

Building a Culture Where All Students Belong

co-authored with

KIM ONDRIK

with input from Rhonda Staples, Deb Webster, and Lorraine Hanson

“A seed holds an incredible life force. When conditions are right, the seed bursts, sending forth an embryo root and stem. Each time, the same thing happens with mind-boggling regularity. *But the key to the process is to give the right seed the right conditions — which is the gardener’s job.*”

— Gerald Knox, gardening authority

“From my belonging research I have learned that this simple idea is at the core of every person. It’s the soil from which a seed grows... belonging is to learning as soil is to a seed.”

— Kim Ondrik, teacher

Fostering a culture of “belonging” in a community can help children develop love, friendship, commitment, and caring. This “belonging” moves students to act in an inclusive way, change behavior, go out of their way for others, and appreciate others for who they are.

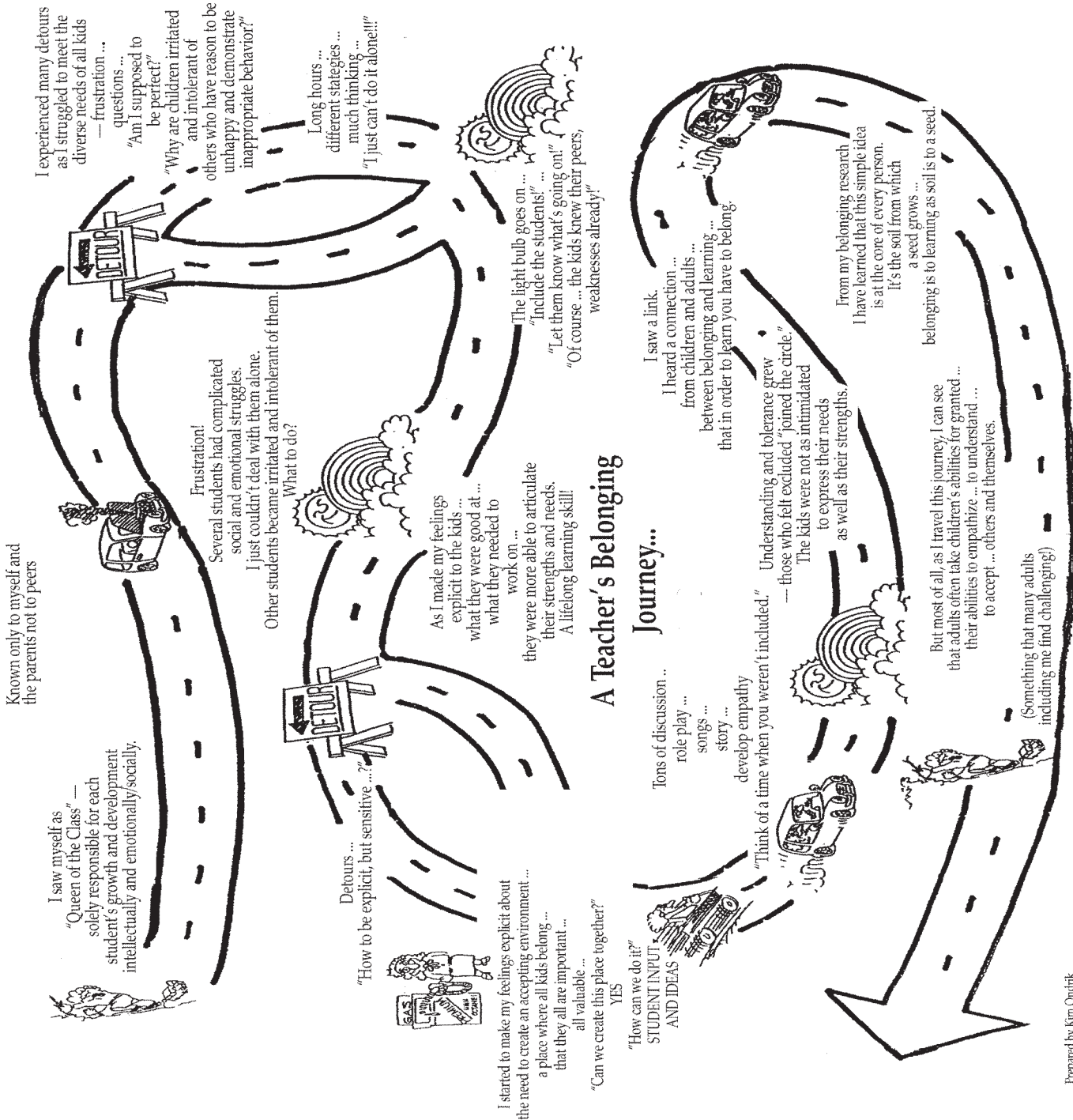
How deeply these changes happen in the classroom seems to depend on the individual teacher: how much the teacher cares about developing an inclusive culture, how able he or she is at reaching individual students, and how involved he or she allows students to be in developing that community. Teachers who value a culture where everyone feels they belong set it as a priority, and constantly model respect and caring in their behavior and language. Many teachers believe, though, that a strong culture is more easily built when they have same students for a few years.

