4.22), female (4.27), cisgender (4.13), heterosexual (4.02) and bisexual (3.78).
- from certain ethnic and faith groups, including students who are white (4.1), Asian/ Asian British (4.14) and Hindu (4.29).

No threat of physical violence

For secondary aged students, this factor was rated particularly highly by students who are:

- from certain ethnic and faith groups, including students who are White (3.95), Asian/ Asian British (3.92), Black/Black British (4.1), Christian (3.89), Muslim (3.96), Atheists (3.96), Hindu (3.99) and of no religion (3.92).
- young carers (3.94) and those who have English as an Additional Language (3.9).

Qualitative data on physical safety

While secondary students ranked the absence of threats of crime and violence as highly important on the survey, there was comparatively little discussion of it in focus groups. While they often referred to *'aggression'* or pushing and *'shoving'* in corridors, people being *'slapped'* or shoved, there was little explicit discussion of crime and physical violence.

Students occasionally referred to fights and the measures schools put in place to protect them from physical conflict. In these instances, their comments often highlighted the challenges schools face in dealing with this without further compromising a sense of safety:

> "the school has a lot of fights at break times sometimes during break or during lessons so I think teachers should like notice when like if it's in lessons I think when a student's getting like angry."
>
> JC, STUDENT, SECONDARY.

As with bullying and discrimination, staff alertness, noticing and dealing pro-actively with angry outbursts and taking time to deal with both sides of the story were aspects students mentioned as important to helping them feel physically safe.

Students and staff in pupil referral units and alternative provisions which draw students from different geographical areas spoke about taking many additional measures to keep students safe. One headteacher described how they had reconfigured the space within school and timings to be able to minimise the risk of conflict. Transporting students across areas of the city that are known to be hostile for them was another key way of keeping them physically safe:

"We've developed safe spaces in the school… we have different parts of the school that are sectioned off. We get kids in at different times of day, so they're not in the building at the same time. We protect journeys to and from school as well. So, I think part of it is you can do whatever you want in school, but actually if a kid from, say this meeting, is having to cross through sort three different gang territories to get to school, then their safety's at risk. So, we have got kids that are taxied across those territories and various groups."

JN, HEADTEACHER, PRU.

Students were aware of and deeply valued this level of support and care:

"that's very appreciated because one day you can leave school knowing that you might get stabbed and that it could happen, but your school prevented it from happening. I feel like they're really good at the time. They're really good when it comes to safety…if they know something will happen, they'll drop you home. Like they'll try or drop you off the road, so they know that you won't get in trouble. And that they really care about you."

FT, STUDENT, ALTERNATIVE PROVISION.

Some measures that schools take to try to improve physical safety, for instance searching students for weapons or drugs, was seen to be problematic for young people and compromise their sense of safety. They suggested that giving clear 'guidelines' about what could be considered a weapon would be helpful to avoid 'misunderstandings' and 'misconceptions.' They also felt that conversation was more appropriate before taking any 'stop and search' style approaches:

"I think you should also question people, like ask them like, oh, would you have any dangerous weapons on you, like you can tell us now if you suspect you might have something that would go down as a weapon, like before doing any searches, because they might understand the situation, the person might want to tell them first before they get all their things searched."

DE, STUDENT, SECONDARY.

Having a friend or trusted peer with you if you were expected to have your bag searched was seen as a way to protect the safety, dignity and privacy of the person being searched:

"I think if you are going to be searched, making sure maybe that you have a friend, maybe in private but maybe having someone as well maybe standing outside like a friend making sure that you feel- Because if you've not done anything wrong and the teacher says, oh, I think you... I think it's important to have someone outside and someone close to you to make sure that you're ok."

CE, STUDENT, SECONDARY

Students highlighted that searching in this way could have repercussions in making students feeling emotionally unsafe throughout the school:

"Yeah, I feel like it comes as quite a shock and a lot of people would be left feeling quite unsafe because they might have a personal item that they don't really want other people to see because... people are going to make fun of them if they have it in their bag and then people don't like getting searched in front of others, they probably feel like it's quite a violation of privacy, not to the teachers but to the other students that might actually see it."

AE, STUDENT, SECONDARY.

Staff in alternative provisions and PRUs echoed this view that while conceived of as a means to keep students safe, searching could be harmful to their sense of safety. Describing the procedures when she first arrived at an institution she was heading up, one Head said:

"As the students arrived in the morning, they were searched the minute that they arrived. That was their first experience every morning... (staff) they'd have their metal detectors ready and every single morning it created a massive issue. Children would understandably get very upset and angry and frustrated. Somebody would inevitably end up being physically restrained. Children would leave the building every single morning and it was the first thing that I, from day one, knew needed to stop happening. If I walked into a building and somebody searched me the minute I arrived, what are we saying to that young person?"

GY, EXECUTIVE HEADTEACHER, ALTERNATIVE PROVISION.

"We had an awful lot of work to do in terms of making sure that our young people who came to us were valued and that the community did not see and label our young people as these awful gang members who were just a nuisance to society"

GY, EXECUTIVE HEADTEACHER, ALTERNATIVE PROVISION.

The role of space and place in belonging and safety

A further theme to emerge across the dataset was the spatial dimension to children's sense of belonging and safety in school. This was indicated by the relative importance to students of *'having a space in school where me and my friends can feel comfortable.'* For primary school children, this factor emerged as the fifth most important factor (3.81), while for secondary school students '*having a space in school where me and my friends can feel comfortable'* was rated as the seventh most important factor (3.64) (see Appendix 3, Table 1g).

Having a space where me and my friends can hang out/feel comfortable in school

For secondary aged students this factor was particularly important for students who are:

- socio-economically disadvantaged (3.76), female (3.75), cisgender (3.72), heterosexual (3.79), bisexual (3.83), white (3.67),
- from certain ethnic and faith groups, including Asian/ Asian British (3.65), and Hindu (3.8).

For primary school aged students this factor was important for students who are:

- white (3.82), Asian/Asian British (3.9), Black/Black British (3.81) and mixed heritage (3.9).
- from certain faith groups including Hindu (3.95) and for those with no religion (3.88).

Qualitative data on the spatial dimension to belonging and safety

In focus groups most discussion of the role of places and spaces in school belonging was closely related to feelings of safety. The main exceptions to this were some discussions of specific initiatives where students used the school spaces for extracurricular or personally supportive activities. This section therefore starts by presenting qualitative data on the spatial dimension of school belonging before exploring how this is seen to relate to safety, our other key component of inclusion.

Students often described school belonging in terms of feeling comfortable and motivated to enter and remain in the setting:

> "it's a place where you feel like you're happy to go to."
> AW, STUDENT, SECONDARY.

> "it's coming to an environment away from any external places... coming to a place every day for like five days a week and... being comfortable in your surroundings."
> AL, STUDENT, SECONDARY.

Many students referenced the amount of time they spent in school:

> "it's somewhere you go like, various hours of your day, you spend most of your time from like Monday to Friday in school."
> FL, STUDENT, SECONDARY.

Students' examples highlight that feeling school is a space for them and is a place they have some choice and autonomy over using the space impacts their feelings of belonging. For instance, one group of Year 11s offered the example of Saturday school as something which made a very positive impact on their sense of belonging:

> "it's a way of like to get out the house and it's somewhere that I like to go. I don't wake up and be like, oh I have to go to school, I actually get up and I want to go to school."
> DL, STUDENT, SECONDARY

> "Because it's that option also. You don't have to. It's not necessarily like school because you don't need to come in your uniform, it's more relaxed, like if you sit and eat, you can do so, so it's kind like, it's like going to a library basically but you've got like a more focused environment around you so that you can actually learn."
> FL, STUDENT, SECONDARY.

With students from disadvantaged backgrounds more likely to rate the spatial dimension of school belonging as significant, these comments may help explain this finding. Being able to access school spaces at the weekend, to access resources and support for additional learning at school and to have a place to meet friends at weekends that is free could potentially have greater significance for this cohort. It may also be that this optional element enables them to exercise some agency or choice over whether to enter the school, maybe shifting their perception of it.

Students also suggested that the use of school spaces outside of the school day can impact belonging by enabling them to interact with staff in less formal ways or by enabling them to engage in activities which support their ability to feel ready to engage and learn. For instance:

> "I think the school should put some like before school clubs because if you do something productive in the morning, you'll feel like emotionally better like let's say you do like a workout in the morning or if you're much better by yourself and like you're getting less affected by other people. Also, it's an opportunity for all the teachers to do something as well, like you know how teachers are always teaching and like some students only see them teaching."
> BC, STUDENT, SECONDARY.

> "Maybe if you're not like very good in the classroom or like your behaviour will be different when you're doing something that you might enjoy... maybe it's like a way you can like express yourself and maybe just like calm down and do what you like and then maybe that can help repair your student-teacher relationship."
> AC, STUDENT, SECONDARY.

This echoes findings of a recent study into school belonging where students identified spaces in school where belonging was not contingent on success and skill level to be those where they felt the strongest sense of belonging (Walls and Louis 2023). Spaces where you are accepted as you are and can participate at whatever level you happen to be at were consistently flagged by students as places where they experienced school belonging. This suggests that maximising opportunities for students to have a choice or say over the use of school spaces, and enabling them to experience less formal interactions in these spaces, whether during or outside of the typical school day, may support students' sense of belonging.

Taking on responsibilities within particular spaces or encouraging stewardship of the school natural environment through enabling students to take on particular roles was another approach that was seen to support school belonging. Some students described their roles as Ecowarriors in their primary school, where they agreed that initiatives about the use of the school environment helped them feel school belonging:

> "I feel like I have a responsibility to do more things and it just makes me feel more welcome that everyone has a chance and I have a chance."
>
> EH, STUDENT, PRIMARY.

This was echoed by staff from primary schools who also recognised the importance of giving students this opportunity to influence school spaces in supporting school belonging;

> "We have ambassadors... we have lunchtime ambassadors... we have playground ambassadors, so it's how can you support the community by giving some of your time to do something that also gives them a sense of belonging."
>
> AE, HEADTEACHER, PRIMARY.

For students with additional needs, whether learning, sensory or emotional and mental health needs, the importance of access to school spaces designed to meet those needs was seen as critical to a sense of belonging.

Spaces to regulate, manage difficult emotions or emotional outbursts were seen to positively support school belonging for pupils in alternative provisions and pupil referral units, and were identified as something which would have made a positive difference to these students' sense of belonging in mainstream schools. For instance, students at one alternative provision commented:

> "I'd probably say, going back to what N said again, like with kids who have ADHD and autism and stuff like that, who have outbursts, who can't manage their emotions... there needs to be more facilities."
>
> LL, STUDENT, ALTERNATIVE PROVISION.

> "So, when I was in primary yeah, I used to be angry and then the school like, requested like a drama thing and I used to go there every Thursday so, I think somewhere, some place or someone who can bring you somewhere it's quiet and peaceful would be very helpful like, to actually bring you back to where you were."
>
> CH, STUDENT, ALTERNATIVE PROVISION.

Students flagged sensory rooms and safe spaces as the kinds of facilities that would make a difference. Students who struggled with emotional outbursts in a mainstream setting echoed this:

> "As someone who suffered that, I just feel like it's a good way to handle it to be honest. Instead of taking it out on other people, you want to take it out in a room by yourself."
>
> JD, STUDENT, SECONDARY

In terms of wellbeing struggles, students talked about having both somewhere to go and someone to talk to:

> "We have... things like Place2Be and things like that where you can go and talk to someone if you don't feel like you belong or something like that."
>
> AR, STUDENT, PRIMARY.

Views from staff across secondary and primary mainstream and alternative settings chimed with students' views. They too flagged the necessity of designated spaces for students to access:

> "We have a few children that struggle with their kind of mental health and wellbeing who need a space that they know that they can go to. I think sometimes they get so overwhelmed, and they don't know where to run to. So, we have designated areas in school that they know that they can go to, but we also know that they'll be safe there as well."
>
> SN, ASSISTANT HEADTEACHER, PRIMARY.

> "We have like the nurture pods and we've got a sensory room and things like that."
>
> AA, SUBJECT LEAD, SECONDARY SPECIAL SCHOOL.

The importance of privacy for self-regulation was highlighted. One Headteacher spoke about the creation of de-escalation spaces all around their school and criticised public, visible methods like "chairs labelled thinking time." They saw this latter approach as humiliating and undignified:

> "I don't see any difference between putting a child on that sort of public shaming stool to having them sat there maybe 30-40 years ago with the dunce's cap on. You know it's not acceptable to do that and when the child is unregulated, they need to find somewhere where they can re-regulate with the level of privacy and dignity."
>
> RR, HEADTEACHER, PRIMARY.

As discussed in the previous section on Social Safety, students' sense of social safety was closely related to spaces and places. Public, unmonitored spaces were seen to be places where they could be subject to verbal abuse and physically rough behaviour. Educators too recognised that there were certain areas, such as the toilets, or areas out of sight of staff, where children regularly fed back that they felt unsafe. However, students also spoke about the importance of refuges during these unstructured times. The toilets could be a place to retreat to when alone and feeling anxious. Public dining halls could feel intolerably unsafe if not protected by the presence of friends. In this regard, adult control of space could hinder safety as they were not allowed to access toilets or classrooms when they felt they wanted to escape, leading to them feeling they have 'nowhere to go.' (see Social Safety: Knowing school will deal with bully and discrimination for fuller discussion).

Barriers to belonging

Overall ratings of all factors by primary and secondary-aged students

We asked participants to select what they considered to be the top 5 most significant barriers to their sense of belonging at school. Tallying their responses, we then ranked these barriers from 1-11 according to most and least mentioned. Analysis of both secondary and primary survey responses showed a consistent pattern in the ranking of barriers to feeling a sense of belonging in school, with "*being treated unfairly*" and "*worrying about bullying (or unkind behaviour)*" consistently occupying the top two positions. This is the same up to top 9s ranking for both secondary and primary students. However, a difference is observed in the least ranked barriers. For primary students, "*Uncomfortable classrooms and buildings*" is the lowest rated factor, whereas for secondary students, it is "*Not being involved in activities, clubs, and trips.*"

Figure 20: Do any of these things stop you from feeling a sense of belonging at school?
(Ranking by primary-aged and secondary-aged students)

Barriers	Secondary Ranking	Primary Ranking
Being treated unfairly	1	1
Worrying about bullying (or unkind behaviour)	2	2
Feeling unwelcome in school	3	3
Feeling under pressure at school	4	4
Not feeling able to be myself in school	5	5
Not having someone I trust to talk to when I have a problem	6	6
Feeling teachers don't care about me	7	7
Teachers not understanding me	8	8
Not getting help when I find work difficult	9	9
Uncomfortable classrooms and buildings	10	11
Not being involved in activities, clubs and trips	11	10

Note: The table employs a modified competition ranking approach, where identical scores receive the same rank, and subsequent ranks are adjusted accordingly

However, there are some important differences to note between different groups of pupils in terms of the barriers that they viewed to be most important.

Students with an impairment or disability were much more likely to rate '*uncomfortable classrooms and buildings*' as a more important barrier for belonging at both primary and secondary levels (it was ranked 7th compared to 11th by other students at primary level and 7th compared to 10th at secondary level). Respondents who self-identified as being an asylum seeker or as living in care also tended to rank the barrier *'not feeling able to be myself'* much higher than was the case overall. Primary-aged Asylum seekers ranked this as their number 1 factor (for all primary-aged pupils it was ranked 5th), whilst secondary aged Asylum seekers ranked it 2nd (for all secondary-aged pupils it was ranked 5th).

At secondary level, there are important differences in the barriers to belonging by gender. '*Not feeling able to be myself*' is less important for those identifying as male (ranked 9th), but for almost every other gender group, it is ranked much more highly, including those identifying as gender neutral (ranked 1st), transgender (ranked 2nd), non-binary (ranked 2nd), gender fluid (ranked 2nd) and female (ranked 4th). These polarised responses were also apparent according to sexuality. Those identifying as heterosexual ranked the issue of bullying 5th, but those with different sexual identities ranked this issue much higher. For example, it was ranked 2nd by those identifying as gay/lesbian and queer and 3rd by those identifying as bisexual and pansexual. Similarly, students who self-identified as having a sexual orientation other than heterosexual were much more likely to rank '*not feeling able to be myself*' as a more significant

barrier compared to those identifying as heterosexual. The data suggests a polarisation in the barriers to belonging based on gender and sexuality. This chimes with the theory on the dominance of masculine identity and heteronormative school cultures, which can make schools feel intimidating environments for girls and students of other sexual orientations (not heterosexual).

