

## Relational Inclusion blog #27: Relational Belonging

This week my blog is not my own, but I found something that was too good to not share exactly as I found it:

### **What Actually Makes a Pupil Belong?**

We keep saying that “belonging” matters in schools — but what does that really mean in practice? What helps a child feel like they belong? Is it a house point? A well-worn uniform? Their photo on the wall?

What does the research — and the lived experiences of children — actually say?

Belonging isn't a sticker chart or a slogan. It's not about rewards, displays or systems of merit. It's not even about strict routines or matching socks (though that's often where schools start).

Belonging is a felt sense of safety, connection, and acceptance. It's the knowledge that “someone knows me here. I can be myself here. If I struggle, I won't be shamed.”

Studies (like those from the Education Endowment Foundation and research around school connectedness) show that relationships are at the core. Pupils feel they belong when:

- They are known and remembered
- Their names are pronounced correctly
- Their cultures and identities are represented in the classroom
- Their feelings are acknowledged rather than dismissed
- Their needs are understood without judgement

It's not about being the “perfect” pupil — it's about being a real one and still being welcome.

House points and reward systems might give momentary boosts, but they tend to favour the already confident, the compliant, the able-to-mask. They can leave others feeling unseen or “less than,” especially when their challenges make rewards harder to access.

Strict uniform policies are often seen as “levellers,” but for many pupils, they can reinforce difference — especially for those with sensory needs, financial hardship, or gender expression that doesn't fit the norm. Belonging can't be pinned to a tie.

So what does work?

- ☒ Warm, attuned adults who notice when something's off
- ☒ Flexible approaches that allow individuality
- ☒ Curriculums that reflect diverse voices
- ☒ Clear but compassionate boundaries
- ☒ Safe spaces to retreat to when things feel too much
- ☒ Pupils having a say in decisions that affect them

We must also acknowledge that belonging and behaviour aren't the same thing. A child can look like they're complying — quiet, uniformed, sitting still — and feel completely alone. Another child might shout or walk out of class because they don't feel safe enough to stay. One masks. The other escapes. Neither truly belongs.

Belonging isn't always visible.

The truth is, belonging can't be forced. But it can be nurtured — daily, gently, relationally. It's in the look that says "I see you," the voice that says "you're safe here," and the actions that say "you matter."

We need to not mistake control for connection.

Because in the end, a child who feels like they belong is a child who is more able to learn, more willing to try, and more likely to come back tomorrow.

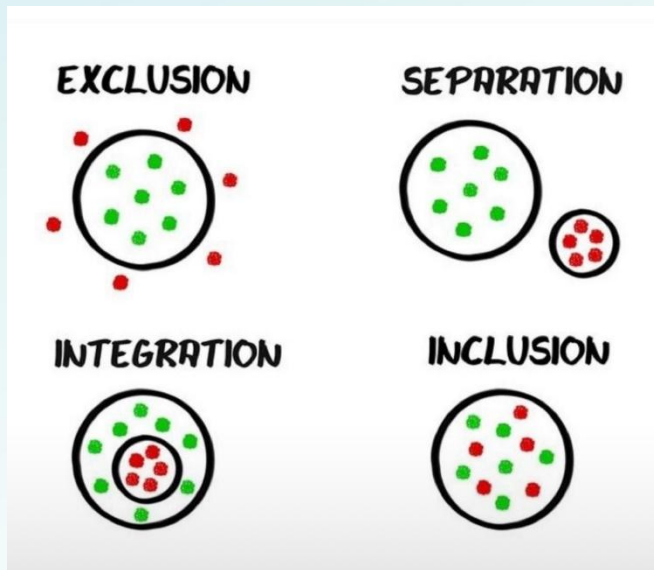
(Credit Emma the Autistic SENCo ∞)



The quotes I thought worth sharing this week are:

- 1) *Peace is not something you chase; It is something you allow. It lives in the pauses between words, in the hush of early mornings, in the way the wind moves through the trees. You don't have to search for it – you only need to make space to feel it.* (The Healing Podcast)
- 2) *Reminder: My child is acting like a child because they are a child* (Inside Parenting)
- 3) *Even if we disagree about everything, we can still be kind to each other.* (positive energy)
- 4) *Children treat us how they feel. So if they are hurting, sometimes they hurt others.* (@responsive\_parenting)
- 5) *I believe the children who stir us up are the ones who are here to **wake** us up.* (Inside Parenting)
- 6) *Defiance is not a discipline problem, it's a relationship problem.* (Dr Laura Markham)
- 7) *He said, "Try to learn to breathe deeply, really to taste food when you eat, and when you sleep, really sleep. Try as much to be wholly alive with all your might, and when you laugh, laugh like hell. And when you get angry, get good and angry. Try to be alive. You will be dead soon enough.* (Unknown)

My two print and stick to the wall images this week are:



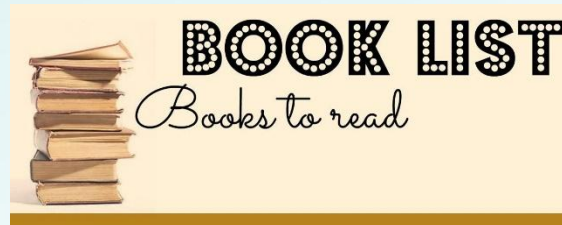
### Communication Code: What I Might Be Missing...

"This student is so irritating and disrespectful!"	This student needs connection. They need to be seen and heard. What am I missing here?
"They're pushing my buttons again!"	Have I checked in with my brain and body state? Have I reflected on my own triggers?
"This student doesn't care!"	What am I not understanding? What's happening in this students' internal world that I'm not aware of?
"This student never listens."	They might be feeling so dysregulated that they cannot listen. They might need some space, time, or something/someone other than me, that feels safe & steady.
"This student will never learn!"	My reaction could be originating from my own fixed mindset. What's the state of my nervous system?
"This student feels aggressive and defiant."	Your student might be in a survival state where they feel threatened or unsafe. How are you creating feelings of safety in your classroom? Have you taken time to reflect on your biases in how you define "aggression" and "defiance"?

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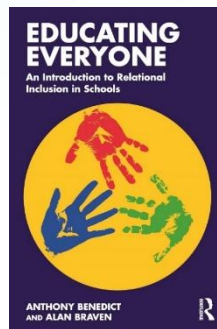
My recommended read is about how to manage your emotions: [Manage your emotions, in 9 minutes - Big Think](#)



If you have read any interesting books which support / develop / further understanding of all things relational inclusion, please add a comment through Substack.

If you find the Relational Inclusion blog useful, feel free to share with your networks.

Our book, Educating Everyone: An Introduction to relational Inclusion in Schools is out now and you must buy it and tell everyone else to buy it. It is available pretty much everywhere that sells books or you can get it here:



You can subscribe to my weekly blog here:

[https://open.substack.com/pub/anthonybenedict/p/relational-inclusion-blog-15?r=5ki35n&utm\\_campaign=post&utm\\_medium=web&showWelcomeOnShare=true](https://open.substack.com/pub/anthonybenedict/p/relational-inclusion-blog-15?r=5ki35n&utm_campaign=post&utm_medium=web&showWelcomeOnShare=true)

Finally, I'd like to share a quote which has really stuck in my mind:

8) *I believe the children who stir us up are the ones who are here to **wake** us up.*  
(Inside Parenting)

Thanks for reading

Anthony Benedict

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