

Project 349

May 2026

# Building Community: An Appreciative Inquiry Focused Research Study at Greystone Heights School

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This research was partially funded through a grant from the McDowell Foundation. However, the points of view and opinions expressed in project documents are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Foundation.

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# Thematic Analysis of Paired Teacher Interviews on Belonging at Greystone Heights School: Qualitative Findings

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## Abstract

Belonging is a powerful lever for student engagement, well-being, and community, yet schools often lack practical, context-specific guidance. This single-site qualitative case study, informed by Appreciative Inquiry, investigates how educators define belonging, why it matters, and which practices best build and sustain it. This interview occurred after the teachers had spent the school collaborating and completing two appreciative inquiry cycles. Seven teacher-researchers from Greystone Heights School participated in paired, semi-structured interviews conducted on Zoom (total duration  $\approx$  96 minutes). Audio was transcribed and thematically analyzed, with themes organized by guiding questions. Findings indicate that belonging is built through reciprocal daily interactions; it elevates motivation, engagement, and ownership; it underpins citizenship and participation; it requires emotional safety and comfort; and it grows through shared school–community experiences. Design-oriented themes highlight student-led and inclusive initiatives, cross-class/grade relationships, supportive and flexible staff culture, and celebration/visibility during the school day. Sustained practices include cross-class collaboration and student swapping, everyday recognition and rituals, embedding belonging into routine instruction, keeping approaches flexible and simple, and expanding leadership/mentoring roles. Practically, schools can treat belonging as everyday work by embedding micro-interactions, student agency, and public recognition into existing routines, supported by leader encouragement and collegial collaboration. Limitations include the small, single-site sample and reliance on self-report; findings are context-bound rather than statistically generalizable.

## Keywords:

school belonging; student engagement; school culture; appreciative inquiry; practitioner inquiry; qualitative case study; thematic

# Introduction

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Cultivating belonging in school settings is linked to participation, risk-taking, well-being, and community stewardship. Yet educators often ask how to translate the idea of belonging into concrete, sustainable routines. This study addresses that problem through an in-depth look at one school's teacher-generated perspectives and practices.

## Purpose

To identify how educators at a single school define belonging, why it matters for students and staff, and which actions can be implemented and sustained.

## Research Questions:

1. Definition: What is belonging in the context of a school, and why does it matter?
2. Design: What will our team do to implement and maximize the effect of the identified factors?
3. Destiny: Which actions and practices are worth continuing (recommendations for our future and others)?

# Conceptual and Methodological Frame

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This study is informed by Appreciative Inquiry, a strengths-based orientation that privileges what works and how to amplify it. Appreciative Inquiry guided the structuring of questions and the organization of findings (Definition, Design, Destiny). A practical, practitioner-inquiry stance positions educators as knowledge producers, emphasizing transferably specific descriptions over statistical generalization.

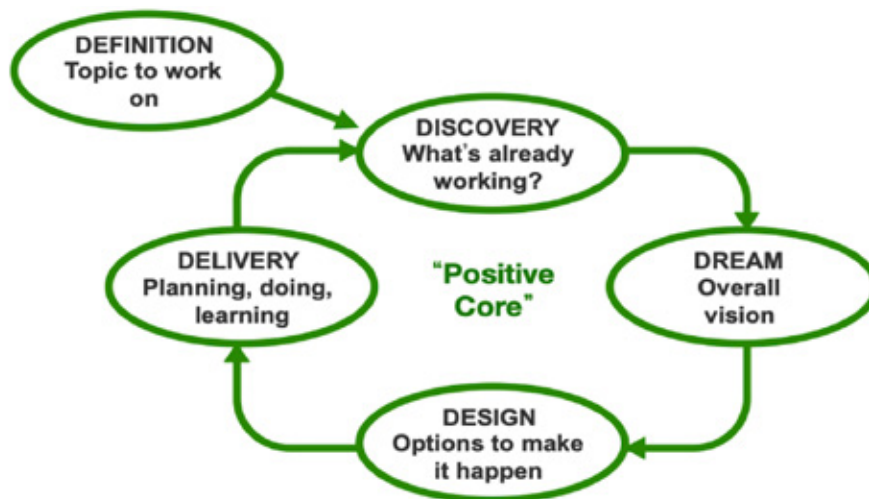
# Method

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## Design and Approach

Qualitative, exploratory single-site case study informed by Appreciative Inquiry.

Core Appreciative Research Question: What factors contribute to a sense of belonging among students and staff at Greystone Heights School?



Appreciative Inquiry 4-D Cycle - David Cooperrider

### Appreciative Inquiry Process and Guiding Questions:

#### Stage 0: Definition

- What is belonging in the context of a school? Why does creating a sense of belonging matter?

#### Stage 1: Discover

- What factors contribute to a sense of belonging among students and staff at Greystone Heights School?

