

As Director of Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging at UNIS, Alcy Leyva views belonging as both a mission and a daily practice. It is the heartbeat of our community. Belonging is not something we simply achieve, but something we nurture together every day.



Alcy Leyva
UNIS DEIB Director



At UNIS, the “B” in DEIB—belonging—was intentionally added because it represents the lived experience of our mission. It is what connects the values of the United Nations to the daily interactions that take place in our classrooms, hallways, and homes. Belonging is not an outcome we measure only once a year; it is a practice that defines who we are and how we treat one another.

When I first arrived as an English teacher at UNIS in 2019, the world came to a sudden halt with the onset of COVID-19. The familiar rhythm of school life was replaced by uncertainty. Yet, in that difficult moment, the UNIS English Department became my anchor and place of belonging.

My colleagues checked in regularly, shared resources, and offered laughter during long virtual meetings.

They created space for one another to be human amid the chaos. It was in those early days that I truly understood what belonging at UNIS meant.

To belong is to feel recognized, respected, and valued—not for fitting into a mold, but for being your whole self in a community. For students and families at UNIS, belonging is the difference between simply attending a school and becoming part of a collective that feels like home. When belonging is present, learning deepens, collaboration strengthens, and compassion grows naturally. It is the invisible thread that ties our international community together across cultures, languages, and perspectives.

To me, the idea of belonging mirrors the dynamics of a family. In families,

people may disagree, misunderstand each other, or see the world differently. Yet there is an underlying anchor of care and protection. Families make space for aspirations, growth, and laughter. Families also remind us that belonging cannot exist without responsibility. Each member contributes to the health of the whole. In schools, this means that belonging is sustained by students, teachers, and families who choose to act with intention. Every sleepy-eyed “Good morning”, every moment of listening, every time we make space for another person’s story—these are all acts of belonging. They build trust and reinforce the belief that everyone has a place in this community.

This year, I started my first meeting with the statement:

DIVERSITY is a fact.
EQUITY is a choice.
INCLUSION is an action.
BELONGING is an outcome

This is especially important in a community as diverse as UNIS, with students and families representing every corner of the globe. This diversity is a gift, but it also means that our experiences, customs, and understandings of identity are diverse and varied. Without a sense of belonging, diversity can feel distant.

With belonging, diversity becomes a source of strength and connection. Belonging becomes a reality as students see their home cultures reflected in the curriculum, staff feel supported in bringing their full identities to work, and families are invited to share traditions that enrich our community. Belonging transforms diversity from a description into a shared experience.

As the Director of Diversity, Inclusion, Equity, and Belonging, I view belonging as both a goal and a guiding principle. It reminds us that policies and programs are only meaningful when people feel seen within them. It asks us to slow down and listen before acting, to understand before assuming. Belonging teaches patience and care, helping students become thoughtful global citizens who recognize their impact on others.

At UNIS, we strive to embed a sense of belonging into the rhythm

of school life. It shapes our advisory conversations, our cultural celebrations, and our support systems. It influences how we discuss identity, conflict, and history. It even informs how we welcome new members of our community. When new students or families arrive, we want them to know that UNIS is not just a place of learning but a place of connection. This community celebrates differences while uniting around shared purpose. Ultimately, belonging matters because it affirms our humanity. It says, proudly- "You belong here." It allows a student to raise their hand with confidence.

It provides an opportunity for a teacher to share new ideas or for parents to engage in conversations with trust. Belonging transforms the concept of school into a living entity, where every person's presence contributes to the collective story of who we are. When I served as an English

teacher, I often encouraged my students to seek the humanity within a story—the shared thread of hope or heartache, pain or passion—that speaks to us through the written word. I referred to this as the "heart" of the story. In much the same way, belonging is not merely one aspect of DEIB; it is our heart. I see it when we break bread together. I see it when we pack up our bags and board our buses on our way to the next great adventure.

These moments in time give meaning and coherence to what UNIS is and what UNIS can be. And just like a family, our strength is found not in uniformity, but in unity. When we celebrate, protect, and care for one another, we live the ideals of the United Nations and fulfill the promise of our mission. That is why belonging is, and always will be, at the center of my work here at UNIS.

We build connection through care

Every greeting, check-in, and shared story strengthens trust and community.

We honor diversity through inclusion

Students, staff, and families see their cultures and identities reflected and valued.

We lead with humanity

Belonging shapes how we listen, learn, and live our UN values together every day.

Creating Belonging

