

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

A Sense of Belonging in Regional Queensland Special Schools From the Perspective of School Leaders, Teachers, and Teacher Aides[†]

Marie Hayward and Margaret Marshman 

University of the Sunshine Coast, Australia

Corresponding author: Margaret Marshman; Email: mmarshma@usc.edu.au

(Received 13 November 2023; revised 10 October 2024; accepted 27 November 2024)

Abstract

Sense of belonging is a complex construct that we all strive for in our daily lives. Sense of school belonging influences educational outcomes and is vital for cognitive, behavioural, and socio-emotional success at school. Sense of belonging for students with disability in special schools has rarely been examined and is not well understood. In this study, we investigated the role special school leaders, teachers, and teacher aides play in building a sense of belonging for themselves and their students. Two hundred and sixty-two participants from 10 state special schools within a regional area of Queensland, Australia, completed a survey to determine their perceptions of how special school staff promoted school belonging as well as their knowledge of policy documents. Responses consistently indicated a positive sense of school belonging across all schools. Findings highlight what school leaders, teachers, and teacher aides do in their everyday practices to promote a strong sense of belonging at their special schools, including building positive trusting relationships with all stakeholders, learning environments that valued diversity and difference, inclusive practices that met the social and academic needs of students, and schools' organisational practices.

Keywords: sense of belonging; school culture; relationships; Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (APST); inclusion; special schools

Schools play an important role in the inclusion of students with disability and develop welcoming cultures through policies, practices, and language that enhance safe and supportive learning environments (Soto-Chodiman et al., 2012). The Queensland Government Department of Education (DoE, 2021) states that with inclusive education all students can attend their local state school, access and participate in high-quality education, learn in safe and supportive environments, and have their academic and social needs met. For students with disability, their learning goals can be achieved through reasonable adjustments and supports. To create and maintain inclusive classrooms for all students, teachers need to extend and incorporate their professional knowledge, professional practice, and professional engagement (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership [AITSL], 2018) to provide students with learning opportunities and experiences (Kauffman & Hornby, 2020). For some students with moderate and/or severe multiple disabilities, mainstream education is not always

[†]This manuscript was accepted under the Editorship of Michael Arthur-Kelly.

suitable due to limited or inappropriate resources, staffing and staff development, and available specialist learning experiences (Hornby & Kauffman, 2021).

Queensland, like other Australian states and territories (and internationally), maintains a dual education system for educating students with disability (Maag et al., 2019). Students enrolled in Queensland special schools have a recognised complex disability, including moderate to severe intellectual disability, and could not reach their full potential without the special education services delivered by special schools (DoE, 2022). Parents whose children have a disability make difficult decisions when enrolling their children into school; some prefer to send their children to mainstream schools, whereas others continue to support special schools. Some parents favoured segregated special school settings due to smaller class sizes with specialised teaching practices, equipment, and facility design; lower teacher-to-student ratios; and resources beneficial for children with significant disability (Maag et al., 2019). Other parents were frustrated with the limited funding and specialist training available for teachers in mainstream schools, making special schools a better option for their children (Maag et al., 2019): ‘families are more likely to feel truly included and emotionally safe when teachers value children as learners; accommodating and supporting their learning’ (Maag et al., 2019, p. 185). This study investigated the role of school leaders, teachers, and teacher aides at 10 special schools in building a sense of belonging for themselves and their students within these special school environments. Findings highlighted what these school leaders, teachers, and teacher aides do in their everyday practices to promote a strong sense of belonging for all.

Belonging

Belonging is something we all strive for and may encompass a feeling, a sense, or a set of practices that relate to people, places, things, and objects (Wright, 2015). However, belonging is not simply accomplished or achieved but something that is situational, personal, and socially constructed (Pesonen et al., 2023). Experiencing a sense of belonging is integral to people’s lives (Greenwood & Kelly, 2019). Belonging builds social bonds that enhance individual competencies and wellbeing (Dimitrellou & Hurry, 2019) as well as encourage social reproduction, shared resources and interest, and self-satisfaction (Slaten et al., 2016). Sense of belonging incorporates feelings of comfort, security, and emotional attachment (Riley & White, 2016).