### **Stage 2: Dream**

- What would Greystone Heights look like if all staff and students felt a strong sense of belonging?

### **Stage 3: Design**

- What will our team do to implement and maximize the effect of the discovered factors? (Results of Stage 1 and 2 inquiry.)

### **Stage 4: Destiny**

- Which actions and practices are worth continuing? (Recommendations for our future and others.)

## **Setting and Participants**

The study took place at Greystone Heights School. Seven teacher-researchers participated.

Greystone Heights' context is distinctive: it hosts the S.A.G.E. (Saskatoon Academically Gifted Education) program, serves many refugee and immigrant families, and sits in a largely middle-class neighbourhood adjacent to areas of lower-income housing. Historically, this diversity has sometimes produced segmentation across social and cultural groups. The project directly addressed these challenges by centring everyday practices that build connection.

## **Data Collection**

Data collection included teacher interviews, focus groups, and evidence-collection meetings; artifacts included journals, field notes, quotes, stories, photos, and other materials. Following implementation, the team conducted semi-structured teacher interviews (facilitated by university graduate students). To enhance analytic rigour and create distance from the practitioner-researchers, interview coding was completed by researchers outside the team. This end-of-project analysis surfaced themes and insights that complemented and, at times, extended findings from earlier cycles.

The study was conducted on school premises with six–12 staff participants (teachers and administrators). No students participated directly. Data were gathered through focus groups, evidence-collection meetings, and semi-structured teacher interviews. The methodology followed the AI 5-D cycle (Define, Discover, Dream, Design, Destiny) over two research cycles. Preparation occurred in May 2024; the project ran from August 2024 to April 2025 and concluded in June 2025.

## **Data Analysis**

We used thematic analysis. Coding proceeded deductively from the guiding questions (top-level categories) and inductively to develop sub-themes. Themes were iteratively refined and evidenced with verbatim quotations. Findings are reported as thematic responses to each guiding question.

# Timeline of Research

## May 2024

The group of teachers met to plan out a tentative schedule for the research. Sharing with the school staff, we started planning the project and making arrangements for the beginning of Cycle One, set to start in August 2024.

## August 2024

The team met for a full day before the school year started to Discover, Dream, and Design our project. With the support of a facilitator, a shared definition of belonging was created, as well as an examination of what was currently being done to support belonging within our school community. We took the time to Dream of what we wanted our school to look like and designed some possible effort of how we will achieve this. Following the creation of a shared definition of belonging, each teacher identified a personal action item to explore further in their classroom practice.

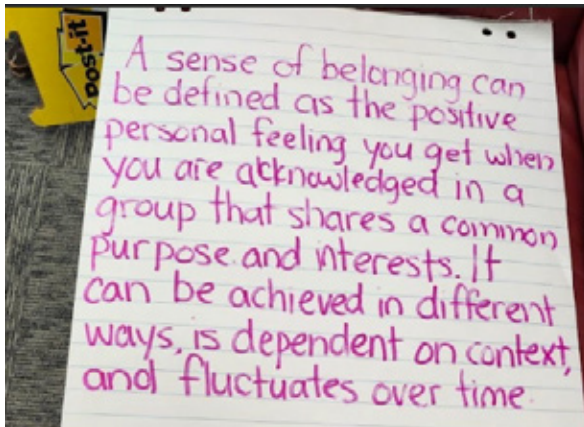


Photo 1: Group Definition of Belonging created August 2024.

## Fall 2024

Two after-school meetings were held for participating teachers during the fall. During these meetings, teachers shared what they had been doing to support the sense of belonging. The meetings lasted 30-45 minutes and allowed for collaboration and feedback within the group.

1. **Empowering students** and giving them ownership over their learning, classroom environment, and leadership roles inside and outside the classroom.
2. **Acknowledging and validating** all students, not just the most confident or outgoing ones. Making sure everyone feels seen and heard is key to belonging.
3. **Expanding connections** beyond the individual classroom, through cross-classroom interactions, school-wide activities, and involving the broader school community. This helps foster a sense of belonging to the whole school.
4. **Providing opportunities for students to pursue their passions** and interests, whether academic or extracurricular. This allows them to feel valued for who they are.

The first meeting was held in October, and the big ideas that emerged were our four pillars of belonging.

The second after-school artifact collection happened in November, and our definition and pillars were re-examined to ensure they still felt accurate. Teachers each shared an example of something they had been working on and how it connected to the factors.

Over the course of the fall, teachers met in partners for a half-day to allow time to plan events and opportunities that promote belonging within the classroom and school. There were interclass projects, such as intentional care partners, and school-wide projects that were planned.

