

# **INVITE: Inclusion of Newcomers - Video Diaries in Initial Teacher Education**

Dr Peter Tiernan, Dr Matthew Martin, Dr Joe Usher & Karen McGivern

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## Executive summary

This report explores the understanding and perceptions of pre-service teachers regarding their role in fostering a sense of belonging for newcomer children in schools. Conducted through a joint project between St. Mary's University College Belfast and the Institute of Education, Dublin City University, the study investigates how pre-service teachers, as 'place-makers,' can promote belonging and inclusion in increasingly diverse educational environments.

Belonging is a critical psychological need that significantly impacts students' academic achievement, social integration, and emotional well-being. Global migration trends have led to an influx of asylum seekers and refugees into schools across Ireland and Northern Ireland, highlighting the need for teachers to develop culturally responsive practices. This study addresses a gap in the literature by examining pre-service teachers' understanding of belonging and their preparedness to support newcomer students.

The study used an anonymous online questionnaire distributed to pre-service teachers at St. Mary's University College and Dublin City University. The survey gathered both qualitative and quantitative data on pre-service teachers' understanding of belonging and their perceptions of the challenges and opportunities associated with fostering a sense of belonging in schools.

The findings reveal that pre-service teachers universally recognise the importance of fostering a sense of belonging. Key themes emerged, such as the role of belonging in promoting students' academic success, social inclusion, and emotional well-being. Teachers identified opportunities to foster belonging through inclusive classroom practices, promoting diversity in the curriculum, and building strong teacher-student relationships.

However, the study also highlights several barriers to fostering belonging, including time constraints, language barriers, cultural differences, and social group dynamics. Pre-service teachers expressed concern over the lack of resources and support to effectively implement inclusive strategies.

The study underscores the critical role pre-service teachers play in creating inclusive school environments that foster belonging for all students, particularly newcomer

children. While pre-service teachers have a nuanced understanding of belonging, further training and resources are needed to equip them to meet the challenges of increasingly diverse classrooms. Fostering a sense of belonging not only benefits newcomer children but enhances the educational experience for the entire school community.

## Introduction & context

The purpose of this study was to explore pre-service teachers' understanding of belonging in schools, their role as 'place-makers' (Riley, 2019) in the process, and the opportunities and challenges that they perceive exist in fostering a sense of belonging for newcomer children.

Sense of belonging is defined as the extent to which individuals feel accepted, respected, included and supported by others in their social environment (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Recent global events have resulted in unprecedented numbers of asylum seekers and refugees entering the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland (CSO, 2023; Devlin, Northern Ireland Assembly 2022). In the Republic of Ireland, the number of asylum seekers has increased regularly in recent years with a record number of 13,276 in 2023 (ECRE, 2023). Significantly, the figures for the first six months of 2024 were 94% higher than the same period in 2023 (McGreevy, 2024). While the overall figures of asylum seekers coming to Northern Ireland is low in comparison with other areas of the UK, this figure has risen by over 300% from the period of 2020 to 2023 with 3,220 applicants in 2023 (LCNI, 2023). The number and geographic dispersal of new arrivals means that many schools that had remained relatively homogenous in their student makeup now cater to multiple nationalities (Herzog-Punzenberger et al., 2022). Teachers in both jurisdictions need to create environments that foster a sense of belonging for these 'newcomer' children.

Previous research has examined the role schools play in connecting newcomer children to communities, fostering new relationships and establishing a sense of belonging in their new country (e.g. Correa-Velez et al., 2010; deHeer et al., 2016; Mace et al., 2014). A gap exists, however, in the literature around pre-service teachers' understanding of belonging amidst diversity, and their confidence in fostering a sense of belonging (Riley, 2019). This project (INVITE) addresses this gap by engaging with pre-service teachers on initial teacher education (ITE) programmes north and south.

## Belonging in Schools

A sense of belonging in educational settings has been defined as a feeling that you fit in, that you are safe in your identity, and that you are valued (Flewitt et al., 2017; Riley, 2017). Belonging is a multifaceted and multidimensional concept that has received

much attention in academic literature. Authors have discussed belonging as a psychological need (Osterman, 2000), as a representation of inclusion and acceptance (Roberts, 2020), as membership (Schnorr, 1997), as a discursive resource that constructs, claims, justifies, or resists forms of inclusion and exclusion (Antonsich, 2010), and as a guiding principle for educational institutions (Allen & Bowles, 2012) that impacts factors such as well-being, life satisfaction, and academic achievement.

The definitions above speak to the wide-ranging implications of belonging (or lack thereof) on students' academic engagement and emotional well-being. Research indicates that students who feel a strong sense of belonging are more engaged and achieve higher academically (Allen et al., 2021; Booker & Brevard, 2017). A feeling of belonging enables students to engage more confidently in learning activities and to embrace academic challenges (Osterman, 2010). From a social perspective, belonging creates a cooperative and inclusive environment that fosters interactions among students from diverse backgrounds, thereby promoting a harmonious school climate (Juvonen, 2011). Schools that prioritise cultivating belonging not only see improved student outcomes but also enhanced overall school functionality (Allen *et al.*, 2021; Korpershoek *et al.*, 2019), as students feel more connected to their peers and more supportive of their educational community. Thus, actively fostering belonging within schools is vital for enabling students to thrive academically, emotionally, and socially. It also mitigates psychological distress acting as a buffer which is crucial for maintaining student motivation and engagement (Walton & Cohen, 2011; Eccles & Roeser, 2011).

Belonging is such an important factor in students' perceptions of school life that Goodenow's (1993) "Psychological Sense of School Membership" model considers it a fundamental human requirement that is essential for motivation and social development. While belonging is influenced by school culture, school policies, curricular design and implementation, and peer interaction (Allen et al., 2021; Eccles & Roeser, 2011), teacher-student relationships and interactions are (unsurprisingly) particularly important in influencing students' experiences of belonging in schools (Osterman, 2010).

## Understanding Newcomer Children

Definitions of what is meant by the term 'newcomer children' vary by national context. Northern Ireland is distinctive in that there the definition is explicitly based strictly upon a child's language ability:

The term 'newcomer' is used to refer to a pupil who does not have satisfactory language skills to participate fully in the school curriculum and does not have a language in common with the teacher (DENI).

The official definition in Northern Ireland is entirely focused on the language barriers a child faces in accessing the statutory curriculum. For better or for ill in terms of comprehensiveness of policy and execution of strategies, this definition does carry with it a welcome clarity in terms of distinguishing precisely which children are being focused upon in discussions of Newcomers.

In some other jurisdictions across the English-speaking world, including the Republic of Ireland, the term 'newcomer' is used as more of an umbrella term which can contain within it sub-categories of children who come without knowing English as well as those who come from outside the country but nonetheless do speak English. This can include refugee children, asylum seekers and those with other reasons for immigrating. The only text on the Republic's Department of Education website that contains the term 'newcomer' is a 2009 publication from the Economic and Social Research Institute which was commissioned by what was then named the Department of Education and Science entitled "Adapting to Diversity: Irish schools And Newcomer Students". While this publication foregrounds the term 'newcomer' in its title, it quickly steps back from any overly strict definition and is equally quick to acknowledge the range of rough terminology that is commonly used in these discussions:

A number of different terms have been used to delineate immigrant populations (see NCCRI, 2008). 'Newcomer' is now commonly used in educational policy circles and so is the term adopted in this study. Our definition of 'newcomer students' refers to students from families where both parents are from outside Ireland, whether or not the student's first language is English/Irish. This excludes children born abroad with Irish parents (return migrants), and those with one Irish and one immigrant parent. The latter group are likely to differ from the newcomer group as we define it since one of the parents will have English language competency and knowledge of, and familiarity with, the Irish educational system. Although 'newcomer' is used in the remainder of this study, teachers and students use a range of different terms so the quotes cited in the text reflect ordinary usage.

The lack of strict boundaries around this definition does not prevent the conclusions of the piece from foregrounding the fact that, within the Republic, most newcomers do

not have English as a first language and that if language needs are not addressed, academic success and social integration of students will suffer. On the other hand, this study also correctly points out a complicating detail:

Around 38 per cent of non-Irish nationals are from English speaking countries. A reasonable estimate might be that just over one-third of non-Irish nationals are native English speakers; two-thirds do not have English as their first language. Of course, within the group of non-native speakers, language ability may vary substantially.

The Northern Ireland definition usefully cuts through this detail by defining the target population of newcomer policies as those without the language ability to access the national curriculum.

It is important to note that for any focus to be applied on the lack of English skills among such a population, as is done in Northern Ireland, runs a risk of defining these students by their linguistic deficits which can, in turn, alter our thinking about how best to integrate them into school environments in Ireland north and south. Harmon highlights this in the Republic's *School Guidance Handbook*:

The 'deficit model' of English language support continues to prevail in Irish education settings (Ward, 2004; Devine, 2005; Horgan, 2016). This model tends not to value linguistic diversity or further learning of mother tongue languages. Students may be referred to as 'non-English speaking' and the accompanying narrative is that when students learn English they will be able to access the curriculum the same as any other student (p. 8).

So, while the Northern Ireland definition is clear, it may carry with it an unintended focus on the deficit model of understanding pupil abilities and potentials.

It is useful to compare this problem of categorisation and definition within the island of Ireland to the similarly rough and open approach to understanding what is meant by 'newcomer' within the United States, a society almost entirely constituted of people from some degree of immigrant background:

"Newcomer" is an umbrella term that includes various categories of immigrants who are born outside of the United States. For example, all immigrants are not necessarily ELs [English Learners], as some are fluent in English, while others speak little or no English. Students identified as ELs require assistance with language acquisition (though more than 40 percent of identified ELs are born in the United States). Some ELs may need help integrating into U.S. culture. Depending on the school district, newcomers of school age who attend public school may be placed in a newcomer program or mainstreamed" (USDE).