Belonging is defined as individuals feeling included (Ibrahim & El Zaatari, 2020), accepted, respected, supported, and valued (Greenwood & Kelly, 2019) within a particular social setting (Vaccaro & Newman, 2016). The four components that affect our sense of belonging within any group include (a) membership, which aligns with affiliation and identification with group members; (b) influencing the discourse of ‘talk’ of being part of a group; (c) integration and fulfilment of personal needs relating to levels of care, trust, and support among group members; and (d) shared emotional connections (Hyde et al., 2022).

School Belonging

Schools have complex and dynamic social environments that play a key role in establishing a sense of belonging through social networks and relationships (Pesonen, 2016). Schools support building a sense of belonging by encouraging strong relationships between staff, students, and parents (Breeman et al., 2015) as well as providing opportunities for students to participate in school-based activities (Prince & Hadwin, 2013). Such relationships and social networks are essential for overall school functioning, with ‘trust [as] the key ingredient’ (Erwin, 2004, p. 9). These close relationships and feelings of belonging support physical and psychological wellbeing (Pesonen, 2016). One of the first things staff and students do at a new school is to establish social bonds to foster personal connections and a sense of belonging (Vaz et al., 2015). Feeling that one belongs at school impacts the ‘quality of social relations’

(Dimitrellou & Hurry, 2019, p. 322) as well as students' cognitive, behavioural, and socio-emotional success at school. Those who feel part of the school community display greater competence, confidence, security, and satisfaction (Moore-Southall, 2016). In contrast, a lack of a sense of belonging has been associated with negative psychological factors such as stress, emotional distress, alienation, and loneliness, which may impede school success for staff and students (Moore-Southall, 2016).

Schools provide optimum learning environments where students experience belonging, participate in school-based activities, and form friendships (Neal, 2013). The school environment is considered as the 'heart and soul' of the school (Cobb, 2014, p. 16), where a caring, safe, and supportive learning environment enhances students' sense of belonging (Pesonen, 2016). Turner et al. (2014) described the school community as 'what we are and what we do as a school' (p. 331). School belonging is derived from social, emotional, and cognitive components of the school learning environment (Sassen, 2015), which is supported by school policies and practices both within and outside classroom settings (Niemi, 2017).

School belonging could be a belief or a perception that the adults within the school community care about learning, show interest in students' work, and have high academic and social expectations, which can positively influence school success (Moore-Southall, 2016). A sense of belonging at school gives staff and students an opportunity to learn, interact, and understand how staff and students develop feelings of acceptance, support, inclusion, and respect (Pesonen et al., 2021): 'It is important to understand that school success and students' success academically are not the precursors of school belonging but the result of it' (Hyde et al., 2022, p. 429). It is crucial that school belonging 'supports students at a time in their lives when they are vulnerable and searching for their own sense of identity' (Hyde et al., 2022, p. 429). School belonging enables students to feel more comfortable in their social and academic abilities (Sassen, 2015).

A sense of belonging for school leaders, teachers, and teacher aides is multifaceted based on their various relationships that are grounded on mutual trust, support, care, and acceptance (Pesonen et al., 2021). The culture of the school provides a platform for sharing ideas and beliefs; in addition, it enables school staff to feel comfortable in their own abilities and feel valued as a contributing member of the school community. For school staff, positive school culture encourages a strong work ethic and increases job satisfaction and wellbeing (Wiley, 2017). For students, a sense of belonging is how they feel safe, get along with school leaders, teachers, teacher aides, and peers, and feel that school staff care about them and treat them fairly (Moffa et al., 2016). Students who feel that they belong in the classroom and school community develop stronger social connections (Moore-Southall, 2016), show interest, and enjoy school (Raufelder et al., 2015).

A sense of school belonging (SoSB) for students with and without disability has been widely researched in mainstream school literature. According to Pesonen et al. (2016), there is limited research into school belonging within special segregated settings. There is also limited research on how school leaders, teachers, and teacher aides perceive and create a sense of belonging at special schools. In this study, we aim to consider the perspectives of school leaders, teachers, and teacher aides on what constitutes a sense of belonging within regional Queensland special school settings. The research questions are as follows:

- How do school leaders, teachers, and teacher aides achieve an SoSB for themselves and their students within regional Queensland special school settings?
- How does school leaders, teachers, and teacher aides knowledge and understanding of the policy documents Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (APST; AITSL, 2018) and the Inclusive Education Policy (DoE, 2021) support an SoSB for themselves and their students within regional Queensland special school settings?

