**Podcast transcript: Bullying and Belonging**

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Announcer: This is a Queensland Department of Education podcast.

Virginia:Australian schools have banded together to tackle the problem of bullying and violence through Bullying No Way: National week of action - Australia’s key prevention initiative connecting schools and communities to find workable solutions to prevent bullying.

Today Dr Kelly-Ann Allen joins me to discuss the importance of belonging in schools and how it can help to prevent bullying.

Thanks for joining me Dr Allen. Could you tell me a little bit about your career to-date and your interest in the area of belonging?

Dr Allen: Absolutely. Thank you so much for having me.

I am an Associate Professor in the School of Educational Psychology and Counselling at Monash University. I haven’t always been an academic. I started off my career as a school psychologist, endorsed in the practice area of educational and developmental psychology. My first year of working as a psychologist was working in an early childhood intervention setting and then moved into primary schools and then later into a K–12 setting.

I think that gave me a really good appreciation of just how important it was to translate the research into something usable in practice. I had an opportunity to work around teachers and school leaders and other school psychologists. They’re busy, dynamic, chaotic sometimes, unpredictable settings. And you know, the way we use research in those settings can vary, but we don’t always have the time to sit down and read the latest research. So, when I eventually went into academia after doing quite a few years of sessional teaching in academia, I took on this appreciation of being able to translate research that we do, into something usable. And I think that's kind of where I have landed at the moment as an academic.

Virginia:So, you’ve combined your expertise as a practitioner with your academic research? Is that right? And your interest is in the field of belonging and social inclusion?

Dr Allen: That is absolutely spot on. The belonging piece really comes from being so deeply inspired by some of the educational context where I worked previously, as a school psychologist, where I could see some schools just really nailed the belonging aspect of that school climate, school environment, the relationships. They really did belonging well.

It made me driven, to understand better how schools could all do belonging well. What are the ingredients of belonging? So, I think it was from my work as a practitioner that inspired me to pursue deeper research interests than understanding of belonging for schools.

Virginia:And what does it actually mean to belong at school?

Dr Allen: That’s a really interesting one. So I’ll start off with the academic response, so bear with me and don’t get bored.

It basically means, where everyone has that sense or a feeling, that they feel accepted and included and respected and valued. When you’re looking at research on school belonging, or writing on school belonging, that is actually the main definition that most researchers will use. Feeling that you’re in the right place at the right time and you’re meant to be there. As my daughter says, who’s nine, she goes, ‘it’s when I feel like I’m meant to be somewhere’.As a researcher I have actually asked other students, not just my daughter, with a sample size of one. I have asked others and I’ve had this amazing opportunity to ask children as young as three years right up to adolescence and even university level students about what belonging means to them. And we see lots of similarities even with the three-year-olds. They’re talking about things like safety and feeling comfortable. And I think adding in those kinds of words to describe a sense of school belonging is also I think important to think about safety, of course is really important in the context of why we’re talking today because there’s things that make us not so safe, of course threaten our sense of belonging. So, comfort and safety I would add in.

Virginia:Why is it easier to belong at some stages or some ages compared to others?

Dr Allen: That’s a really interesting question. I’m so glad you asked that. I think, what we see with belonging, we see similarities and common language, common things that facilitate belonging across the age groups. But I do think that we also see that certain age groups might have more difficulties and challenges with a sense of belonging than other age groups.

There’s lots of reasons for that. There’s natural human development. I remember when I was a school psychologist, we would use something called, The Beck Inventory, and we would measure something like self-esteem or self-efficacy and when we did it with younger children, their self-esteem was huge. It was always really high. You know, you talk to a five-year-old or a six-year-old about what they can do. They’re very quick, usually, to be able to give you some answers to that but, once they get to the upper year levels, they’re more likely to be more judgemental at what they are doing. There is more of that self-criticism, comparison to others and a part of that is, a part of that developmental shift from childhood to adolescence. It’s not uncommon. A part of the feeling like you belong is very much around your perceptions of whether or not you belong or fit in. As psychologists, we say cognitions or attributions or perceptions but really, it’s that internal chatter or the thoughts that you might have around whether or not you feel like you belong or whether an event has happened and whether that internal chatter is saying well that negative event that I just experienced, well that’s happened because I don’t feel Iike I belong here.