So, in Irish educational contexts north and south, a "newcomer" child refers to children who arrive for various reasons and in a variety of contexts. Newcomer children may be immigrants: children who move with their families to seek better living conditions or

economic opportunities (Potochnick & Perreira, 2017). They may be refugees who were forced to leave their country to escape war, persecution, or natural disaster (Kia-Keating & Ellis, 2017). They may be asylum seekers who have arrived with their families as refugees but whose claims are still being processed. They may also be unaccompanied minors, having entered the country without the presence of a guardian (Szente, Hoot, & Taylor, 2017). These children often face unique challenges as they adjust to a new cultural and educational environment, which can significantly impact their learning and social integration.

In this context, schools need to create inclusive and supportive educational environments for newcomer children, ones which understand their particular and varied backgrounds, the trauma they might have experienced, and their specific educational and emotional needs (Yoshikawa, Suárez-Orozco, & Gonzales, 2017). Teachers and school staff need to be equipped with the cultural competence and resources to effectively support the diverse needs of newcomer students, helping them to overcome barriers and succeed in their new settings (Umansky & Dumont, 2016).

## Challenges and impacts

Newcomer children encounter several distinct challenges which can influence their academic and social integration. These include language barriers, cultural adjustment, social integration, and systemic challenges (Fakhari *et al.*, 2023; Bennouna *et al.*, 2021). As non-native speakers, many newcomer children struggle with the language of instruction, forming a barrier which can affect their ability to follow lessons and participate in discussions (Callahan & Shifrer, 2016). Indeed, in the RoI, a research report undertaken by the DES (2017) found just 75.3% of Primary students reported English or Irish as their mother tongue, indicating a large percentage of Primary students with English as another language (EAL). In the north, as of 2018, more than 15,000 pupils in Northern Ireland lacked a sufficient grasp of English to fully participate in school life (Rutherford 2018). Devlin's briefing paper to the Northern Ireland Assembly (2022) indicates that the numbers of newcomer children coming to Northern Ireland have continued to increase in recent years largely due to rises in the numbers of refugees and asylum seekers. As for percentages of non-English speaking children in schools:



The last number of years have seen continuous significant growth in the number and proportion of newcomer pupils in schools in Northern Ireland. In 2021/22, newcomer pupils accounted for 5.2% of the school population. This figure has risen by over 4,400 pupils since 2016/17. In 2021/22, there are approximately 90 first languages spoken by pupils. Polish and Lithuanian continue to be the most commonly spoken languages behind English; this has been the case for the last ten years (Devlin 2022).

Due to the difference in defining who newcomer pupils are in the Republic of Ireland, it is difficult to find exactly parallel statistics within the two constituencies. Nonetheless, one can see that there is a rough similarity in numbers by looking at the demographic numbers offered by the Republic's Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration, and Youth in 2024 in their report entitled 'State of the Nation's Children: Sociodemographics 1' which states:

In 2022, there were 88,630 foreign national children in Ireland. This accounted for 7.3% of the child population.

This is in keeping with most recent discussions of the matter which suggest that the Republic has a slightly larger percentage of immigrant children in schools than the north, but that the more interesting statistics point toward the wide variation in those percentages from region to region and from school to school within each jurisdiction. As the University College Dublin project report entitled 'Children's School Lives' documents, there is considerable 'variation across... schools in the pupil composition and profile' with regard to numbers and percentages of newcomer pupils. One example is noted of the sorts of statistics typifying this variable situation across the cohort of schools being looked at in the UCD study – and is referred to there as the phenomenon of 'clustering':

Over three quarters of these schools had some children of immigrant background, but these were not evenly distributed. Some clustering was evident, with 12% of these schools having over 40% of their school comprised of children from immigrant backgrounds with a further 22% having over a quarter of children from immigrant communities. Conversely, a quarter of schools had no children of immigrant background (Sloan et al., p. 15).

As will be addressed later, this clustering raises questions about ITE programmes and their ability to provide all pre-service teachers with placement experiences featuring diverse classrooms.

Whether one defines 'newcomer' by language ability or not, adapting to a new cultural environment is itself a significant challenge for foreign pupils. Newcomer children must learn to navigate the educational norms and social expectations of their new country, which can be vastly different from those in their country of origin. Misunderstandings and misinterpretations of these cultural norms can lead to social isolation and emotional distress (Tran & Lee, 2017). In fact, social integration itself is a challenge which newcomer children can experience. Building new relationships can be particularly difficult for these children due to both linguistic and cultural differences. These can be compounded by peers' and teachers' preconceived notions about newcomer children's culture or background, leading to further isolation and exclusion (De Feyter & Winsler, 2018). Systemic challenges also appear for newcomer children. Not only do newcomer children and their families find it difficult to navigate existing school and social systems and structures, but their disproportionate attendance at schools with fewer resources means that systemic challenges related to an ongoing lack of academic support and fewer opportunities for extracurricular activities may exacerbate inequalities and hinder progression and future prospects (Umansky, Thompson, & Díaz, 2017). A combination of these factors may lead to further psychological strain, and heightened levels of anxiety and depression, which further entrench a sense of isolation and potential for underachievement (Gándara & Ee, 2018).

Addressing these challenges requires a holistic approach that includes language development programs, cultural orientation, psychological support services, and strategies to foster inclusion within the school community. Such support not only helps newcomer children adjust and succeed but also enriches the educational environment for all students. However, as mentioned previously, teachers play a crucial role in fostering belonging in schools.

## Teachers' Role in Fostering Belonging

The teachers' role in fostering a sense of belonging can be broadly categorised into initial 'welcoming' strategies, and broader, more long-term strategies.

Initial welcoming strategies include cultural responsiveness practices, language and emotional support, social integration techniques, and family engagement (Guo-Brennan & Guo-Brennan, 2021). Cultural responsiveness practices involve recognising and celebrating the diversity that newcomer children bring to the classroom. This can be achieved through the curriculum content as well as classroom decorations and artefacts that reflect culturally diverse backgrounds (Cappellini & Menasche, 2020). Coleman (2022) found that Irish teachers' having positive cognitive, affective and behavioural attitudes towards inclusion had significant impacts on students' reading attainment. Initial language support can take the form of visual aids, the use of simplified instructional language, and peer-assisted learning strategies. Teachers can also encourage the use of first languages as a bridge to learning English, showing respect for the child's native language and culture (Tran & Lee, 2017). Modern interventions, such as the use of AI to translate the teachers' materials and delivery also show great promise in this regard (Kelly & Hou, 2021). In the early stage of a newcomer child's integration, emotional support from the teacher involves establishing a supportive environment by being approachable, listening actively, and providing affirmations. Establishing trust early on helps these students feel secure and supported in their new environment (Callahan & Shifrer, 2016). Creating opportunities for social interaction is crucial. Teachers can facilitate group activities that promote collaboration between newcomer and native students. Structured activities like buddy systems or peer mentoring can help newcomer children build relationships and feel less isolated (Gándara & Ee, 2018). Engaging with the families of newcomer children can enhance the feeling of belonging. Teachers can reach out to families, involve them in the school community, and provide information about educational practices and resources available. Family involvement is associated with better social and academic outcomes for newcomer children (De Feyter & Winsler, 2018). In the RoI schools which are categorised as DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) receive funding for a Home-School Community Liaison Officer (HSCL). A similar role exists in Northern Ireland in the form of Parents Officers. This HSCL/Parents Officer is a teacher from the school who has been released from teaching duties in order to promote partnership between parents, teachers and community family support services and to improve the educational outcomes and social development of the students (Weir, Kavanagh, Moran, Ryan, 2018). Schools with HSCLs/Parents Officers have designated parents' rooms which Weir et al. (2018) found gave

parents/guardians a sense of ownership of the school and greatly aided in overcoming any apprehension that they may have about visiting and participating with the school. There have been calls for recognising the need to increase allocation of HSCLs/Parent Officers beyond disadvantaged schools in both jurisdictions (Walsh et al. 2022). Indeed this need is compounded in RoI where rural DEIS schools are excluded from the scheme. Walsh et al. (2022) argue that the role of the HCLS/Parent Officer is increasingly important in terms of facilitating the belonging of newcomer students and their families with many HCLS/Parent Officers noting the increased numbers of refugees and immigrant families in their school communities which can bring additional needs and challenges in terms of language and cultural differences.

Numerous organisations outside of schools across both the North and the South of Ireland collaborate with families, such as educational support services and external agencies, to provide guidance and support to teachers and school staff working with newcomer children, from preschool through Post-Primary levels. These efforts aim to address the specific educational needs of children and young people who may be asylum seekers, refugees, or even those from traveller and Roma families. The integration and support of newcomer students in educational settings across Ireland and Northern Ireland can be improved by involving several key organisations who can assist schools in developing their inclusive learning environments. These organisations implement evidence-based approaches to address the unique needs of diverse student populations. The Full Service Community Network, as part of the All-Island Education Network, facilitates a cross-border online community of practice. This initiative, developed in collaboration with Mother Tongues (a social enterprise working to promote multilingualism and intercultural dialogue in Ireland) targets educators of pupils aged 5-12 and focuses on critical areas such as English as an Additional Language (EAL) instruction, multilingual pedagogies, and enhancing communication between schools and migrant families. This approach aligns with research emphasising the importance of culturally responsive teaching and family engagement in supporting newcomer students' academic success. Schools of Sanctuary, a network of more than 1200 Primary and Secondary schools operating throughout Ireland, aims to cultivate a culture of welcome and inclusion within educational institutions. This program reflects the growing recognition of schools as key sites for promoting social cohesion and intercultural understanding, as highlighted in recent literature on refugee

education and integration. The Intercultural Education Service (IES), under the auspices of the Education Authority in Northern Ireland, provides comprehensive support to schools across the north at no cost. The IES's mandate to assist Asylum-Seeking, Refugee, Traveller, Roma, and other Newcomer pupils and their families in accessing education demonstrates a systemic approach to addressing educational equity. This aligns with international best practices in supporting diverse learner populations and reflects a commitment to inclusive education policies. These organisations collectively contribute to a multi-faceted approach to intercultural education, addressing linguistic, cultural, and social dimensions of newcomer integration in educational settings.