Looking at race, it was noticeable that the barrier '*teachers not understanding me*' was ranked more highly by students from all ethnic minority backgrounds (excluding white minorities) across both secondary and primary levels. This barrier was ranked 6th for Black and Mixed heritage groups at primary level but ranked 8th by the whole cohort. At secondary level, the barrier was also ranked higher for Asian (ranked 4th), Black (ranked 5th) and mixed heritage groups (ranked 3rd) in comparison with the whole cohort ranking of 8th.

Overall ratings of all factors by parents and educators

We also asked parents and educators about their views on young people's barriers to school belonging. The perspectives of parents and educators are important to take into account when considering young people's belonging. What they view as a key barrier is important because it could shape how they seek to help and support them. Comparing between what educators and parents think are barriers, and the reality of what children and young people say are the barriers, is an important exercise for policymakers and senior school leaders.

The survey asked parents and educators to select 5 of the most important factors from a predetermined list. These were then tallied and ranked 1-11 for both parents and educators, with most frequently selected factor being rank 1, and the least frequently selected as rank 11 (see figure 27)

Figure 21: Do any of these things stop you from feeling a sense of belonging at school?
(Ranking by primary-aged and secondary-aged students)

Barriers to Belonging	Educators Ranking	Parents Ranking
Negative staff-student relationships	1	2 =
Relationship challenges with other students	2	1
Not feeling cared about in school	3	6
Not being able to access support service to meet child's need	4	2 =
Lack of flexibility to meet the child's needs (e.g SEMH, EAL, SEND)	5	4
Not having staff who believe in the child's potential to succeed	= 6	5
Discrimination from staff	= 6	8 =
Not understanding the school system and rules	8	8 =
Discrimination from other students	9	12
No partnership work with parents to support students	10	10 =
No school connection with the community	11	10 =
Not having the right clothes, kit or equipment	12	15
Not enough help to settle into school	13	14
Not having a say in decisions about the school	14	13
Anxiety about tests and exams	15	7

Note: The table employs a modified competition ranking approach, where identical scores receive the same rank, and subsequent ranks are adjusted accordingly

Relationship challenges (whether with staff or other students) were identified as the most significant barrier by both educators and parents.

While educators ranked '*negative staff-student relationships*' as the top barrier, parents view *relationship challenges with other students*' with equal concern. This may reflect educators' awareness of their direct influence on student experiences and parents' recognition of the social challenges their children face.

There is greater divergence between Educators' and Parents' views of the importance of some barriers. Educators rank '*not feeling cared about in school*' more highly than parents, while parents demonstrate higher levels of concern about the impact of academic pressure on children's sense of belonging. Parents see '*anxiety about tests and exams*' as a much more significant barrier than Educators, who rate this as the least important barrier. As primary and secondary students ranked feeling under pressure at school as their fourth most significant barrier to belonging this suggests that parents may be more alert to the negative impact of institutional and academic pressures on their children. This would be a useful area to explore further in terms of supporting young people's sense of school belonging and safety.

Both groups rank '*not being able to access support service to meet child's need'* and '*lack of flexibility to meet the child's needs*' highly, though parents give slightly more importance to these barriers. This suggests a shared concern for the adequacy of support services and adaptability of educational practices to individual needs, albeit with parents possibly having a closer view of the impacts of this.

Discrimination from both staff and students is acknowledged as a significant barrier by both educators and parents, although educators overall ranked both forms of discrimination as more significant barriers than did parents. This could imply a parental underestimation of the impact of both forms of discrimination. However, it is notable that both groups felt discrimination from staff to be a greater barrier.

The lower rankings given to issues like '*not understanding the school system and rules,' 'no partnership work with parents to support students*,' and '*not having the right clothes, kit or equipment'* by both groups indicate a recognition that, while these factors play a role in belonging, they are overshadowed by the more immediate and personal experiences of relationships, support, and care within the school environment.

Findings from focus groups with Students and educators

The survey findings from all four stakeholder groups indicate that the key barriers to belonging are relational and point to systemic factors that constrain and shape these important relationships. Both primary and secondary students ranked feeling under pressure as the fourth most important barrier while educators and parents viewed a lack of flexibility and access to support to meet young people's needs as highly important.

The relational aspects of being treated unfairly, worrying about bullying, feeling unwelcome or not cared about and the individual identity concern of not feeling able to be myself at school have all been discussed in earlier sections on belonging and safety. This section focuses on those top barriers that have not yet been discussed: a lack of flexibility to meet child's needs, and students feeling under pressure. It then discusses how these systemic and structural factors may negatively impact on staff-student relationships and students' peer relationships.

Drawing on focus group data and optional additional comments in the survey, this section uses participants' words to offer a more detailed understanding of the ways in which these two barriers are experienced and perceived.

Barrier 1: Lack of flexibility to meet child's needs

The lack of access to external support services constraining schools' ability to meet individual students' needs was regularly raised as a key issue by educators in focus groups. For students with SEND, mental health challenges or complex family circumstances, this was seen to create additional barriers to their sense of belonging and safety;

> "not being able to access support services for our SEND pupils especially... I would almost want to put that level with discrimination and negative staff/student relationships."
>
> AA, SUBJECT LEAD, SECONDARY SPECIAL SCHOOL.

> "As a practitioner, I would put not being able to access support services to meet the children's needs (higher), that's very frustrating when you've got a child in need, mental health or family challenges."
>
> DA, TEACHER, SPECIAL EDUCATION.

A lack of adaptability to meet individual students' needs was seen to be a "system-wide" barrier, which required tackling through policy and teacher training:

> "there's a deep lack of understanding from school leaders' point of view... you kind of learn it as you go and inherently that's an issue for the DfE and how they put together things like NPQH (National Professional Qualification for Headship), but also ITT (Initial Teacher Training)... the investment you put into them understanding about difference in diversity or inclusion."
>
> SE, HEADTEACHER, SECONDARY AND DIRECTOR, MULTI-ACADEMY TRUST.

Parents also pointed to their child's needs not being met as a significant barrier to belonging. Parents' survey comments referred to "no support," and "a lack of patience from staff" regarding children's special educational needs and disabilities.

A lack of cultural understanding and of adaptability to young people from different backgrounds was also cited by parents as a key barrier to belonging. Examples included not being able to relate to students from certain backgrounds, not showing that they value a student's additional language, or lack of understanding of cultural sensitivities:

> "Lack of cultural competence from staff (e.g. staff not understanding the nuances and culture of young people from council estates). Therefore, they end up getting involved in more trouble in school as they can sometimes be misunderstood and may not being afforded the same grace as other students)."
>
> PARENT, SURVEY RESPONSE.

> "Lack of understanding of the child culture and why they might behave out of character."
>
> PARENT, SURVEY RESPONSE.

> "Their language are not valued nor accept."
>
> PARENT, SURVEY RESPONSE.

Increased need for access to support services among their student population alongside funding cuts, service shortages and long waiting list were described as significant barriers by headteachers in mainstream settings, alternative provisions and pupil referral units. This suggests that barriers to belonging for students in need of additional support are therefore increased in two ways: being in an education setting where their needs are not being met, and being in an education setting where the staff body have reduced capacity to support students because of taking on an increased range of responsibilities and challenges:

> "the difficulty is there is such a shortage of services and we're desperate and increasingly schools are becoming the place that provides that service, which we struggle to do. In primary certainly we provide an awful lot of that wrap around support for families, whether it be cost of living, whether it be crime prevention, whether it be housing, all of those things that are ... what keeps a child safe. I think then for schools and for teachers there is a lack of flexibility to meet the child's needs because it's imposed upon them... it's not there isn't…the willingness there,... it's just the flexibility isn't there because as schools we need a bigger team around us to help us do what we try to do."
>
> HN, EXECUTIVE HEADTEACHER, PRIMARY.

> "The increase in the severity of the mental health needs of our students, which was steadily rising anyway, the pandemic just put it into overdrive. So, I think the risk to themselves in terms of self-harm and suicidality is through the roof. I've worked here for 11 years now, and it is certainly as extreme as I've ever seen it over that time. And also, part of that, the sort of support services around us are crumbling. Not because they're not brilliant, but because of the lack of funding and increasing demand on waiting lists. And that goes for social care, CAMHS, like everyone. So, it feels like the school is having to take on more and more of the responsibility for all of that."
>
> JN, HEADTEACHER, PRU.

Both staff and students in alternative provision, specialist settings and pupil referral units spoke about the positive impact of the increased flexibility in these settings in comparison to mainstream schools in supporting students' belonging and safety:

> "it's not a mainstream environment, because I used to go to a mainstream school, luckily, I didn't get eaten alive but yes it was a bit traumatising.…(here) I think that they give us more support and they can change things. More freedom…they meet our needs."
>
> FT, STUDENT, ALTERNATIVE PROVISION.

> "I think in mainstream schools…it's the pressure of numbers and you don't have the luxury of spending time maintaining relationships."
>
> JN, HEADTEACHER, PRU

With students, staff and parents across all settings highlighting the significance of relationships for students' sense of school belonging and safety, having inadequate time to build and maintain relationships in mainstream schools, where the vast majority of young people are educated, represents a key barrier to address.

Educators in mainstream settings related the lack of flexibility to a lack of capacity within staffing, resourcing and workload, referencing:

> "a stretched and stressed staff team, no fault of the children, due to insufficient budget, level of complex needs, poor support and acknowledgement of need for service required of schools."
>
> EDUCATOR SURVEY RESPONSE

In contrast, specialist and alternative settings described the flexibility of their approach, which enabled them to keep students safe and feeling a sense of belonging:

> "a lot of effort is put into rebuilding that trust and working with them and providing support for families. So, I have access to mental health services that are funded by the school for parents as well as for students."
>
> JN, HEADTEACHER, PRU.

Flexibility to meet students' needs was seen to extend beyond adaptations to *"the timetable, to the curriculum, to the provision offer for pupils"* by mainstream Headteachers who prioritised inclusion. These staff described the significant efforts they undertake in the face of service shortages and high levels of need to engage with families, services and communities:

> "We work really, really hard to engage our families. We really want them to feel that sense of belonging within our community and that means that we have to work really, really creatively to reach some of our hard-to-reach families… There are still, you know, a very small pocket of families that we have to go the extra mile and even then, it doesn't always work but that's probably true of any setting."
>
> JE, HEADTEACHER PRIMARY.

> "to have that sense of belonging we have to work really closely with our partners. So, we work with policing and we work with public health, school nursing, local charities and such... when it comes together, that can have an impact on their children's perceptions of school."
>
> JE, HEADTEACHER PRIMARY.

Educators expressed frustration at the short-termism of funding and cuts and described the knock-on effect on individual school policies and approaches. In particular, they criticised the adoption of zero-tolerance behaviour policies as harmful to belonging and inclusion, and viewed the use of these approaches as a response to these pressure schools were under and a lack of training or awareness of other approaches:

> "Anyone who says that they have got a zero-tolerance policy is automatically proclaiming themselves to be non-inclusive because they're not prepared to take every individual case at its own value... I think Maslow put it probably best - which was if the only tool you've got in your toolbox is a hammer you tend to treat everything like a nail."
>
> RR, HEADTEACHER, PRIMARY.

Others acknowledged the difficulties involved in being inclusive and saw the adoption of inflexible policies taking the easier or cheaper path:

> "I think the problem that school leaders face is when they're faced with those challenges around inclusivity, it's always the harder decision to go with it. It's much easier to try and duck it. It's cheaper. You don't have to get the expertise or the resource."
>
> SE, HEADTEACHER, SECONDARY AND DIRECTOR, MULTI-ACADEMY TRUST.

> "{the school leadership} are not working in the best interests of the young people, they're working in the best interests of the grown-ups. They're making life easier for themselves rather than doing the hard thing, which is deal with the issues for the young people"
>
> RR, HEADTEACHER, PRIMARY.

While acknowledging the difficulties, the Headteachers who attended focus groups saw it as vital for school leaders to reflect on their systems and how they adapt to their learners' needs:

> "There are some … schools, establishments, businesses, you've got academies that need to look at their systems and how they can adapt themselves to meet the child's needs."
>
> DA, TEACHER, SECONDARY SPECIAL SCHOOL.

A key aspect of enabling this flexible approach was seen to be having staff with the level of training, understanding and support needed to be sustainably flexible. Headteachers described the challenge of supporting staff who cannot flexibly respond to a range of types of need:

> "there's something there to be thought about in terms of making sure that staff are flexible in terms of their ability to respond to lots of different circumstances - and some of them that are quite culturally different to their own life experience - so they're able to actually have an open mind to things as well. Regardless of our own backgrounds, I think we tend to come to the teaching profession with a pretty middle class set of attitudes and we need to be able to challenge those because otherwise we risk engaging with sympathy rather than empathy and it's the empathy that's going to help."
>
> RR, HEADTEACHER, PRIMARY.

Having staff who are "exhausted" and "fatigued" in the face of the daily pressures they faced was seen to constrain their ability to maintain a positive 'climate' or respond empathetically to students' challenges over time. A collaborative team culture where staff support each other and are supported were seen as essential by settings who prioritised a highly flexible and inclusive approach:

> "I think how you support staff to be able to maintain that is critical as well. So, we have mental health support for staff as needed, and supervision for key members of staff. And we are lucky because we are a specialist provision so, we've got the money to do it…I don't know if you could replicate this across the world, but a version of it you could. This supervision for key staff on a weekly basis. There's supervision on demand from clinical psychology for every member of staff that they need at some point."
>
> JN, HEADTEACHER, PRU

> "When you're a small team, you've got to work together, when you've got a 5-year-old who's gone from foster care home to her foster home who's literally on the floor growling and we don't have the experience... we're really having to work together, support each other to help to keep her safe."
>
> AE, HEADTEACHER, PRIMARY.

Barrier 2: Behavioural and attainment related pressure at school

Students also described feeling under pressure as a key barrier to belonging. They spoke about different forms of pressure and described its emotional impact on them, giving insight into how this pressure functions to create a barrier to their sense of inclusion and belonging.

Certain classroom practices were experienced as pressurising by several students. Being put on the spot during questioning led to unhelpful anxiety and pressure. While questioning is a vital tool for teachers to monitor understanding and promote reflection, certain instances of questioning can be perceived as a disciplinary measure or as confrontational:

> "when the teacher picks on a child to test if they have been listening... I think sometimes when teachers pick on children, it can make them scared to go to that lesson because they may have like anxiety or anything like that and then it's just putting them on the spot, which is like out of their comfort zone and then yeah, they wouldn't feel safe."
>
> EW, STUDENT, SECONDARY

Attention to questioning techniques may be valuable when exploring ways to maximise a sense of belonging through classroom practice by alleviating the sense of alienation and pressure that the students describe.

Disciplinary practices and teachers' interaction styles when responding to conflict or behavioural issues were also mentioned by students as having a negative emotional impact:

> "We have like a lot of pressure because our teacher keeps on telling us... your behaviour needs to be better than this, but instead of just shouting at us you can tell us in a calmer voice and you can tell us what we've done before you tell us off, so you can improve on it."
>
> CH, STUDENT, PRIMARY

This implies a cumulative effect in terms of the forms of pressure that students experience. Day-to-day interactions over their conduct make them feel particularly pressurised when shouted at. Student comments also suggest that they can find classroom interactions to be pressurised and demanding.

Pressure around academic attainment was an even greater concern for students and may explain the behavioural pressures they feel under. This was felt to go beyond making them stressed and anxious to impact their self-esteem, well-being or sense of identity.

When asked what schools could do to improve students' sense of belonging and safety, one student described her perception that schools try to motivate students and raise attainment via threats, where other methods may be more effective:

> "maybe working on different ways to like motivate kids because like, obviously most schools just employ detentions and threats and stuff but I mean, for me personally, I don't think it works as well as other methods would because a lot of my friends, it just freaks them out so much if they get stressed and then can't actually do anything and I think it's because a lot of teachers feel like students, some of them don't care about their grades and like scaring them is the only way that's going to make them care but I think it would work better maybe if instead they were like, made it clear that whatever happened in the exams, that's not the only thing in life and it will be fine and actually getting kids excited about like, what they want to study in the future and other things around that, instead of just like, a target grade that they think their entire identity is based around, would help people feel more safe to be able to study what they want and actually be happy in school."
>
> DW, STUDENT, SECONDARY.

