Chapter 19
Journeying Towards Belonging:
The Voices of Young International School Students

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ABSTRACT

This chapter builds an understanding of belonging and examines it in the context of international schools in an increasingly global world. It focuses on the early years and explores a case study at a well-established international school with eighteen 4- to 6-year-old children. Together with the children, the researcher co-constructs understandings around young children's ontological perceptions of belonging. The research explores children's views of what enables and what hinders belonging in ethnically, culturally, and linguistically diverse international educational spaces and culturally responsive and developmentally appropriate means through which these perceptions can be accessed. The chapter then discusses the implications and recommendations resulting from the case study. It offers methodological practices for research with young children in international spaces, possibilities for further research, as well as theoretical, pedagogical, and structural considerations for international educators and school leaders striving to create inclusive spaces.

INTRODUCTION

Belonging is a commonly used word. Its meaning seems so natural and commonsensical that it is often mentioned without much explanation or questioning from an early age. It is not unusual to hear: *"That shovel belongs to me!"* in sandpits all over the world. As we grow older, the concept of belonging takes on several meanings and we start to recognize it as not merely relating to our possessions but also forming out of interpersonal attachments.

Maslow (1943), who proposed a five-tiered motivational theory, established belonging as a fundamental human need. He identified it as essential, right after basic physiological and safety needs had been met. Baumeister and Leary (1995) argued that belonging is the critical human motivation that drives everything we do as individuals and as a society. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) concluded that belonging is intrinsic to the well-being of children (United Nations, 1998).

In the recent past, the world was conceived as a collection of mutually exclusive national states. Belonging was directly tied to nationality, ethnicity and race (Pollock & Van Renken, 2009). The role of schools was to transmit and shape the cultural values, beliefs, behaviours and norms necessary for the next generation to successfully negotiate belonging in their geographical location (Healy, 2020). Globalisation, however, has blurred boundaries; the role of schools in perpetuating traditional norms to create a homogenous society has been and continues to be confronted by hybridity. The COVID pandemic seemed to further highlight the human longing and need to belong as well as an increasingly interdependent, interconnected world. This leads to the question: what does belonging in a global world look like and entail, and what are schools' roles in fostering it? While grappling with how to ensure belonging in increasingly diverse classrooms, some highlight that a school's role has become even more important as children start formal education ever earlier (Johansson & Puroila, 2021).

International schools, which readily conjure up colourful, happy images of many nationalities and cultures playing, working and laughing together, seem like ideal places to look for solutions. In recent years, international schools have witnessed unprecedented growth (Hayden & Thompson, 1995; Dixon & Hayden, 2008; ISC, 2022). The International Baccalaureate (IB), a popular curriculum initially developed for the international sector, has been adopted by not only a growing number of international schools but also national schools (IBO, 2020). Could international schools and international education untangle belonging from traditional notions and provide a more globally relevant framework through which to view and foster it? Although 'international' in name and often espousing to develop *"intercultural understanding and respect"* (International Baccalaureate Organisation, n.d.), international schools are coming under attack for upholding and promoting western, colonial, hegemonic ideologies (Tanu, 2020).

This chapter presents a case study at a well-established European international school which adds to the discourse around belonging in culturally, ethnically and linguistically diverse settings by including the voices of young international school students. The chapter commences with a broad literature review on belonging, narrowing its focus first to school belonging and then conceptions of belonging in early years' frameworks. It critically examines and establishes understandings around the terms international school, international education, Third Culture Kid (TCK) and Cross Culture Kid (CCK). Finally, the chapter discusses the implications and recommendations resulting from the case study. It offers developmentally appropriate and culturally responsive methodological practices for research with young children, possibilities for further research, as well as theoretical, pedagogical and structural considerations to enable inclusive spaces.

BACKGROUND

Defining the Concept of Belonging

The concept of belonging has been widely researched through the lenses of diverse disciplines. Several researchers argue, however, that these studies have been undertaken without concise definitions (Anton-

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