In the long term, fostering a sense of belonging for newcomer children requires sustained, effective practices that nurture inclusivity and cultural competence (Dzerviniks *et al.*, 2024; Tarune & Ušča, 2023). These strategies help build a school community where all students feel valued and supported. Strategies include sustained language development, integrative curriculum design, peer programmes and cross-cultural activities, and continued professional development. Continuing language support beyond the initial stages is crucial for newcomer children. Long-term language development should include language classes and continued use of visual and technological aids to enhance comprehension and expression. Providing contexts for language use in real-life situations within the classroom can also greatly aid linguistic and academic development (Hakuta, Butler, & Witt, 2020). Teachers can design curricula that integrate the history, stories, and perspectives of different cultures. Doing this in a sustained way helps normalise diversity and teaches all students to appreciate multiple perspectives, fostering a more inclusive classroom environment (Samson & Collins, 2018). Establishing peer mentoring programs where newcomer and 'native' students collaborate on projects can enhance mutual understanding and respect. Regularly scheduled cross-cultural activities also promote shared experiences and friendships among all students, reinforcing a sense of community and belonging (García-Moya, Brooks, & Moreno, 2020). Long-term engagement with parents and local communities reinforces students' sense of belonging. Teachers can facilitate this by organising multicultural events that invite family participation and by fostering communication channels that make newcomer families feel welcomed and valued (Zhao, Wehmeyer, Basham, & Hansen, 2019). Finally, teachers should engage in

continuous professional development focused on cultural competence. Workshops and training programs that enhance teachers' understanding of the cultures, traditions, and educational needs of newcomer children can improve classroom interactions and instructional strategies (Lopez, 2019).

By employing these strategies consistently, teachers can create a dynamic learning environment that not only supports the integration of newcomer children but also enriches the educational experience for all students, promoting a comprehensive, inclusive community.

## Intercultural Education in Initial Teacher Education in the ROI and NI

In the context of this study, it is important to examine the initial teacher education (ITE) context in the ROI and NI. ITE programmes in the north and the south of Ireland are at a critical crossroads; they are building on previous efforts made to account for the more diverse classrooms student teachers are entering, and beginning to set priorities for future provision in which issues of diversity and inclusion will dominate educational debates. Representative of this crossroads is the recent article “Reframing Teacher Competencies around Inclusion, Equity, and Social Justice: towards an alternative values-centred model of Teacher Education” (Purdy, 2023). This article argues that teachers in this current socially diverse landscape can no longer be educated as mere deliverers of the curriculum but must view themselves “as agents of change to create a more inclusive, equitable, and fair society for all’. It is the purpose of this present study to understand in more detail what can be done to empower beginning teachers in this regard in relation specifically to newcomer children and their sense of belonging in schools. We now examine the ITE context in Northern Ireland and the Republic across four different areas: curriculum content, pedagogical strategies, teacher competencies, and policies and standards.

Initial teacher education (ITE) in Ireland and Northern Ireland increasingly emphasizes intercultural education, reflecting the growing diversity in schools and the recognition of its importance in fostering inclusive educational environments. The **curricular content** for ITE programs in both jurisdictions includes several key intercultural elements aimed at preparing future teachers to effectively engage with and support diverse student populations. These modules are designed to prepare teachers to manage and value diversity in the classroom, equipping them with the skills to foster

an inclusive atmosphere that respects and celebrates differences among students (Loader, 2017). Moving beyond a module-centric approach, ITE programmes in both jurisdictions have integrated intercultural elements across various subjects rather than confining them to specific modules. Literacy and English, Music and History – these culturally-driven subjects particularly increasingly encourage a critical awareness of the need for cultural responsiveness in diverse classrooms. Such integration helps normalize diversity as a core component of all educational experiences, encouraging teachers to implement intercultural practices across the curriculum and to begin viewing themselves more as active ‘change agents’ (Lynch et al., 2017). For example, Céim standards in RoI led to the replanning and rewriting of all ITE module descriptors in all university providers to ensure they complied with Céim standards which include Global Citizenship Education and Interculturalism. The principles of GCE and Interculturalism had to be embedded within the learning outcomes and content of all ITE modules. Many providers also experiment with innovative pedagogy to develop teachers’ intercultural competence. For example in DCU, in module EDP1065 Social and Environmental Education, pre-service Primary teachers engage in a teaching resource evaluation exercise using the framework for Critical Multicultural Geography Education (Usher, 2021). Here pre-service teachers evaluate teaching resources for accuracy, bias and the reinforcement of stereotypes and identify additional supplementary resources that would aid in challenging misconceptions. Other examples include the use of virtual reality to simulate diverse classroom settings, providing teachers with realistic practice opportunities to apply intercultural teaching strategies in a controlled, reflective manner (Jones, 2020).

A list of both specifically relevant modules and curricular sequences in the two institutions involved in this study (SMUCB and DCU) are listed below:

Institution	Degree / Module
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SMUCB	<p><b><i>BEd Degrees in Primary and Post-Primary Education:</i></b></p> <p><b><i>MES2013, MES 2014 Psychological Perspectives on Teaching and Learning</i></b></p> <p>These two modules for second year BEd students involve a number of lectures on relevant learning theories in the first term and Newcomer provision in the second term and are delivered to both Primary and Post-Primary students. Two lectures on approaches to teaching classes with Newcomer children are followed by sessions wherein the students undertake independent work on the subject. Lectures are also followed by reflective workshops after School Experience which focus on the student experiences with newcomer teaching. The learning theories work is assessed by a written assignment and the specific newcomer work is assessed by reflective practice and workshop participation.</p>
SMUCB	<p><b>Saphara Welcome Week</b></p> <p>The lecturer responsible for delivering the Newcomer aspects of <i>Psychological Perspectives on Teaching and Learning</i> is also involved with the Saphara Welcome Week which is delivered in St Mary's University College. The "Be The Change" project is delivered by the charitable organisation, Saphara. 'Be the Change' allows schools and ITE institutions to become better informed about best practice in engaging with Newcomer children and brings practitioners into contact with children in NI with low levels of English literacy living in socio-economically disadvantaged areas.</p>
DCU	<p><b><i>Professional Master of Education Post-Primary:</i></b></p> <p><b>EDS1083: Human Diversity: Being a Teacher of All Students</b></p> <p>This module is designed to equip student teachers with the knowledge, skills and attitudes required to be effectively inclusive teachers of all students they will encounter in Post-Primary schools. Human Diversity will be explored and considered in terms of the implications for teaching and learning in all subject areas and aspects of school life. Student Teachers will have the opportunity to develop personal understanding of inclusivity and what that means in practical terms for them and for their pupils. Policy, procedures and responsibilities for inclusive education will be part of the learning. Case examples representing a full range of learner diversity (e.g. ability/disability, behaviour, ethnicity, gender, religious beliefs, sexuality and race) will be used each week to illustrate and scaffold</p>



	the learning. Student teachers will each develop their own portfolio of inclusive knowledge and practice that is responsive to the learner diversity they encounter in their placement schools.
<b>DCU</b>	<p><b><i>Professional Master of Education Primary:</i></b></p> <p><b>EDP1096: Enabling Learning</b></p> <p>This module aims to support students in integrating and applying the key principles of digital learning, special and inclusive education, and classroom assessment. Students are enabled to design and create learning spaces and opportunities that optimise the engagement, achievement and rounded development of all children in all settings. Specifically, students explore the use of digital technologies, the role of assessment and the implications of individual special/additional needs to make informed decisions to engage and enable all learners in a pedagogically inclusive manner. Collaborative practice is modelled to ensure that concepts are explicitly linked and to prime students to engage in such practice at school level in a collegiate and professional manner.</p>
<b>DCU</b>	<p><b><i>Professional Master of Education Primary:</i></b></p> <p><b>ED1024: Working in Schools</b></p> <p>This module focuses on student teachers developing a "range of inclusive pedagogical strategies and approaches" to create "a welcoming inclusive classroom environment". It is designed and delivered "in line with the Teaching Council's conceptualisation of inclusive education as specified in Céim standards for ITE":  <a href="https://modspec.dcu.ie/registry/module_contents.php?function=2&amp;subcode=ED8088">https://modspec.dcu.ie/registry/module_contents.php?function=2&amp;subcode=ED8088</a></p> <p>(The DCU BEd course also includes a similar module, <i>Teacher as a Reflective Practitioner</i>, which has similar aims and content.</p>

St Mary's University College extends its culturally responsive curriculum into its subject-based studies for both Post-Primary and Primary ITE students. For example, within the study of English literature an emphasis is placed on the need for cultural and social diversity within the literature being taught. Over the course of a three-year pattern of study that needs to cover most of the traditional 'great works' of western European literature, a significant strand is dedicated to the often-overlooked works of great female and minority writers who are now part of a more critically-minded

contemporary canon. A similar critically-minded effort is made throughout studies in the music and history departments, as well.