### **January 2025**

The group of seven met again in January for a full day to examine what had been impactful and identify what they wanted the school community to look like going forward for the second cycle. In the morning of that day, all school staff who were interested were invited to join as we examined the best of what had been done. During this session, the group also looked for gaps and issues in what had been done. The group identified that there were lots of class-to-class collaboration activities, but a focus was needed on incorporating EAL students, culture, and onboarding more staff within the school.

### **Spring 2025**

Staff met again with partners for a half-day to plan and reflect on what had been done to build belonging within the school and what other opportunities they wanted to pursue.

In April, teachers connected after school to examine where they were at and what supports were needed to ensure completion of the project. Each teacher was asked to reflect on a minimum of three tasks they had worked on to add to the end report. In May, the teachers met again with partners for an exit interview. This allowed them to reflect on the process throughout the year and share their experience.

This year-long inquiry into belonging fostered a stronger sense of community among both staff and students. By identifying key pillars, reflecting on actions, and adapting based on evidence, the team laid the groundwork for sustainable cultural growth within the school. The process highlighted the importance of intentional, inclusive practice and left participants with a renewed commitment to building a school where all students feel seen, heard, and valued.

## **Researcher Positionality**

As insider teacher-researchers, authors bring situated knowledge of the school's culture and practices. This position affords depth and relevance while also requiring reflexivity about assumptions, power, and role duality.

# Overview of Results

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Findings are organized by guiding question.

## Definition—What belonging is/why it matters

1. Reciprocal daily interactions build belonging.
2. Belonging increases motivation, engagement, and ownership (for students) and energy (for staff).
3. Belonging underpins citizenship and participation in classroom, school, and neighbourhood.
4. Belonging entails emotional safety and comfort, honouring diverse needs and identities.
5. Shared school–community experiences create identity anchors and connection.

## Design—How to implement

- Student-led, inclusive initiatives (e.g., authentic recognition; interest-based clubs).
- Cross-class/grade relationships (care partners, mentorship).
- Supportive, flexible staff culture (leader encouragement; collegial check-ins).
- Celebration and visibility during the school day (announcements, shout-outs, rituals).

## Destiny—What to sustain

- Cross-class collaboration and student swapping to broaden trusted networks.
- Ongoing recognition and everyday rituals (greetings, small wins).
- Embedding belonging into everyday instruction and routines.
- Flexible, simple approaches that start small and adapt.
- Leadership and mentoring roles that cultivate purpose and legacy.

# Summary

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The participants included seven teacher-researchers (n=7) from Greystone Heights School. Their goal was to explore strategies for building a strong sense of belonging and community within the school. The interview lasted one hour and 36 minutes and was conducted in pairs. Data was collected through Zoom, then transcribed, coded, and analyzed to identify key themes based on the guiding research questions. The interview questions were carefully designed to align with and respond to these guiding questions. The findings are organized by theme, with each theme presented as a response to a specific guiding question.

## Research Findings

**GUIDING QUESTION (DEFINITION):** What is belonging in the context of a school? Why does creating a sense of belonging matter?

### Belonging Is Built Through Reciprocal Relationships and Daily Interactions

One of the strongest themes that emerged from the interviews was the role of genuine, consistent interpersonal connections in building a sense of belonging. Participants shared that when students feel recognized and valued through everyday gestures and reciprocal interactions, it signals to them that they are an integral part of the school community. One participant described how a daily ritual evolved into a meaningful relationship:

*It's the little thing. For example, I say good morning to every student. Now I have a student who yells, "Good morning!" to me from a block away every morning when he's coming to school. He says, "I beat you to it!" But now we've connected. He feels like he belongs to school, and he has a purpose—because he's got to yell, "Good morning" from a block away. (Interview, p.1.)*

Another participant highlighted how reciprocal communication is a marker of relationship-building that deepens belonging:

*Once kids are reciprocating that relationship—so it's not just a one-sided thing. Now they feel that connection too. They're coming to me first, telling me things without me having to ask about their weekends and stuff. They just come excitedly to share things—or whatever's going on, right? That's how you know it's a connection." (Interview, p.1.)*

A third participant gave an example of how moments of connection across groups can foster collective joy and engagement that reinforces a shared sense of belonging:

*When I got home from work yesterday, I said to my husband, "I had so much fun at work today!" Because I was interacting with different groups of staff and students throughout the day ... I was just so engaged in what was happening with staff, students, and a member of our community that it made yesterday an awesome day. (Interview, p.2.)*

This theme shows that small, daily moments of genuine interaction build the emotional fabric of school life. When relationships move from one-sided to reciprocal, they create a foundation for deep connection. These moments affirm identity, invite joy, and remind students and staff that they are truly seen and valued.