Method

The findings presented here are part of a larger doctoral study. We report here on the initial phase, a paper-based survey. The survey was developed to gain a general insight from the maximum number of participants into school belonging in special schools within a selected educational region in Queensland. The survey was administered to teaching staff and school leaders at 10 participating special schools within an education region of Queensland, identified alphabetically A through J. This region was selected due to the diversity of special schools, enrolments ranging from 65 to 248 students, and locality ranging from metropolitan to rural schools. The survey results were used to identify a school that represented the educational, demographic, policy, and procedural features of the 10 schools in which to conduct an in-depth single case study (Phase 2). Ethical approval was gained from the Human Research Ethics Committee of the University of the Sunshine Coast (approval number S171025) and from Research Services in the Department of Education, Queensland. School principals were approached via teleconference at a regional principals' meeting. Individual principals' consent was obtained at follow-up meetings. The first author attended school staff meetings and explained the project, including that it was doctoral research and their firsthand perspectives of school belonging was valued. Participants were assured of the voluntary nature of the survey and anonymity of individuals and schools. Paper consent forms and surveys were distributed with large envelopes for the two forms to be returned separately.

Participants

School leaders, teachers, and teacher aides were invited to participate at staff meetings where 262 participants undertook the survey (male = 40, female = 220, abstained = 2). There were 219 teachers (including principals and deputy principals) and 43 teacher aides. The participants' median age range was 46–55 years, with 7–11 median years of teaching experience. The participants' teaching qualifications included 65 with primary, 16 with secondary, 34 with early childhood, and 139 with special education qualifications. Some participants held multiple qualifications. Their current positions were principal ($n = 8$), deputy principal ($n = 9$), head of department ($n = 9$), and teacher ($n = 181$), while two abstained. Ten participants indicated that they held other positions, including information technology support officer, communication coach, and educational interpreter, while three participants abstained. The response rate was 87%. Each participant was given a numerical identifier (e.g., teacher 45 at school S was identified as S45).

Data Collection

The survey was developed to gain insight into staff's perspectives of how they developed students' SoSB using literature on school belonging and inclusion and policies including the APST (AITSL, 2018). The school leadership teams were asked further demographic questions relating to staff and student numbers and class sizes. The survey contained forty 5-point Likert-scale statements ranging from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (5) as well as open-ended responses grouped into three categories:

- *SoSB*, where participants shared their beliefs and experiences about school belonging in relation to perceived relationships and interactions that built school culture, social bonds, and positive connections among stakeholders, especially with students within their school communities.
- *Inclusive school systems*, which underpin SoSB and encompassed acceptance, respect, and listening to all voices within school communities. Inclusive schools provided a space where success was experienced, both academically and socially. The definition of inclusive schools used is that required by AITSL (2020). The Disability Standards for Education 2005 (Department of Education, Skills and Employment, 2020) require that all Australian schools
 - ensure that students with disability are able to access and participate in education on the same basis as students without disability

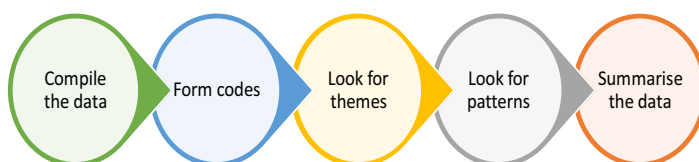


Figure 1. Thematic Map.

- make or provide ‘reasonable adjustments’ for students where necessary to enable their access and participation.
- *Policies*, such as the Student Learning and Wellbeing Framework (DoE, 2018), the National Safe Schools Framework (Education Services Australia, 2013), and APST, are all combined under the headings of Professional Knowledge, Professional Practice, and Professional Engagement.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data responses were analysed statistically using SPSS Statistics 26 by performing descriptive statistics and an ANOVA to identify any statistically significantly different responses between the 10 schools. Following each category of items, an open-response question allowed participants to respond in more detail. The qualitative data derived from these responses were thematically analysed according to Yin’s (2011) five-step process. The first step was to re-read participants’ comments in order to compile and group the data. The second step was to disassemble the data to form codes. The third step was to reassemble the data to find themes from the codes. The fourth step related to interpreting the data to check for patterns and to interpret meanings. The fifth step summarised the data. Figure 1 represents the thematic process for interpreting and analysing participants’ comments. Findings from themes aligned with the survey categories were presented.