Many of the **pedagogical strategies and approaches** that are adopted in ITE facilitate reflection on, and development of, intercultural competencies. Lesson study and collaborative learning have gained particular traction (SMUCB expects undergraduate students to complete a lesson-study-like professional enquiry project and also offers a complete Masters module in Research Lesson Study). These reflective practices involve teachers collaboratively planning, observing, and analysing learning activities. When adapted for enhancing pedagogical strategies for intercultural education, these approaches promote deeper understanding and effective implementation of intercultural practices in the classroom (McSweeney & Gardner, 2018). ITE programmes also adopt second-order knowledge and continuous pedagogical education which, by focusing on the ongoing development of teaching skills through reflection on theory and practice, ensure responsiveness to cultural diversity in the student population (Dolan, 2018; Ivanova, 2020). Emphasizing a "transformative pedagogy," ITE programs also develop teachers' intercultural and moral-philosophical understanding. This approach enhances teachers' professional identities by integrating practitioner-researcher and leadership roles, facilitating deep, evidence-informed engagement with intercultural education (Farren, 2019). Multiple strategies incorporated in ITE demonstrate a committed approach to preparing teachers in Ireland and Northern Ireland to effectively address and leverage cultural diversity in their classrooms. The focus is on creating inclusive, supportive, and engaging educational environments that respect and celebrate the diverse backgrounds of all students.

In Ireland and Northern Ireland, teacher education programs increasingly focus on developing **specific competencies** related to intercultural education (Department of Education, 2021; Intercultural Education Service, 2018). These competencies include intercultural sensitivity and awareness, pedagogical adaptability, communication skills, reflective practice, and collaborative skills. One of the primary competencies emphasised is the development of intercultural sensitivity and awareness. Teachers are trained to recognise and respect cultural differences, which is crucial in avoiding stereotypes and fostering an inclusive classroom environment (Nagy, 2018). Teachers are also expected to develop pedagogical adaptability that allows them to modify

teaching strategies to meet the needs of students from various cultural backgrounds. This includes the ability to design and implement curricula that reflect the diversity of the student population (Vogt, 2016). Effective communication skills are critical for intercultural competence. Teacher education programs stress the importance of developing skills that enable teachers to communicate effectively with students for whom English is an additional language, thereby facilitating better understanding and integration (Rissanen, Kuusisto & Kuusisto, 2016). Teachers also develop as reflective practitioners through reflection on their own cultural biases and the impact these may have on their teaching. This reflective practice is aimed at continuously improving their intercultural competence and teaching practices (Marković, Mamutović & Petrović, 2020). Finally, the ability to collaborate with colleagues, parents and the community is emphasized. Teachers are trained to work collaboratively to create supportive learning environments that respect and celebrate cultural diversity, thereby enhancing student engagement and success (Hîrbu, 2022). These competencies are developed through a combination of theoretical learning and practical experiences, such as placements, wherever possible, in diverse school settings and participation in professional development workshops focusing on intercultural education. The aim is to equip teachers with the skills and knowledge necessary to navigate the complexities of increasingly multicultural classrooms effectively. It should be noted however that placements in diverse settings are not compulsory in either jurisdiction with the pre-service teachers themselves often having to secure a school to carry out their placement experience themselves.

In both Ireland and Northern Ireland, **policies and standards** for intercultural education in teacher training are driven by a blend of national mandates and institutional strategies aimed at cultivating an education system that can adeptly handle cultural diversity. In the Republic of Ireland, the "Céim: Standards for Initial Teacher Education" set by the Teaching Council (TC, 2020) emphasises the development of intercultural understanding as a core competency for teachers. This policy framework mandates that teacher education programs integrate intercultural education into their curricula to prepare teachers for increasingly diverse classrooms (Gorman & Furlong, 2023). Northern Ireland's unique political and social landscape has influenced its approach to intercultural education, particularly through the Shared Education policy. This policy facilitates and encourages inter-school collaboration

across different community backgrounds, aiming to foster intercultural understanding and reduce communal tensions (Loader, 2017). The need for intercultural education in ITE has been recognised by Higher education institutions in both jurisdictions (O'Hara *et al.*, 2024; Brown *et al.*, 2024). Institutions have responded by developing specific modules and courses focused on intercultural education. For example, it is in this particular light that universities have incorporated some individual modules that equip teacher candidates with skills to manage diverse classrooms effectively and promote inclusion (Milliken, Bates, & Smith, 2020; Whitaker, 2017). Both Ireland and Northern Ireland stress the importance of continuous professional development in intercultural education, recognizing that initial teacher training is just the beginning. Ongoing training helps teachers stay current with new pedagogical strategies and understand emerging cultural dynamics (Carruthers & O Mainnin, 2017). Ongoing research into the effectiveness of intercultural education policies is crucial. Studies often examine the outcomes of these policies in real classroom settings, providing feedback for policy adjustments and improvements (Austin & Turner, 2020). Together, these policies and initiatives reflect a committed strategy to embed intercultural competencies in the fabric of teacher education, ensuring that educators are well-prepared to meet the needs of all students in a culturally diverse educational landscape.

## Methodology

### Sample

The study sample consisted of pre-service teachers from two higher education institutions: SMUCB and DCU. Participants were enrolled in either Primary or Post-Primary ITE programs, contributing to a diverse range of perspectives within the study. As displayed in Chart 1, respondents comprised 9.5% Post-Primary pre-service teachers at SMUCB, 9.5% Primary pre-service teachers from DCU, 38% Primary pre-service teachers at SMUCB, and 43% Post-Primary pre-service teachers at DCU. This distribution of respondents across both institutions and educational levels provided a comprehensive representation of pre-service teachers' experiences and insights, enriching the findings of the research.

## Current Degree Programme

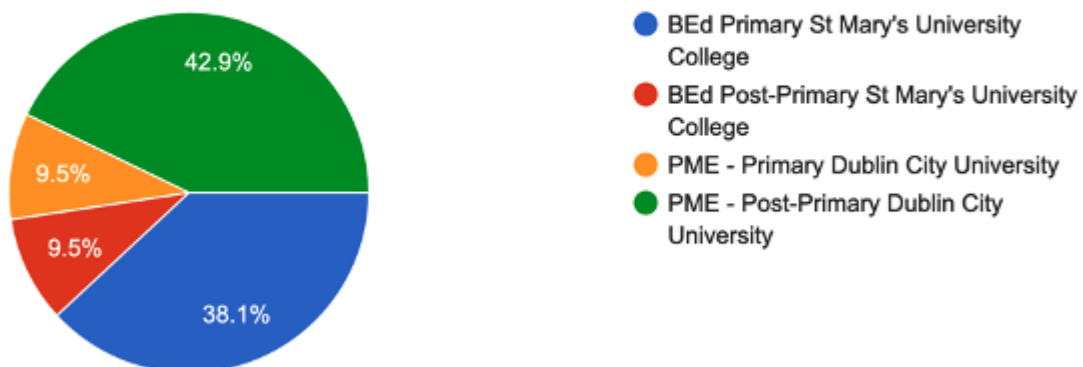


Chart 1: Degree Programme of Participants

## Description of Process

The purpose of this study was to explore pre-service teachers' understanding of belonging in schools, their role as 'place-makers' in the process, and the opportunities and challenges that exist in fostering a sense of belonging. To achieve this, the study contained three distinct phases. Phase one involved the distribution of an online questionnaire. This report is based on the findings of this survey, and details of this are provided in the various sections of this methodology. Phase two involved the delivery of a series of guest talks aimed at positively impacting pre-service teachers' understanding of belonging by providing multiple perspectives on the issues. These included the perspectives of international academics, charity organisations, researchers, and community leaders. A list of speakers can be found in Appendix 1. Phase three invited pre-service teachers to submit video reflections on any change in understanding following attendance at the guest talks. Unfortunately, while attendance at the guest talks was strong, the team received only one video reflection afterwards. For this reason, the data included in this report, and the findings presented, are based on data from the initial survey only.

## Instruments

Data collection was carried out using an anonymous online questionnaire. Questions gathered a mixture of qualitative and quantitative information. The questionnaire

consisted of a series of open and closed questions. Open questions were used to gather pre-service teachers' thoughts, feelings, and opinions. Closed questions took a variety of forms. Some questions were used to gather general participant information, such as the institution being attended and their current degree programme. In these instances, pre-service teachers chose from a predefined list of options. One question, "To what extent do you think it is important to foster a sense of belonging?", asked pre-service teachers to answer along a five-point scale from "not important at all" to "very important". This was followed with a qualitative prompt to support their selection. A series of statements concerning pre-service teachers' understanding of fostering a sense of belonging for newcomer students were structured to ascertain pre-service teachers' level of agreement along a five-point scale (1=strongly disagree, 2=somewhat disagree, 3=neither disagree nor agree, 4=somewhat agree, 5=strongly agree).

## Procedure

Following ethical approval, an email was sent to pre-service teachers in each participating institution which provided an overview of the project, researchers' contact details, a plain language statement, and a link to the online questionnaire. The questionnaire opened in November 2023 and remained available for a period of 6 weeks. Out of the 870 potential pre-service teachers, 90 completed questionnaires were returned, giving a response rate of 10%.

## Data analysis

The data collected for this study was analysed in two ways. Quantitative data was analysed using descriptive analysis, and while this form of analysis cannot make inferences for general populations, it is useful in presenting patterns from within individual studies (Tashakkori and Teddlie, 2003). In an effort to gain a deeper understanding of pre-service teachers' perceptions of belonging and its related issues, qualitative data was analysed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Xu and Zammit, 2020). This involved analysing the qualitative data for patterns in the words and phrases in pre-service teachers' responses, which were coded and grouped together as initial categories. As categories emerged, rules of inclusion were developed to ensure consistency in each category. If a piece of data did not meet the

rules for inclusion, a new category was created. This process was repeated until clear categories were present.