The “Journey” outlined on page 20 is an example of the work of a teacher who cared about establishing a culture of belonging in her primary multi-aged classroom.

The Need to Belong as the Soil for Learning

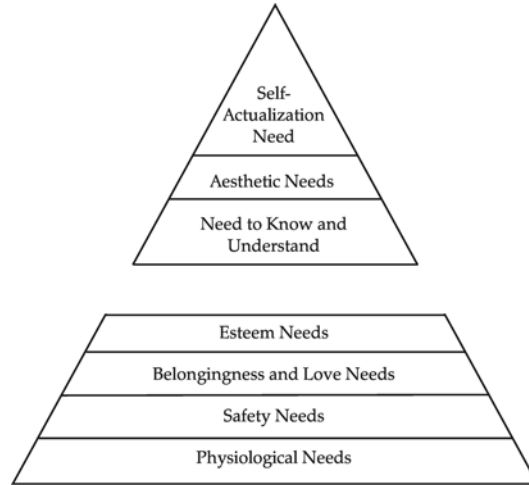
The term “belonging” was coined by A. H. Maslow and appears with “love” on his hierarchy of needs. Maslow put forth the premise that human beings are motivated to satisfy needs. These needs are hierarchical and must be at least partially satisfied before a person will try to satisfy higher needs.

One critical concept introduced by Maslow was the distinction between deficiency needs and growth needs. Deficiency needs (physiological needs, safety, love, and esteem) are those that are critical to physical and psychological well-being. These needs must be satisfied, but once they are, a person’s motivation to satisfy them diminishes. In contrast, growth needs, such as the need to know and understand things, to appreciate beauty, or to grow and develop an appreciation of others,



Prepared by Kim Oudink

can never be satisfied completely. In fact, the more individuals can meet the need to know and understand the world around them, the greater their motivation may become to learn more.



Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

At school, we generally focus too narrowly on satisfying growth needs, developing children's intellectual skills. The problem is that children who are hungry or who come from abusive situations will have very little psychological energy to put into learning. They have many more basic needs to satisfy before they can grow intellectually. Similarly, if children do not feel accepted or included in a classroom, they are unlikely to have a strong motivation to achieve the higher growth objectives — the search for knowledge and understanding for their own sake, or the creativity and openness to new ideas. A child who is unsure of his or her acceptance in a class may feel sad or rejected, make the cautious choice, go with the crowd, or study for a test without any interest in learning the ideas.

If a teacher can create a classroom where all children feel they belong, in Maslow's view, the students will become eager to learn for the sake of learning. Children will also open themselves to new ideas and take creative risks. If they are to become self-directed learners, children must feel that they are loved, that the teacher will respond to them fairly and consistently, and that they will not be ridiculed or punished for honest answers or risk taking.

Classrooms built on the philosophy of belonging have caring, safe environments where children support and help each other. Such a philosophy promotes an "I can" attitude in all children. When children feel they belong, they feel safe and secure and good about themselves. As a result, they become tolerant of others, more accepting and forgiving.

Classrooms that foster a sense of belonging provide an environment that encourages risk-taking, allows for a cooperative spirit, models acceptance, encourages divergent thinking, promotes appreciation of others, practices empathy, and recognizes the unique contributions that each individual makes to the group. Safe classrooms provide for effective

"If you belong, you learn more...
you won't be worried."

— A primary student

exchanges between individuals. Safe classrooms are warm, loving, caring, and honest.

Establishing a Framework for Teaching Belongingness

“...if you find that you don’t have ideal or even good soil, you don’t have to be satisfied with what you have. You can improve it to help make sure your plants feel at home.”

— Gerald Knox

Four understandings must be in evidence before the teaching of belongingness can take hold.

1. Make the concept explicit

Belonging is a curriculum on its own. It has to be taught as life skills. It can’t be treated as a theme that can be covered in a few weeks. This belonging curriculum has its own vocabulary that the children need to learn in order to communicate effectively.