Findings

Findings from the 10 participating schools are presented according to SoSB, inclusive school systems, professional knowledge, professional practice, and professional engagement. Table 1 gives the number of participants and the mean agreement rating and standard deviation in each category for each school.

SoSB

Participants shared their beliefs and experiences about school belonging in statements about the perceived relationships and interactions that built school culture, social bonds, and positive connections among members of their school communities. Twelve statements contributed to the total SoSB, showing a strong mean agreement rating ($M = 4.37$, $SD = 0.42$). Participants noted (see Table 2) that school belonging contributed to the wellbeing of staff, students, and parents within their school communities. The themes from the open-response question included school belonging, school culture, and relationships.

Communication gave people a voice and critically influenced school belonging for all stakeholders. Participants strived for open communication, as one teacher stated, ‘communication builds rapport’ (C9). Daily connection between school and home developed trust and respect, as demonstrated in the use of artefacts such as communication books, which informed staff and parents about daily school/home activities (H16).

Participants reported that students’ learning outcomes and wellbeing were the glue that knitted the community together. A school leader stated that staff were ‘committed to every student succeeding’ (E6). Being smaller schools, ‘students’ learning is highly individualised [and] bonds, understanding,

Table 1. Number of Participants, the Mean Agreement Rating, and Standard Deviation in Each Category for Each School

		School									
		A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J
Number of participants		40	28	37	18	17	30	9	16	25	42
Sense of school belonging	<i>M</i>	4.33	4.30	4.22	4.54	4.46	4.58	4.45	4.53	4.43	4.21
	<i>SD</i>	0.36	0.44	0.38	0.36	0.35	0.35	0.35	0.33	0.36	0.53
Inclusive school systems	<i>M</i>	4.50	4.44	4.29	4.70	4.52	4.60	4.45	4.70	4.41	4.22
	<i>SD</i>	0.43	0.44	0.38	0.34	0.34	0.40	0.41	0.37	0.40	0.65
Professional knowledge	<i>M</i>	4.56	4.61	4.25	4.58	4.46	4.63	4.55	4.83	4.41	4.26
	<i>SD</i>	0.44	0.43	0.58	0.52	0.49	0.42	0.30	0.33	0.47	0.69
Professional practice	<i>M</i>	4.44	4.59	4.17	4.55	4.51	4.80	4.60	4.74	4.51	4.16
	<i>SD</i>	0.55	0.41	0.53	0.49	0.54	0.31	0.42	0.34	0.48	0.70
Professional engagement	<i>M</i>	4.45	4.61	4.25	4.60	4.56	4.71	4.67	4.71	4.53	4.30
	<i>SD</i>	0.43	0.45	0.55	0.59	0.46	0.38	0.39	0.37	0.46	0.70

Table 2. Sense of School Belonging (SoSB) Items Mean Agreement Rating and Standard Deviation

Statement			Percentage of participants agreeing
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	
Relationships between staff and students' impact on the SoSB.	4.66	0.54	99%
Teachers play a critical role in shaping students' school social experiences.	4.61	0.57	97%
Special school enrolment does not prevent students with disability from feeling an SoSB.	4.56	0.83	90%
Belonging is building social bonds with others within a community/group.	4.52	0.59	96%
Teaching and learning relationships influence students' perceptions and interactions within the school community.	4.50	0.58	97%
Interpersonal relationships are dimensions of school culture.	4.38	0.65	93%
Social involvement and school-based activities are factors of school belonging.	4.37	0.69	94%
School belonging is how stakeholders (staff, parents/carers, students) identify with the school community.	4.36	0.64	92%
Belonging is a psychological need rather than a want.	4.35	0.87	96%
School culture is a significant aspect of the school environment.	4.21	1.02	84%
Disciplinary codes, norms, and rules influence school belonging.	4.16	0.67	89%
School belonging is influenced by the school's organisational practices.	3.78	1.02	72%
SoSB (Total)	4.37	0.42	

and communicating with students and parents are especially close' (H1). Participants articulated school belonging was shaped by high expectations for both staff and students, commitment to staff and students' wellbeing, access to age-appropriate individualised curriculum, and celebrating students' achievements and successes, with communication a 'cornerstone' (H1).