This suggests that attainment pressures can lead to a punitive culture which generates fear and stress among students, leading to them feeling unsafe and uncared for. The pressure as the student above describes it is linked specifically to exam results, something she contrasts with a broader, more useful focus on future choices in life.

This view was echoed by multiple students at both primary and secondary level. Students in year 6 described experiencing stress and pressure in relation to the SATS (national standardised assessment tests). They too found the way that their futures were spoken about by teachers to be unhelpful:

> "Year 6 is really stressful because all we get told about is our SATs and our GCSEs."
>
> CH, STUDENT, PRIMARY

> "Making us feel like it's happening right now when we've still got time for like GCSEs and the SATs. GCSEs we've got like 10 years until you're like an adult and you can like do decisions on your own when you're an adult. So, he doesn't need to tell us about our GCSEs …he's just making us feel more stressed about the future when it's not even happening yet."
>
> AH, STUDENT, PRIMARY

These comments suggest that, not only is the pressure cumulative for students, but that their aspirations can be dampened when teachers frame their predicted future outcomes in a stressful and pressurised way:

> "there's a lot of pressure with GCSEs and sixth forms and things and a lot of the time it feels like the teachers aren't really on your side because they're also telling you how important the mocks are and things... a lot of people are just like kind of constantly scared the whole time, they don't really feel safe in themselves because they're taught that like, the grade is going to be the thing that determines their entire future... they put so much pressure that's it's really kind of really hard to feel like, safe and be able to be like, I did that but it's okay, when they're constantly telling you that, it's going to mess up your entire life."
>
> GW, STUDENT, SECONDARY

The three key barriers explored in this section are interconnected. The pressure on staff, due to the shortage of support services, funding cuts and increasing mental health challenges among young people, and the pressure on young people whose needs remain unmet and who experience high levels of pressure to attain benchmark exam results can be seen to shape their daily interactions in school. The negative impact of these pressures on staff-student relationship is a key barrier to students' sense of belonging and safety.

Barrier 3: Negative relationships between staff and students

'*Not feeling cared about in school*,' was ranked 3rd and 6th by educators and parents respectively. Headteachers spoke about the ways that school pressures can shape teacher-student interactions and negatively impact on the quality of student-teacher relationships:

> "I think behaviour is quite challenging in schools at the moment and I think it's because there's a lot of unmet needs so it's interrelated... There's a lot of services that families can't access at the moment and we're seeing the sort of ripple effect in schools and subsequently that really impacts on teachers. It really impacts on their workloads. It makes them feel very fatigued and then that can have a negative impact on their relationship with the child. They try to be very professional and separate their emotions but ultimately if a child is being quite oppositional and they feel like they're butting heads with them, it puts a strain on that working relationship."
>
> JE, HEADTEACHER PRIMARY

Students spoke about both very positive relationships with teachers and very negative ones. A key problem for them was around the availability and accessibility of teachers who either had the authority and responsibility to address issues they were facing, or who they trusted or felt confident to approach. They were clear that positive teacher pupil relationships for belonging involved being heard, given attention, and feeling trust:

> "school belonging is where the teachers … listen to you and give you time …if you need to go to them for academic or just personal situations you have."
>
> CE, STUDENT, SECONDARY.

> "teachers need to like build more a trust with students because I feel like, if you say something is wrong it's always go and tell a teacher or something but like, a lot of the students don't want to tell a teacher because ... there's not a lot of trust between them."
>
> AW, STUDENT, SECONDARY.

Students offered insights into the aspects of relationships that pose a barrier to trust or approachability. Staff being seen to be too busy, too focussed on academics, disinterested in personal matters, authoritative or high up in the school hierarchy were all barriers that students identified to getting help and support:

> "the most important thing is just to be approachable because it's like, you go over to a school in Year 7 and... you're specifically looking for certain teachers, you're like, ah who can I go to, who can I go to? But I feel like, any teacher you should approach, you should feel comfortable to talk to them. I mean obviously everyone is different, but I feel like, teachers like, they shouldn't just be talking about grades, of how you revise and that kind of thing, I feel like, it helps when you feel like they're your friend instead of like someone above you. You don't want to feel like, we're low down here, I don't think they want to hear our problems... if teachers are approachable then you'll feel like that's just another human being that I can talk to, kind of thing so, it's like more of a personal relationship than a professional one."
>
> GL, STUDENT, SECONDARY.

Although many students mentioned the existence of safeguarding teams who they can approach for support, they also described the challenges of trying to speak to them or get support from them:

> "They're mostly teachers that are higher up, who have got other things to do... they're very busy so I feel like, if they've got a safeguarding team, I feel school should focus on the teachers who a lot of students feel comfortable with... because they're so approachable and because they're so likeable."
>
> CL, STUDENT, SECONDARY.

> "it's kind of really like intimidating to talk to like say one of the designated members of the staff team."
>
> EE, STUDENT, SECONDARY.

> "We have some safeguarding people, but the thing is you have to book an appointment before you can go and actually talk to them. So it's kind of really inconvenient if you're like really stressed with something, you've got something really, really big happening, you have to book an appointment and wait to talk to someone about it, you might feel like they don't see your problem as important, they're not really going to do anything, they're not really going to care."
>
> AE, STUDENT, SECONDARY.

Not having access to approachable staff who they feel comfortable to speak to, who have the time to listen to them and to address their issues is another important barrier which can be seen to be related to the pressures faced by schools. Educators echoed this concern. In survey feedback they identified key barriers as 'staff workload impacting how much time/priority is given to building relationships with children,' and a 'lack of funding, lack of staff time to support students.'

Another aspect of perceived negative staff-student relationship for both educators and parents is '*not having staff who believe in the child's potential to succeed*.' Further research to understand what underpins these low expectations and whether they impact certain groups of students disproportionately would be valuable. An understanding of whether this stems from a narrow definition of success that is tightly focused on attainment in exam grades, leading to staff feeling certain students will struggle or be unmotivated to be successful, from staff prejudice towards students from certain groups or backgrounds, or whether it reflects a sense of fear among students and staff of their own abilities to meet the expectations placed upon them, would be useful in formulating actions to counter this.

Recommendations: school actions to promote belonging and safety

This section presents the findings from focus group discussions with school leaders, educators and students about the actions schools can undertake to enable belonging, safety and inclusion. These are organised into the four action principles that emerged through the analysis of the whole data set and form the underpinning principles of London's Inclusion Charter (London's Violence Reduction Unit, 2024):

- Embedding equity and diversity
- Students as active citizens
- Being adaptable and reflective
- Beyond academic achievement

Educators recognised that these principles could be enacted in a superficial or partial way. For the principles to make a meaningful difference to students' sense of belonging and safety at school they need to be undertaken in tandem with two key values which are also explored:

- Relational values
- Care and nurture

A key finding to emerge through this research is the importance of identity in underpinning children's sense of belonging and safety. Schools' role in building and affirming children's individual and social identities is discussed at the end of this section as a further impact of an inclusive approach.

Embedding equity and diversity

These actions focus on integrating policies, systems and practices to ensure that students from all backgrounds feel welcome and valued in schools. Educators described the danger of schools taking a 'tick-box' approach to this principle or failing to see the relevance to the full spectrum of students from different groups. To make a meaningful difference to students' sense of school belonging and safety, implementation of this principle needs to be child-centred, applied in consideration of every student, and in multiple ways:

> "Sometimes when we think of diversity it's not always thought of in the most positive of ways or it's about a tick box exercise as to how can we make sure we're being diverse, do we have enough multicultural teachers in the school for example, tick box, yes, done, but I think it's more than that, it's more about what are we doing to make sure every child genuinely feels like they belong in this school, they're welcome and that we're celebrating them."
>
> AA, SUBJECT LEAD, SPECIAL EDUCATION

> "there's so many different facets of inclusivity. People think, "Oh, it's SEND." No, it's not… it's gender-neutral toilets and all of that. So, we've done a huge amount of work on not just SEND or gender specificity or race. I mean, it goes across the whole gambit... We've come across young people who feel their schools are really championing inclusivity for race and culture, but then talk about the isolation of the SEND students or vice versa."
>
> SE, HEADTEACHER, SECONDARY AND DIRECTOR, MULTI-ACADEMY TRUST.

Celebrating and exploring uniqueness and diversity

Educators described the ways in which they celebrated uniqueness or diversity to address this aspect. These ranged from classroom displays to special projects for a year group:

> "We have the British values up in most rooms and then we also have this celebrate each other board in every classroom and on that we have things like, for example, home reading or we have like autism awareness week, we have Eid, we have Ramadan, we have Diwali, LGBTQ+, we've just got a few words on there to try and show again that we're celebrating everybody."
>
> AA, SUBJECT LEAD, SPECIAL EDUCATION.

> "So, we bring a baby to class and we watch the parent and the baby and watch the attunement and the teaching. The central point of teaching is around the uniqueness of every individual. Very powerful... we explore temperament... we look at things like intensity or distractibility, mood. And so, we watch the baby. We just talked last time about the baby slept and then the baby woke and the mum was trying to anticipate if the baby would kind of be really grouchy. So, then I just said, "Well, what are you like when you wake up?" And then the children explored their individual response when they wake and what they're like... They were just, "Well, I just lie there for 20 minutes till I have to get out of bed." But it was lovely because it's celebrating uniqueness. It's a lovely programme, but in a sense, it's just a new way of looking at our uniqueness. But it's giving us a new language, which is around temperament and I find that really helpful."
>
> AE, HEADTEACHER, PRIMARY.

Creating spaces in the curriculum to specifically explore and discuss uniqueness, approaching it from different angles which are not always related to protected characteristics, was seen to be helpful in supporting the development of empathy and inclusion among young people.

Challenging and tackling discrimination

Other educators spoke about the need to go beyond celebrating to actively challenging prejudice of all forms. Tackling this within and through the curriculum was seen to be an important way to address the discriminatory views and behaviours that students told us they were experiencing, and which harmed their sense of belonging:

> "Challenging stereotypes and challenging racism and social equity... I think those things are really missing because you can celebrate, but that doesn't mean you're challenging when it happens and that's really, really important."
>
> HN, EXECUTIVE HEADTEACHER, PRIMARY.

> "Addressing your curriculum in terms of racist social justice I think is absolutely vital as well, so that pupils feel that they've got a relevant place that's recognised within the school."
>
> RR, HEADTEACHER, PRIMARY.

Some described redesigning curriculum approaches to ensure that they both reflect and illuminate the diversity of the experiences and backgrounds in the school:

> "We've got a new curriculum for reading and writing and it's been really important that we've chosen books in our kind of units in reading and writing, they call it windows and mirrors and sliding doors. So, all children should be able to see themselves reflected in the books that they've got, but also, they are window to learning and welcoming other cultures and religions and experiences. And a sliding door means they can kind of go in and out really."
>
> JA, HEADTEACHER, SECONDARY

Others described more personalised responses to specific instances of discrimination involving ongoing work with individuals to challenge and reduce prejudice:

> "Intervention and support for the young person who might have been unkind, but also for the other young person who might have experienced that. I think they're really key for us working together with children to kind of understand what's happened and why it's happened, but also then setting, say targets, I don't know if that's the right word, but kind of things that we want to try and achieve and do differently, but doing that together and thinking about what that looks like together and then coming back and checking and seeing where we're at and do we need additional support with that."
>
> GY, EXECUTIVE HEADTEACHER, AP

> "There's work to be done there with you know... kind of I guess helping kids with their social skills where they can support kids' sense of sort of compassion really as well as on the other hand sort of tolerance of lots of different types of people and ways of being even if you don't actually get on, you do have to all rub along together."
>
> DA, TEACHER, SPECIAL EDUCATION.

Limitations to this were acknowledged, where some students had ingrained views and were resistant to change. For these students, ongoing education about understanding the law around hate crimes, working with families to explore or set boundaries so that everyone can be kept safe, were approaches described:

> "What we find a lot of the time is that when we try and engage them in a conversation they genuinely don't understand something is wrong with it and a lot of the time they relate that back to their family and they say but mum thinks this, mum said this or whatever it is. If they've used some kind of discriminatory language or whatever it is that's really difficult to unpick a kind of lifelong knowledge or belief that something is a certain way. I think the angle we try to go in with is, especially when we engage parents and carers in that conversation who may also be of the same opinion, that okay it's not that we're attempting to change opinion but what we will not tolerate is somebody making somebody feel socially unsafe if we're using this language but you cannot share that publicly and educating them on the law."
>
> EY, DEPUTY SAFEGUARDING LEAD, PRIMARY AND SECONDARY.

Students as active citizens

This set of actions shares a focus on co-working and collaboration with the school community. Educators spoke about a variety of reasons why this is important to belonging and safety. On one level these actions were seen to be about fostering agency and engagement, minimising passivity or students' perceptions that education is something being done to them. On another level, they helped students to experience a range of ways of contributing to a community, preparing them for societal and community participation in later life, by strengthening their sense of being a local, national and global citizen. Lastly, these actions were seen to foster dialogue and understanding between students and staff, improving shared understanding and conflict resolution.

Student roles within the school community

Educators spoke about the value of students assuming roles within the school community. Helping others and giving back to their communities, supporting their peers or helping to foster a supportive school culture, were seen to be especially beneficial:

> "we're really trying to empower children, not just to be receivers but to be active. I guess, that's part of our vision is that children are active members of the school community, and there are different ways. They can help younger children with reading. We have peer reading that goes on. So, it's them playing an active role, that's community, that's belonging."
>
> AE, HEADTEACHER, PRIMARY.

> "We give our student council a lot of responsibility as well where they will be on duties in the different playgrounds for example and if they notice anyone being a little bit unkind, they will step in and say are we using our kind words and our school rules as well."
>
> AA, SUBJECT LEAD, SPECIAL EDUCATION.

One mainstream secondary school educator explained how their anti-bullying ambassadors particularly helped students who found it difficult to approach staff for support. As we saw in students' discussion of belonging and safety, some view approaching teachers to be a last resort, or find it intimidating, so this role was seen to help 'bridge' this divide:

> "We've got also our head of year nine, he's leading across the academy, anti-bullying ambassadors. So, it's something that he initiated last academic year and he's just hoping to push it to the next level where students are really being kind of effective and also at the forefront of supporting one another. So, what they do, it's not that they go and take on situations themselves, but they help kind of bridge the gaps between the teachers and the students that are finding it a struggle to report things. So, it might not be physical bullying, a lot of it tends to be emotional bullying. Bullying things that people say to one another."
>
> SA, PASTORAL LEAD, SECONDARY.

Involvement with the wider community

Educators described how actions to engage young people with the wider community were helpful not just to their sense of school belonging, but in starting to build a sense of belonging beyond the school in readiness for their participation in society in the future:

> "Being part of community projects, making local links to the community, you know some of our children you know they will go up and they will help out at a church, do some gardening and weeding, all these things I feel are building blocks to belonging to a sense of community."
>
> DA, TEACHER, SPECIAL EDUCATION.

> "We have community ambassadors as well. So, we reach beyond the school, we go and do activities on a monthly basis. It's just giving children that sense that there are a number of ways to be part of the community."
>
> AE, HEADTEACHER, PRIMARY.

Supporting involvement in the world outside the school walls was seen to be a valuable investment for students' future wellbeing and for society as a whole:

> "It is about the broadest possible experiences that you can enrich children's lives with so they can be the most effective, successful citizens within our communities because that's our fundamental purpose is to create brilliant citizens for the future, so society is sustained in the healthiest possible way."
>
> SE, HEADTEACHER, SECONDARY AND DIRECTOR, MULTI-ACADEMY TRUST

It was also seen to be important to bring the community into the education setting, in terms of both facilitating children's community identities as well as in challenging negative perceptions and stereotypes about the identity of the school and the young people in it:

> "we had an awful lot of work to do in terms of making sure that our young people who came to us were valued and that the community did not see and label our young people as these awful gang members who were just a nuisance to society... since then we've had so many now what we call either community celebration events or community forums where we have visitors come in and they can be parents, carers, they can be residents who live in the tower blocks opposite the school, people from the council, the Mayor, MPs. And all of that is about making sure that our young people are seen as valuable within our community and really set that, like our weekly newsletter we send out to a whole host of people and it's about changing that narrative... it's things like that, that's belonging, but it's a different way of looking at it, I think."
>
> GY, EXECUTIVE HEADTEACHER, ALTERNATIVE PROVISION.