“Belonging” should become a classroom word. Teachers need to talk about belonging with their students and bring the subtleties out into the open, letting the children become aware of what they do to promote it. Discussions centred around belonging make implicit social behaviors and feelings *explicit*.

The language of belonging is striking — *love, care, value, important, share, help, encourage, friendship, support, freedom, choices, problem-solving*. As students begin to understand the concept, their language becomes *descriptive* — “What does belonging feel like, look like, and sound like?” Their language also becomes *prescriptive* — “What can you do so everyone belongs?”

2. Include children in problem-solving

Discipline problems are minimized when children understand the feelings of others and can better relate those feelings to their own experiences. In a classroom where belonging is emphasized, difficulties become everyone’s problem. Everyone is responsible for the solutions. Fingers are not pointed and children are not singled out. Everyone works together to re-establish the feeling of belonging, giving the child ownership over the problem and a sense of empowerment from being part of the solution. By discussing belonging in the classroom, children’s problem-solving skills are enhanced in a meaningful way.

3. Teach inclusion — and celebrate diversity

Belonging allows for and celebrates diversity. A strong sense of belonging can transcend any unease created by diversity — physical, mental, and cultural. Talking about belonging and what is important helps children realize that it’s their “heart condition,” how they treat themselves and others, that matters, not how many toys they own, or how many different clothes they have, or how quickly they learn something new.

“When you solve the little problems then you don’t have big problems.”

— Robert, Grade 2

4. Establish a relationship with each child

Children need a relationship with the adult in the classroom to get their bearings, to understand what is acceptable and not acceptable, to observe and emulate. They need to be able to transfer the relationship they have with their parents to their teacher, to know they are accepted, *safe*, and cared for. "Once there is a strong connection between adult and child, the child will respond to the tiniest cues from the adult," says child psychologist Gordon Neufeld. Penelope Leach, in *Children First*, writes that "Children depend on parents or their substitutes not only to maintain their self-esteem but also to build it." She believes that teachers need to play the role of the "parent substitute" and not be detached from students. She says further that teachers must be "involved in reciprocal interpersonal relations" with students, not see students as "objects to be taught if they will listen, controlled rather than consulted if they will not."

Concrete Ways to Create a "Belonging" Classroom

You can begin to create a genuinely inclusive classroom through discussions and activities, such as are outlined below. The examples here deal with younger children, but can easily be adapted for students through middle school and, in some cases, for secondary students. For other ideas for middle and secondary grades, see chapters 5–7, where the ideas presented here are pursued in a variety of ways for use with older students.

1. Brainstorm "What is belonging?" We prefer to begin with whole-class brainstorming, moving to individual responses, which honor each child's contribution. An example appears below.

A place where I belong
is _____
because _____
A place where I don't belong
is _____
because _____



2. Ask students to reflect on where they feel they belong and why — and where they don't. This activity can be done using various formats at any grade level or using cross-grade buddies. One option is to provide open-ended sentences such as those in the margin at left.

What does a classroom where all kids belong look like, sound like, and feel like?

3. Explore these two questions with your students: (1) What does a classroom where all kids belong look like, sound like, and feel like? (2) What does a classroom where belonging is not thought about look like, sound like, and feel like?



What does a classroom where belonging is not thought about look like, sound like, and feel like?



How One Primary Multi-Age Class Addressed Questions on Belonging

What does belonging look like in our classroom?

- painting together
- playing together (play-ground, swings)
- going down the slide together
- making pictures, coloring together
- building something with friends
- sharing a book
- helping me at cleanup time
- working in groups...

What does belonging sound like in our classroom?

- come and play
- I like you
- I'll play with you. Do you want to play?
- Do you want to come to my house?
- You are a good friend
- You have lots of detail in your picture
- That is awesome
- Thank you. You are welcome...

What does it feel like when you belong?

- good
- warm and cozy
- comfortable
- caring and loving
- safe
- fun and happy
- soft
- kind

What does it feel like when you don't belong?

- scary 'cause I might get hurt
- sad
- hurt
- anxious
- mad, angry
- uncomfortable
- lonely, left out
- worried
- like I'm in danger

4. Ask students to consider whether belonging helps them learn “school things.” How does it do this? In a primary multi-aged classroom, the children seemed to connect *not belonging* to a preoccupation with

problems that need to be solved, or with worry and anxiety. “If you don’t belong then you worry.” “If you belong, you get more work done.” “You can ask for help so you learn more!” “It’s good to belong in the classroom because if you have a problem, you can’t focus on your work — you keep thinking about your problem.”