## Findings and discussion

Baseline survey data provides an understanding of pre-service teachers' perceptions of belonging and their role as 'place-makers' across Primary and Post-Primary settings in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. Themes covered in this survey include (i) the importance of belonging and pre-service teachers' understanding of belonging, (ii) opportunities and barriers to fostering a sense of belonging in schools, (iii) good practice in schools in establishing a sense of belonging, (iv) understanding of the term 'Newcomer' and their capacity for fostering a sense of belonging.

### The importance of belonging and pre-service teachers' understanding of a 'sense of belonging'

Many authors (e.g. Allen et al., 2021; Osterman, 2010; Walton & Cohen, 2011; Eccles & Roeser, 2011) have highlighted the impact of belonging on student engagement, achievement, and social integration in schools. Findings in this study indicate that pre-service teachers are aware of the significance of belonging. 100% of respondents to the survey indicated that fostering a sense of belonging was either 'important' or 'very important'.

The analysis reveals equally strong agreement across all programs on the importance of fostering a sense of belonging, with the majority of all respondents rating it as highly important. Among pre-service Primary teachers at DCU, 100% strongly agreed, while similarly high levels of agreement were seen in PME Post-Primary and BEd Primary programs, where 80% or more selected highly important. Moderate agreement was observed among a smaller number of respondents, particularly in PME Post-Primary and BEd Primary programs. These findings highlight a shared recognition of belonging as crucial to the academic environment, with minor variations reflecting different program-specific experiences (See Chart 2).

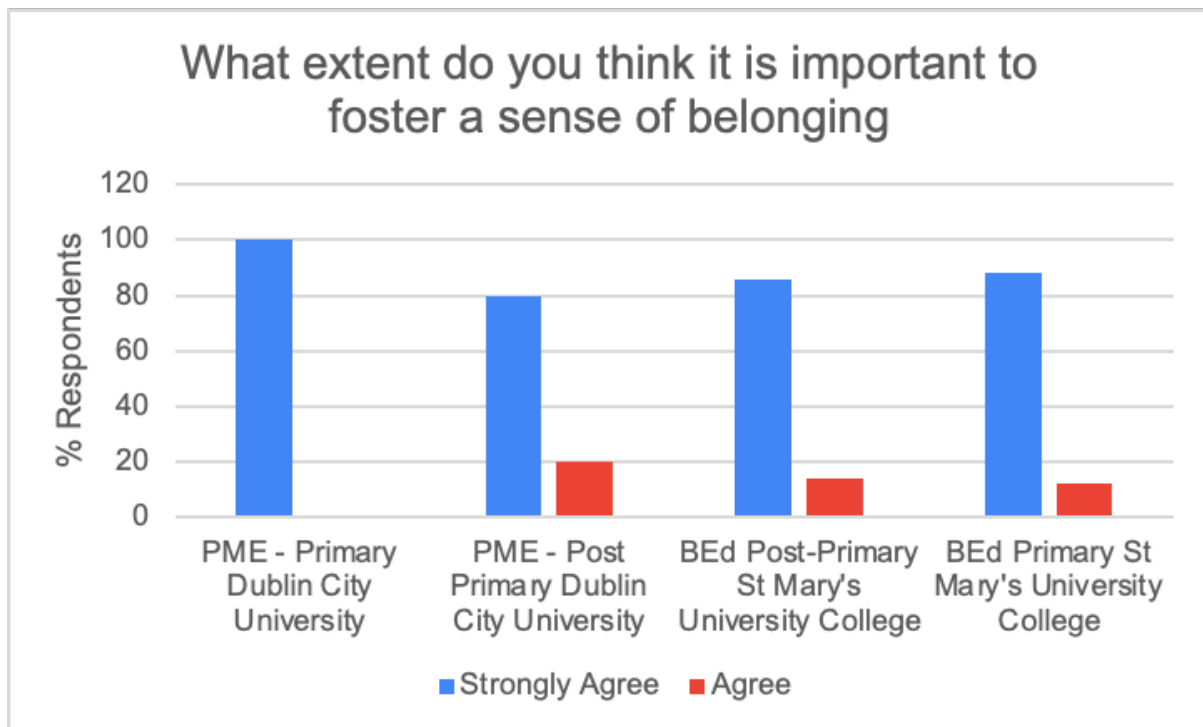


Chart 2: Importance of Fostering a Sense of Belonging

The reasons for their responses also align closely with those highlighted in the literature. Many of the pre-service teachers' responses (42%) related their commitment to belonging to the impact inclusion has on a student's academic achievement and success, with particular emphasis placed on self-esteem as a contributing factor to academic performance. Comments on this theme included statements such as "it helps promote engagement and therefore helps with success", and "if students feel like they belong to a school community [they] are likely to take advantage of all educational opportunities available to them". Pre-service teachers' comments related to self-esteem included: "belonging promotes positive self-esteem in children and gives them equal opportunities to learn" (Respondent 41), and "belonging is directly linked with self-esteem and confidence, which are both vital to development" (Respondent 3). Social inclusion was another prominent theme in pre-service teachers' responses (35%), which included belonging as a basic human need and a concept that is particularly important for schools to develop. Pre-service teachers felt that "everyone should feel included, no matter who they are or where they are from" (Respondent 37) and viewed belonging as a barrier against exclusion saying "exclusion can occur very rapidly if there is no sense of belonging" (Respondent 16). Some responses made reference to Maslow's hierarchy of needs (McLeod, 2007) saying "Maslow's hierarchy of needs places great emphasis on belonging and love,



placing it just after physiological needs and safety” (Respondent 6) and “Belonging is near the bottom of Maslow’s Needs Hierarchy, crucial to surviving and thriving” (Respondent 27). Responses in this theme also made reference to the importance of schools being places of belonging, saying “Everyone should feel like they belong, especially in an educational setting where there are diverse students” (Respondent 81) and “Every child should be entitled to the opportunity to feel that they belong, especially in school” (Respondent 13). The final theme which emerged from the data was wellbeing, with 23% of comments addressing this. Pre-service teachers acknowledged the importance of belonging as it “brings assurance and peace of mind”, stating that it is “paramount for emotional wellbeing and especially mental health”, and that without it students “may develop feelings of anxiety and unease and may withdraw from social opportunities” (Respondent 52).

Data in this section reveals that pre-service teachers are in generally in tune with the importance of developing a sense of belonging. They understand the potential impact of belonging (or lack thereof) on students’ academic success (Allen et al., 2021; Booker & Brevard, 2017; Osterman, 2010), social engagement in school and the wider community (Juvonen, 2011), and the positive role it can play in alleviating stress and improving the overall wellbeing of newcomer students (Walton & Cohen, 2011; Eccles & Roeser, 2011).

The findings suggest that pre-service teachers are aware of the influence their relationship with newcomer students has on belonging (Osterman, 2010). We know that teachers play a significant role as ‘place-makers’ in creating this sense of belonging (Riley, 2019), therefore it is important to understand more fully, pre-service teachers’ understanding of the term. Responses in this section highlight, for the reader, pre-service teachers’ understanding of belonging and show that it is predominately centred around ideas such as connection, acceptance, feelings of comfort, and inclusivity, with these making up 23%, 15%, 10%, and 9% of comments respectively. However, a broad range of lesser-represented understandings were present in the data. For example, being valued, and culture, make up 5%, and 3% of comments respectively.

A sense of connection is described in the literature as linking students to their new communities and the fostering of new relationships (Correa-Velez et al., 2010; deHeer

et al., 2016; Mace et al., 2014). This prominent theme in responses (23%) was described by pre-service teachers as 'feeling connected to a group' and 'fitting in'. For example, one respondent described a sense of belonging as "Feeling that you fit in and belong to a group of people. That you don't feel out of place. That you feel comfortable within that group" (Respondent 67). Acceptance, which made up 15% of comments, was heavily linked with being part of a group. For example, one respondent said "feeling like you are accepted and valued" (Respondent 17), while others said belonging was "a place you feel accepted in" (Respondent 61) and "acceptance in the school community" (Respondent 32). Comfort, which made up 10% of comments, was closely linked to safety and security, with respondents making comments such as "feeling comfortable and safe", "belonging means to feel comfortable and secure no matter what your circumstances" (Respondent 22). Pre-service teachers' comments which highlighted inclusivity as a core element of belonging (9%) also seemed to centre around safety and comfort. For example, pre-service teachers said belonging means having "an inclusive and welcoming atmosphere that you feel safe in" (Respondent 11) and a place where you feel "included and able to participate" (Respondent 79). While not as prominent as other themes, pre-service teachers' understanding of belonging as feeling valued (5%), and culture (3%), provide interesting and nuanced perspectives that are worth noting. Value appeared as a sense of feeling that you, and your contributions are worthwhile and meaningful. For example, comments included, "feeling that you are valued by someone" (Respondent 60), "every child feels valued and loved" (Respondent 55), and "you feel that your peers respect and value you" (Respondent 24). Culture was tied up with identity, with comments like "a sense of identity and culture" (Respondent 46).

Data in this section builds on previous research, which has highlighted the impact of belonging (Allen et al., 2021; Osterman, 2010; Walton & Cohen, 2011; Eccles & Roeser, 2011) and its multifaceted nature (Correa-Velez et al., 2010; deHeer et al., 2016; Mace et al., 2014) by highlighting pre-service teachers' nuanced understanding of the concept as something that includes feelings of connection and acceptance, but also deeper issues such as feelings of safety and value with school and the wider community. This suggests that pre-service teachers have an understanding of the complexity of the topic and its potential implications for newcomer children.