Participants remarked that relationships among all stakeholders were crucial to building positive school culture and school belonging. These relationships were described as 'positive', 'trusting', 'strong', and 'close'. A teacher noted that the 'personal priority of teachers is being committed to building positive relationships' (D2). Rapport needed to be built with students and their families to gain

assistance and understanding of students' individual support needs. A school leader said, 'positive relationships between staff and students is key' (J26) to building rapport and trust. Regular connections with families formed working relationships, networking platforms, and friendships that influenced the learning environment. Participants said they strived for open communication, giving stakeholders a voice and an SoSB.

Participants stated that working as a team fostered and maintained positive relationships. Parental involvement was important as it provided a platform to 'meet with parents to discuss learning goals and parent concerns' (F20). Parent collaboration was encouraged 'in all aspects of student learning, planning, goal setting, assessment, and extra-curricular activities' (B11). Collaboration between home, school, and the wider community enabled students to 'experience life and learning in other settings' (C16), thereby facilitating partnerships that enabled students to understand social relationships and interactions.

Inclusive School Systems

Inclusive school systems valued and accommodated diversity and difference as a foundation of school belonging. Inclusive school systems underpin SoSB and encompassed acceptance, respect, and listening to all voices within school communities. Inclusive schools provided a space where success was experienced, both academically and socially. According to the *Final Report of the 2020 Review of the Disability Standards for Education 2005* (Department of Education, Skills and Employment, 2020), inclusive education ensures students with disability can access and participate in all school-based activities with reasonable and necessary adjustments. Participants said an inclusive school system developed and maintained school belonging where responsive programs promoted stakeholder collaboration enabling students to learn and reach their full potential in safe and supportive environments. Participants agreed they provided a space where students experienced academic and social success. For the 10 schools, there was a strong combined mean agreement rating across the 11 statements ($M = 4.44$, $SD = 0.43$; see Table 3). The themes from the open response question included inclusivity, inclusive education, and inclusive practices.

According to one teacher, inclusion was 'an essential element for all stakeholders to successfully function and participate' (D12). This was reiterated by a school leader, who said that 'if we all feel included, we all feel valued, [and] this directly impacts on students' sense of belonging' (A34). A teacher added, 'feeling included is key to establishing and maintaining the culture that supports all stakeholders to be the best they can be' (D3).

A school leader acknowledged that special schools were not 'inclusive' because of 'the need for diagnosis/IQ tests in order to enrol and stay' (B10) but were very inclusive of all stakeholders within their school communities. Inclusive education should be student-centric with trained staff who provide a safe, supportive, and inclusive environment. A teacher noted that inclusive education allowed students 'to feel as though they are respected and valued members of the school community' (F1).

Inclusive practices were regarded as central for understanding students' individual learning needs, ensuring that 'programs ... were individualised' (I12), enabling students to experience success. Teachers said they 'celebrated, encouraged, and acknowledged students' individual achievements' (D4).

Professional Knowledge

Professional knowledge pertaining to school belonging included teachers knowing their students and how they learnt, which aligns with APST 1: 'Know students and how they learn' (AITSL, 2018), as well as what experiences and capabilities students brought to the classroom. Through their knowledge of the curriculum, teachers structured and differentiated their programs and pedagogy to meet students' learning needs, demonstrating teachers achieving APST 1.5: 'Differentiate teaching to meet the specific learning needs of students across a full range of abilities' (AITSL, 2018). Classroom communication enhanced students' social skills and social needs, demonstrating teachers achieving APST 3.5: 'Use

Table 3. Inclusive School Systems Mean Agreement Rating and Standard Deviation

Statement	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Percentage of participants agreeing
Inclusive education is a process, not a product.	4.30	0.68	91%
Inclusive practices enable students to learn and achieve within a safe, supported, and disciplined learning environment.	4.51	0.62	95%
Inclusive practices deliver quality education that aligns with students' abilities, skills, and competencies.	4.47	0.64	93%
Social outcomes are a focus of inclusive practices.	3.92	0.95	74%
Inclusive practices must be located within the culture of the school.	4.21	0.86	83%
Members of the school community are more likely to achieve their potential if they feel accepted, respected, valued, and included.	4.77	0.48	98%
Special school settings can be inclusive.	4.59	0.78	93%
School should promote positive respectful relationships among the school community.	4.70	0.51	99%
Inclusive practices promote collaboration between staff and parents for better educational and social outcomes.	4.48	0.64	95%
Inclusive practices deliver responsive programs and services for students with disability.	4.38	0.70	95%
Inclusive education matches curriculum and pedagogy with students' social and learning needs.	4.38	0.71	92%
Inclusive school systems (Total)	4.44	0.43	

