

## A sense of belonging

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A word I hear increasingly from UK and international school leaders is 'belonging'. They are reflecting on that word in animated discussions about student attendance. It has set me thinking about special, primary and secondary schools in very different contexts which I have visited this academic year.

And, yes, what they have in common is they are schools where students say they belong, where they feel valued, and where they want to come each day.

What's the proposition here?

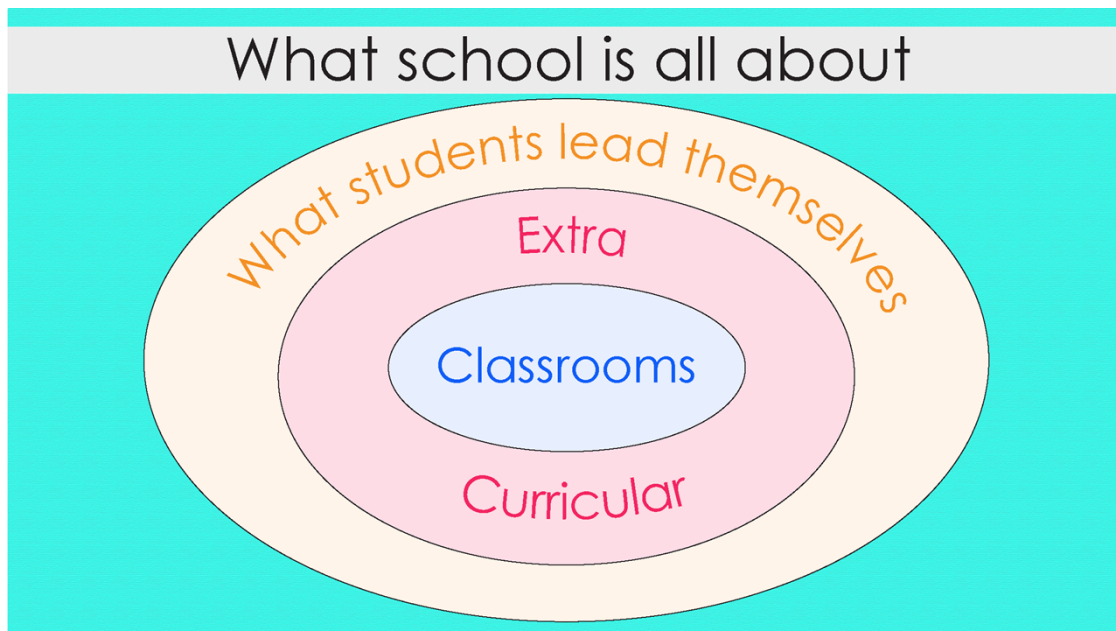
Leaders everywhere are wrestling with a post-Covid sentiment that whilst families and children still value education, attendance everyday in the place called school is not essential to making academic progress. Anecdotal and data evidence to that effect is ubiquitous.

Recent unseasonal rains throughout the Gulf region led to administrators closing schools for several days, with the presumption that on-line learning can just be switched on. Switch into gear all schools did with professional ease, but with variable rates of virtual attendance from students. Teachers in the region comment on the long-term impact of this assumption that schools can be closed all too readily.

And the same is true of snow, polling station (how quaintly English) and RAAC closures in the UK - the impact particularly on more vulnerable students is everywhere to be seen in challenges around mental health, resilience and classroom behaviours. Arguably this cocktail is more evident in the secondary sector, yet special and primary colleagues have similar tales to tell.

How are schools fighting back and achieving today consistent 90-few per cent attendance? From the perspective of the learner, schools are about what goes on in classrooms and common spaces, in extra-curricular programmes, and in activities which students lead.

# What school is all about



Schools I have visited which buck the trend of a downward spiral in attendance - where Friday absentee rates are no worse than Monday, where March rates are as good as those in January - create fundamentally a sense of belonging. School environments, classrooms and corridors present a warm and engaging welcome. The quality of classroom commerce promotes the fun and fundamentals of learning. Teachers and support staff value the presence and contribution of every child.

Further in these schools where attendance is high, the diversity of extra-curricular clubs appeals to the interests of almost all children, not just to those who thrive in sports, drama and music. They enable children to develop important friendships.

Most significantly, 'belonging' is best evidenced when students take a lead *themselves* in organising a range of clubs, activities, visits and visitors. Talk to learners in schools in any context and their conversations are alight with opportunities to do just that. And for some 'children on the margins', the responsibility and pride this affords makes that sense of belonging ever more precious.

So often I see the very best of state education when sitting alongside learners in special schools and SEND hubs within mainstream. Dr Tim Coulson (CEO, Unity Partnership) memorably observes that when a school captures the heart of an inspector, that inspector captures the heart of the school in the inspection report. Take this from a residential special school:

*Children thoroughly enjoy staying at the school. They take part in a range of different experiences that help them to have fun, develop relationships and practise the skills that they need in order to be successful when they leave. This includes going to a local gym and on shopping trips and taking part in imaginative play.*

Or this from a secondary comprehensive:

*Speakers and external visits are deliberately interwoven into the curriculum to enhance pupils' experiences. Many pupils develop their leadership skills and take up opportunities to become school councillors or reading mentors. Pupils leave school with a secure knowledge of the different opportunities available to them.*

These are but two examples where that deep sense of belonging leads to high attendance rates.

Belonging lies deep in the human psyche. Leaders and teachers who recognise this provide irresistible learning environments. Every time, these trump those who casually assume that virtual experiences can supplant the living classroom.

**Roy Blatchford's is the author of [The A - Z of Great Classrooms](#) published by John Catt.**