## Opportunities and barriers to fostering a sense of belonging in schools

### Opportunities

Many authors have outlined the broad strategies that should be undertaken at a school and teacher level in order to foster a sense of belonging in schools. At a school level, it has been suggested that schools should have clear policies around acceptance, inclusion and discrimination (Sancho & Cline, 2012; McDiarmid *et al.* 2023), and have structured approaches in place to assist with social inclusion (Groot *et al.* 2019), culturally responsive education, and language support (Álvarez *et al.* 2022). Teachers are encouraged to demonstrate cultural responsiveness, language support (Tran & Lee, 2017), emotional support (Callahan & Shifrer, 2016), social integration techniques (Gándara & Ee, 2018), and family engagement (De Feyter & Winsler, 2018). An important aspect of this research was gathering pre-service teachers' perceptions of the opportunities that they see at school and teacher level to foster a sense of belonging. However, as may be expected, some crossover is evident between these categories.

#### *School level*

Pre-service teachers' responses in relation to opportunities for fostering a sense of belonging are strongly aligned with literature and can be divided into two broad categories: diversity and inclusivity (56%) and school ethos and community (44%).

Promoting diversity and inclusivity in schools as a means of fostering students' sense of belonging is evidenced by research (Cappellini & Menasche, 2020; Samson & Collins, 2018; Lynch *et al.*, 2017; Vogt, 2016). Pre-service teachers indicated that diversity and inclusion should be included in the school curriculum saying "children should be taught about diversity and inclusion during lessons" (Respondent 36), and "incorporate different cultures and ideologies into the curriculum" (Respondent 78). They also spoke about including the voice of children, both in the creation of school values, and in the definition of belonging. They said "Increased student voice" (Respondent 73), "invite students to contribute to the school's set of values and codes of conduct" (Respondent 4), and "Giving children the opportunity to partake in a flipped classroom to describe what they feel belonging is" (Respondent 56). Their comments also included practical ideas for promoting belonging in schools such as cultural celebrations, visual representations, buddy systems, and safe spaces; aligning with

strategies outlined by Cappellini & Menasche (2020). For example, pre-service teachers recommended including “flags of all nations in the school, try to incorporate the child's language into lessons” (Respondent 15) and to “celebrate diversity—school displays, culture days, etc” (Respondent 60). Some respondents advocated for a “standardised buddy system” so pre-service teachers could support newcomers in “reading/presenting work across the key stages” (Respondent 19). Finally, pre-service teachers recommended that schools have a safe space where students can go if “they don't have this sense of belonging” (Respondent 24). However, they were keen to point out that this must be backed up with “addressing bullying”.

Fostering students' sense of belonging through school ethos and community was strongly evident in 44% of respondents and aligns with findings in the literature (Hîrbu, 2022; Riley, 2019). This comprised a number of interrelated aspects, the first of which was the promotion of whole-school activities and events. Their suggestions included “whole school activities where different class/year groups can mingle”(Respondent 12), “group activities bring us closer together as a community” (Respondent 80), and “World Day/Country Day, where the canteen serves food from different countries” (Respondent 33). They also spoke about schools being more proactive in celebrating varied student achievements. For example, “The sum of achievements are celebrated through website/social media and shared with all students”, and “Generate pride in all school and student endeavours, not restricted to sport or academia” (Respondent 51). Outside of school activities, pre-service teachers also advocated for a greater emphasis on extracurricular clubs and societies, saying “encouraging the formation of lunchtime/after-school clubs” (Respondent 19) and “Extra-curricular activities are great for this: School Musical; School sports teams” (Respondent 73).

### *Teacher level*

Pre-service teachers' responses reveal several interconnected themes for fostering a sense of belonging among students. These themes highlight the importance of creating an inclusive, supportive, and culturally aware classroom environment while promoting student participation and collaboration.

One of the most prominent themes is creating an Inclusive Classroom Environment (30%), aligning with arguments made by Nagy (2018). Pre-service teachers feel that every student must feel welcomed, respected, and valued. Inclusivity goes beyond

surface-level interactions and requires teachers to actively embrace diversity within their classroom. As one respondent noted, teachers should "be inclusive to the whole class, use open body language so even non-verbal and non-English speaking children feel welcome" (Respondent 4). Another emphasised the need to "create an inclusive classroom where students feel as though they can be themselves without judgement" (Respondent 59). Pre-service teachers identified encouraging empathy and understanding of differences (19%), as important elements of inclusivity. For example, a teacher should "promote empathy among each other, encourage the 'different' students to share those differences to educate us all" (Respondent 78). Another respondent added, "Show genuine interest in pupils' backgrounds/cultures, and be respectful by being aware of important dates in the calendar for different religions" (Respondent 63).

Building positive relationships with students (24%) was another theme present in the data as a key component of inclusivity, aligning with findings from Osterman (2010). Strong relationships between teachers and students lay the foundation for a supportive environment where students feel secure. One pre-service teacher highlighted the importance of building rapport: "Have a personal rapport with students, get to know things about them and include them in different activities" (Respondent 82). Another said, "Getting to know one's pupils, by helping them make friends and by taking an interest in their lives" (Respondent 16). Relationship building was also mentioned in relation to promoting student participation and voice (20%), where teachers create opportunities for students to express themselves and feel heard. Allowing every student to participate in class discussions and activities promotes belonging. One pre-service teacher said that teachers should "allow all students to participate in the classroom," (Respondent 64) while another stressed the importance of ensuring that "all students are heard in the classroom and in the wider school environment" (Respondent 48). Callahan & Shifrer (2016) make similar arguments but also highlight the difficulties posed for non-native English speakers. The idea of participation also appears in relation to group work and collaboration (9%). By promoting group work and collaboration, teachers can help students build new friendships and feel part of the classroom community. One respondent recommended, "Plenty of group work. The groups should be changed regularly to make sure everyone has a chance to work

together." Another noted, "Encourage students to learn from each other" (Respondent 30).

The final theme present in the data was creating a safe and supportive classroom environment (16%). A safe classroom fosters participation, collaboration, and inclusion, enabling students to engage without fear of judgement (Yoshikawa, Suárez-Orozco, & Gonzales, 2017). One respondent recommended teachers "Make sure all children are being included and feel welcome in the classroom," (Respondent 55). Another added, "Allow pupils to feel safe in their classroom, where all opinions are valued, no questions are silly, we are a team" (Respondent 25).

This data suggests that pre-service teachers are keenly aware of some aspects of their role as 'place-makers' and in fostering a sense of belonging in schools. Their responses indicate an understanding of the need to create inclusive classrooms that integrate newcomer children (Tran & Lee, 2017), by being empathetic, providing a safe environment, and welcoming difference. They acknowledge the importance of developing strong student relationships through participation and interaction, which may help with integration and connection (Gándara & Ee, 2018).

## Barriers

Data reveals that pre-service teachers perceive many interrelated barriers and challenges to fostering a sense of belonging in schools.

One of the most prominent themes present in the data is time constraints and curricular pressures (23%). Pre-service teachers feel that they may struggle to find the time within a packed curriculum to focus on building relationships and fostering a sense of belonging. For example, one pre-service teacher said "Teachers don't often have the time in class to incorporate other stuff as curriculums are quite time-sensitive", while another said "Time pressure makes it difficult to foster a sense of belonging". These potential challenges were closely connected with the area of resources and support (13%), or rather a fear of a lack of these. Pre-service teachers feel they may not have the necessary tools or support to implement inclusive strategies effectively. Comments included "It is hard to be an inclusive teacher without all the resources available to you or without the school having your backing", another said "Lack of funding and support makes fostering a sense of belonging difficult".

Language barriers and cultural differences (21%) were also highlighted by pre-service teachers as potential barriers and challenges to fostering a sense of belonging, especially in increasingly diverse classrooms. Pre-service teachers may find it hard to cater to the needs of students who come from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. For example, one pre-service teacher said “Possible language barriers. Catering to the needs of all pupils in a very diverse class may require resources in several languages”, another said “Challenges can be that teachers might not have the adequate knowledge of how to support different cultures in the class”. These challenges may be exacerbated by larger and increasingly diverse classes (10%). With these changing classroom dynamics, it may become harder for teachers to give individual attention to students from diverse backgrounds. Comments in this theme included “Catering to the needs of all pupils in a very diverse class may require additional resources” and “The amount of students teachers have makes it difficult to foster a personal connection with each one”.

Social and group dynamics also appeared as a prominent theme (23%) in pre-service teachers' perceptions of the challenges associated with fostering belonging. Pre-services teachers spoke of ‘cliques’, ‘exclusionary behaviour’, and ‘existing social dynamics’. One pre-service teacher said “People naturally drift into groups that can become exclusionary”, another said “It is difficult for new entrants into these environments to break into pre-existing groups”.

The final theme evident in the data, was that of influences from and connections with the outside (11%). These outside influences included negative or discriminatory beliefs that come from home, with one pre-service teacher saying “Attitudes brought from home or outside can make it difficult to foster belonging”. Connection with the outside was presented in relation to parents/guardians of newcomer children, with one pre-service teacher saying “Lack of communication with parents/guardians of newcomer families can hinder inclusion efforts”.