5. Invite students to respond to each triad of prompt statements below. They can tell their stories or draw their answers. See Appendix 2 on page 139 for strategy.
 - a) Think of a time when you belonged.
Think of a time when you didn’t belong.
Think of a time when you made someone feel like they belonged.
 - b) Think of a time when you weren’t included.
Think of a time when you saw someone not being included.
Think of a time when you didn’t include someone.

Once through the process, pull the class together to reflect on what they learned from one another and how they can put these ideas into action.

6. Ask students to show, through drawing, when someone belongs and when they don’t.
7. Every once in a while do a heart check and see how students are feeling about life in the classroom. This activity is a great starter for class discussions.
8. Introduce *Thinking Yes, Thinking No* to your students. Give each student a page divided in half. Ask students to think of a time they felt loved, cared about, and included, then to think of a time they felt left out, alone, out of place. Before they begin their individual work, invite students to share some reflections with the whole class so they can get an idea of what others are thinking. For younger students who are new to the concept of belonging, you might connect the feelings of happiness and sadness to belonging and not belonging.

The students draw and write about feeling included on the first half of the paper and share their thinking with a partner. Later, some students can share their reflections with the whole group. Repeat the process, having the students draw, write, and talk about not feeling included.

After the children have finished the task, try to push their thinking. Ask them to describe why they felt the way they did. For example, “Kenny, what was it about going swimming with your friends and family that made you feel that you belonged?” or “When the boy teased you, how did you feel? What was it about that that made you feel you didn’t belong?”

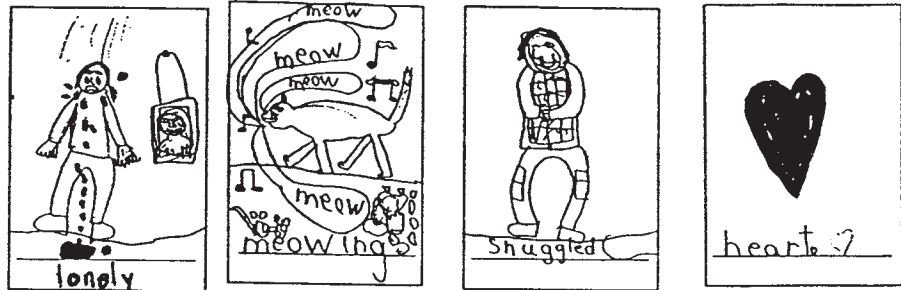
As the students describe specifically what made them feel they belonged or didn’t belong, record their thinking in two columns:

Reflective “Heart Check”

Getting these ideas from my
brain was ... great because
I just knew what
I was going to paint
in my head
I felt like I belonged today
in the class ♥ ♥ ♥
on the playground ♥ ♥ ♥

copy them onto one sheet of paper. Make one photocopy for every two students. Have students work in pairs and cluster around the pictures their ideas about the images, or the story.

- Give the students four words from the story, for example: “lonely,” “meowed,” “snuggled,” and “heart.” Have the students illustrate the four words.



- Direct students to write a prediction of what the story will be about or a short story based on the book title, pictures and clusters, and the four vocabulary words.
- Read the story to the students. Stop in several places and discuss whether or not the characters are feeling they belong or don't belong. After completing the story, have students, as a group, gather evidence as to why the characters felt they belonged or didn't belong.

One summary appears below.

Belonging	Not Belonging
they are together	cat had to stay outside
they love their cat	Jessie is alone in the house
the cat snuggles on the bed	bolted the flap
man and cat stay together	William stopped doing all the familiar things
the man and woman snuggle	cat scratches Jessie
the food bowl, flap in the door	

- Read the story again. In the large group, invite students to identify and record heavy-hearted and happy-hearted words. Talk about the implications of using such words in the classroom and build a T-chart of happy- and heavy-hearted words used there.

Happy-hearted Words	Heavy-hearted Words
loved, together, best of friends, happy, friends, pleased, snuggled, purred	alone, scratches, crossly, dreadful, cried, dark, lonely, yowled

An annotated bibliography of other suitable books is featured at the back of this book.