So, I think that that as we mature and grow older that kind of thinking can creep in a little bit more and it can challenge us. But the other thing I want to say about that is, we see the 15 to16-year-olds in high school, we see a drop in their belonging but we do see a higher sense of belonging towards the end of high school. And I think one of the reasons for that is, if we can put aside human development and adolescence and the turbulence that’s associated with adolescence, in schools we also see a lot of things occurring at the start of high school and at the end of high school. There’s a lot of work and thought that goes into transitions. So there’s a part of me that wonders whether or not that also has an impact on sense of belonging. But the other thing about this is, something that we forget about all the time – and I think it’s because it’s free and just happens – and that is time. It actually takes time to belong. So sometimes there’s work places or school settings that will ask students that have just spent a minute in the context and they are asking them, ‘do they feel a sense of belonging’. They probably don’t yet. Belonging does take time to grow. And I guess we need to think about that in the context of transitions and how we think about belonging to make sure we are allowing that time and space for it to actually happen.

Virginia:So, belonging I guess will mean different things to different people, so can you explain how it’s different in some cultures. How they have a different understanding or experience of what belonging means?

Dr Allen: Now that’s an interesting one because, I think, when we think about belonging, we cannot really think of it as this kind of separate entity. It is very context specific. So, when we are talking about cultures, culture is one example of a particular context in which someone might feel a sense of belonging. So, you might have all those individual traits that will lead you to having a high sense of belonging like you might have really high social and emotional competencies, you’re able to connect well with others make friends, keep friends. You’ve got a high sense of self-worth and self-efficacy. You might have all those positive perceptions about school and your sense of place there and whether or not you fit in, but if your context is rubbish, then you are going to have trouble feeling like you’re going to belong.

The context is important. Like if you don’t have that support around you or if there’ s no opportunities to belong. Even though I’m segueing off culture in the way that you probably mean it, I’m sorry about that. I just want to really emphasise that context really matters in terms of belonging. I think understanding students and teachers and other school staff sense of belonging within a particular context is always an important lens to be examining why people belong and why they might not belong.

Virginia:Can you give an example of what you mean by context?

Dr Allen: I guess I’m taking a really literal perspective of context. It’s just the place – it’s the school culture, it’s the school climate, the presence or absence of policies or professional development opportunities for educators. The peer group and the culture and climate of the peer group – is it positive? What are the social norms around welcoming people and being friendly? What kinds of social networks exist, what sorts of activities, sporting groups, clubs. I guess that’s what I mean by context. That’s probably different from your original question which was about culture. With that, I probably should say that, the way the word, belonging, is understood in different languages can vary greatly in different cultural groups, in different contexts can vary greatly. Like a really good example of that is, understanding the belonging that comes from First Nations people and just how belonging is such a prioritised and respected construct within their culture. Over 80,000 years’ worth of knowledge and shared knowledge just how we’ve actually got something that we can really learn from their understanding of a sense of belonging and what it means. A sense of belonging to land, a sense of belonging to kinship. Again, that takes that definition of a sense of belonging just to be that little bit broader than just that individual experience. It’s about the community. The community functioning well together, not just the individual within that community.

Virginia:What are some of the benefits for students when they feel like they belong at school?

Dr Allen: The benefits are endless and it’s actually really hard to boil it down into a nutshell, but we see huge amounts of benefits, particularly for mental health. I’ve done some research recently with some colleagues at Monash and Deakin [Universities], and the University of Melbourne and we have seen the benefits of feeling a sense of belonging at school at the age of 15, being linked to reduced depression and anxiety and stress right up until the age of 30. So, these are just not benefits for the experience then and there. It’s the benefits right into adulthood.

We’ve also done some research with Phil Parker at ACU [Australian Catholic University] who looked at education, further education and employment, and he found benefits of school belonging again in adulthood. When students found a sense of belonging at school, they are more likely to engage in further education and employment. It sounds like it would be obvious though, right? If you feel a sense of belonging at school it might prime you to do further education down the track.

The benefits, there’s associations found with things like, physical health and social competency, being engaged in communities, trust, relationships, it’s endless almost.

Virginia:Are there any benefits regarding the sense of belonging, if say, you didn’t feel like you belonged at school but you had a group of friends at school that you belonged in? Does that assist or is that something that can be potentially negative?

Dr Allen: Regarding the question, there’s probably some room for some further research. But I guess if you sort of step it back and you go and you sort of look at the ancient philosophies and really early research, we can see that belonging is understood to be a fundamental human need. At the very core we are driven to feel a sense of belonging. I think if we sort of think about that, then you might not feel a sense of belonging to school but you got a positive peer group, which I argue, might help with your sense of belonging to school. That need is being fulfilled in a really positive and pro-social way. That is meeting that basic psychological need that would then be a protective factor.