Data in this section suggests that pre-service teachers are aware of the potential barriers and challenges associated with developing a sense of belonging. It is interesting to note that most prominent of these are the challenges of existing constraints and pressures placed on teachers. This adds to calls by authors such Umansky & Dumont (2016), Coleman (2022) and Weir et al. (2018) that teachers need

adequate time, support and resources to provide the attention and care necessary to ensure newcomer children develop that sense of belonging. Other potential barriers align with previous literature on integration (Tran & Lee, 2017) and language barriers (Callahan & Shifrer, 2016) providing important detail on the perceptions of pre-service teachers. These pre-service teachers' perceptions demonstrate that they are already acutely aware of the challenges associated with developing a sense of belonging and may be informed from their observations and experiences in schools on placement.

### Good practice in schools in establishing a sense of belonging

Almost two-thirds (61%) of pre-service teachers had positive experiences of good practices in schools pertaining to fostering a sense of belonging, while 39% did not.

These positive experiences comprised 10% Post-Primary pre-service teachers from SMUCB, 28% Primary pre-service teachers from SMUCB, 52% Post-Primary pre-service teachers from DCU, and 10% Primary pre-service teachers from DCU. While these figures closely mirror participation rates, they do suggest slightly higher instances of positive experiences among DCU Post-Primary pre-service teachers, and slightly lower instances of positive experiences among SMUCB Primary pre-service teachers. Pre-service teachers that reported no good experiences in fostering a sense of belonging (39%) comprised 9% Post-Primary pre-service teachers and 50% of Primary pre-service teachers at SMUCB, and 9% Primary pre-service teachers and 31% of Post-Primary pre-service teachers at DCU. Again, these figures align closely with participation rates across institutions. However, they suggest slightly lower instances of 'no good experiences' among DCU Post-Primary pre-service teachers and slightly higher instances of the same among SMUCB Primary pre-service teachers.

At least two possible theories need to be examined here. First, some pre-service teachers who have witnessed no good practice in this area may have been placed only in schools without diverse classrooms. Second, others may have been working amidst diverse student populations but still did not witness particularly good practice. Each scenario raises its own particular concerns: the first is a product of the 'clustering' phenomenon discussed earlier; the second may be a product of schools not taking full advantage of the support that is available.



It appears that an ‘apprentice[ship] of observation’ (Brennan et al. 2024) is evidenced in pre-service teachers’ responses whereby respondents’ recollections of good practice pertaining to fostering a sense of belonging in schools are strongly correlated to their answers pertaining to barriers and opportunities for fostering a sense of belonging. Such recollections include culturally responsive education, acknowledgement of language backgrounds and providing language support, promoting inclusivity and diversity, using social integration techniques and family engagement. The majority of responses highlight several key areas of good practice including promoting inclusivity and diversity, ensuring students feel valued, and acknowledging students’ religious and linguistic backgrounds. For example Respondent 49 recalled “a school I did placement in had different parents come in and read a book to the children at the start or end of the day...this fostered a sense of pride in the children when their families and parents were encouraged to read in their first language so it supported the children in feeling confident and proud of their first language and how they felt like they belonged”. The responses indicate that opportunities for social interaction, strong ties to the school or class, and acknowledgement of students’ religious and cultural backgrounds play crucial roles in creating a supportive environment (Tran & Lee, 2017). The presence of peer support systems “buddy systems/pairing”, student voice “having power” and family engagement also align with answers pertaining to opportunities for fostering belonging.

## Pre-service teachers’ understanding of the term ‘Newcomer’ and their capacity for fostering a sense of belonging amongst newcomer students

### Pre-service teachers’ understanding of the term ‘Newcomer’

Pre-service teachers were asked what they understood the term ‘newcomer’ to mean. Responses varied but 67% defined newcomer students as new to the school and/or new to the country. While remembering that the official meaning of the term ‘newcomer’ students in the Northern Ireland education system is that of a student who is enrolled in a school but does not have the language skills to fully participate in the curriculum and does not share a language with the teacher (Department of Education

NI, 2022; Smyth et al. 2009), it is interesting to note that such a focus on language skills was reflected in only 18% of the overall pre-service teachers' responses. One might interpret this as meaning that respondents, even in the north, are generally unfamiliar with the idea that the term 'newcomer' can speak directly to language ability (and this indicates that pre-service teachers are perhaps not receiving adequate professional learning pertaining to newcomer students more broadly within their ITE courses). Or, one may look at the wide range of definitions and uses of the term 'newcomer' here and abroad and recognise that for most practicing professionals, it does serve as a rough umbrella term for a wide range of language, cultural and learning obstacles.

### Pre-service teachers' capacity for fostering a sense of belonging amongst newcomer students

Respondents were asked to indicate how strongly they agree or disagree with various statements concerning their understanding and capacity for fostering a sense of belonging in their classrooms. The data offers valuable insights into pre-service teachers' familiarity with methods and strategies for building connections with newcomer students, as reported across various degree programs. Within the PME Post-Primary DCU cohort, 17% of participants strongly agreed with the statement '*I am familiar with methods and strategies for building connections with newcomer students*', while a substantial 50% agreed, reflecting a generally high level of familiarity. However, a significant portion of the group, 33%, either disagreed or strongly disagreed, indicating a degree of variability in the perception of these strategies. In contrast, among pre-service teachers enrolled in the BEd Primary SMUCB program, 37% agreed, and 24% were neutral, suggesting moderate familiarity with the methods. Nevertheless, a notable 39% expressed disagreement, pointing to a less favourable view of their familiarity with the strategies. Similarly, the BEd Post-Primary SMUCB cohort reported 39% agreement and 23% neutrality, with the remaining 38% indicating some level of disagreement. Lastly, in the PME Primary DCU program, 37% of pre-service teachers agreed, while 27% were neutral, and 36% expressed disagreement, underscoring a varied distribution of familiarity within this group.

Perhaps one of the most significant outcomes of the baseline survey was the discovery that a majority of pre-service teachers (68%) self-reported as lacking awareness of the range of resources and support services available to help newcomer students settle in the community and 55% of respondents were unaware of any multilingual support available. In all cases, among every cohort (north and south /primary and post-primary) at least two-thirds of respondents felt that that could not agree with the statement that they were aware of support available to them as teachers of newcomer children. These results are completely in keeping with the qualitative responses from those who attended the St Mary's conference in person. They were surprised and delighted to discover there was so much knowledge, experience and good practice on display by people willing to help. And, significantly, one student said that this newfound knowledge needed to be communicated back to their school more generally. It suggests that further research will find that this lack of knowledge about support available in relation to newcomer children in schools is not simply an ITE, pre-service teacher problem – but one that needs to be addressed throughout schools more generally. That is an investigation worth undertaking with some urgency.

There did not seem to be a particularly large difference in levels of awareness among these cohorts with the exception that those training with a primary-level focus showed a slightly greater degree of awareness. All this might suggest for further research is that post-primary schools should most certainly not be left out of any further studies.

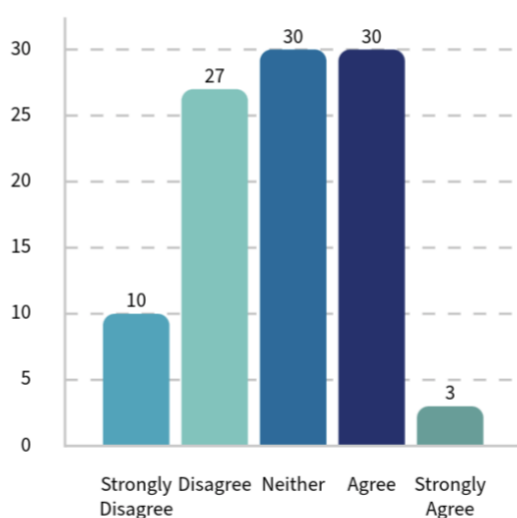


Chart 3 – Awareness of resources SMUCB Primary

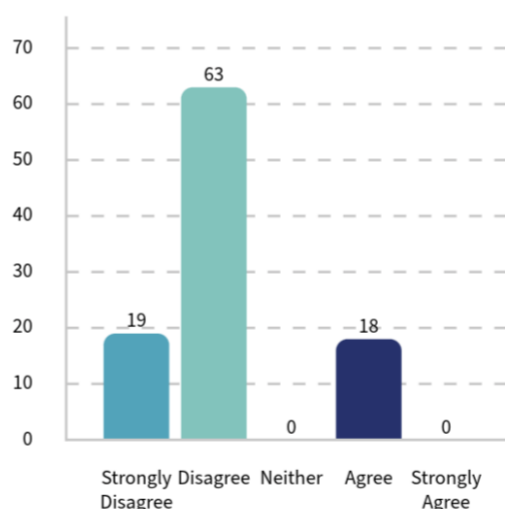


Chart 4 – Awareness of resources SMUCB Post-Primary

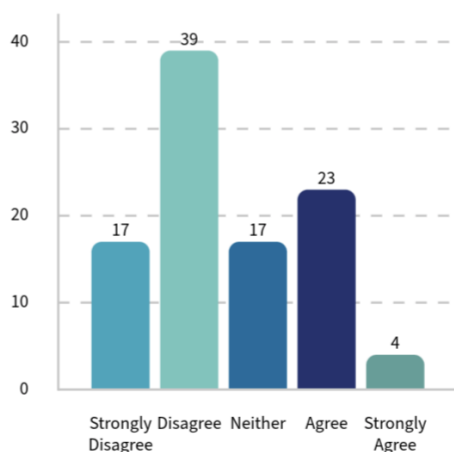


Chart 5 – Awareness of resources DCU Post-Primary

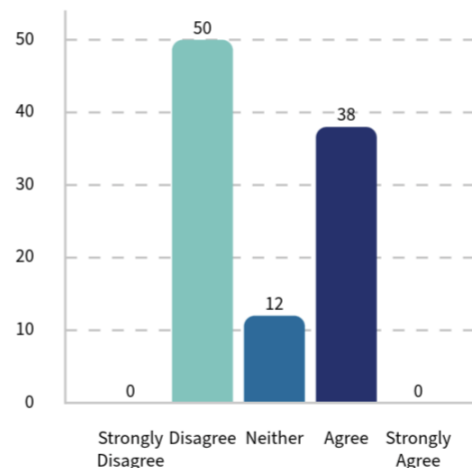


Chart 6 – Awareness of resources DCU Primary

However, 57% of respondents did say that they would be confident in reaching out to NGOs for support were it available. Respondents demonstrated a strong overall understanding for the needs of newcomer students with 68% of pre-service teachers acknowledging that newcomer students have different needs to ‘native’ students and 79% of respondents stating that they are aware of the factors contributing to a newcomer student's sense of belonging in schools. Overall, the vast majority of pre-service teachers recognise that a sense of belonging is crucially important to the lives of the students with over 90% of respondents agreeing that developing a sense of belonging is more important for newcomer students than their academic development.

## Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to explore pre-service teachers’ understanding of and perceptions of belonging, and their role in fostering a sense of belonging in schools. We began this study by highlighting the importance of belonging at the significant impact it has on student engagement, academic achievement, and integration. The findings reveal that pre-service teachers recognize the importance of fostering belonging, understanding the concept as connection, acceptance, safety, and inclusivity. Pre-service teachers also noted the opportunities available at both the school and teacher levels to promote belonging. They suggested integrating diversity and inclusion into the curriculum, establishing a school ethos that values community and cultural celebrations, and utilising strategies such as buddy systems and safe

spaces. At the classroom level, they advocated for creating inclusive, supportive environments that promote empathy, student participation, and strong teacher-student relationships. The findings also highlighted barriers to fostering belonging. Pre-service teachers pointed to time constraints, curricular pressures, a lack of resources, language barriers, and social group dynamics as challenges that could impede their efforts to create inclusive environments. In conclusion, this study underscores the critical role that pre-service teachers play as "place-makers" in schools. Their understanding of belonging is nuanced, encompassing academic, social, and emotional dimensions, but they also recognize the challenges inherent in fostering belonging, particularly for newcomer students. The findings suggest a need for further training and resources to equip teachers with the tools necessary to support diverse student populations effectively. Ultimately, creating a sense of belonging in schools benefits not only newcomer children but the entire school community.

## Limitations

While findings from this study are important and provide important insights into pre-service teachers' understanding of and perceptions of belonging, these insights are subject to some limitations. First, the response rate was relatively low, with only 10% of the 870 potential participants completing the survey, limiting the potential impact of the findings. Second, the data gathered was self-reported in nature. Such data can be subject to misunderstandings and a lack of awareness around issues under investigation. Finally, the absence of the planned video reflections restricts the ability to assess the impact of the intervention on pre-service teachers' perceptions of belonging and reduces the depth of gathered overall.

## Recommendations for Further Research

One of the most useful outcomes of this study was the clarity with which we can now see the two key areas in which further research is most necessary:

1. Heightening awareness of third-party voluntary and government bodies and organisations which are able to support and share best practice with schools around newcomers' and their school experiences

2. Understanding comprehensively the experiences to which pre-service teachers are exposed on placement in relation to newcomer children – and determining if some minimum requirements should be established across ITE institutions on the island.

### **Awareness of Third Party Voluntary and Government Bodies**

The surprising number of third party voluntary bodies and organisations which were brought into play in this study as support for advice, experience and knowledge of best practice around newcomer children in schools was a revelation to the the participating ITE students surveyed and those who attended the conferences. Many said that they would be passing on news of the existence of these organisations and support networks to the management in the schools in which they were placed. These comments made clear two things: 1) the support available to schools from these bodies is extensive and 2) knowledge of these bodies' existence is patchy at best. Further research in this area should involve a more comprehensive survey of management in schools across the island on the question of staff awareness of the support available. Then, questions need to be asked about how best to communicate meaningfully with schools about what support groups they might usefully make arrangements with. The conference in St Mary's, at which people turned up in person to hear speakers from these organisations, highlighted the value for teachers of hearing these experts speak in some depth and detail about their experiences and knowledge. Just knowing of a group's existence, it became clear, is rarely sufficient to motivate/inform staff about how that organisation might be able to support them. The one student who completed a detailed video diary explained (and this is worth quoting at length for its clarity about the need for expanding awareness of the support available):

A massive thing that I really wasn't aware of as a student teacher was all of the support networks that are available -- from listening to the guest speakers, the Full Service Community Network, the Intercultural Education Service and all of the different support that's available to pupils and parents and teachers in the school. As well as even things like advice... and after the conference, I then went on the websites of each of the support networks and read through all the different support and advice. Just even knowing . . . that there's somewhere I'm able to go if I encounter something that I don't know how to approach or just want to broaden my understanding of children with different backgrounds. As I said at the beginning, I've only ever worked with newcomer children in my third-

year school experience and, when I was working with them, it was really eye opening. I definitely developed my skill set by working with them, but this was obviously only for a few weeks. For the rest of my career, as the statistics indicated in the presentations, the idea of newcomer children (and the figures are there to back this up), it's only going to increase. So, it's really important that, especially myself as a young aspiring teacher, that I educate myself, but it's also so good that I'm able to put a school (my school, whatever school I end up in) that I'm able to put them in contact with all of these... the full support network... that's available to both the school, parents and the pupils. So, if a parent . . . for example, I know when I was on school experience, a parent was asking 'is there anything else I can do to ensure that they're still improving?' And, to be honest, I remember at the time thinking, 'what way do I approach this?' and I remember I said, 'No -- as long as you always feel that you can come to the school if you need any other support'. It's actually great that I can use all of these support networks to help me and parents and obviously the school as well.

The emphasis this student is placing on the need for her to spread the word highlights for the project as a whole the continued work that will be necessary to communicate about the further support that is already available to teachers and schools.

Another student who was surveyed after the conference indicated something similar about the eye-opening nature of the event given that presenters had time to speak in some depth and detail:

The newcomer conference was amazing. What I remember most was the two schools discussing their methods of how they integrate newcomer pupils. I based my Education assignment on newcomers and so the conference really helped in my knowledge around the day-to-day practical measures which can be taken. The range of speakers was also very, very good as we were able to understand from a range of perspectives how newcomers pupils are helped. Having the different groups before the conference at their individual booths was really good as we got to speak to them and understand more about their work. Also, the conference was long, but it didn't feel long at all! The variety of speakers really helped with this.

It seems obvious not only that exposure to these organisations was deemed new and useful by these students, but that the detail and depth of their presentations was what seemed to make the difference in terms of communicating the significance of their work and what they had to offer to staff and schools.

### **Pre-Service Teachers' Newcomer Experiences on Placement**

Nearly 40% of the students surveyed either had very limited exposure to newcomer children on their school teaching placements or had no exposure to good practice in relation to developing a sense of belonging for newcomer children. It is apparent that across both jurisdictions, north and south, the distribution of newcomer children across the schools which ITE institutions use for placements is highly variable. It is common for some students to be exposed to classes made up almost entirely of newcomer children while others will be on placements in schools with virtually no newcomer children. Of equal interest are the accounts we heard of students who were in schools with a limited number of newcomer children – so that the school may not have prioritised the issue and focused on much by way of whole-school planning around establishing a welcoming environment for all cultures.

As a consequence of this highly variable level of experiences across those surveyed, we encountered a range of more- and less-informed perspectives on what constitutes a welcoming environment in which belonging is something that is promoted. Some respondents had a clearer sense that, where newcomer children are involved, belonging had to be rooted in diversity and inclusiveness:

Any “difference” a child may feel they have (ethnic, language, cultural, religious, disability etc.) [should be] celebrated within the school community [so that it] does not make the child feel “othered” by their peers.

These sorts of comments came from students who understood that ‘belonging’ in contemporary Ireland was necessarily contingent on including a variety of faces, voices and cultures. There were other comments, however, that suggested not everyone had been sufficiently exposed to this variety of students – so that ‘belonging’ remained for them an idea rooted in a more outdated sense of uniformity:

[Belonging means] being with your “tribe”, i.e., people who look and sound like you -- a shared sense of common experience.

This sort of response was sometimes even detailed in terms of everyone being able to identify with local culture, religion, sports and iconography:

Everyone took part in religious events, our interests were fostered in after school activities and as most of the pupils in our school supported the same club, teachers had us paint flags and meet the team members.



An understanding of what constitutes good practice around newcomer children and their sense of belonging is dependent in many cases on numbers and awareness of newcomer issues – which is not always a feature of ITE student teaching placements. Further research would be welcome as well, then, in the area of if and how ITE institutions track their students' exposure to diverse pupil bodies while on placement – and ensuring that it cannot be the case that one can qualify as a teacher in Ireland without having had some experience of a culturally diverse classroom.

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## Appendix 1 – List of guest speakers

<b>Name</b>	<b>Affiliation</b>
Mr Alan Bedford – School Principal	Bray Project School
Mr Homayoon Shirzad – Coordinator	Schools of Sanctuary Ireland
Dr Aoife Lynam – Psychology of Education	Trinity College Dublin
Professor Joanna McIntyre – Refugee and Migrant Education	University of Nottingham
Dr Wills Kalisha – Refugee and Migrant Education	NLA University College
Ann Pendleton & Sophie Cocault	Full-Service Community Network
Dr Kieran Shields & Jane Camara	Intercultural Educational Service – Education Authority
Dr Maria Stewart	Home-school partnership for migrant families
Braid Welsh & Hilary Brennan	St Clare’s Primary School
Conor Kennedy	All Saints College, Belfast