effective classroom communication' (AITSL, 2018). When teachers know each student individually and how they learn, are able to differentiate to cater for each student, and communicate effectively with each student, teachers can create classroom environments where each student feels valued and that they belong. Participants reported that their professional knowledge contributed to stakeholders' sense of belonging and wellbeing. There was a strong combined mean agreement rating ($M = 4.48, SD = 0.53$) across the 10 schools, as shown in Table 4. The themes from the open-response question included teachers' knowledge, teachers' actions, and teachers' thoughts.

Participants felt that their professional knowledge built a sense of belonging at school. Teachers' knowledge of the APST (AITSL, 2018) was critical, as a school leader (D4) explained, 'as teachers in special schools, it is vitally important that teachers are expert in developing their knowledge of students (APST 1) and the content that is to be taught (APST 2)' (AITSL, 2018). By understanding how students learn, teachers assisted students to participate fully in school-based activities. Knowledge of the curriculum allowed teachers to differentiate learning activities to accommodate students' needs.

Professional knowledge was important for supporting students' holistic learning, as a teacher reflected that 'shared knowledge, shared understanding, and learning outcomes assist in maintaining strong supportive relationships between staff and students at this school' (D3). A teacher aide expressed that 'it takes both professional knowledge and understanding each student's repertoire to help students with both educational and social needs' (B15). A teacher added that 'professional knowledge involves researching different ways of communication and interacting with different students with different disabilities in different situations . . . keeps teachers accountable' (A38).

Professional Practice

Professional practice supported school belonging, enabling teachers to plan lessons, implement the curriculum, and evaluate students' progress in a safe, supportive environment, as evident in APST 4:

Table 4. Professional Knowledge Mean Agreement Rating and Standard Deviation

Statement	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Percentage of participants agreeing
Understanding how students learn is enhanced through our professional knowledge.	4.56	0.58	97%
Professional knowledge assists students in participating fully in classroom activities.	4.49	0.64	95%
Knowledge of the curriculum allows teachers to differentiate planning and lessons to meet the learning needs of students.	4.52	0.71	94%
While implementing the curriculum and utilising pedagogy, teachers are responsible for meeting the social needs of their students.	4.27	0.76	88%
Professional knowledge can enhance classroom communication, particularly for students with disability.	4.55	0.61	97%
Professional knowledge (Total)	4.48	0.53	

‘Create and maintain supportive and safe learning environments’ (AITSL, 2018). Participants agreed that professional practice contributed to the school community’s sense of belonging. These professional practices developed productive and engaging learning environments, improved school communities’ awareness and celebrations of diversity and difference, and enhanced student wellbeing and personal/social capabilities, evidencing APST 4.4: ‘Maintain student safety’ (and wellbeing; AITSL, 2018), and hence contributed to the school community’s sense of belonging. Across the 10 schools, there was a strong combined mean agreement rating ($M = 4.46$, $SD = 0.53$), as shown in Table 5. The themes from the open-response question included teachers’ everyday practice and teachers’ opinions about their practice.

Participants believed that their professional practice ‘keeps goals challenging but realistic’ (A38). A school leader added, ‘individual skill sets for teaching staff impacts our own ability to provide a rich learning environment that is open, respectful, caring, and safe’ (D8). Another school leader described the importance of professional practice on school belonging: ‘professional practice, sense of community, and strong focus on using PBL [Positive Behaviour for Learning] are supporting our desire to improve school belonging’ (A34). A teacher expressed that ‘a high level of professional practice enables teachers to know the students well and that impacts on belonging’ (D13), aligning with APST 1.

Professional Engagement

Professional engagement impacted on stakeholders’ sense of belonging. Through cooperation and collaboration, school partnerships were fostered, which helped to promote safe, supportive learning environments. Across the 10 schools, there was a strong combined mean agreement rating ($M = 4.51$, $SD = 0.52$) in response to the individual survey items, as demonstrated in Table 6. The themes from the open-response question included teacher engagement and partnerships.