### **Belonging Enhances Motivation, Engagement, and Ownership**

Another dominant theme was the link between belonging and motivation. A participant explained how belonging transforms the student experience from passive participation to active ownership:

*Students see school as just a place they have to come to ... But when they have a sense of belonging, when they feel connected to everybody, it becomes a place they want to come to. They feel like they have ownership, like they have a say in how things happen. (Interview, p.3.)*

A second participant affirmed that ownership and participation are core indicators of belonging:

*If they feel like they belong, then they're a part of it, rather than just having things happen to them. They're involved in what's happening to them—if that makes sense. (Interview, p. 3.)*

Another participant concurred and emphasized that belonging is not only about student engagement but also drives staff energy and commitment:

*If I can create more belongings, I'm going to enjoy work more. And that translates to kids, too. I feel like if kids feel like this is their place, they'll be more likely to show up. And when they're here, they'll be more willing to take risks, because they know they have people who will support them. (Interview, p. 3.)*

This theme illustrates how belonging acts as a catalyst for motivation. When students feel ownership over their experiences, they engage more actively in school life. The sense of connection empowers both students and staff to contribute, take initiative, and invest more meaningfully in their shared environment.

### **Belonging is the Foundation for Citizenship and Community Building**

Participants also shared that fostering belonging is essential to shaping not only good students but responsible citizens. One participant articulated the civic value of belonging:

*One of the purposes of school is obviously to teach content. But another big reason we have school is to build community—to build good citizens. And to become a good citizen, you have to feel like you belong to whatever group you’re trying to be a citizen of. (Interview, p. 3.)*

Another participant linked this idea to the broader community:

*... it creates a sense of belonging. You feel more willing to participate and do things for the good of the community whether it’s your classroom community, the school community, or our great neighborhood. (Interview, p. 3.)*

A third participant added that a shared sense of belonging creates buy-in, which in turn sustains school life:

*You get stronger buy-ins for the activities, events, and the learning you want to do with the kids and staff when they feel like this is a place they want to be. If they feel like they’re part of the community, they’ll be more likely to participate. (Interview, p. 3.)*

This theme reveals that belonging is essential not only for personal connection but also for creating a culture of shared responsibility. Schools become training grounds for citizenship where empathy, participation, and commitment to others are practiced daily. When people feel they belong, they invest in the collective good.

### **Belonging as Emotional Safety and Comfort**

Participants emphasized that belonging is not just about relationships; it’s also about emotional safety, comfort, and being oneself. One participant reflected on how emotional comfort is visible when students are relaxed and authentic:

*My little class, who I lovingly call the “misfits” because we’re all kind of odd ducks, were all dancing together in a group. They almost looked like siblings—goofy and carefree—and I thought, they feel comfortable. They feel like they belong here. (Interview, p.13.)*

A third participant highlighted the importance of recognizing diverse needs:

*We're always trying to find ways for a new student to feel like they have space here. A space where they feel seen, in ways that are unique to them. That helps them really connect and find their people (Interview, p. 14.)*

The above theme underscores that emotional safety is central to belonging. When people feel free to be themselves without judgment, they engage more deeply and confidently. Belonging grows when spaces honour each person's uniqueness and foster comfort through trust and acceptance.

### **Belonging Through Community Engagement and Shared Experiences**

Finally, participants spoke about how shared experiences that bridge school and community enhance belonging. One participant described a meaningful day of engagement:

*I couldn't believe it—I said, "I can't believe I got paid for today," because I had so much fun. It felt like a weekend day ... I was just so engaged in what was happening with staff, students, and a member of our community that it made yesterday an awesome day. (Interview, p. 2.)*

Another participant shared how school events reflected community familiarity:

*I cheered for my student, and then for the next student ... I knew their name; I've worked with them. Then the next student came, and I knew them—and their family ... That was a moment for me where I thought, "Yeah, I belong here." (Interview, p. 2.)*

A third participant emphasized the importance of connection for new students:

*We're always trying to find ways for a new student to feel like they have a space here ... That helps them really connect and find their people, you know? So, they can say, "I belong here." (Interview, p. 14.)*

This theme highlights that belonging is strengthened through shared experiences that build identity and connection. When students and staff engage together in moments that reflect who they are and where they come from, these experiences become lasting memories and emotional anchors of inclusion and joy.

**GUIDING QUESTION (DESIGN):** What will our team do to implement and maximize the effect of the discovered factors?

### Designing Inclusive and Student-Led Initiatives

A central idea that emerged in the design phase was the shift toward student-led and inclusive initiatives. Participants emphasized the need to empower students to shape their own experiences by leading clubs, projects, and recognition systems. One participant discussed the value of designing opportunities around students' interests:

*Now that I've gotten to know their interests and built those relationships, I could give them opportunities to create things they want to do at school. Maybe that's clubs or something like that ... I've got a bunch of kids obsessed with scootering right now. So maybe I could come up with a lunchtime scooter club. The kids could lead it, and that would give them opportunities to take on leadership too. (Interview, p. 4.)*

Building on that idea, another participant shared an initiative that made student recognition more meaningful and authentic:

