

EMAT
EASTERN MULTI-ACADEMY TRUST

**BELONGING
IN EMAT ACADEMIES**



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Belonging is not optional – it is the foundation for learning, motivation, well-being and retention (both pupils and staff).

THE ELEVEN DIMENSIONS OF BELONGING



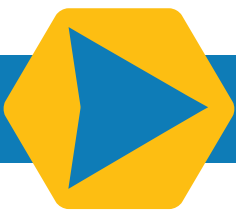


INTRODUCTION

Within Eastern Multi Academy Trust (EMAT), we want to recognise that belonging is a fundamental need for students (and staff), and unless children feel that they belong, other efforts in school (academic, behavioural, social-emotional) are much less effective. Belonging is more than a nice extra - it's foundational for learning, motivation, well-being, equity, and retention (both for students and teachers).

Belonging in our academies can be organised around eleven dimensions of belonging. Each dimension will be treated differently in each academy setting with evidence-based actions, reflective questions, case studies, etc. to meet the needs of the community.





KEY PRINCIPLES/INSIGHTS

The key aspects to consider for each of the eleven dimensions should include (but are not exclusive to):

► **Belonging precedes achievement**

If pupils do not feel like they belong, they are less likely to engage, persist through challenges, or reach their potential. The emotional/social foundation is essential.

► **Multiple facets of belonging**

It's not enough to think "nice" or "friendly classroom" - belonging involves feeling welcomed, accepted, supported, having friends, being involved, feeling needed, etc. Some of those dimensions may be missing even in our academies that are well intentioned.

► **The role of adults/school staff**

Teachers, school leaders, school support staff - they must actively cultivate belonging. This includes both their relationships with pupils, but also the school's policies, culture, how inclusive it is, how responsive and caring people are. Also, the well-being and belonging of staff matter, to underpin all these actions.

► **Equity and inclusion**

Belonging is especially critical for pupils from marginalised backgrounds (minorities, LGBTQ+, differently-abled, EAL, SEND, etc.). Academies must recognise barriers to belonging and act to reduce them.

► **Sustainability & intentional design**

It's not about one-off activities, but about embedding practices into daily interactions, classroom routines, school culture, leadership, etc. Reviewing what's working, reflecting and adapting, and insuring that every child is reached.





PRACTICAL STRATEGIES

Some of the specific ideas to consider include:

▶ **Reflection prompts**

Each academy should draw up 'Reflection prompts' for teachers ("Essential Questions", "What's Your Advice?", "What's Next?") to think about belonging in their own classroom and each individual academy context.

▶ **Case studies**

Use the case studies included for examples of how schools have built belonging in different ways.

▶ **Primary/Secondary similarities and differences**

Balancing primary and secondary school examples — acknowledging that what belonging looks/feels like differs by age.



IMPLEMENTATION

STRENGTHS

▶ **Practical and concrete (not just theory)**

This makes it more usable for school leaders and teachers and should be easily embedded into daily life in the academy.

▶ **The 11 dimensions allow for diagnosing gaps**

What dimension(s) of belonging might be weak in a particular school?

▶ **Inclusive focus**

Considering the widest range of student identities; also considering staff belonging and how this will look.

THINGS TO WATCH OUT FOR...

▶ **Constrained environments**

Translating the ideas into very constrained environments (time, resources, large class sizes, systemic inequalities) may be hard.

▶ **Ensuring sustained effort**

If belonging efforts are superficial or episodic, they may not shift academy culture.

▶ **Measuring belonging well**

Some academies may struggle with how to assess whether belonging is increasing, or in which dimensions improvements are needed.



WHY IT MATTERS

There is a growing belief and understanding that when belonging is in place:

- ▶ Pupils are more engaged, more likely to persist, and more willing to take academic risks. They will also want to attend school regularly.
- ▶ Poor behaviour decreases; social relationships improve.
- ▶ Mental health/well-being is better.
- ▶ Teacher satisfaction and retention improve.

In short: belonging is foundational to both academic success and the emotional/social health of the school community.

Belonging is not optional – it is the foundation for learning, motivation, well-being and retention (both pupils and staff).

THE ELEVEN DIMENSIONS OF BELONGING



Think about how this looks/will look in your academy.



PRACTICAL ACTIONS

CLASSROOM

- ▶ Greet every pupil by name at the door.
- ▶ Build “getting to know you” routines (e.g. daily check-ins, circle time).
- ▶ Co-create class charters with pupils.
- ▶ Use mixed grouping to encourage new friendships; including at Whole School Level

WHOLE ACADEMY

- ▶ Review policies for inclusivity (e.g. uniform, curriculum representation).
- ▶ Ensure clubs, trips, and leadership roles are accessible to all pupils.
- ▶ Monitor attendance/exclusions for equity gaps.
- ▶ Train staff on unconscious bias, trauma-informed practice, and inclusive language.