Seeking and responding to student voice

Involving and working with students to make decisions, understand barriers and inform changes were seen by educators to be fundamentally important to building school belonging and safety. Educators stressed the importance of ongoing collaboration with the full range of students, as opposed to the occasional survey or student council meeting (this differentiation is further explored in the section on embedding active citizenship).

> "You do listen and respond, but actually if it's going to work you want to involve the children. You listen to them, you hear what they've got to say, and then you work with them to make change."
>
> HN, EXECUTIVE HEADTEACHER, PRIMARY.

> "I think communication is key to it. I think that school leaders need to really go back to the core purpose of schools and perhaps do some canvassing and pupil voice, staff voice, parent voice, different forums, different consultations, to find out what is important to that school in that context in that community."
>
> CE, SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT LEADER, SECONDARY.

Many school leaders stressed the importance of an ongoing dialogue and collaboration not only with students but with parents and the wider community. This was seen to ensure that the school could be sensitive and responsive to specific contextual issues. For students most vulnerable to exclusion and marginalisation, this approach was seen to be critically important:

> "it's active participation from the whole community, isn't it?"
>
> SN, ASSISTANT HEADTEACHER, PRIMARY.

> "I think it's about creating an environment where there's a sense of shared responsibility and accountability about the school community and what we're all trying to achieve in partnership... parents have got to be central to that if we're talking about co-actors and active participation, because one of the biggest challenges you have with those children who are on the margins is often... they're in really difficult circumstances of single parents or in terms of financially or non-English speaking or whatever it might be so I would suggest that certainly needs to be that kind of shared enterprise."
>
> SE, HEADTEACHER, SECONDARY AND DIRECTOR, MULTI-ACADEMY TRUST.

Parents' survey feedback supports the importance of the student and parent voice. The majority of negative comments from parents focused on not being heard or listened to by their child's school, or feeling the school was not responsive to the issues their child experienced. When asked to leave comments about any good or bad experiences of school supporting their child to feel that they belong and are safe, negative comments included:

> "My child was feeling unsafe at school and it took long time for the school to acknowledge the issue and sort it out."
>
> PARENT 1, PARENT SURVEY

> "School only reach those who they want to reach." PARENT 2, PARENT SURVEY

> "Not listening to parents concerns." PARENT 3, PARENT SURVEY

> "Not having enough information shared with the parents."
>
> PARENT 4, PARENT SURVEY

Conversely, many of the positive comments referenced being kept up to date by the school, or the school being responsive in any issues raised by parents and students;

> "Regular communication between parents and school about their child progress."
>
> PARENT 6, PARENT SURVEY

> "We are new but so far the teachers have listened to my concern on a topic outside of school to keep an eye on any behaviour changes in my child."
>
> PARENT 7, PARENT SURVEY

> "Quick access arranged to see a well-being practitioner when my daughter was struggling with anxiety."
>
> PARENT 8, PARENT SURVEY

Seeing students as active citizens extends to seeing them as active members of families and communities. How welcome individual children feel in school can be impacted by their family's or community's sense of how welcome people like them are in school.

Restorative conflict resolution

In our focus group discussions, embedding this view of active citizenship within school approaches to discipline and conflict resolution was seen to be an important way to build a sense of school belonging and safety:

> "We have like this restorative justice approach where if something does happen let's talk about it let's go through it together, let's mediate, let's work through it."
>
> AA, SUBJECT LEAD, SPECIAL EDUCATION

> "We don't have detentions here, for example, because we just think it's just not an appropriate kind of sanction to support children to be more responsible about their behaviours. So, I think some of the barriers are around the policies and practices that schools have, the constraints they have by virtue of their designation. The support leaders have to be less conformative, I guess in relation to what is expected."
>
> SE, HEADTEACHER, SECONDARY AND DIRECTOR, MULTI-ACADEMY TRUST

> "We have a number of those children who have experienced a high level of domestic violence in the community. So, when I'm dealing with incidents, when the restorative conversation's really, really important, I just start with the premise, you're here to learn, but actually my first job is to keep everybody safe. My job is to keep you safe and then we can think about learning."
>
> AE, HEADTEACHER, PRIMARY

Taking restorative as opposed to punitive approaches to discipline, focusing on dialogue and shared understanding and avoiding one-size-fits-all, zero-tolerance approaches, was understood to be an important step to enabling schools to support more marginalised and vulnerable students with more complex needs, to feel a sense of school belonging and safety.

Embedding active citizenship for students

Educators frequently highlighted the danger that active participation as a principle could be adopted in a superficial and therefore less effective fashion:

> "I could be sitting here saying 'we do that' and we do it once a term because we do a questionnaire, whereas somebody else could sit there and say 'yes we do that' because actually they do it all the time, every day. We're both saying we do it, we are both saying we agree with it, but actually the reality is we're not both doing it."
>
> HN, EXECUTIVE HEADTEACHER, PRIMARY.

> "You can have active participation where you send out a questionnaire or … in a five-minute break-time chat with a teacher that really cares about you and knows you, you're going to find far more useful information there."
>
> EY, DEPUTY SAFEGUARDING LEAD, PRIMARY AND SECONDARY.

The example of a termly questionnaire was often cited as an example of a tick box approach to this action principle and contrasted with more embedded, personal approaches. A key difference that educators saw between cursory and committed approaches to supporting students to be active citizens was that to be maximally impactful, it should be undertaken in the context of established, trusting and caring relationships. The importance of these values is discussed in the sections on the underpinning values of relationships, care and nurture. The suggestion here is that more honest and valuable responses may be garnered when the student-teacher relationship is established. Findings in the section on factors that promote safety were that being listened to and heard in school is key for students. Engaging in this degree of dialogue and collaboration may also impact their view of the student-staff relationship.

Being adaptable and reflective

A key area for school action concerns creating a supportive culture where educators are empowered and enabled to innovate, experiment and refine their practices to meet the diverse needs of all students. Developing reflective and responsive school systems and practices was seen to be necessary in terms of genuinely ensuring equity and diversity are addressed and that adjustments can be made. The four key areas discussed in focus groups with school leaders were: the need for leadership to take time to develop this culture with staff; pedagogic approaches which can model reflexivity for students; logistical changes that can help; and adapting behavioural and discipline policies.

Leadership creating a flexible culture

Avoidance of rigidity in rules and policies was seen to set the tone and enable a school to become more reflective and adaptable. Inflexibility was understood to reduce staff agency and creativity and model an authoritarian, top-down approach to students that was unhelpful in terms of school belonging and collaboration.

A culture where staff feel free to innovate, can make mistakes, acknowledge them and feel confident to address them was seen to enable them to develop the repertoire of skills needed when working with a diverse student body:

> "We need to build a culture where we're constantly challenging our own practise and perception of our own practise. It's very easy sometimes in the school to say we've nailed this, but we need to be constantly challenging ourselves about it, so I think part of this is the underlying principle that we're not always going to get it right. We frequently don't get it right. The important thing is to learn from not getting it right and move forwards and not assume that we're there. If you come back to those schools that have got those very rigid rules, then they are schools that are saying 'we've got it right and nobody's changing us because we've got it right' and it's dangerous."
>
> RR, HEADTEACHER, PRIMARY.

A culture with scope to flex and adapt was seen to be beneficial to the belonging and safety of students who need adaptations due to SEND or cultural differences. Having a set way of doing things with visible alterations for certain individuals was seen to be a factor in reducing a sense of belonging for students who can come to be seen as awkward learners for whom additional work has to be undertaken to meet their needs:

> "those flexibilities should be already inbuilt, understood, implicit in what we do so that any child any adult, when they arrive in that environment, it meets their needs rather than feeling 'I'm different and therefore you are going to have to change something for me.'… you want to be coming into a community where they're saying, 'this is an environment that is accepting of me already because they're recognising my needs and they've anticipated them and the environment is reflective of them'."
>
> SE, HEADTEACHER, SECONDARY AND DIRECTOR, MULTI-ACADEMY TRUST.

Teaching approaches

In terms of classroom practice, this principle was illustrated in teachers modelling a growth mindset to students. Explicitly explaining to students and enlisting their help when trialling an alteration to their teaching practice is a way to enact this principle during learning:

> "Mr L is using the Rosenshine principles for education and effective teaching, but he's showing the children that he's doing that. He says, "Ooh, I'm really focussing this week on not asking you to put your hands up but I'm probably going to do that because that's what I've done my whole life. If I do it, G, can you be the one, can we nominate you this week to be the hands-up spotter and can you just let me know?"
>
> CE, SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT LEADER, SECONDARY

This example illustrates how being adaptable and reflective can work alongside supporting students as active citizens in listening to, involving and responding to their critiques of teaching practice, involving them throughout the process.

Organisational approaches

Another practical implementation of this principle is the restructuring of the school day to make it easier for students to talk to staff and, therefore, for staff to hear and respond to them.

> "if you've got 30 in a tutor group it's really hard to make sure that you're seeing and responding to all of those pupils and families and similarly for pupils it is perfectly possible, particularly in year 7 and 8 for example, to go through a school day, doesn't matter how good your teachers are, without actually having spoken to a member of staff. You could go from lesson to lesson and stay below the radar, and so we didn't feel that was good enough. You know, and staff were working really hard to make sure that pupils felt cared for and supported but you know, actually in a large school that's hard, so we've shifted so that rather than that tutor with a tutor group of 30 we've shifted to a model that we've

seen elsewhere where we have, and we call them coaching circles but they're vertical groups with year 7 to 11 but they're only very small groups of 12, and so we start each week with pupils meeting in that circle and by 10 past 9 every morning, every pupil in that circle will have spoken and you know, the circle is intentional in that respect but they will have spoken to a member of staff and they will have spoken to other pupils and that's about building the positive relationships between students, because one of the things that came up from contextual safeguarding was concern from younger pupils about older pupils in the playground and that sort of thing and we wanted to break down those issues but also we very consciously constructed every circle so they are diverse and they reflect the whole community. So, on a Monday by 10 past 9 every pupil in the school has spoken to a member of staff and been heard by a member of staff."

JA, HEADTEACHER, SECONDARY.

As well as being adaptable by restructuring their mornings to respond to a difficulty faced by students, this action was seen to support ongoing reflective practice by being able to more easily hear from and respond to students.

Dealing with families flexibly was another action that was seen to be valuable, for instance adapting the means of communication to keep dialogue open with parents and sustain a relationship:

"The many adaptations (the Headteacher) makes to the timetable, to the curriculum, to the provision offer for pupils, but also about the different ways that she communicates with families, some are text messages, some are letters, some are meetings, some is on the gate. That kind of nuanced approach."

CE, SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT LEADER, SECONDARY.

Adapting disciplinary approaches

Student feedback highlighted discipline and conflict management as a key factor impacting their sense of belonging and safety. Not feeling they were able to have their say, and feeling staff acted without understanding the situation or the root of the problem, were negative experiences raised by students across multiple schools.

School leaders we spoke with suggested that viewing moments of transgression and conflict as learning opportunities rather than as a trigger for specific punishment was beneficial:

"Behaviours are all about a learning opportunity when something happens, I think … if something goes wrong, it's a learning opportunity. It's having that mindset and I think I've learned through the work… that behaviours are something that give us an opportunity to teach children and help them learn the skills to manage."

AE, HEADTEACHER, PRIMARY.

"We try to role model how to behave and then if, unfortunately, for whatever reason, bullying does occur, then how are we resolving that?... We don't want to go straight to the harshest of what we call punishment or consequence … but we want to actually kind of build on 'how can you learn from this? What can we do to make sure this doesn't happen again? And have you understood how you've made the other person feel?'"

AA, SUBJECT LEAD, SPECIAL EDUCATION.

Echoing actions described in the section on 'restorative conflict resolution' supporting students to be active citizens, avoiding 'zero-tolerance' policies and being less conformist in the way you handle conflict within a school also helps create a more reflective and adaptable culture. A trauma-informed approach to discipline, which fosters an inquisitive approach to conflict was viewed to be a much better approach for building school belonging, as well as safety for everyone in the longer term:

"that's quite an important thing about the staff and how we support staff around staying appropriate and trauma-informed and approaching with inquisitiveness to find out what's going on with the child at that moment, seeing behaviour as a message and a communication. When they're tipping the chairs over and things like that, it's not them being naughty, it's because they're in distress and it's about them trying to get out of the place. So, staff will then try and find out what the hell's going on for them."

JN, HEADTEACHER, PRU.

Educators were clear that, in terms of enacting these principles, there is no singular way of implementing them, it is an ongoing, reflective process:

"it's not a school view, (these principles) need to relate to the individual pupil within a school. There's going to be a range of pupils they'll relate to in different ways in different schools and it comes back to the 'if you've only got one tool in the toolbox you're only going to do one thing...' schools need to accept the fact that these principles are principles for every child and every child will need addressing with these principles in a slightly different way because they're all individual."

JA, HEADTEACHER, SECONDARY.

Beyond academic achievement

This action principle is drawn from the wealth of educator and student feedback about the importance of a broader, more holistic notion of achievement and success to support students' belonging and safety at school. Educators saw trips, experiences and non-academic learning as equally important to academic attainment for young people's futures. These opportunities were seen to tackle the exclusion and marginalisation of disadvantaged groups in three key ways: firstly in raising aspirations through enabling young people's identity development and sense of self-worth; secondly in building the social and emotional skills needed to thrive in the social world; thirdly, in helping students to make connections between school learning and the wider world.

The importance of trips and experiences

What would traditionally be termed 'extra-curricular' activities were seen by educators as essential parts of the educational experience. They were understood to relate to school belonging in terms of schools acknowledging and responding to the whole child, enabling wider aspects of their identity and interests to be part of the school experience. There was also the perception that these experiences could raise or widen aspirations through giving students access to places and experiences they might not otherwise benefit from - something which could change their view of themselves, what they are capable of, or interested in.

"We have a responsibility to educate the whole child. And if you go to a private school, you have lots of opportunities for these sorts of things, different experiences, speakers that come in."

SE, HEADTEACHER, SECONDARY AND DIRECTOR, MULTI-ACADEMY TRUST.

"Outside of the classroom (is) just as important as inside to narrate, enrich the human experience. Some of our students have never been to the zoo. Things like that are just as important as teaching you your numbers and your multiplications... more emphasis on this is key."

EY, DEPUTY SAFEGUARDING LEAD, PRIMARY AND SECONDARY.

Issues of equity come through strongly in terms of schools being able to provide young people with the kinds of experiences that others might take for granted. In this regard, it relates to tackling barriers to school belonging and societal belonging for particular groups. In this respect, it also relates to the principle of supporting students as active citizens:

"We have special school down the road and they come in weekly and our children work with those children. So, they have that exposure to children and people in the community that have profound learning and physical disabilities because they're part of a community and they will come across those individuals throughout their daily lives."

SE, HEADTEACHER, SECONDARY AND DIRECTOR, MULTI-ACADEMY TRUST.

Tackling barriers to extracurricular engagement

Underpinning educators' discussion of extracurricular engagement was a strong sense that these opportunities should not simply be offered. Rather, they saw participation and engagement in these opportunities as something for the school to actively nurture and facilitate by removing the barriers to participation. Students who experience a weaker sense of belonging or face more barriers may not take part in additional activities outside of the classroom. A range of ways that schools have successfully supported these students to take part and make it a reality were described:

"Some children naturally go to clubs and they volunteer for things and they stand up in assemblies and talk and they're good at that sort of thing. But we try to look at the steps children have to make to feel brave enough to do something in an assembly. And we do join the community in those kind of public events, find a way that they feel that they can be supported to do that."

AE, HEADTEACHER, PRIMARY.

"One of our non-negotiables is that all children will go on all residentials because we believe that exposing them to these things in life - opportunities and all of those things. In those conversations though a year before we're going to tell parents that that's one of their agreements. If a parent says oh, I'm quite nervous about that, it allows for that conversation to happen and for us to know if it's a parental anxiety point of view, whether it's a money concern and field that before it gets to the point of any kind of pressure."