*Something we came up with this year was the "Good-Hearted Griffin." Each week, two students are nominated. We give a shout-out over the intercom, take a picture, and post it on Edsby ... They're noticing good deeds. It's genuine, not token. (Interview, p. 4.)*

A third participant added that such recognition also uplifts students who might otherwise go unnoticed:

*They're not always the athletes or the ones in big clubs who get ribbons or awards. But they're still doing really important things for their classroom or school community ... That's how it started. Then Eric's class has GHS News ... we interview the students who receive the awards. (Interview, p. 4.)*

This theme shows that when students lead and see their diverse contributions celebrated, they feel respected and included. Student-driven activities nurture agencies and help build a culture where everyone can find their place, not just the outgoing or high-performing.

### Fostering Cross-Classroom and Inter-Grade Relationships

Another participant shared how building connections across grades and classrooms helps foster a wider sense of community. One participant recounted how a visit between grade levels created mentorship and long-lasting connection:

*My Grade 6 class visited Grade 8s ... It was so cool. My students got to see them present, and the older kids gave really good feedback ... When they go to high school and see those same students, they'll remember, "Hey, I saw your presentation!" ... The impact in connection and mentorship was huge. (Interview, p. 5.)*

Expanding on this, another participant explained how intentional pairing through a care partner program benefited both social and academic development:

*We paired students intentionally—new students with returning ones, extroverts with introverts ... Some started their day reading together, others helped each other with tough tasks ... It supports their English learning. It's just so awesome. (Interview, p. 5.)*

A third participant added that these relationships foster a sense of responsibility and belonging for older students as well:

*Care partners build community. The younger kids look forward to it. The older kids feel responsible. They feel needed. And feeling needed is a big part of being in a community. If you left, the community would feel your absence. (Interview, p. 5.)*

This theme demonstrates that inter-grade and cross-classroom activities help break down silos, allowing students to connect across differences. These connections create empathy, trust, and mutual support that reinforce a school-wide sense of belonging.

### **Creating a Supportive and Flexible Culture Among Staff**

Participants also highlighted the importance of supportive leadership and a collaborative staff culture. One participant shared how having an encouraging administrator empowered staff to innovate:

*I just feel really lucky to have Kristin as our administrator. She's not a "no" person—she's the kind who says, "How can we make this work?" ... With sleepovers, for example, she comes in the evening, reads bedtime stories, and drops off little care packages. We feel so supported in all this work. (Interview, p. 6.)*

In agreement, another participant described how supporting new staff was crucial for maintaining momentum:

*It's really important to me that new staff feel like they belong here. I go out of my way to welcome them, give them tips and heads-ups about how our community works. Because if they don't feel welcome or connected, they're less likely to want to participate—and our initiatives will fall flat. (Interview, p. 6.)*

A third participant reflected on how informal peer encouragement helps sustain the work:

*For me, it's not about holding each other accountable in a strict way, but more about checking in. Like, "Hey, have you done anything with your care partner lately?" ... "Those casual check-ins—asking about community building or sharing care partner activities—that's what helps most." (Interview, p. 7.)*

This theme shows that strong staff culture is the backbone of any sustainable belonging initiative. When leaders support creativity and colleagues collaborate informally, it creates the psychological safety needed for staff to model belonging for students.

### **Building Belonging Through Celebration and Visibility**

Celebration and visibility also emerged as vital components of belonging. One participant suggested publicly celebrating teacher collaboration with student involvement:

*Our teacher “shout-out” ... It’s not about best outfit or best performance—it’s always about collaboration and teamwork ... What if a student interviewed the teacher who got the shout-out? Maybe the teacher gets a small token ... Something that says: we value collaboration, we value belonging. (Interview, p. 5.)*

Another participant emphasized how school announcements can become intentional tools for belonging:

*Morning announcements are a great, protected time to build school culture—whether that’s norms, values, messaging, or acknowledgement. It’s something tangible we can use well. (Interview, p. 11.)*

A third participant shared that scheduling celebrations during the school day made inclusion more practical and equitable:

*Not everyone can stay after school ... so building these things into the day is more inclusive and doable. Pep rallies or dances—they’re fun and happen during the school day. Same with class swaps or care-partner activities. (Interview, p. 11.)*

This theme illustrates how public recognition fosters pride and inclusion. Whether through announcements, shout-outs, or visible rituals, celebrating everyone’s contributions during regular school hours sends the message that every member of the community matters.

**GUIDING QUESTION (DESTINY):** Which actions and practices are worth continuing? (Recommendations for our future and others.)