There is a lot of research on that general sense of belonging as well. But I find some times when I’m engaging in that type of research, people will first say ‘Belonging to what? What are we actually feeling a sense of belonging too?’.So, I guess, in your question, it’s that a sense of belonging to your peer group.

Virginia:A lot of your research has been to do with belonging and bullying. Is that right?

Dr Allen: Belonging has been the focus of my research and then through that research I have dipped my toes into lots of areas. That’s included a wide range of things like, belonging in older adults and AI and a sense of belonging and loneliness. So, I’ve dived all over the place. One example of that is, actually being in the area of bullying research as well, which I’ve done alongside other colleagues in that area. If we’re talking about belonging and bullying, I don’t think I’m going to say anything that’s going to be ground breaking.

We know that bullying threatens personal safety. Safety is important for belonging. When you’re being bullied your sense of belonging is going to be a bit rocky. I don’t think anything sends the message, ‘you don’t belong here’, more than bullying behaviour. These are messages that when we are experiencing bullying, it’s detrimental because it’s stuff we carry throughout our lives. If we’re looking for the reasons we don’t feel a sense of belonging, when we are feeling bullied or we are experiencing bullying, we can then go onto almost being hypervigilant or hyper-aware of circumstances or events or experiences or interactions that might send the message, where we don’t belong. We almost collect that evidence and it becomes this mindset for us. You know, anyone that is listening, I challenge them to really reflect, if you’ve got the time and the space, on what your experiences were like at school. Did you experience bullying? The way that bullying is thought of and approached throughout the generations have changed quite significantly. The next frontier I think is maybe going to be tackling sibling bullying which we’ve kind of dismissed sometimes as a little bit normal. In previous years, bullying behaviour was a little bit brushed under the carpet or a little bit more accepted. I think now that we are sort of more in tune and more aware and more armed with being knowledgeable about what respectful relationships are and how that doesn’t include bullying behaviour, we are going to have more positive relationships with people in the future or we’re set up to, at least.

Virginia:Following on from what you’ve been saying, does it then make sense, that people who engage in bullying have reduced wellbeing?

Dr Allen: Yeah absolutely. The people that experience bullying of course seems really obvious that their wellbeing will be impacted, their self-worth, their self-efficacy, all those things that actually help with the good school experience, they’re all impacted. But I think what’s less known is that some of those negative side-affects, if you will, of bullying are also experienced for the person that is engaging in bullying.

We know about students who do bully others, they may themselves have behavioural problems. They may also feel like an outsider. They may also have a low sense of belonging. And while for a moment we might think okay, so they are engaging in a behaviour that might be shifting that power balance and you might be thinking that there might be some benefits associated with it, the research over time shows that those benefits are really temporary and there are major social repercussions that can impact their sense of belonging. Peers might move away from them and they might themselves suffer from a loss of friendships, lack of respect from their peer groups, teachers struggling to manage them may view them more negatively. And just taken together, this can just have a negative impact on how they are socially accepted and then those opportunities for them to feel a sense of belonging can reinforce itself and become a really negative cycle.

Virginia:Can you tell us why having strong relationships with teachers and feeling valued by your teachers is so important to students?

Dr Allen: One of the first pieces of research that I did do was a meta-analysis, looking at those ingredients of what makes people feel a sense of belonging at school and the most powerful factor was the student-teacher relationship. Back then I called it teacher’s support. Really that meant that teachers are likable, they’re approachable, they are available for emotional support, not just academic support. All those kinds of things that make up that relationship and it was just one of the biggest influences compared to any other variables.

When I first did that research, I went in with the belief that peers would be the most powerful and I left that research understanding that it was actually teachers. Peers are important for a sense of belonging of course but teachers have the most powerful influence in students’ feeling a sense of school belonging.

Why teachers though? Why teachers over peers? I think teachers are more influential than sometimes we give them credit for. Although, when it comes to looking at things like learning and achievement and success, whatever that means, we know through research, like John Hattie’s research for instance that teachers are a pretty important variable already. I think even just by the sheer nature of being a teacher it carries a particular weight or a power dynamic that just makes that relationship just that little bit more special. I mean, if you are listening to this, transport yourself back to that first time you saw a teacher when you were a student out in the wild, out in the supermarket or out in a restaurant and that feeling you had, like you have just seen a celebrity. Teachers just by being teachers and not even necessarily going off and doing the latest PD or being amazingly good at their job. They don’t need to do anything; they just need to be the teacher in that relationship and that’s sometimes just enough. For many students it’s such a special relationship. To be noticed and known and talked to by your teacher, is just such an incredible relationship or such an incredible event. I think that relationship is important for many students for their sense of belonging.

