

Dimensions of Belonging in the Classroom

Directions

Consider what student belonging looks like in your classroom. Choose one or two dimensions from the list below.

Dimension	 What does it <i>look</i> like?	 What does it <i>sound</i> like?	 What does it <i>feel</i> like (for the student)?
Welcomed	- Greeting students warmly with a smile and eye contact as they enter the room. - Standing at the door or designated greeting spot to welcome each student by name. - Starting the day with a consistent classroom ritual (like a morning check-in or welcome circle).	“I’m so glad you’re here today!” “Welcome back—it’s great to see you!” “Good morning, [student’s name]!”	- Feeling noticed and acknowledged. - Looking forward to going to school. - Feeling included in the classroom community.
Invited	- Modeling how to extend invitations—verbally and non-verbally—during classroom and social activities. - Creating classroom norms that encourage students to ask peers to join games, groups or conversations. - Encouraging and supporting peer invitations to participate in extracurriculars, clubs or leadership opportunities.	“Would you like to help lead this part?” “I’d love to hear your perspective on this.” “Would you like to join us?”	- A genuine sense of being wanted and welcomed. - Openness to participating without needing to ask first. - Feeling confident that there’s a place for them in social and academic spaces.

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Present	- Students showing up consistently and on time, with routines that support strong attendance. - Actively engaging in class activities—raising hands, contributing ideas, working with peers. - Teachers noticing and acknowledging both physical and emotional presence and checking in when a student seems distracted or disconnected.	“It’s great to have you here today.” “Glad you’re back—here’s what we were working on.” “I noticed you were quiet—everything okay?”	- Feeling like their presence is meaningful. - Feeling motivated to engage because their presence matters. - Being aware that others notice and value their contributions.
Known	- Learning and consistently pronouncing students’ names correctly. - Building strong, trusting relationships. - Highlighting and affirming each student’s strengths and contributions in class.	“Did I pronounce your name correctly?” “I noticed how well you supported your group today.” “You’re really growing in this area—I see how hard you’re working.”	- Being recognized as an individual. - Feeling a connection to and trust with teachers. - Being encouraged to and feeling confidence from having their strengths seen and acknowledged.

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Accepted	• Positive body language, facial expressions and posture to show openness and respect. • Visual displays and classroom materials that reflect and affirm all student groups (posters, student work, inclusive signage). • Instructional content and instructional materials that are responsive and celebrate students' cultures, languages and identities.	“Everyone’s perspective matters here.” “This story reflects some of the experiences in our community.” “Thank you for sharing—thank you for helping us learn more.”	• Feeling respected and valued. • Feeling seen in the classroom content and environment. • Feeling safe to share personal experiences and ideas.
Involved	• Students participating in structured, collaborative learning experiences (partner tasks, group projects). • Students setting individual or group learning goals and tracking their progress. • Classroom discussions where students use academic vocabulary to explain their thinking and engage with content.	“Let’s set a goal for what you want to accomplish today.” “Talk with your group about how you’ll solve this.” “Use the language from the anchor chart to explain your idea.”	• Engaging actively and being part of the learning process. • Being responsible for their own growth and contribution. • Confidently using academic language as a tool for expression and learning.

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Heard	• Providing structured opportunities for student feedback. • Responding to student ideas and input with visible action or change. • Building in regular moments for student agency in lessons.	“What were your favorite and least favorite parts of this lesson? Why?” “Show your understanding in the way that works best for you—here are some options...” “I’m hearing you say X—I’d love to understand more about what that means to you.”	• Feeling listened to and valued. • Believing their opinions can shape the learning environment. • Having choices and decision-making power in demonstrating their understanding.
Supported	• Strong instructional scaffolding that helps all students access the learning. • Clear and responsive tiers of academic and emotional support. • Modeling and demonstrating strategies, not just delivering content.	“Let me show you how I’d approach this.” “Do you need more to finish? Is there anything I can help you with?” “Here’s another way we can try this together.”	• Feeling guided and not left to figure things out alone. • Trusting that help is available when needed. • Believing that support is a normal and expected part of learning.
Befriended	• Intentionally structuring activities (partner rotations, group work) that allow students to collaborate with a wide range of peers. • Explicitly teaching and reinforcing peer interaction norms (active listening, encouragement, shared responsibility). • Using curriculum that includes lessons and discussions focused on friendship skills, empathy and positive peer relationships.	“Turn to someone new today and share your ideas.” “Let’s talk about how we support one another in groups.” “What’s one way you showed kindness to a classmate this week?”	• Feeling connected to classmates across groups. • Being included in social and collaborative activities. • Feeling trust and comfort in forming and maintaining peer relationships.

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Needed	- Students helping each other during academic tasks or classroom routines. - Building peer tutoring structures into instruction to leverage student strengths. - Using group work structures where each student has a meaningful role in the outcome.	“Can you explain that to your partner?” “Your group is counting on your perspective.” “Let’s support each other to get this done.”	- Feeling a sense of purpose and contribution in group settings. - Being recognized for their skills and value by both peers and teachers. - Being motivated by knowing others depend on them.
Loved	- Demonstrating patience through calm, supportive responses—even during challenging moments. - Offering comfort through kind gestures, tone or physical environment (calming spaces, warm lighting). - Taking time to build meaningful relationships with students—learning about their lives, interests and needs.	“I care about you no matter what.” “It’s okay to have tough days—I’m here for you.” “You matter in this class and in this community.”	- Feeling a deep sense of emotional security and acceptance. - Being reassured that they are cared for beyond their academic performance. - Being confident that their teacher is invested in who they are as a whole person.

This handout is adapted from Figure 1 in Fisher, D., & Frey, N. (2023). What does it mean to belong? Educational Leadership, 80(7), ASCD. <https://www.ascd.org/el/articles/what-does-it-mean-to-belong>, which itself was adapted from Carter, E. W. (2021). Dimensions of belonging for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities. In J. L. Jones & K. L. Gallus (Eds.), Belonging and resilience in individuals with developmental disabilities (pp. 12–33). Springer Nature.