EY, DEPUTY SAFEGUARDING LEAD, PRIMARY AND SECONDARY.

Both examples describe a highly personalised, individual response for understanding the barriers and blockers to a student feeling part of a school experience and taking steps to resolve them. Other schools spoke about how they made these experiences part and parcel of what they do by creating space within the curriculum:

"You have to create your own luck for these children as a Headteacher in a school. And how we do it is, we don't leave it to chance. We don't put on clubs and hope that children will go. We lever it into the curriculum because it's too important to leave out of the curriculum. So, our mantra is to go beyond what other schools ordinarily do. So, every child, as part of their weekly curriculum has something scheduled called Going Beyond and they do all sorts of things... those sorts of things shouldn't be the preserve of the elite, they're also achievable in state education... those different experiences and trips and activities should be everybody's rights and they shouldn't be left to chance. And every school, in my view, should be challenged to lever that into their curriculum and make time for it."

SE, HEADTEACHER, SECONDARY AND DIRECTOR, MULTI-ACADEMY TRUST.

"We actively seek out experiences and funding for them alongside our curriculum. It's really important."

SN, ASSISTANT HEADTEACHER, PRIMARY

"the kids always say is they can't believe how many trips they go on when they come (here), but it's just so important... in terms of kind of the belonging, but also the sense of changing how they perceive themselves, but also how others perceive them. Being in those places and having those experiences is really important."

GY, EXECUTIVE HEADTEACHER, ALTERNATIVE PROVISION.

Broader notions of achievement

Prioritising these experiences was aligned with having a broad notion of achievement. In line with students' views that they would feel more able to be themselves in school and develop their individual interests if there were less focus on academic attainment, and wider appreciation of broader notions of success, educators saw a holistic approach to achievement as facilitating belonging.

"I think as an educator it's not just about the academics, it's about that hidden curriculum."

DA, TEACHER, SPECIAL EDUCATION.

Some described the importance of addressing life skills to support students to feel and be successful:

"that life of choice and opportunity is not just going to be found through GCSE results and 'A' level, they're a great start but if you don't know how to have a conversation over a meal or use your knife and fork or respond appropriately to an adult then you're not going to be successful in that and the enrichment opportunities that schools offer is just as important as the academic opportunities."

EY, DEPUTY SAFEGUARDING LEAD, PRIMARY AND SECONDARY.

Others spoke about the importance of supporting students to have a more fluid and flexible view of success, seeing it not as an externally validated notion, but also a personal matter. Finding ways to celebrate all forms of achievement and acknowledging that progress is not always in a linear direction, was understood to support the belonging and self-esteem of a broader range of students than would be achieved through celebrating academic attainment alone:

"Achievement implies some kind of external success… (but it is) more about the experience, the exposure that children have through their education."

SE, HEADTEACHER, SECONDARY AND DIRECTOR, MULTI-ACADEMY TRUST.

"it's a bit like snakes and ladders; you can climb, climb, climb, but then you might slide down again… it depends on different aspects of your life. So, it's not a set in stone progression and so achievement is not a clear indicator at a fixed point in time, is it. It's got to be something that's fluidly recognised."

HN, EXECUTIVE HEADTEACHER, PRIMARY.

Schools identified a range of ways in which they achieved this, from supportive comments, phone calls home, to displays:

"for our young people, quite often they've never really felt celebrated or successful and whether that's through things like reward assemblies and certificates, or whether it's around phone calls home to your parent or carer saying that you've done something brilliant that day, even just comments that you might make to children in the day-to-day interactions about how well they're doing or how impressed you are by something, for some of our young people, they're really shocked that you are acknowledging their strengths."

GY, EXECUTIVE HEADTEACHER, ALTERNATIVE PROVISION

Values underpinning effective implementation of school actions

If these actions are to have an impact, educators highlighted that the spirit in which they are implemented is of critical importance. As well as consistently appearing as top factors supporting belonging and safety in all four surveys, relationships were seen to be the central mechanism by which a sense of belonging, safety and self-worth can be nurtured.

Relational values

Supporting students to build, sustain and repair relationships

Strong relational practice was seen by educators to be not only about trying to establish trusting, respectful relationships with pupils, but also about teaching and modelling to students how to manage relationships effectively. As well as being critically important to their success later on in life, it was understood to be a central aspect of knowing how to belong.

"One of the most important things I think we give our students is the tool to sustain relationships when things are going wrong."

JN, HEADTEACHER, PRU.

So, all the work is around being peacemakers, trying to have an approach to relationships where, when we fall out, we've got good skills which contributes to a strong sense of belonging." AE, Headteacher, Primary.

An action several educators referenced in relation to building a school culture where these relationships can be experienced and expected, was ensuring staff are trained in understanding trauma and adverse childhood experiences (ACES):

"it's all about really creating the best possible environment to nurture positive relationships where children feel loved, they trust adults, and we just do everything we can to reduce the opportunity for negative interaction and the use of negative language... our behaviour policy has a strong emphasis on trauma-informed practice and adverse childhood experiences and different responses and positive use of language to help us create the best possible environment that we can."

SE, HEADTEACHER, SECONDARY AND DIRECTOR, MULTI-ACADEMY TRUST

"Schools often identify a handful of staff to identify as Emotionally Available Adults. We need to train ALL of our staff in Attachment, ACEs and Trauma Informed Practice. If we do that then we can look to create Emotionally Available Schools."

RR, HEADTEACHER, PRIMARY

Student feedback highlighted the struggles they had in finding a member of staff they felt they could approach for help when needed, so this school action speaks directly to this high priority factor for students.

Some schools described other actions to achieve these positive relationships; welcoming and offering breakfast, or asking students to choose one adult they feel safe with:

"Everybody chooses the adult that they want to work with. It's quite a mammoth path, but they identify the adult that they feel safe with, and they want to talk to."

AE, HEADTEACHER, PRIMARY.

"We'll ask them if they need breakfast. Do they want breakfast? We'll sit and play games together. They'll have breakfast. Sometimes children might have had a difficult morning or a difficult day the night before and they might need the space to kind of talk, but every single day the first thing is we have a team of people in the front of school and it's welcome. And we focus very much on the welcoming children to school and having a really positive start to the day and a recognition that we're really pleased to see you."

GY, EXECUTIVE HEADTEACHER, ALTERNATIVE PROVISION.

Although a priority, this was flagged as a particular challenge for schools due to funding cuts. Constraints on time and resources to support these vital relationships with students was raised as a key concern:

"I think there's a challenge back to the government because it's about how can schools continue to do what we do… we're losing the behaviour mentors, we're losing those staff because we can't afford them anymore and there needs to be better investment to enable schools to provide all of that in the background but actually it's in the foreground support because it's becoming harder and harder. With the best will in the world, I know my school is not able to do any more than we did 10 years ago because we've had to cut and cut and cut. I think there was a real challenge back to the government that there needs to be investment in this because this is probably the thing that's going to make the biggest difference to society apart from education."

HN, EXECUTIVE HEADTEACHER, PRIMARY

It was notable how many students mentioned the positive impact of mentors, often naming them or praising the difference they had made to their perceptions and connections with school. One student described mainstream schools are "stingy with their mentors," highlighting how this lack of availability of staff to form these connections can compound an existing lack of belonging by giving students the impression that school doesn't care enough to prioritise them to receive a mentor.

Building relationships with families and communities

Building relationships with families to unpick some of the barriers or issues preventing their child from engaging, connecting or feeling safe in school was another facet of relational values, which educators described:

> "A bigger barrier to that is when families feel judged, particularly if they are from a disadvantaged background themselves and if they have had a negative experience with the education system themselves. I think we often forget that adults are just taller children in some aspects and we – I think where adults can feel discriminated for, yes, kind of the most obvious factors but also something such as so and so hasn't done their homework, some of our parents take that as a personal kind of embarrassment or like they're being told off and we work really hard to build relationship so in Reception and Year 7 every child has a home visit from one class teacher and a member of our senior leadership team... that's the preface of potentially difficult conversations moving forward where for example parents and carers may feel like we don't care about them or that we've got a negative relationship towards them, it eradicates that because the first time that we are seeing them is not in the face of crisis when they're being called in and we're having to tell them something negative."
>
> EY, DEPUTY SAFEGUARDING LEAD, PRIMARY AND SECONDARY.

Modelling supportive relationships in staff interaction

Acknowledging the difficulty of sustaining these relationships in times of conflict, putting in support and tools to help staff know how to handle situations and being mindful that staff interactions act as a model for the students in terms of how to manage relationships, were other key areas of discussion. From using 'google messaging' to help staff improve responsiveness and stay in contact, to creating scripts for staff on the kinds of language to use in high tension conflict situations, school leaders shared a range of concrete actions to support staff to sustain these high-quality relationships despite the pressures they faced:

> "We can be in constant communication with each other having never had that previously - (google messaging platform) is one of the best tools I would say for then responding to things that require us to build relationships or step in and make students feel safe because we know about it at all times."
>
> EY, DEPUTY SAFEGUARDING LEAD, PRIMARY AND SECONDARY.

> "We're working with very high end kids with a wide range of needs and I think it's hard for staff sometimes or we have new staff or temporary staff, it's hard for them... the 'hang them and flog them brigade' I call them…so we build that reset in, again it comes back to these skills and maintaining relationships. So, it's all about staff modelling to the kids."
>
> JN, HEADTEACHER, PRU

Care and nurture

Closely related to relational values are those of care and nurture. School leaders identified these to be at the essence of the spirit of the relationships that needed to be fostered. Care and nurture were understood to be particularly critical for students' sense of emotional safety in school as well as to wellbeing more broadly:

> "Nurture is absolutely central to the development of well-being, and well-being underpins academic achievement, social achievement, relationship achievement, everything."
>
> RR, HEADTEACHER, PRIMARY.

Ongoing professional development and coaching to support staff to develop helpful language to use when conflict situations arise was highlighted as a necessary step in the light of high staff-turnover:

> "I think the way that we handle when a child has not made the right choice I think it's a very delicate approach that needs to be made to ensure that emotional safety is still there, because you are giving them a negative experience but you also need to narrate that you're doing it because you love and care for them. So we – the CPD that we give staff - we do a lot of coaching where we literally script those conversations, because to build a habit you need to do something many times and we have a lot of new staff and a lot of new to teaching staff and younger staff so will literally script a conversation between staff and child of how you are going to sanction without doing it publicly or without doing it to shame them or embarrass them or to not fuel the fire or whatever."
>
> EY, DEPUTY SAFEGUARDING LEAD, PRIMARY AND SECONDARY.

Training not a selection of staff, but all staff in the school was seen to be an important action to ensure students can always access a teacher or adult who is equipped to respond to and support them effectively in a way that maximises feelings of safety and belonging across the whole student body:

> "Trying to provide that kind of environment of where every adult is an emotionally available adult, so you don't have to have a particular place children go to access that because the whole school has provision for that. Then when your emotionally available adult isn't there, you know I need somebody I've been in crisis. I'm sorry Bob's not in today and you're going to have to wait - that's not acceptable so this developing that whole ethos of providing that emotionally available, nurturing environment for all children at all times."
>
> RR, HEADTEACHER, PRIMARY.

Identity building and affirming

School leaders viewed identity building and affirming as central to the task of supporting school belonging and safety. Interactions, experiences and relationships in school were seen to shape young people's sense of who they are, their self-worth and perceptions of what their futures might hold. The experience of belonging or feeling welcome in school was seen to shape their aspirations or expectations around belonging in the workplace, at college and in the wider world. It also was seen to shape what young people come to expect in terms of the effort required for relationships and shared enterprises. Many educators emphasised the need for a more explicit understanding among school leaders and staff of this important relationship between identity and school belonging:

> "I think that schools don't necessarily recognise the importance of that and leaders in education don't necessarily recognise how central and fundamental a sense of belonging is and that sense of identity and inclusivity and diversity in all of its different manifestations actually."
>
> SE, HEADTEACHER, SECONDARY AND DIRECTOR, MULTI-ACADEMY TRUST.

Finding themselves and finding their place in the world was understood by many of the educators we spoke with to be the core purpose of schooling for students:

> "Once they've finished college, they will belong to a workplace you know, it's about identity and all those skills that make us who we are."
>
> DA, TEACHER, SPECIAL EDUCATION

Conclusion

Belonging and safety and their impact on inclusion in London schools are of foremost importance, especially with rates of persistent absence rising and the detrimental impacts for the individual and for society of children being out of school. This comprehensive, London-wide study of school belonging, safety and inclusion highlights specific actions and a direction of travel for schools and the wider education ecosystem to advance school inclusion. The findings presented here underpin London's Inclusion Charter (London's Violence Reduction Unit 2024) and its recommendations which are grounded in evidence from the study.

Key groups for improving belonging and safety

While children's sense of school belonging was generally good in the London schools involved in this study, especially at primary level, this is not the case for all children. The students who contributed to the research attended schools who prioritise inclusion in so far as they made time to enable their students and staff to participate. It is important for the London school system to recognise the relatively weaker or ambivalent sense of belonging experienced by the following groups of students:

- Neurodivergent
- Disabled / Impaired
- Care-experienced
- Refugees and asylum seekers
- Females, Trans and gender diverse
- Non-heterosexual
- Black / Black British
- Sikh, Atheist, Muslim, and Buddhist

Key barriers to belonging

The key barriers Stakeholders identified as impacting a sense of school belonging for all young people are:

- **A lack of flexibility to meet students' needs**
- **Performance related pressures on students (regarding their academic achievement or behaviour)**
- **Negative relationships between staff and students**

Findings from all four stakeholder groups signal that key barriers to belonging are relational and that systemic and structural aspects influence these important relationships in school. Attainment related pressures and a lack of flexibility at institutional and structural levels often impact staff-student relationships in ways that are harmful to young people's feelings of belonging.

Securing children's belonging

Our research has many positive messages about the difference that schools can make to improve young people's sense of belonging and safety, especially for those more marginalised groups identified above. The three themes to emerge from analysis of the factors impacting belonging for primary and secondary aged students are:

1. **Friendship and peer relationships**
2. **Respect for social identity, acceptance and equity**
3. **Individual identity building and affirming**

A key finding to emerge from participants' views is the importance of identity development and relationships in school. Belonging is achieved through respecting individual and social identities and providing opportunities for children to explore and affirm the various aspects of their individual and social identities. Providing young people with opportunities to be themselves in school (and out of school) and ensuring trusting, respectful relationships are nurtured in school, with families and in the wider community, are key mechanisms for affirming their identities. Central to this is support for young people's friendships and peer relationships.

Securing children's safety

A second aspect of this research was understanding what supports children's sense of safety in school. The three key themes to emerge from analysis of the factors impacting young people's sense of safety at school are:

1. **Supporting emotional safety through respect and fairness in teacher-student interactions**
2. **Supporting emotional safety through student-staff relationships which affirm student's individual identities**
3. **Supporting social safety through dealing effectively with bullying and discrimination.**

We found that emotional safety was of primary importance to children. Feeling that teachers respect their individuality and are interested in them as people are important to secure children's emotional safety. Feeling socially and physically safe were also crucial and young people saw schools' effective response to bullying and discrimination to be key to securing their sense of social safety.

Key principles for securing belonging and safety

To support schools in building belonging and safety for all students, these insights are distilled into four principles for inclusive practice. These indicate key priorities to guide educational policy and practice:

1. **Embedding equity and diversity.**
2. **Students as active citizens.**
3. **Being adaptable and reflective.**
4. **Beyond academic achievement.**

These four principles form the basis of London's Inclusion Charter which contains detailed discussion of what they mean for Local Authorities, schools and education settings and for young people. Action guided by these four principles must be underpinned by particular values to be effective. To avoid tickbox or superficial implementation of these principles, **relational values** and the values of **care and nurture** are vitally important.