Virginia:That’s actually really wonderful to hear.

 Dr Allen: I think the beauty of this belonging stuff is, it doesn’t necessarily require an intervention, which is good because there’s not that many around. These are the things that we‘ve got as human beings. We are equipped to do those things. Of course, there are things we can always do better. I do a lot of work with Erica Frydenberg who has a huge amount of research on coping over the last 30 years. She says you can always cope better, well I think we can always belong better and we can always be more active and mindful and engaged with the relationships around us and invest in them, and spend time with those relationships. So, I think we can always belong better and include others. The teacher relationship is a really good starting point for that.

Virginia:The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, or the OECD, identifies belonging as a major trend in education, however, Programme for International Student Assessment, or PISA data, is showing a decline in school belonging. What more might be done to address this apparent disconnect?

Dr Allen: I’ve been monitoring the piece of data for quite some time and this decline in school belonging has been persistent for over a decade now. Slowly it’s been dropping. If you’d asked me 5 years ago, what could we do to put belonging on the table or belonging as an agenda item for schools or governments or policy makers, I would never have imaged saying something like, ‘you know what we need, we need a global pandemic and we need lockdowns, you need to stay at home and not leave our house’. I would have never have said that. However, having studied belonging since 2010 and to see the shift in the way it’s been prioritised in recent years and more recently. It’s just amazing to see something that wasn’t necessarily of interest or dismissed because it’s naturally occurring, all those reasons to see it on people’s minds, and schools, school leaders having it as a priority is just amazing.

Virginia:Is it because during the pandemic there was less of a sense of belonging, that it became obvious that that’s what was needed?

Dr Allen: I think so. I think the pandemic and the associated lockdowns and that fact that we weren’t able to engage in the usual opportunities that would give us a sense of belonging – the clubs, the groups, the social activities. When you think about it for many people, other people really are important for this sense of belonging relatedness and those relationships and they were disrupted. And we had to get creative with how we navigated it, how we were able to overcome barriers to belonging through the lockdowns. So not only was it sort of challenged for us, and made many of us reflect on how important some of those relationships, those visits, attending those groups, that we may have even dragged our feet to attend or grumbled about as we were having the family over for dinner. I think the pandemic gave us a new sense of appreciation for just how important other people are for our belonging and put it on people’s agendas. I mean we did see a drop in belonging. There is some research that shows a rise in loneliness around that time. The facilitators for what helps us to belong have remained stable. So that’s one important part of the research to come out of it.

Virginia:Finally, if you could give one piece of advice to teachers or school leaders about how to help students feel they belong, what would it be?

Dr Allen: There’s one thing that I would say that, there is not one thing that will help students feel like they belong. It is a variety of things and different things will facilitate belonging for some students and not others, so I think making sure that the environment is rich with different opportunities to belong is really important. So, belonging is being tackled in a variety of ways. Whether it is building up those social and emotional competencies, the psychological flexibilities, that ability to be able to deal with challenges and to cope and not question your belonging. All those things I think are important and the relationships of course.

But if I could just say just one thing, for say educators or school staff or school leaders. It’s to be liked and to be likeable. I’m not saying here, cross professional boundaries or become BFFs with your students. I’m not saying that at all, but look within yourselves and in your own lives and the satisfying relationships that you might have, within your own relationships and notice the time that you might put into them and the effort you put into them and acknowledge that they’re not necessarily something that just happens automatically. They take a little bit of work. It’s the same for the student-teacher relationship. It does take a little bit of work and a little bit of thought around, what are the common interests I have with this person? And what are the things that we both like to do? What do I know about them and what do they know about me? I think these are really simple things and we practise usually with our other relationships but applying that to students in a school context is important. I think no matter what their age. And I think you’ll find that the benefits aren’t just for the students, they actually might be for the educators and the school staff as well.

Virginia:Thanks very much for your time, Dr Allen. Thanks for your insightful look into bullying and belonging.

Dr Allen: My absolute pleasure. Thank you so much for having me along.

Virginia: This podcast was produced on behalf of Bullying No Way, an initiative of the Australian Schools Anti-Bullying Collective.

Announcer: You have been listening to a Queensland Department of Education podcast. The Department of Education acknowledges the traditional owners of the lands from across Queensland. We pay our respects to the elders past and present, for they hold the memories, the traditions, the culture and hopes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.