Participants felt that professional engagement was important and supported staff ‘to have a sense of belonging at school’ (E7). A teacher aide felt that there was ‘no learning without engagement and no engagement without a feeling of safety and wellbeing’ (A26). The learning environment was influenced by staff’s professional development, particularly areas centred on ‘wellbeing and mindfulness’ (H8). A school leader said their school ‘has a strong commitment to developing professional engagement of our people’ (D4), as it was ‘the link between the school community [which] was reliant on the school leadership to establish goodwill that could have a positive influence on school belonging’ (J40).

Participants said valuing partnerships was important ‘but their impact on belonging was dependent on relationships [and] respect for people within these partnerships’ (J3). Positive partnerships between ‘school, home, and the community impact greatly on belonging’ (D12). A school leader added that

Table 5. Professional Practice Mean Agreement Rating and Standard Deviation

Statement	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Percentage of participants agreeing
Teachers' professional practice supports students' personal and social capabilities.	4.41	0.65	94%
This school provides a rich learning environment that is open, respectful, caring, and safe.	4.34	0.78	87%
Safe and supportive teaching and learning environments are enhanced through positive behaviour management.	4.53	0.64	95%
Our professional practice helps create and maintain teaching and learning environments.	4.48	0.59	95%
Building communities that value diversity and difference are improved by our professional practice.	4.49	0.62	84%
Students' safety and wellbeing are supported through our professional knowledge.	4.51	0.63	95%
Professional practice (Total)	4.46	0.53	

Table 6. Professional Engagement Mean Agreement Rating and Standard Deviation

Statement	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Percentage of participants agreeing
School partnerships between staff, parents, and the community help promote safe and supportive teaching and learning environments.	4.48	0.62	94%
Our school acknowledges positive relationships within the school community that influence students' social and academic outcomes.	4.36	0.68	89%
Teacher–student relationships may have a positive effect on students' sense of school belonging.	4.66	0.52	97%
Our teaching and learning relationships influence students' perceptions and interaction within this school community.	4.52	0.59	95%
Our professional learning enhances our understanding of social relationships and interactions, which promote safe and supportive teaching and learning environments.	4.42	0.68	89%
Professional cooperation and collaboration are components that impact on school belonging	4.53	0.58	95%
Professional engagement (Total)	4.51	0.52	

'relationships with families are imperative. [We] provide ongoing support for students and families' (F1).

Other themes that emerged that are not otherwise classified included school policies, programs, procedures and practices, inclusion, and school belonging.

Discussion

Survey findings showed that there was strong positive support for an SoSB across the 10 special schools. Moreover, the SoSB across the participating schools was highly sought. Participants stated that belonging was a feeling of being accepted, supported, and valued as a contributing member of the

school community, supporting the work of Greenwood and Kelly (2019). Akin to Dimitrellou and Hurry's (2019) and Hyde et al.'s (2022) findings, encouraging social bonds and feelings of affiliation and identification with all members of the school community constructed the SoSB, and collegial support was important.

Culture was the heart and soul of these school communities (Cobb, 2014), where a caring, safe, and supportive learning environment enhanced the sense of belonging, as described by Pesonen (2016). Participants described these school environments as positive, welcoming, and supportive. Survey findings indicated that schools' organisational practices, disciplinary codes, social norms, and school rules influenced the sense of belonging at all participating schools, and students with moderate and/or severe disability experienced a sense of belonging. Communication was seen as critical to school belonging for all stakeholders, as it gave them a voice, and communication books developed trust and respect between home and school. In agreement with Greenwood and Kelly's (2019) study, policies, resources, high expectations, and a nurturing ethos contributed to a positive school culture.

Relationships had a positive impact on school leaders, teachers, teacher aides, and students, which supported students' perceptions and interactions within the school communities, similar to Greenwood and Kelly's (2019) findings. Participants said that relationships were positive, trusting, strong, and close among all stakeholders and were crucial to building positive school culture and school belonging. The survey findings indicated that teachers agreed they played a critical role in shaping students' school experiences, aligning with the work of Dimitrellou and Hurry (2019). These teacher-student relationships played an important role in fostering a sense of belonging and positive school culture, supporting the work of Erwin (2004).