### **Prioritizing Cross-Classroom Collaboration and Teacher Swapping**

A recurring practice that participants recommended continuing was cross-classroom collaboration and teacher swapping. These strategies allowed students to form bonds with multiple staff members and peers, helping to foster a more integrated school community. One participant described how rotating across classrooms expanded their connections:

*I taught in four different classrooms for at least two periods a week ... It allowed me to build relationships with about 100 different students—I learned their names, interests, and got to be part of their days ... For the kids, it meant they had six different adults in their classrooms they could connect with. (Interview, p. 9.)*

Another participant supported this point, sharing how it strengthened trust and created safe spaces for students:

*Some girls in Jayden's class, maybe they're not comfortable coming to him for help, but they'll come to me. Before, I wouldn't know those students' names. Now they're coming to me for help—or even asking for feminine hygiene products. That's because of those relationships we've built through the swaps. (Interview, p. 9.)*

Yet another participant noted how this familiarity translated into greater connection during school-wide events:

*Like I mentioned yesterday with the track meet, I knew almost every kid in the race. That's not common. A lot of that comes from doing these immersive projects and sharing students between classes. It gave me a deep connection with learners and as people. (Interview, p. 10.)*

This theme shows that class-swapping and cross-teaching creates a web of relationships that promote trust, access, and shared responsibility. These practices reduce isolation and make the school feel smaller, more connected, and more caring.

## Continuing Recognition and Rituals That Uplift Every Student

Participants also spoke about the importance of maintaining systems that highlight positive behaviours and contributions. These rituals made students feel seen in ways that extend beyond academics. One participant shared how a weekly recognition ritual brought joy to younger students:

*The teacher writes up what the student did, and we make it sound amazing—like, “This student helped their class and made the room a better place.” Then they get their photo taken with a Griffin stuffed animal, and it goes into the school newsletter. The little kids love it. (Interview, p. 11.)*

Another participant added that even older students took these recognitions seriously and reflected on their behavior:

*Even the older kids say things like, “I might be a Good-Hearted Griffin right now,” so they’re thinking about what that means and how they’re contributing. It gets them reflecting on their actions. (Interview, p. 11.)*

A third participant described how consistent small gestures—like daily greetings—could evolve into a school-wide culture:

*Saying good morning to every student—I do that every day. I’ve noticed other teachers standing in the foyer doing it too. Those small things make a big difference ... If we had a teacher at each door, we could reach every student as they leave. (Interview, p. 11.)*

This theme highlights how regular, meaningful recognition and everyday rituals nurture a sense of value and connection. By embedding these moments into the rhythm of the school day, staff ensure that all students feel appreciated and encouraged to contribute.

## Embedding Belonging into Everyday Structures and Routines

Participants agreed that belonging-building efforts are most sustainable when embedded into daily routines rather than added as extra tasks. One participant categorized strategies based on sustainability:

There’s the mindset—how we approach our work and interact with kids. That’s sustainable and energizing. Then there are instructional approaches—things that become habits, like partnering with other classes ... Finally, there are the big events. These have a huge impact but are harder to sustain. (Interview, p. 8.)

Another participant echoed this idea, encouraging teachers to start with what they already do well:

*You don’t always need to reinvent what you’re doing. Look at your existing routines, your students’ interests, and your own strengths ... Maybe give students more ownership, hear their voices, or let them lead activities. (Interview, p. 8.)*

A third participant emphasized that community-building should be treated with the same importance as academics:

*It's just as valuable as teaching math. We're here to teach students how to be good community members, and they need time and space to build relationships. (Interview, p. 7.)*

This theme reinforces that for belonging to thrive long-term, it must be seamlessly woven into classroom structures and teaching practices. When educators align belonging with their daily goals, it becomes a natural, energizing part of school life

### **Sustain Belonging Through Flexibility and Simplicity**

Flexibility and simplicity were key strategies discussed for ensuring that belonging practices endure. One participant advised starting small and staying adaptable:

*Start small. And make sure the initiatives you want to try are flexible—so they're achievable in some form, for everyone. (Interview, p. 13.)*

Another participant added that if teachers value relationships, they naturally make time for them—even in brief moments:

*Doing things to build those relationships doesn't feel like extra work ... a lot of the time it's the little things that matter—those two-second interactions that make a difference. If it's something you value, it doesn't feel like work. (Interview, p. 8.)*

A third participant emphasized modifying existing practices rather than creating entirely new ones:

*Look at your existing routines, your students' interests, and your own strengths ... Maybe give students more ownership, hear their voices, or let them lead activities. Invite others in to participate in what you're already doing. (Interview, p. 8.)*

This theme shows that keeping things simple and responsive makes belonging efforts more realistic and sustainable. When teachers act from core values and allow practices to evolve, they can maintain energy and authenticity over time.