Next steps: Further research

The study marks the first step in a journey for the London school system to strengthen children's belonging and safety. Further research is needed to understand how best to translate these findings and principles into action, and the most effective ways to enact change. Four valuable foci for further research to emerge from this study are:

- **Tensions between school-wide action and identity-based work.** A deeper understanding of the actions that schools can take to ensure that collectivised / group-based identities and individual identities are equally affirmed is needed. In addition, developing insights into how different social groups are impacted by the dual demands of embracing 'authentic' or unique aspects of their individual identities and gaining the social acceptance of their peers could enhance our understanding of the specific belonging needs of different social groups.
- **The effectiveness of school-level actions on improving belonging.** Research to monitor the effectiveness of school leaders' implementations of these principles will be needed to inform beneficial adaptations. An action research approach to development would be advantageous. Evaluating the subjective sense of belonging and safety is arguably more challenging than evaluating interventions aiming to improve more objective outcomes, like attainment, meaning that the development of a consistent measure of belonging, and identifying the best evaluation and monitoring approaches are key priorities.
- **How change can be effectively navigated with parents and educators.** This study highlights that the views of parents/carers, educators and children themselves do not always neatly align. More research is needed on how stakeholders and students can work together to bring about change, and to address any conflicts or challenges that might hinder this process. A deeper understanding of potential conflicts will be important to the development of ways to enact change that achieve 'buy in' from parents and carers.
- **Spatial dimensions of belonging and safety.** The role of school spaces emerged as important for different groups in different ways. The concept of 'safe spaces' encompassed diverse needs, including safety to express and explore different identities, to manage emotions and to gain respite from larger groups. The design of some school buildings in recent years (large open spaces, extensive use of glass, and a lack of private physical spaces) have implications for these aspects of belonging. More work is needed to understand how schools can think about how their spaces are used to secure a sense of belonging for all groups and how sub-groups of the school population can be provided with safe spaces in a way that does not single them out in terms of their points of difference from the wider school community. The tension between providing safe spaces without fragmenting the school population is an area that requires further research.

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Appendices

Appendix 1:

Mean survey ratings for individual belonging factors by students with different social characteristics

Appendix 1a: How important are these things in helping you feel a sense of belonging in school?
(mean scores for two 'peer relationship' factors according to students from different social groups)

Appendix 1a		Having a friend or group of friends in school that I trust		Getting along with other students at school	
Group		Secondary student	Primary student	Secondary student	Primary student
Overall cohort mean		4.25	4.15	3.82	3.72
SES	Socio-economically disadvantaged	4.26	4.08	3.86	3.79
	Not Socio-economically disadvantaged	4.28	4.26	3.84	3.67
Gender	Male	4.19	x	3.77	x
	Female	4.36	x	3.92	x
	Cisgender	4.26	x	3.83	x
	Transgender	3.75	x	3.76	x
	Gender Fluid	3.66	x	3.45	x
	Non-Binary	3.66	x	3.81	x
	Gender neutral	3.83	x	3.53	x
Sexuality	Heterosexual	4.28	x	3.94	x
	Bisexual	4.22	x	3.9	x
	Gay/Lesbian	3.98	x	3.36	x
	Asexual	3.67	x	3.24	x
	Queer	3.74	x	3.53	x
	Pan sexual	3.7	x	3.58	x
Ethnicity	White	4.34	4.22	3.86	3.81
	Asian or Asian British	4.22	4.17	3.81	3.73
	Black or black British	4.1	4.15	3.73	3.73
	Mixed heritage	4.25	4.39	3.77	3.79
Faith	Christian	4.3	4.19	3.84	3.79
	Muslim	4.21	4.1	3.77	3.63
	Atheist	4.23	4.09	3.87	3.74
	Jewish	4.16	5	3.22	4
	Buddhist	3.53	4.13	3.22	3.86
	Hindu	4.28	4.27	3.87	3.87
	Sikh	4.08	3.88	3.54	3.86
	No religion	4.33	4.22	3.87	3.75
Other characteristics	EAL	4.16	4.21	3.81	3.69
	Neurodivergent	4.21	4.17	3.81	3.67
	Young carer	4.34	4.04	3.85	3.66
	Disability Impairment	3.97	4.13	4.04	3.9
	Refugee	3.59	3.91	3.54	3.74
	Asylum seeker	3.36	3.68	3.5	3.65
	Care experienced	3.71	4	3,73	3.81

Appendix 1b: How important are these things in helping you feel a sense of belonging in school?
(mean scores for two 'respect' factors according to students from different social groups)

Appendix 1b		Being treated with as much respect as everyone else at school		People from all backgrounds feeling welcome and heard in school	
Group		Secondary student	Primary student	Secondary student	Primary student
Overall cohort mean		4.26	4.34	4.01	4.45
SES	Socio-economically disadvantaged	4.34	4.33	4.08	4.46
	Not Socio-economically disadvantaged	4.25	4.37	4	4.49
Gender	Male	4.08	x	3.75	x
	Female	4.44	x	4.28	x
	Cisgender	4.36	x	4.12	x
	Transgender	3.5	x	3.03	x
	Gender Fluid	3.57	x	3.09	x
	Non-Binary	3.57	x	3.03	x
	Gender neutral	3.74	x	3.04	x
Sexuality	Heterosexual	4.25	x	3.95	x
	Bisexual	4.09	x	3.91	x
	Gay/Lesbian	3.77	x	3.42	x
	Asexual	3.6	x	3.08	x
	Queer	3.47	x	2.91	x
	Pan sexual	3.45	x	2.94	x
Ethnicity	White	4.27	4.3	4.02	4.32
	Asian or Asian British	4.26	4.37	4.06	4.54
	Black or black British	4.27	4.42	3.96	4.54
	Mixed heritage	4.21	4.41	3.97	4.58
Faith	Christian	4.3	4.4	4	4.5
	Muslim	4.21	4.32	3.96	4.46
	Atheist	4.23	3.94	4.08	4.37
	Jewish	4.16	5	3.61	5
	Buddhist	3.53	3.88	4	3.88
	Hindu	4.28	4.42	4.38	4.63
	Sikh	4.08	4.37	3.94	4.56
	No religion	4.33	4.27	4.03	4.29
Other characteristics	EAL	4.27	4.37	4.05	4.44
	Neurodivergent	4.22	4.25	3.96	4.17
	Young carer	4.21	4.41	3.92	4.35
	Disability Impairment	3.79	4.03	3.44	4.26
	Refugee	3.59	3.95	3.31	4.14
	Asylum seeker	3.71	4	2.97	3.81
	Care experienced	3.36	4.33	3.6	4.33

Appendix 1c: How important are these things in helping you feel a sense of belonging in school?
(mean scores for two 'identity' factors according to students from different social groups)

Appendix 1c		Feeling confident to plan for my future	Feeling able to be myself	
Group		Secondary only	Secondary student	Primary student
Overall cohort mean		3.88	3.67	3.96
SES	Socio-economically disadvantaged	4.03	3.86	3.97
	Not Socio-economically disadvantaged	3.86	3.64	4.01
Gender	Male	3.87	3.49	x
	Female	3.93	3.88	x
	Cisgender	3.83	3.75	x
	Transgender	3.3	3.32	x
	Gender Fluid	3.35	3.26	x
	Non-Binary	3.41	3.41	x
	Gender neutral	3.07	3.36	x
Sexuality	Heterosexual	3.91	3.68	x
	Bisexual	3.55	3.88	x
	Gay/Lesbian	3.47	3.41	x
	Asexual	3.53	3.25	x
	Queer	3.17	3.23	x
	Pan sexual	3.44	3.31	x
Ethnicity	White	3.82	3.65	3.93
	Asian or Asian British	3.91	3.65	3.95
	Black or black British	4.02	3.8	4.13
	Mixed heritage	3.97	3.69	4.01
Faith	Christian	3.95	3.73	3.97
	Muslim	4.06	3.68	3.93
	Atheist	3.7	3.62	3.71
	Jewish	3.16	3.11	5
	Buddhist	4.06	3.33	3.5
	Hindu	4.07	3.85	4.1
	Sikh	3.61	3.86	3.81
	No religion	3.77	3.67	4.05
Other characteristics	EAL	4	3.65	3.98
	Neurodivergent	3.72	3.66	3.78
	Young carer	3.8	3.62	3.88
	Disability Impairment	3.52	3.44	3.57
	Refugee	3.45	3.12	3.69
	Asylum seeker	3.52	2.74	3.24
	Care experienced	3.63	3.28	3.87

Appendix 2:

Mean survey ratings for individual safety factors by students With different social characteristics

Appendix 2a: Which of these are most important in helping you feel safe in school?
(Mean ratings according to primary-aged and secondary aged students of different social groups.)

Appendix 2a		Teachers and adults being respectful to children		School rules which are fair		Teachers accepting me for who I am		Feeling that teachers care about me	
Group		Secondary aged	Primary aged	Secondary aged	Primary aged	Secondary aged	Primary aged	Secondary aged	Primary aged
Overall cohort mean		4.12	4.42	3.85	4.19	3.76	4.18	3.39	3.96
SES	Socio-economically disadvantaged	4.19	4.38	3.9	4.2	3.89	4.19	3.55	3.95
	Not Socio-economically disadvantaged	4.12	4.48	3.84	4.23	3.72	4.26	3.36	4.08
Gender	Male	3.97	x	3.72	x	3.51	x	3.2	x
	Female	4.28	x	3.98	x	4.01	x	3.59	x
	Cisgender	4.15	x	3.98	x	3.76	x	3.37	x
	Transgender	3.45	x	3.45	x	3.45	x	2.77	x
	Gender Fluid	3.52	x	3.23	x	3.33	x	2.68	x
	Non-Binary	3.24	x	3.21	x	3.14	x	2.46	x
	Gender neutral	3.36	x	3.11	x	3.32	x	2.5	x
Sexuality	Heterosex	4.07	x	3.79	x	3.7	x	3.35	x
	Bisexual	3.95	x	3.66	x	3.9	x	3.43	x
	Gay/Lesbian	3.65	x	3.69	x	3.24	x	2.65	x
	Asexual	3.39	x	3.23	x	3.2	x	2.29	x
	Queer	3.26	x	3.42	x	2.88	x	2.37	x
	Pan sexual	3.41	x	3.31	x	3.16	x	2.65	x
Ethnicity	White	4.08	4.35	3.83	4.03	3.72	4.19	3.43	3.87
	Asian Asian British	4.16	4.43	3.87	4.24	3.91	4.16	3.43	4.04
	Black black British	3.49	4.49	3.73	4.22	4.02	4.34	3.96	3.97
	Mixed heritage	4.21	4.59	3.86	4.36	3.73	4.37	3.21	4.22
Faith	Christian	4.12	4.42	3.86	4.17	3.75	4.28	3.44	3.98
	Muslim	4.14	4.4	3.84	4.24	3.81	4.09	3.34	3.96
	Atheist	4.05	4.29	3.82	3.65	3.68	4.11	3.31	3.29
	Jewish	3.89	5	3.71	5	3.15	5	3.26	5
	Buddhist	4.53	4.75	3.76	3.38	3.72	4.5	3.39	4.5
	Hindu	4.19	4.5	3.94	4.46	4.09	4.17	3.74	4.14
	Sikh	4.17	4.42	3.91	4.25	4	4.36	3.34	4.1
	No religion	4.15	4.39	3.9	4.07	3.8	4.19	3.42	3.91
Other characteristics	EAL	4.11	4.41	3.96	4.25	3.86	4.21	3.46	4.04
	Neurodiver	4.06	4.46	3.8	4.07	3.78	4.18	3.35	3.75
	Young carer	3.96	4.55	3.62	4.36	3.82	4.18	3.36	4
	Disability Impairment	3.62	4.44	3.34	4.03	3.51	4.07	3.07	3.82
	Refugee	3.33	4.35	3.04	4.13	3.26	3.76	2.86	4
	Asylum seeker	2.75	4.24	2.82	4.1	3.15	3.64	2.41	4.14
	Care experienced	3.71	4.56	3.34	4.03	3.82	4.11	2.85	4.13

Appendix 2b: How important is this in helping you feel safe in school?
(mean scores on two 'bullying and discrimination' factors according to students from different social groups)

Appendix 2b		Knowing that if bullying is reported it will be dealt with/ knowing teachers will stop all kinds of bullying		School deals effectively with discrimination if it occurs
Group		Secondary student	Primary student	Secondary only
Overall cohort mean		3.77	4.24	3.91
SES	Socio-economically disadvantaged	3.83	4.2	4
	Not Socio-economically disadvantaged	3.77	4.35	3.9
Gender	Male	3.63	x	3.74
	Female	3.92	x	4.11
	Cisgender	3.75	x	3.99
	Transgender	3.19	x	3.78
	Gender Fluid	3.28	x	3.41
	Non-Binary	2.93	x	3.73
	Gender neutral	3.1	x	3.72
Sexuality	Heterosexual	3.62	x	3.96
	Bisexual	3.51	x	4.04
	Gay/Lesbian	3.4	x	3.88
	Asexual	3	x	3.43
	Queer	2.83	x	3.44
	Pan sexual	3.19	x	3.55
Ethnicity	White	3.79	4.14	3.94
	Asian or Asian British	3.85	4.29	3.93
	Black or black British	3.59	4.32	4.27
	Mixed heritage	3.67	4.33	3.83
Faith	Christian	3.74	4.38	3.87
	Muslim	3.81	4.2	4.03
	Atheist	3.71	3.64	3.98
	Jewish	3.83	5	3.63
	Buddhist	3.94	3.71	3.89
	Hindu	3.99	4.51	3.92
	Sikh	3.83	4.39	3.86
	No religion	3.81	4.03	3.88
Other characteristics	EAL	3.76	4.27	3.82
	Neurodivergent	3.65	4.02	3.77
	Young carer	3.74	4.21	3.8
	Disability Impairment	3.44	4.14	3.25
	Refugee	3.17	3.93	3.04
	Asylum seeker	3.07	3.59	3
	Care experienced	3.37	4.11	3.47

Appendix 2c: How important is this in helping you feel safe in school?
(mean scores on two physical safety factors according to students from different social groups)

Appendix 2c		No threat of crime	No threat of violence
Group		Secondary student	Secondary student
Overall cohort mean		4.1	3.91
SES	Socio-economically disadvantaged	4.22	4.01
	Not Socio-economically disadvantaged	4.08	3.91
Gender	Male	3.95	3.67
	Female	4.27	4.16
	Cisgender	4.13	4.08
	Transgender	3.5	3.38
	Gender Fluid	3.29	3.41
	Non-Binary	3.47	3.37
	Gender neutral	3.38	3.24
Sexuality	Heterosexual	4.02	3.8
	Bisexual	3.78	3.92
	Gay/Lesbian	3.46	3.57
	Asexual	3.22	3.3
	Queer	3.14	3.18
	Pan sexual	3.27	3.22
Ethnicity	White	4.1	3.95
	Asian or Asian British	4.14	3.92
	Black or black British	3.33	4.1
	Mixed heritage	4	3.8
Faith	Christian	4.15	3.89
	Muslim	4.13	3.96
	Atheist	4.03	3.96
	Jewish	3.61	3.4
	Buddhist	3.83	3.67
	Hindu	4.29	3.99
	Sikh	3.91	3.79
	No religion	4.05	3.92
Other characteristics	EAL	4.14	3.9
	Neurodivergent	3.77	3.73
	Young carer	4	3.94
	Disability Impairment	3.68	3.38
	Refugee	3.13	3.11
	Asylum seeker	2.86	2.89
	Care experienced	3.24	2.93

Appendix 3:

Mean survey ratings for individual spatial factors impacting belonging For students with different social characteristics

Appendix 3: How important is this in helping you feel a sense of belonging in school?
(mean scores two 'spatial' factors according to students from different social groups at secondary and primary level)

Appendix 3		Having a space where me and my friends can hang out in school	Having a space in school where me and my friends can feel comfortable
Group		Secondary student	Primary student
Overall cohort mean		3.64	3.81
SES	Socio-economically disadvantaged	3.76	3.8
	Not Socio-economically disadvantaged	3.64	3.86
Gender	Male	3.56	x
	Female	3.75	x
	Cisgender	3.72	x
	Transgender	3.26	x
	Gender Fluid	3.26	x
	Non-Binary	3.28	x
	Gender neutral	3.21	x
Sexuality	Heterosexual	3.79	x
	Bisexual	3.83	x
	Gay/Lesbian	3.59	x
	Asexual	3.28	x
	Queer	3.4	x
	Pan sexual	3.22	x
Ethnicity	White	3.67	3.82
	Asian or Asian British	3.65	3.9
	Black or black British	3.59	3.81
	Mixed heritage	3.63	3.9
Faith	Christian	3.73	3.72
	Muslim	3.63	3.83
	Atheist	3.58	3.77
	Jewish	3.47	4
	Buddhist	3.39	3.63
	Hindu	3.8	3.95
	Sikh	3.47	3.64
	No religion	3.54	3.88
Other characteristics	EAL	3.62	3.79
	Neurodivergent	3.6	3.73
	Young carer	3.63	3.89
	Disability Impairment	3.3	3.51
	Refugee	3.26	3.74
	Asylum seeker	2.82	3.5
	Care experienced	3.02	3.79

Appendix 4:
Literature review

Belonging

What do we mean by school belonging?