Many participants commented that even though special schools are segregated spaces, their respective schools were very inclusive of the students enrolled. Members of the school communities felt included, accepted, respected, and valued, enabling all stakeholders to reach their full potential, similar to the work of Greenwood and Kelly (2019). School leaders were adamant that their respective schools adopted an inclusive education ethos of equity and access. Participants said inclusive practices enabled students to learn and achieve within safe, supportive, and disciplined learning environments, aligning with APST 4 (AITSL, 2018). In support of Dimitrellou and Hurry's (2019) conclusions, most teachers in this study reported that their inclusive practices delivered responsive programs and quality education that aligned with students' abilities, skills, and competencies. Collaboration between teachers and parents resulted in better educational and social outcomes for students.

Teachers had the professional knowledge to implement curriculum and pedagogy to meet the social and academic need of their students, aligning with APST 2 (AITSL, 2018). Teachers' professional practice meant that their school communities provided rich learning environments that were open, respectful, caring, and safe, which supported the Student Learning and Wellbeing Framework (DoE, 2018). Teachers created and maintained teaching and learning environments that valued diversity and difference with students' safety and wellbeing at the forefront, supported by a strong grasp of educational policies, practices, and procedures and positive behaviour management, all of which demonstrated teachers achieving APST 4 (AITSL, 2018). Teachers' engagement with professional learning enhanced their understanding of the social relationships and interactions that promoted safe and supportive learning environments. Tolerance, rapport, and understanding were identified as essential for a safe and supportive environment. Relationships with students had a positive effect on students' feelings of belonging and supported students' social and academic outcomes, aligning with APST 6 (AITSL, 2018).

Conclusion

In this study, we considered how a sense of belonging in special school settings was interpreted by school leaders, teachers, and teacher aides and how this was supported by their knowledge and understanding of policy documents. We sought to address the paucity of SoSB research conducted in

segregated special schools (identified by Pesonen et al., 2016) by surveying those who work with students within special school settings. An SoSB was felt strongly by school staff (school leaders, teachers, and teacher aides), and there was strong overall agreement that an SoSB influenced students' social and academic outcomes, setting students up for postschool success. Participants expressed confidence that their professional knowledge, professional practice, and professional engagement, as specified in the policy document APST (AITSL, 2018), nurtured an SoSB within their special school communities by (a) building positive trusting relationships with all stakeholders, (b) learning environments that valued diversity and difference, (c) inclusive practices that met the social and academic needs of students, and (d) schools' organisational practices. Variations in the data between the schools were minor and emphasised the value of school belonging within these special schools. Staff encouraged and supported the SoSB for all stakeholders.

This survey provided an initial investigation of how special school leaders, teachers, and teacher aides, across an education region in Queensland, conceptualised and experienced an SoSB in their schools. The findings provided a collective voice about how SoSB was nurtured and developed within these schools, providing a guide for other special schools wanting to strengthen their SoSB. The strength of the agreement with statements in the survey and the participant responses that included direct references to policy documents indicated the strong knowledge of the relevant policy documents of the participants who work in special schools. However, the survey findings do not describe individual experiences, nor do the findings provide scope to fully understand the intricacies of school operations.

In this study, we considered the perspectives of the adult population within special school settings. However, the teacher aides from seven schools were not surveyed. Future research on parents' perspectives would also add considerable insight into school culture and the impacts on students' sense of belonging. A case study of an individual special school (Phase 2 of the research) elaborated on these findings in policy and practice. These are under preparation and will be reported elsewhere. It is important to recognise the impact of school belonging on all stakeholders. We all need to feel included, supported, and valued. Queensland's Inclusive Education Policy (DoE, 2021) stated that students attending their local state school will be welcomed, have access to and participate in school-based activities, and learn in a safe and supportive environment. The adults in the school community also need to feel included, supported, and valued. It is critical for policymakers to acknowledge the importance of school belonging, particularly in special school settings, to enable staff and students to experience success.

Acknowledgements. The authors thank Merv Hyde and Anne Drabble for support with developing the survey.

Funding. No funding was received for this study.

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Cite this article: Hayward, M. & Marshman, M. (2025). A sense of belonging in regional Queensland special schools from the perspective of school leaders, teachers, and teacher aides. *Australasian Journal of Special and Inclusive Education*, 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.1017/jsi.2025.2>