STAFF

- ▶ Regular wellbeing check-ins, respect and consideration.
- ▶ Opportunities for staff voice in decision-making.
- ▶ Mentorship/buddy systems for new teachers.

What do we already do? What are we missing?



REFLECTION PROMPTS

- ▶ Which of the 11 dimensions are strong in our academy? Which are weak?
- ▶ Whose voices are missing from decision-making?
- ▶ How do we know if pupils feel they belong here?
- ▶ Do staff feel they belong just as much as pupils?



OUTCOMES (IF DONE WELL)

- ▶ Increased engagement & attendance.
- ▶ Reduced behaviour incidents & exclusions.
- ▶ Better attainment, especially for disadvantaged groups.
- ▶ Improved wellbeing and staff retention.



CASE STUDIES

Across Early Years and primary settings, strategies to build belonging often centre around warm, consistent relationships, inclusive practices, and intentional responses when connections break down.

The following three case studies illustrate ways that schools and practitioners promote belonging at different stages: in early years, in small rural schools connecting with families and communities, and in Year 4 classrooms restoring relationships when challenges arise.

CASE STUDY 1 EARLY YEARS THE POWER OF POSITIVE RELATIONSHIPS

“Children must feel safe, secure, and known before they can learn.”

Context & rationale

In early years (nursery, reception), children’s sense of belonging is deeply tied to the relationships they form with trusted adults and peers. The importance of such relationships is supported by attachment theory and research showing long-term benefits in social and academic outcomes. Before effective teaching can happen, children must feel safe, secure, and known.

Key strategies/practices

- ▶ Strong transitions
Home visits or early contact to establish familiarity.
- ▶ Playful interactions
Prioritising play over formal assessments to build connections.
- ▶ Welcoming environment
Creating a warm, family-like space
- ▶ Shared vision
Ensuring all adults understand the importance of belonging.
- ▶ Modelling prosocial behaviour
Staff model kindness and cooperation.

Reflections/challenges

Some children may not have experienced consistent, positive relationships at home, making the school environment crucial as their safe space. Schools must reflect on whether positive relationships are consistent for all children.

Source: Exchange Research School



CASE STUDY 2

SMALL RURAL SCHOOLS

COMMUNITY AND PARENTAL RELATIONSHIPS

“Belonging in small schools must be intentionally nurtured, not left to chance.”

Context & rationale

In small, often rural schools, the sense of belonging extends beyond the classroom to the local community. While small schools have advantages (close relationships, fewer staff), belonging must be intentionally nurtured. Tight-knit communities can sometimes risk excluding or scrutinising families.

Key strategies/practices

- ▶ Staff visible at school gates to greet families daily.
- ▶ Regular community and parental events (e.g. church services, coffee mornings).
- ▶ Staff know names, birthdays, and family contexts of pupils.
- ▶ Flexible scheduling for parents' evenings.
- ▶ Outreach to local community members.
- ▶ Awareness of pupils' emotional as well as academic needs.

Reflections/challenges

Close-knit communities can feel supportive but also pressurising. Schools need to ensure inclusion for all, especially newcomers or families less engaged with community ties.

Source: North Yorkshire Coast Research School

CASE STUDY 3

YEAR 4 – ESTABLISHING, MAINTAINING, AND RESTORING RELATIONSHIPS

“Catch every child being good.”

Context & rationale

As children grow older, belonging must be actively maintained and sometimes repaired. One helpful framework is EMR: Establish – Maintain – Restore. This was applied in a Year 4 class at Nields Academy.

Key strategies/practices

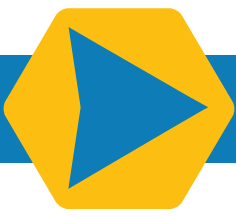
- ▶ Establish – use daily check-ins, anticipate challenges, adapt praise to each child.
- ▶ Maintain – acknowledge positive behaviour, discreet signals of affirmation, celebrate children’s work.
- ▶ Restore – use restorative conversations after conflict, apply consequences promptly, reflect on teacher practice.

Reflections/challenges

Relationships are dynamic, not static. Repairing them when ruptures occur is essential. The EMR framework offers a structured, consistent approach for staff.

Source: Great Heights Research School





CONCLUSION

Across all three case studies, several themes emerge:

- ▶ Relationships are central to belonging.
- ▶ Belonging must be proactively designed into school culture.
- ▶ Individual differences matter - knowing each child enables more effective strategies.
- ▶ Restoring relationships is just as important as building them.
- ▶ Community and family involvement strengthen belonging.

By embedding these principles, schools can help all children feel safe, valued, and connected - laying the foundation for both learning and wellbeing.



“To create an environment that is genuinely positive and supportive for all pupils, without exception, school leaders and teachers should seek to understand the activities and interactions driving pupil development in each ‘microsystem’ within the school – the classes that pupils attend as well as the corridors and outside areas.”



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