This section gives a brief overview of different ways of understanding the concept of school belonging to clarify our use of the term. The study draws on a transdisciplinary, rights'-based view of school belonging to account for structural and intersectional factors impacting the views and experiences of young people, their parents and educators. Kuttner (2023, p.8) proposes that school belonging is:

> "a dynamic social process in which students' engage interpersonal relationships, intersecting and fluid identities, their locations within systems of power, and the politics of inclusion and exclusion as they establish a place for themselves and realize their right to be – and feel that they are – valued and active participants, on their own terms, in formal educational spaces."

A foundational view of school belonging is Goodenow's (1993) definition of it as "the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others in the school environment," (p.80) (Walls and Louis, 2023). This psychological perspective continues to dominate approaches to studying school belonging, with behavioural and community dimensions of school belonging also influential among education researchers (Alink et al, 2023). Understanding students' views about the ways in which school experience helps or hinders them in feeling acceptance, respect, inclusion and support is therefore an important starting point when planning school actions to support school belonging.

Recent critiques of the concept of school belonging challenge its individualistic framing; reliance on psychological conceptions (Kuttner 2023) normative and assimilationist approaches (Brown, Kelly and Phillips 2020). In light of these, school belonging may be better understood as a process of identity construction which is negotiated interpersonally, socially and spatially. (Russell 2022, Philp et al 2022; McGillilcuddy 2021). School is a key place where young people develop various aspects of their identities, including for instance their learner identity, cultural identity, gender identity, civic identity and ethnic identity (Nasire, Lee, and de Royston 2021). Students' experiences and social interactions at school impact their sense of self as well as their sense of fitting in. This highlights the importance of taking an intersectional perspective on school belonging (Philip et al 2022) to consider the multiple ways in which school can impact young people's identity development (Verhoeven, Poorthuis and Volman 2019; Brown, Kelly and Phillips 2020) and feelings of belonging (Hamilton 2024). Kuttner's (2020) synthesis of insights into psychological, interpersonal, social, cultural and political processes therefore offers a valuable, holistic lens on school belonging.

The politics of belonging (Davis 2006) comprises specific political projects aimed at constructing belonging in particular ways to particular collectivities that are, at the same time, themselves being constructed by these projects in very particular ways. An analytical differentiation between belonging and the politics of belonging is, therefore, crucial for any critical political discourse on nationalism, racism or other contemporary politics of belonging.

Indicators of belonging

With school belonging being understood and operationalised in different ways (Alink et al 2023 p8), there are multiple indicators to consider when measuring it. This section outlines some of the different indicators that researchers have used, and different approaches to categorising them to help readers understand the development of our school belonging survey questions.

Individual factors

A sense of belonging in school is subjectively experienced by an individual. In attempting to measure this, researchers have evaluated students' feelings of being safe, supported, accepted and respected by teachers and by their peers (Goodenow and Grady, 1993) feeling cared for and supported by their teacher (Shiri Lavy and Naama-Ghanayim 2020), by the school community (Osterman 2000) and their perceptions of fairness (Shean and Mander 2020).

Individual factors linked to school belonging include personal characteristics such as emotional stability (Allen et al 2018), academic motivation and effort (St Amand et al 2017). They also include relational factors such as harmonisation, an individual's willingness to adjust and adapt to situations or people (St Amand 2017) and community orientation; the degree to which individuals identify with, or feel proud to be part of the school (Osterman 2000). Behavioural factors indicating school belonging include class participation (St Amand 2017), involvement in academic and social activities (Allen et al. 2018) or extra-curricular participation (Osterman 2000, St Amand et al 2017).

Relational factors

Relational factors, particularly supportive relationships with teachers, staff, peers and families, have consistently been found to be strongly correlated with school belonging (Allen et al 2018, p25; Cemalcilar 2010; Zaatari and Ibrahim 2021; Uslu 2017). Students' feelings that their teacher cares for them are a critical feature of these relationships (Shiri Lavy and Naama Ghayanim 2020). Students' feelings of hope were found to be directly impacted by support from a Mentor within school, while support from staff has been shown to indirectly contribute to their sense of hope via school belonging (Sulimani-Aidan and Melkman 2022)

School climate and environmental factors

School climate and environment, including aspects such as policies, fairness, discipline and safety (Allen et al 2018) impact school belonging by shaping relationships and students' experiences and actions. Indeed, school climate, as reported by students, has been identified as the single most important factor associated with students' wellbeing and mental health (Hinze et al 2023). Furthermore, a school climate that 'nurtures and builds positive relationships and provides a sense of belonging' is key to improving student wellbeing (Aldridge et al 2018, p.18) and adolescent identity development (Verhoeven, Poorthuis and Volman 2024).

These studies suggest that efforts to understand and build school belonging would more usefully focus on school climate, rather than taking an individualistic focus on skills (Hinze et al 2023). They also highlight that what is important is attending to students' perspectives on school culture, particularly their sense of connection to others and sense of belonging (Aldridge et al p.19). Different students will experience school climate differently so attention to the perspectives of different sub-populations is necessary (Kutsyuruba et al 2015). A school's interethnic climate (how inclusive the environment is for students from all ethnicities) has been associated with a greater sense of school belonging (Vang 2022), while an accepting and supportive school environment has been linked to sense of school belonging for trans/gender-diverse students and students of diverse sexualities (Ullman 2022). For autistic and neurodiverse students, improving the school environment to promote their feelings of belonging through ongoing attention to pupil voice to co-create solutions and foster agency has been recommended (Hamilton 2024).

The spatial dimension to belonging

Attention to ways in which the physical and built environment within education settings impact students' perceptions of school climate and their sense of belonging (Brezicha and Miranda 2022) also emerges as relevant. Cheryan et al.'s (2009) notion of 'ambient belonging' suggest that individuals make decisions about joining or not joining a group based on the group's physical environment. The display of objects and posters within a computer science classroom for instance, was seen to convey gender stereotypes and impact female's interest in an academic course, either deterring, or boosting their interest depending on the nature of the objects. Similarly, attention to who is represented in the halls and on classroom walls has been shown to impact immigrant students' feelings of belonging by signalling differential treatment and implying who is or is not welcome (Brezicha and Miranda 2022).

Other studies draw attention to the use of space around the school and the impact this has on students' experiences of belonging. Walls and Louis' (2023) study asked students to photograph and discuss places where they did and did not fit in. Findings revealed that students valued calm spaces where they could relax alone or with peers, contrasting this with places which are continually monitored and under surveillance by adults. In contrast, students' experiences in the public spaces, like corridors and halls was felt to be 'wild,' uncomfortable and were not places where students believed that they would get help if needed. These spaces were places where they did not feel that they belonged.

Intersectional and multidimensional views of school belonging

Students' sense of school belonging is also shaped by wider social, cultural and structural factors. An individual's gender, ethnicity, socio-economic status, sexuality, cultural background and specific learning needs, for instance, will impact their experiences at school and their beliefs about what it means to belong at school (Fernandez, Ryan and Begeny 2023).

Yuval-Davis (200) reminds us that "people can 'belong' in many different ways and to many different objects of attachments." In school, for instance, an individual may feel connectedness to a particular teacher, to peers, to others in their ethnic group or to the school as a whole. This means that, in attempting to understand feelings of school belonging in diverse cohorts across multiple schools, being alert to the fact that different groups of students may prioritise different factors as important to their sense of school belonging and have differing views about which groups of people within schools, are helpful in understanding students' various feelings of belonging.

A number of studies taking an intersectional lens on school belonging give valuable insights into the perspectives and experiences of specific groups in terms of school belonging. A study of the impact of an inclusive ethos on students with Social Emotional and Mental Health Needs (SEMH) and students with moderate Learning Difficulties (MLD) revealed that the groups had very different belonging needs requiring different inclusive practices, and cautioning that SEND must not be viewed as a homogenous group in this regard (Dimitrellou 2017). Similarly, a study into the experiences of school belonging among secondary students with refugee backgrounds drew attention to their specific belonging needs, particularly the extent to which others respecting and showing interest in their culture or religion impacted their sense of safety, and how supporting new arrivals helped their participation and agency (Sobitan 2022).

When considering young people from marginalised or disadvantaged groups, it is important to remember that they may have to expend different levels of 'emotional labour' (McGillicuddy 2021) to achieve school belonging. They may also face additional 'binds' as they try to negotiate their learner identities (Brown 2014). For instance, a socio-economically disadvantaged student who experiences multiple transitions due to repeated house moves may prioritise social connection with peers to try to achieve a sense of belonging and connectedness on arrival in a new school. The location of their home, or their ability to afford, or not, particular leisure pursuits, may influence the peer group they are able to access for friendships.

Sustaining belonging with this peer group may be a greater priority to them, and dominate their emotional effort, over efforts to comply with school expectations and demands.

Of particular importance in taking a truly intersectional perspective when researching belonging is looking at the 'multiplicative rather than additive influences of different social location variables,' (Philip et al 2022). A good example of this is McGillicuddy's case studies of minority ethnic young people's negotiation of academic identities (2021). Drawing on two case studies, this study highlights the ways that ethnic minority pupils placed in low ability groupings had to undertake additional emotional labour to belong as they dealt with ability-related and race-related bullying and experienced conflicting challenges, which came with cost either to their 'heritage culture' or to their 'majority culture' identities, and required constant negotiation. This additional impact on their status made the students feel they are 'the lowest' of their peer group.

Students' views of belonging.

Student voice is often missing in research into belonging in adolescence (Whiting, 2021). Given the complex, multi-layered nature of school belonging, insights into diverse young people's views about the enablers and barriers to school belonging will be valuable for informing school actions and policy. Furthermore, Russel (2022) describes belonging as "a process through which students construct their identity in relation to others within the school and social context" (Russell 2022, p.65). Given the role played by agency in identity building, the subjective nature of the experience of belonging or not belonging at school, and the unique impacts of different social identities, understanding students' own conceptualisations, motivations and priorities is key when working to build school belonging.

School belonging doesn't mean the same thing to all young people. Recent research exploring students' views suggest a tension between normative approaches to belonging – fitting in and being similar to others, and approaches seeking recognition and acceptance of an 'authentic' identity. (Fernandez et al 2023, Whiting 2021). A study of junior high school students (Whiting 2021) suggests that students 'perform' and manage their emotions in order to fit in while simultaneously trying to be 'authentic.' Students gave advice that, in order to belong, you should just 'be yourself' (p.196), implying the importance of individual uniqueness. However, they also advised that it was important to 'smile,' 'be friendly,' 'be nice' and 'not be weird.' This tension between belonging as fitting in and belonging and being accepted for who you are reveal the 'emotional management' work that students have to undertake to be seen to 'conform' to peers' expectations. It is easy to see how this may require additional labour for certain groups of students, including perhaps for neurodivergent young people or those from different cultural backgrounds, adding to the social behaviour norms they are required to adhere to by teachers and staff.

These two different views of belonging (social and individual identity) are reflected in a study of higher Education students' definitions of belonging. On the one hand, belonging was seen to be about being 'authentic' or true to self (as individuals), while on the other it was perceived to be about having similar experiences and perspectives to those of fellow students (Fernandez et al 2023). There appeared to be patterns in relation to the groups of students who prioritised the different aspects of belonging. For instance, in the latter study, gender identity and socio-economic status were seen to play a role in their views. Students of higher socio-economic status (SES) were seen to prioritise individual authenticity, whereas those of lower SESspoke more about similarity with others and seemed to have a strong sense of a 'prototype' of a typical student that it was important to emulate. In this regard, having the resources to do the things other students do, and being viewed by others as being a 'valid student' were important to them. This differed when students were of low SES backgrounds had other aspects of their identity, such as differing gender identities or sexualities, which may not be accepted in their family context; for these students the importance of authentic social identity was a more important part of their view of belonging. In the former study at the Junior High school, students who spoke English as an additional language (EAL) or from minority religious affiliations were more likely to suggest the importance of authenticity. Females were more likely than males to suggest the need for niceness dispositions in order to belong (Whiting 2021). This may be explained by the fact that these students' social identities in terms of their sexuality, faith or culture may be defined by their minority status in relation to other social majority sexualities, faiths or cultures. Therefore, for them authenticity referred less to their individual characteristics, skills or experiences and more so to their confidence to assume or 'wear' these social identity attributes in contexts where they were identifiable as a minority.

The language students use can be revealing and illuminate their perceptions. In another study where students photographed and discussed places where they do and don't belong, they themselves did not use the terms 'fitting in' or 'belonging' but rather talked about places where they felt 'safe' and 'unsafe' (Walls and Lousi 2023). Staff or people with whom they felt connected were described as 'nice', while places were described as 'calm' or 'comfortable.' This perhaps reflects the ease experienced in those places, where there is less emotional labour expended to negotiate interactions and deal with relational challenges. The buildings that students highlighted were those where 'belonging is non-contingent' particularly where skill level or ability did not dictate who could belong there – such as the gym.

Finally, a research project exploring the views of 84 young people with a range of special educational needs and disabilities explored their priorities in terms of supporting their sense of belonging in school. Of the four key themes developed from the findings, relationships emerged as the most significant for the students. The second most significant category was extracurricular activities, with school environment and teaching and learning coming next. While the significance of relationships for young people perhaps comes as no surprise, the fact that extracurricular activities are the second priority is more surprising and reflects perhaps an area neglected by the body of research into school belonging. Activities included being part of sports and clubs, getting included on school trips and opportunities to play.

School actions to support belonging

There are few research studies focusing specifically on the impact of interventions on school belonging (Allen 2022). This section gives an overview of the findings from studies that do explore the impact of school-based interventions.

Research to date underscores that interventions that successfully fostered students' sense of school belonging

promoted positive peer and student-staff interactions (Allen 2022). In particular, creating a school climate where students and staff feel valued and respected improves school identification among young people (Klik et al 2023). Specific school actions identified include: ensuring every student feels close to at least one supportive adult in the school (Allen and Kern 2017); reframing adult supervision outside of lessons as being about guaranteeing belonging, rather than about matters of physical safety and control; noticing students who may be quietly struggling, not just those who are being loud (Walls and Louis 2023) and having fair disciplinary policies that are collectively agreed on (Allen and Kern 2017). Teachers proactively demonstrating their belief in, and care for students, for instance through explicitly communicating that they see each student as capable of reaching high standards during academic feedback, positively impacts students' revisions of their work. The effect was more marked for black adolescents than for their white peers, suggesting this may be key to countering the ways in which systemic disadvantage compounds belonging vulnerabilities for marginalised groups (Gray, Hope and Byrd 2020).

Interventions which go beyond a focus on student-staff interactions to actively support, influence and account for the importance of peer relationships can also support school belonging (Koirikivi 2015). Pedagogical interventions that actively teach children dialogue and argumentation skills have been shown to positively impact the school climate at classroom level by fostering empathy, tolerance and inclusiveness (Maine and Vrikki 2021). The intercultural understanding fostered by the DIALLs approach (Dialogue and Argumentation for Cultural Literacy Learning in Schools) supports young people's connections with each other while also promoting learning through reflection.

Another key area of school action emerging from the literature is around disciplinary approaches. Riley (2022b) notes that "in schools where adults and young people experience a strong sense of belonging, tough sanction-based behaviour policies do not feature. The red card of exclusion is rare, and interventions are characterised by relational approaches that value individuals. Staff and students report that their voices are heard and that they enjoy school life." Collaboration with students to explore notions of place and belonging has been shown to a "powerful tool for positive school transformation" (Riley 2019). As sense of school belonging predicts whether young adults will be NEET (Philip et al 2022), ongoing monitoring, enquiry and investigation of this with students may be an important action for schools to develop.