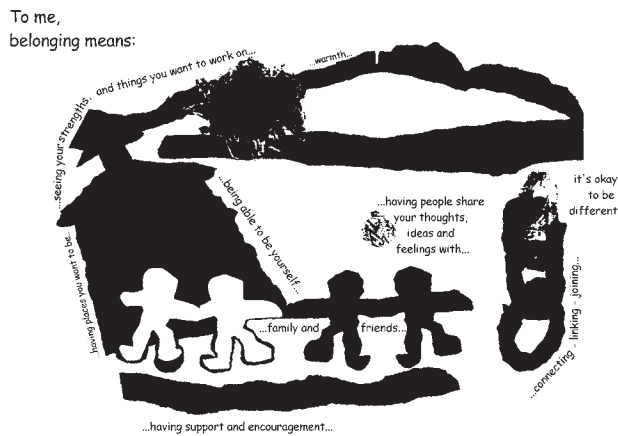
12. Create People Searches that focus on the concepts of belonging that you have been discussing. Directions for this strategy appear in Appendix 1 on page 138. You might ask students to find people who can do the following:
- imagine what a school would look like if all of the children felt they belonged
 - name three ways they help others have a happy heart
 - describe what cooperation means
 - explain what “building other kids up” means
 - tell you what belonging means to them
 - explain why belonging is important to them
 - remember a time they didn’t belong

Find a researcher who can tell you . . .

People help Together DIS	because if People didn't belong They would be swallowed BRYAN
what belonging means to them at my other School when they didn't belong cristina	why belonging is important in life

When all of the students have completed their sheets, meet as a group to hear and discuss some of the answers. You might want to record some of the variety of answers on a master sheet.

13. Explore the theme of belonging through art, music, and drama. Have students create art projects that depict belonging or inclusiveness. An example of “rip art,” done in red, blue, black, and yellow, appears here. Students were asked to create a large picture representing what belonging meant to them, and to write on the art any words that helped to create the whole picture.



Teach songs and poems that focus on diversity, inclusion, celebration of differences, challenges, problem-solving, and acceptance. *If You Could Wear My Sneakers* by Sheree Fitch is one example. You will find others in the Annotated Bibliography.

Use role-play and role drama to assist students in understanding and sorting through the dilemmas of tolerance, prejudice, friendship, and exclusion.

Practical Ways to Help Parents Understand the Concept of Belonging

If we want parents to reinforce and extend the concept of belonging at home, then we need to provide them with an opportunity to understand and experience what inclusion means. Parents need to know why the teacher is doing what she or he is doing, and be given an opportunity to ask questions, observe, and figure out belonging for themselves.

Teachers who welcome parents into their classroom for purposeful and meaningful reasons extend this feeling of belonging. These parents will experience first-hand some of the benefits of creating this kind of culture. However, just as it is important to teach the students explicitly, it is also important to do the same with parents. Teachers will need to articulate their philosophy to the parents and show consistent evidence of it through an open-door policy. They will need to make personal connections and invitations, encouraging parents to be part of their child's education and classroom. Sending home informative newsletters and holding parent nights that model classroom culture are also constructive.

One teacher held a parent night and invited parents to come with their children. The parents were each given a People Search (see Appendix 1 on page 138) with questions about the culture of the classroom. For example, they were directed to find someone who could explain what belonging means to them, or could tell them three ways to include others. Parents were asked to move around the room, asking students to help them with the People Search. Not only did this put the children in the role of expert, it modeled for the parents what learning looked like in this safe and productive environment.

"Belonging — connected — appreciated — supported...These are feelings essential for success. In a truly inclusive classroom, all students are welcomed and invited to participate in all learning activities. The freedom to create and apply evolving understandings in a risk-free, relevant environment paves the pathway to learning."

— Gladys Rosencrans, district coordinator, special programs

Reflections on Belonging

Explicit teaching of the concept of belonging opens dialogue in the classroom that enables students to talk about how they feel and allows others to care for them. It becomes okay to talk about personal feelings. Children can be heard reassuring others, as in one case when a child said, "No one cares about me," and another six-year-old replied, "I do, Jesse, I care about you."

As students learn about and value belongingness, they become more articulate about what it means to them:

- “I like it when people listen to me, and when they listen I belong there.”
- “I am a maker of friendships. I make places where everybody belongs.”
- “I used to feel mad, sad, frustrated, . . . now I feel great because I can learn more because I belong.”

Belongingness relates closely to emotional intelligence. Daniel Goleman has written that, to him, emotional intelligence is the true indicator of those who live rich and productive lives. He says emotional intelligence encompasses self-awareness and impulse control, persistence, zeal and self-motivation, empathy, and social deftness.

We believe that, in striving for classrooms where belonging is a given, teachers can enable more and more students to grow within their emotional intelligence. As a result, they can live — and learn — more productively, and our society will thrive.