### **Sustaining Belonging Through Leadership, Mentorship, and Legacy**

Participants noted that students feel a stronger connection when they are given leadership roles or opportunities to mentor others. One participant reflected on the impact of the care partner program:

*Care partners build community. The younger kids look forward to it. The older kids feel responsible. They feel needed. And feeling needed is a big part of being in a community. If you left, the community would feel your absence. (Interview, p. 5.)*

Another participant described how allowing students to volunteer helped them feel meaningful and recognized:

*If students were done their work, they could choose a classroom to go help in ... They built connections and felt like it was something important and part of building community ... They had the option. It was consistent and accessible. (Interview, p. 9.)*

A third participant emphasized how ongoing relationship-building created peer unity across grade levels:

*The sleepover was the culminating event, but what really mattered was all the work beforehand ... Now both classes feel fluid—it's not a Grade 5 class and a Grade 6 class; they see each other as peers. (Interview, p. 9.)*

This theme demonstrates that roles like mentoring, volunteering, and leadership instill purpose and a sense of legacy. When students contribute to others' well-being, they not only strengthen the community but also deepen their own connection to school.

# Discussing the Themes

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## A. Definition Stage: What is Belonging in a School?

### **Belonging Is Built Through Relationships and Daily Interactions**

Belonging does not always start with big programs or events, it often begins with the small, everyday things people do. When students are greeted by name, asked how they are doing, or simply smiled at, it tells them they are seen and important. These kinds of daily actions may seem small, but they have a big impact. Over time, these simple habits grow into strong, caring relationships.

It's also important that relationships are two-sided. When students begin to respond, share stories, or check in with teachers on their own, it shows that they feel safe and connected. They are not just being talked to, they are joining in. When teachers and students build these back-and-forth connections, school becomes a place where people truly care about each other. Over time, these interactions build trust and joy. Students begin to feel like school is a place where they belong, not just a place they have to go.

### **Belonging Improves Motivation and Participation**

When students feel connected, school becomes more than just a building, it becomes a place where they want to be. Belonging helps students move from just sitting in class to actually getting involved. They raise their hands, join clubs, help classmates, and even come up with ideas to improve the school. This sense of belonging also helps teachers. When teachers feel connected and supported, they are more excited to come to work and give their best. That energy spreads to the students. In this way, belonging becomes a circle—students and teachers support each other, and everyone feels more motivated and involved.

Belonging also gives students the courage to try new things. They are less afraid to make mistakes because they know someone has their back. It creates a classroom where students feel safe to take risks and grow.

### **Belonging Builds Citizenship and Community**

Belonging is not just about feeling good, it teaches students how to be caring, helpful people. In school, students learn how to be part of a team, how to help others, and how

to take responsibility. These are important life skills that will help them outside of school too. When students feel that they are part of something bigger, like a class, a grade, or the whole school, they are more likely to take care of it. They participate in school events, clean up shared spaces, or help a classmate who's having a hard time. These actions help build a strong and caring community.

This also teaches students what it means to be a good citizen—not just in school, but in life. It shows them that they can make a difference in the world around them, starting right in their own classroom.

### **Belonging Means Emotional Safety and Comfort**

Another part of belonging is feeling emotionally safe. This means students feel free to be themselves without fear of being judged, laughed at, or left out. When students feel comfortable, they smile more, laugh, share their ideas, and open up.

Some students feel different for many reasons—maybe because of their background, how they look, or how they learn. It's important that the school makes space for all kinds of students to feel like they belong. Teachers and staff must make an effort to understand each student's unique needs and celebrate what makes them special. When students feel accepted just the way they are, they are more confident and willing to connect with others. This builds a school environment full of kindness, respect, and trust.

### **Belonging Grows Through Shared Experiences and Community Ties**

Belonging also grows when students, staff, and even families take part in shared activities. Whether it's a school event, a classroom project, a celebration, or even a school trip—these shared moments help people feel connected. These shared experiences help everyone learn more about each other. When students recognize familiar faces or remember fun times they had together, it makes the school feel warm and welcoming. It reminds them that they are part of something special. Connecting the school to the wider community—like parents, local leaders, and neighbourhood groups—also helps students feel like they are part of a bigger picture. When they see the same caring adults at events or helping out in school, it makes everything feel more connected and meaningful.

## **B. Design Stage: What Can We Do to Make Belonging Stronger?**

### **Encouraging Student Leadership and Inclusion**

One of the best ways to build belonging is to let students take the lead. When students help create school clubs, run activities, or recognize their classmates for doing good things, they feel more included. It shows them that their voice matters. This is especially powerful when students who are usually quiet or left out get a chance to shine. They see that they have something valuable to give, and others see it too. Teachers can help by guiding students to plan projects based on what they enjoy—like sports, art, music, or helping others.

When students lead, they learn responsibility and teamwork. They also feel proud, and that pride helps them feel even more connected to their school.

