

# Every Student Matters: Cultivating Belonging in the Classroom

These five strategies can help ensure that students feel they belong in your classroom.

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About a year ago, I received a text in the middle of the teaching day from the mother of a student I had taught eight years earlier as a second grader. She thanked me for always being there for her son, who had come out

as gay to their family the night before. She shared that her son—now a senior in high school—mentioned me in their conversation and said I had taught him that all people have equal value in the world, a lesson that helped him face the truth of who he was.

Early elementary teachers rarely see the seeds we try to plant in our young students come to fruition, but we always hope they will grow into the people we imagine they can be. For the last 16 years, I've taught in an inclusion classroom where many students have learning differences that can pose a challenge to connecting with others. I've learned that

if students feel anxious socially, they will not be open to taking academic risks, so building a culture of belonging has become my greatest priority. It is important to clarify that when I say “belonging,” I am not talking about “fitting in”—students’ individuality and uniqueness should always be valued. Belonging in the classroom means ensuring that all students feel welcomed, comfortable, and part of the school family.

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Here are five simple ways I’ve found with which I can convince every student that he or she was meant to be in my classroom:

1. Shine a light on each student. Students often look to their teacher for a cue on how to handle social situations. In learning, we simply call this modeling. When working with students who have learning differences, I’ve learned it’s important to model that every child has something special about him or her that we can celebrate. I had a student who ate alone every day the year before she joined my class. Her behaviors set her apart, and other students naturally started avoiding her. When she became my student, my co-teacher, my aide, and I made an intentional effort to laugh with her

and praise her around her classmates. Soon, my students began to see her in a different light, and she never ate alone again. Help your students see each other through your eyes, so they can see each other's greatness.

2. Foster student identity building. Five times per year, I allow my students to do genius hour or passion projects of their choosing. I require only a two-paragraph written or typed piece to ground the work in English language arts. For students, these projects become very personal and a way to share more about who they are with their classmates, while boosting their public speaking skills. I've had students present about their rare medical conditions that they were previously afraid to talk about. Other students have explored their family heritage or activities they participate in, like karate or dance. In every case, students are empowered by their interests and passions, and they regularly say they enjoyed the learning that took place—about themselves and each other.

3. Always leave one desk empty. Every year, I have had at least one new student join us halfway through the school year. Chances are, for any 8-year-old going through a midyear move, it is one of the most difficult times they will ever endure. Seeing an empty desk when they arrive signals that our class has been waiting for them all year—and reminds other students throughout the year that our class could grow and change at any time. I also have my students make and hand out cards for the new student to welcome him or her upon arrival. Teachers have the power to send the message that they've been inconvenienced or the

message that they're excited and happy for a new student to join the class.

4. Make sure that each child feels chosen. Several times a year, I ask my students to anonymously write down the names of three students they want to sit with or work with—ranked in order of preference. I go over the results to see who is being selected and who is not. With that knowledge, I seek out students who aren't chosen and create opportunities for them to build relationships with their peers. I may call on one of them and say, "Choose anyone you want to walk this to the office," for example, to help improve their social equity in the eyes of their peers. Other times, I will assign these students specific partners who will help them by modeling good social behaviors.

5. Weave social and emotional practices throughout the day. Toward the end of a school year, I start allowing students to choose their partners for activities, but I change up the traditional classroom social dynamics by letting the students who are typically not chosen to be the choosers. Knowing how this could easily backfire, I remind students of the proper and improper ways to react if the person who chooses them wasn't who they had in mind by stating, "When someone chooses you, they are giving you a gift—the gift is saying, out of all the people in the class, I choose you." This simple exercise takes only about three minutes, but it builds an important social and emotional foundation that teaches students to appreciate each other.

We can never take for granted the importance of our students feeling they belong. In a world that does not yet

fully welcome everyone, schools can reinforce existing divisions or provide students a safe community that feels like a second home. That former second-grade student of mine went on to attend the prom with his boyfriend in our very conservative town and initiated a town-wide pride campaign. I have never felt more proud of my impact as a teacher. As educators, we really can help change the world, one child at a time.

<https://www.edutopia.org/article/every-student-matters-cultivating-belonging-classroom>