School actions supporting identity building (Riley 2022a) and signalling welcome and acceptance have been shown to positively impact school belonging for certain social groups. School displays in public areas and welcome halls can signal welcome and acceptance for immigrant students and support their sense of connection (Brezicha and Miranda 2022). Similarly, displays in learning areas can counter gender stereotypes and signal welcome and inclusion to females in domains which may be stereotypically viewed as male areas of interest (Cheryan 2009). Professional development for educators to counter cisnormative practices has been recommended to support belonging for Trans-gender diverse students in schools (Ullman 2022)

Educational Psychologists have an important role to play in shaping interventions to support the specific belonging needs of refugee students which are unlikely to be adequately understood and reflected (Sobitan 2022). Integrating wider services, including health, social care and mental health, on school grounds in an extended school hubs model, is also pinpointed as impactful in meeting needs and supporting school belonging for a diverse cohort (Brown, Kelly and Phillips 2020)

Lastly, intervention approaches which look beyond the school to families and communities are identified as effective in supporting school belonging (Riley 2022a). Enlisting the help of parents; effective home-school communication and supporting parents to navigate their relationships with their children are specific actions shown to be impactful (Allen et al 2018).

These insights into effective school actions for school belonging and the factors impacting school belonging were used to shape the indicators used in our surveys for young people, educators and parents. These surveys and focus group discussions probed their perceptions of which of these factors and actions are most important to supporting young people's sense of school belonging.

Safety

The concept of safety is a complex one with various inter-related components. Following an interdisciplinary review with experts working across multiple public sector services, safety has been defined as the 'state in which hazards and conditions leading to physical, psychological or material harm are controlled in order to preserve the health and well-being of individuals and the community' (Maurice et al. 2001, p239). As can be observed in this definition, the perception or 'feeling' of being safe is just as important for individuals as the 'actual' threat of danger or harm. For school students this perceptual component is important, because as Mayer and Furlong (2010) have argued, schools are essentially safe places for the vast majority of children. However, while the actual incidence of violence or bullying maybe be low and/or affect a very small number of students, the felt perception that school is not a safe space may be experienced by a much wider range of students, even among those who hadn't personally experienced violence or bullying (Cemalcilar 2010). In other words, the idea of school safety is essentially a social construction that is open to subjective experience and shaped by children's social characteristics, cultural experiences and the school context (Kutsyuruba, B., Klinger, D.A. and Hussain 2015). School students themselves have identified safety as a component of belonging (El Zaatari, & Ibrahim 2021). However, we disaggregate it here, as rather a foundation necessary for a sense of belonging. Following Maslow's (1987) hierarchy of needs, safety and security operate as a basic needs platform in order that higher order psychological needs such as belonging and connection can build upon them. We identify between three distinct types of safety that are relevant to children's experiences at school; physical safety, emotional safety, and social safety.

Physical safety

Physical safety refers to a sense of security in the absence of bodily harm or injury to self or others. Mayer and Furlong (2010) see the threats to physical safety in school to operate on a spectrum of five dimensions of gravitas; 1. Bullying Intimidation and Incivility, 2. Theft, 3. Personal Attack, 4. Serious Violent Crime, 5 Shootings. The incidence of threat can be seen to

decrease as the scale increases, according to the severity of the threat. So for example, while shooting and serious violent crime are highly infrequent (especially in the UK where firearms are strictly controlled) physical safety threats at the lower end of the spectrum, such as bullying, are the most frequently occurring. Indeed, the authors draw upon research to show that '32% of secondary students reported being bullied at or around school (Dinkes et al., 2009) with the harmful effects of bullying affecting students' psychological well-being due to constant low-level aggression in schools and an overall atmosphere of incivility. It is also important to consider that students' sense of physical safety is not just affected by the in-school climate but also there is a neighbourhood influence in that levels of crime or violence within the community, for example in the area surrounding a school, can also have a strong bearing on the perception of physical safety (Patel et al 2022). In the case of London this may be particularly, important with regards to gang culture for example.

Emotional safety

Emotional safety refers to the perception of being accepted for who you truly are and what you feel and need. This has two dimensions, firstly an identity dimension in terms of feeling accepted for the individual aspects of identity construction, such as abilities, aptitudes, needs and personal characteristics. A key issue in the educational literature is where students of lower achievement levels perceive themselves to be peripheral or hold undervalued learner identities in the learning community. McGillicuddy, (2021),- for example,- identifies the perceptions that lower achieving students held of feeling they were not respected due to their achievement levels; '"because when you are in the lowest (achievement grouping) everyone slags you". This illustrates the close connection between emotional safety as a foundation for belonging through the mediator of characteristics that accordingly have been associated with holding a positive self identity including; Self efficacy, self esteem, self-concept (Maine &Vrikki 2021), optimism and hope (Sulimani-Aidan, & Melkman 2022). The other dimension of emotional safety, and the one more commonly understood by educators refers to children's mental health and wellbeing. In this sense a child's emotional safety can refer both to the extent to which the child feels that their mental health needs are recognised in school (how safe it is to express them) as well as role of the school in responding to those needs. Research has also outlined the impacts for when a school is perceived by students to be an emotionally unsafe environment. This includes stress, lower attendance at school, and low engagement in learning (Sheane and Mander 2020).

Social safety

Social safety refers to respect for others and 'otherness' and the absence of harassment, discrimination or intimidation. From an identity perspective social identity refers to the aspect of self that we share in membership with others (Turner and Tajfel 1987) for example due to our social class, ethnic or religious group, gender and sexual identities. A lack of social safety can therefore refer to the impact of discrimination whereby students feel that the social aspects of their identity are not recognised or valued in school (Sobitan 2022). On the other hand, social safety also can refer to the security that we have in our social network or friendship group, whereby a lack of social bonds can similarly impinge on students' sense of social safety (Patel et al. 2022; Ben-Arieh et al. 2009).

School actions to strengthen safety

In terms of school actions to promote physical safety there are two key dimensions that schools can consider: the permeability of the school building and the impact of safety measures on students. Firstly, it is important to address the perceived permeability of the school building to ensure that unwelcome or threatening individuals are prevented from entering (Ben-Arieh et al., 2009). However, measures to protect students from threats from outsiders must be balanced against the impact of visible safety measures on students' perceptions on the perceived level of threat. So, for example, physical safety measures such as metal detectors, CCTV cameras or secure doorways have been identified as symbols of exclusion, whereby the presence of such measures acts as constant reminder of the presence of danger. Brezicha and Miranda (2022) warn of the securitized school where students feel 'monitored but unsafe, underrepresented and unwelcome'.

In terms of emotional safety research points to the importance of a school climate where students' sense of belonging to the school community is not based on performative or evaluative measures of worth (Osterman 2000), but rather one which promotes a supportive learning environment that fosters children's identity development (Verhoeven et al. 2019). An emotionally safe school climate has also been identified as one which allows children to make mistakes and take risks in learning without feeling they may become a failure (Hirsh et al. 2004).

Positive relationships between staff and students have been identified as a critically important school action that leads to both emotional and social safety. Shean and Mander (2020) have provided guidance on what constitutes positive relationships between staff and students including where students feel they are valued and treated with respect; and where teachers outline clear boundaries and support for students to realise their potential in the broadest way; academically, socially and personally. Emotionally safe environments are related to more positive identity development, better learning experiences and greater feelings of worth. Advancing our understanding on the importance of positive student teacher relationships, Shiri Lavy, et al. (2020) have identified the importance of students feeling cared for by their teachers, which subsequently was found to lead to a sense of belonging through building students' self-esteem.

A number of researchers have discussed the importance of schools' actions to build and affirm students' pride in their social and cultural identities. Montaro et al. (2020) have discussed how adolescents from minority ethnic backgrounds (excluding white minorities) generate a strong sense of social safety in terms of their connectedness to their school, while (Russell 2022) showed that immigrant and newcomer students often associated belonging with feeling safe and comfortable, but also can be linked to experiences of exclusion and discrimination in and out of school. A further study highlighted how refugee children felt safe when others respected and showed interest in their culture/religion (Sobitan 2022).

Place-based dimension to safety

Furthermore, the perception of school safety has been identified as different for school staff in comparison with school students. While teachers are more likely to focus on safety in the classroom, children have been found to be more sensitive to the perceived safety of the whole school environment (Aldridge and McChesney 2018). It has been identified that children have a more flexible and contextual understanding of safe space to that of adults, whereby dimensions of physical and emotional safety may differ from that of social safety. McDonald (2023) for example, highlights that elements of emotional safety identified by children included having access to a quiet and secluded space to go to enable self-regulation, privacy, solitude and respite. The material component of these space was sought to be sheltered, cosy and confined. In conclusion, such spaces served the function of creating a buffer between the child in emotional distress and the outside world. In contrast socially safe spaces, by definition, refer to those spaces that children share with their peers in which they participate with others. In terms of social safety, therefore, safe space has been identified as a space in which students feel that can speak freely, without fear of negative repercussions from peers or teachers (Flesner and Von der Lippe 2019). In this sense safety refers to a school culture defined by openness to different perspectives, structured by rules which are fair and to which all agree. In the latter case research has also highlighted the ways in which students' sense of safety may be contextual to certain parts of the school where they feel socially safe, and others in which they do not. For example, Kuttner (2023) identifies that a student in the process of identifying as queer may feel alienated in most spaces in their school but find belonging in an LGBTQIA+ student group that the school supports.

Appendix 5:

Student survey response numbers by ethnic group and sub-group

Appendix 5	Primary		Secondary	
	N	%	N	%
White				
British	177	58.0	654	72.9
Gypsy, Roma, Traveller	8	2.6	13	1.4
Irish	18	5.9	43	4.8
Other	102	33.5	187	20.9
Total	**305**	**100**	**897**	**100**
Asian or Asian British				
Bangladeshi	124	27.5	57	13.0
Chinese	16	3.5	47	10.7
Indian	126	27.9	150	34.2
Pakistani	85	18.8	88	20.0
Others	100	22.3	97	22.1
Total	**451**	**100**	**439**	**100**
Black or Black British				
African	116	63.0	149	66.5
Caribbean	46	25.0	60	26.8
Other	22	12.0	15	6.7
Total	**184**	**100**	**224**	**100**
Mixed Heritage				
White and Asian	20	18.5	44	20.8
White and Black African	22	20.4	42	19.8
White and Black Caribbean	21	19.4	59	27.8
Other	45	41.7	67	31.6
Total	**108**	**100**	**212**	**100**
Other Ethnic Groups				
Arab	33	32.4	41	30.6
Other	69	67.6	93	69.4
Total	**102**	**100**	**134**	**100**
Prefer not to say				
Total	**227**	**100**	**112**	**100**

Appendix 6:
Research methodology

Sample

Our sample was selected to include the voices of young people from each of London's 32 boroughs and include a mix of primary (Years 5 and 6), secondary (Years 9, 10 and 11) and alternative provisions (same age ranges). We used Local Authority and Inclusion network contacts to identify schools to approach. To ensure that every borough was represented and a good range of setting types were included, we made follow on approaches to schools selected according to a range of factors, including the diversity of their intake. Parents and carers were invited to complete a survey via networks of parent carer champions across London.

For student focus groups, we prioritised schools and alternative provisions in boroughs with high levels of deprivation and diversity. We organised a mixture of single school, and cross-borough student focus groups, offering both in-person and online discussions. The merit of in-person focus groups was the ability to more easily establish a rapport with the young people. The merits of online sessions were that they enabled us to reach a wider range and number of young people and that some schools found this more manageable. Similarly, single setting focus groups allowed in-depth discussion of particular issues, while cross-borough sessions enabled comparison between experiences in different settings.

A similar approach was taken with educators, with both interview sessions and cross-settings focus groups on offer. The latter enabled comparisons across different types of provisions and with different age ranges, while the interviews offered more flexibility for busy school leaders and more in-depth discussion of particular initiatives and issues.

The sample therefore represents responses from schools who prioritise inclusion and value school belonging, in so far as they made time to enable their students and staff to participate and contribute.

Survey design

A review of the literature (see Appendix 4) allowed us to elicit the key factors informing school belonging, safety and actions to support these. These insights were integrated into the development of four anonymous online surveys: a secondary-aged student survey, a primary-aged students survey, an educator survey and a parent/carer survey. The young person survey tools were then shared with the VRU's YPAG team who supported us in tailoring them to ensure accessibility and inclusivity for young people from a wide range of backgrounds and circumstances.

The student surveys included images alongside each question to represent key concepts to support understanding and accessibility. Students were asked to individually rate the importance of factors understood to support belonging and safety; to rank the five most important factors and rate their own sense of school belonging. Finally, they were invited to share information about those different aspects of their identities that the literature suggests may impact their experiences of school belonging: ethnicity, gender, sexuality, postcode of the area where they live and whether they consider themselves to have a disability/SEND, be neurodivergent, care-experienced, a young carer, a refugee, an asylum-seeker or have English as an Additional language.

This was complemented by anonymised pupil premium and Free School Meal data provided by the school and linked to the anonymous survey response for each young person via a unique identifier code which enabled linking of the two data points.

Quantitative analysis

A descriptive analysis of the survey data was carried out. For binary response questions this involved presenting the proportion of respondents indicating different responses, whilst the responses to Likert questions were analysed by calculating mean score and response ranking. Incomplete responses, for instance, those where individuals chose not to answer the question on for instance ethnicity or gender, were not excluded. The design of the questionnaire ensured that essential questions were compulsory for students, but they were given autonomy to decide how much information to disclose about their personal characteristics.

Given that the literature suggests that belonging and inclusion is differentially experienced according to race, ethnicity, gender, socio-economic status, and sexuality, it was crucial that we also conducted a differentiated analysis of our data. In collecting data on race, gender and sexuality, we used the categories drawn upon by the Office for National Statistics (ONS). In terms of race/ethnicity, we used broader level categories owing to smaller sample sizes in lower-level category groupings.

To take into account socio-economic status, we drew on the Pupil Premium / Free School Meals data as well as information on respondents' postcode, to provide a proxy measure of socio-economic status. Whilst socio-economic status is a more complex concept that encompasses social, cultural and economic factors, the proxy measures we applied are routinely used as proxy measures. In terms of postcode, we matched respondents' postcode to ONS data on the Index of Multiple Deprivation, which provided information to proxy socio-economic status according to the relative deprivation levels of where a respondent lives.

The sample sizes for some groups are relatively small meaning that conclusions cannot be assumed to be generalisable. The numbers of respondents within each category is included and conclusions are not drawn for groups with particularly low numbers.

Qualitative analysis

Qualitative data was initially gathered via student, educator and parent/carer surveys, as each contained an open comment box inviting respondents to share the views and experiences of school belonging and safety that they felt were important. These comments and initial analyses of students' quantitative responses on the top 5 factors supporting school belonging and safety, informed the collection of more in-depth qualitative data during student focus groups.

Student focus groups (both in-person and online) started by offering participants a range of images to choose from to represent and assist them to explain their understandings of school belonging and safety. This approach helped ensure that the discussion was framed by students' personal views and experiences while also offering them support to consider a range of ideas to verbalise their viewpoints. Later in the discussion, the top 5 factors from the student surveys were shared with the group to probe what they felt might be the reasons underpinning these responses. This generated debate, enabled inclusion of alternative viewpoints and deepened our insights into students' perspectives.

Educator interviews and focus groups were an opportunity for deeper exploration of both the key barriers to belonging and of the school actions to facilitate students' sense of school belonging and safety. Group discussions encouraged comparison across setting types, exploring common ground and different experiences, while interviews enabled in-depth discussion of school actions and barriers faced by particular groups, cohorts and settings.

Thematic analysis of our qualitative data set involved the research team coding transcripts of all focus groups and interviews. Initial coding by individual survey factors (belonging/safety/barriers/school actions) allowed insights into which factors were most frequently discussed to be significant. A second round of coding identified additional codes beyond the original survey categories and aided the identification of mechanisms that linked and explained them. Looking across the entire qualitative data set, students', educators' and parents/carers' views were considered within each code, before identifying themes and apparent links between them.

The last step in the analysis involved us looking at 'what' participants told us was important through the quantitative data and 'why' it was important according to the qualitative data. This report presents both sets of insights.

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