## **Building Cross-Class and Inter-Grade Connections**

Belonging grows when students of different ages or classes work together. This could mean older students helping younger ones with reading, or two classes teaming up to work on a project. These partnerships help students learn from one another, build empathy, and make new friends. For younger students, having a buddy from an older grade can be exciting and comforting. For older students, being a role model makes them feel responsible and valued. These kinds of relationships help students feel needed and important. They also prepare students for life outside school, where people often need to work and connect with others who are different from them.

## **Creating a Supportive and Flexible Staff Culture**

Belonging isn't just for students; teachers, and staff also need to feel included and supported. When staff help each other, share ideas, and support new team members, it builds a strong foundation. This makes it easier to try new ideas and stick with long-term plans.

Supportive leadership also makes a difference. When school leaders listen to teachers and encourage creativity, it builds trust. It shows that everyone is working toward the same goal—to make the school a caring place for all. Staff who feel like they belong are more likely to stay, try new things, and go the extra mile for students.

## **Celebrating People and Making Them Visible**

Publicly recognizing students and staff for their efforts helps everyone feel proud and appreciated. This could mean shout-outs in announcements, a “student of the week” program, or just a thank you in front of the class. These moments make people feel good about themselves and remind others to be kind and helpful. It's also important to make sure everyone can be included. Celebrations should happen during the school day so students who can't stay late still get a chance to be part of the fun. When students and staff see that their hard work is noticed and appreciated, it builds pride and a stronger sense of community.

# **C. Destiny Stage: What Should We Keep Doing to Make Belonging Last?**

## **Continuing Cross-Classroom Collaboration and Student Swapping**

One way to make students feel like they belong is by allowing them to interact with many teachers and classmates, not just the ones in their regular classroom. When students move between classes or when teachers visit other classes, it creates more chances for connection.

For example, students might get help from a teacher they didn't know before. Or a student might feel more comfortable talking to another teacher about a personal issue. These kinds of relationships grow when students and teachers get to know each other across different spaces.

This approach also makes the school feel smaller and more like a family. Everyone knows more names and faces. During school-wide events like assemblies or sports days, students feel more comfortable because they recognize many of the adults and classmates around them. It creates a deeper sense of belonging because the students feel they are known and cared for by many people in the school, not just one or two.

### **Keep Recognition and Rituals That Celebrate All Students**

It's important to continue celebrating with students not just for grades or sports, but also for their kindness, helpfulness, or positive attitude. Weekly or monthly recognition programs can make a big difference, especially when they focus on values like teamwork, respect, or helpful actions. Younger students especially enjoy being recognized in front of others, but even older students take these moments seriously. When students know that their good actions are noticed, they are more likely to continue acting in positive ways.

Simple daily routines—like saying good morning, offering high-fives, or checking in with students—are just as important. These small actions, when done consistently, create a warm and welcoming culture. They let every student know that they matter and that someone cares about them.

### **Make Belonging Part of Everyday Routines**

Sometimes schools try to create new programs to build belonging, but those programs don't last because they feel like extra work. The most successful strategies are the ones that fit into what teachers and students are already doing. For example, if a teacher already has students work in pairs during a lesson, they could add a short sharing activity that helps students get to know each other better. If there's a class routine like reading time, it can include opportunities for students to read together across classes or grades. These simple additions don't take much time or effort, but they help build stronger relationships.

Belonging also comes from the way teachers think about their work. When teachers see relationship-building as just as important as teaching math or reading, they naturally find ways to create connections during regular lessons. When belonging becomes part of how the school runs every day, it becomes stronger and easier to maintain over time.

### **Sustain Belonging Through Flexibility and Simplicity**

To make belonging work for everyone, it has to be flexible and simple. Not every teacher has time for big events or extra meetings. That's why it helps to keep things easy to do and adjust when needed.

Teachers don't need to create completely new activities. Instead, they can take something they already do and change it a little to make it more inclusive or student-centred. For example, letting students choose how they work on a project or who they partner with can help them feel more comfortable and included. When teachers and staff focus on the small things—like a two-minute chat with a student or inviting a colleague to share an idea—those small things add up. The more these simple acts of connection happen, the more natural they become. And because they don't take much time, they are easier to keep going throughout the year.

## Support Leadership, Mentoring, and a Sense of Purpose

One of the strongest ways to help students feel they belong is by giving them meaningful roles in the school. When students are mentors, helpers, or leaders, they feel responsible and proud. For example, older students can be care partners for younger students, helping them with reading or school routines. These roles show students that they are trusted and important.

Being a leader or helper also builds confidence. Students begin to see that they make a difference in someone else's day. They also start thinking about their role in the school community—how their actions affect others and how they can support their peers. These experiences don't just build belonging in the moment—they also leave a lasting impact. Students who have been leaders or mentors carry that pride with them. They leave a legacy that inspires others to do the same. This keeps the sense of community alive from one school year to the next.









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ISBN #978-1-927107-64-5 (print)  
#978-1-927107-65-2 (online)