# *Step up into Education*

# *Podcast Three – Belonging and the transition to school*

This podcast is designed to support professional conversations about evidence-informed approaches to transition to school and early years practices, as identified in current research and literature. This is third in a series which will focus on supporting Queensland schools to translate research into everyday practice to:

* understand the term ‘belonging’, and what it means in relation to the transition to school;
* unpack the dimensions of belonging (emotional and social) during the transition to school
* understand how belonging can be used as a marker of an effective transition to school program.

**Sue Dockett** is Emeritus Professor, Charles Sturt University, Australia and Director, Peridot Education Pty Ltd. Since retiring from university life, Sue remains actively involved in research in the field of early childhood education and is an advocate for recognising and responding to the perspectives of young children. She continues to work with children, families and educators to explore transitions to school, children’s play, and learning. Sue is a co-chair of the Special Interest Group on Transitions at the European Early Childhood Education Research Association. In collaboration with Bob Perry, Sue has been researching and publishing in the transition to school field for almost 25 years.

**Bob Perry** is Emeritus Professor at Charles Sturt University, Australia and Director, Peridot Education Pty Ltd. Recently retired after 45 years of university teaching and research, Bob continues to research, consult and publish in conjunction with Sue Dockett in the field of early childhood, with particular emphasis on transition to primary school, researching with children; and evaluation of educational programs. In 2015, he was awarded the title of Hedersdoktor by [Mälardalens Universitet, Sweden for his collaborative work in educational transitions and early mathematics education.](https://www.mdu.se/artiklar/2020/november/tre-nya-hedersdoktorer) Bob continues to publish extensively both nationally and internationally in these areas.

**Announcer:**

This is a Queensland Department of Education podcast.

**Virginia Bowdidge:**

Welcome to the Queensland Department of Education podcast series to talk about belonging and the transition to school. Hi I’m Virginia Bowdidge and in this podcast I welcome back researchers Emeritus Professors Sue Dockett and Bob Perry to chat about their recent work.

Thanks again for your time today, Bob and Sue.

**Sue Dockett:**

Thanks, Virginia.

**Bob Perry:**

Thanks very much, Virginia. Glad to be here.

**Virginia Bowdidge:**

In podcast two, Understanding the Perspectives of Children in the Transition to School, we discussed how children's perspectives of their transition experiences are important to inform decisions about the planning and evaluation of current and future transition to school programs, rather than adults assuming they are best placed to make those decisions. We know that when children's perspectives are taken seriously, are listened to and acted upon, that this contributes to a sense of belonging, but what is belonging?

**Sue Dockett:**

Oh, thanks, Virginia. Belonging is a really fascinating concept. It's very multifaceted and it's often quite fluid, and we demonstrate it in many ways. Many people understand when they feel like they belong, but how you assess somebody else's sense of belonging can be really challenging. We know that there's a personal sense of belonging.

A personal sense of belonging is really important and we see it and we feel it when we feel accepted, when we feel like we've been seen and recognised. And we see this in children when they engage in play and we see the ways in which they feel like they're being accepted by others, seen by others, and sometimes being physically close to others. There's also that social sense of belonging, such as the feelings we get when we belong to a group or a community. We know that social belonging involves collective decisions about who can or can't be part of a particular group.

And again, we can see some of those actions and those decisions when we observe children's play. I said earlier that it's multifaceted and it's really quite often dynamic. And we can feel as though we belong in one place with one person or one group, but not necessarily in another place or with another person or group. Even then in the same place, some people might feel they belong more at some times than at others. In many senses, belonging is both personal and relational. It's about how we feel as an individual and also how we feel like we belong to one or many communities. It's interesting to explore.

**Virginia Bowdidge:**

Thanks, Sue. Given this information, it seems belonging would be considered a key element when considering the aim of an effective transition program. What do you mean by belonging in terms of transition to school? Why is it important?

**Sue Dockett:**

Thanks. There's many ways that it's really important, but to start with we probably need to unpack what we mean by belonging, particularly in relation to transition to school. And to do that we draw on some work from our Australian colleagues, Jennifer Sumsion and Sandie Wong, who described a cartography of belonging. And in that cartography, they outlined 10 dimensions that reflect ways of experiencing belonging. They talked about emotional, social, cultural, spatial, temporal, physical, spiritual, moral or ethical, political, and legal belonging. And that's a great long list. And while they might be described as separate dimensions, in practice they often overlap and converge. And when we talk about transition to school being complete, we describe that as a sense when all involved feel that they belong within the new school context. So, that's when we go back to those 10 dimensions and try and understand what it means for children and educators in schools and prior-to-school settings, as well as families, to feel like they belong in a particular context. It can get pretty complex, but it's also really important to understand.

Let's take the example of spatial belonging. That is about feeling connected to a particular place and knowing how it operates. We can look at children starting school and observe how they might show spatial belonging by knowing where important places are around the school and being comfortable in accessing these places. Things like also knowing the school routines and what happens when, can be evidence of children's understanding, or their building up, if you like, the sense of spatial belonging. School educators demonstrate spatial belonging in a whole range of ways. But one of those ways is taking a sense of ownership of their own classroom and making those spaces personal to themselves. We know that spatial belonging for families can involve many things, but it also includes things like knowing the rules and the routines and the rituals of the school, things like where do you drop off and pick up your children? What are the procedures for parades? What are the spaces where you meet with children's teachers? And those sorts of things. So, spatial belonging, that idea of knowing a place and how it operates, can be observed among different groups at different times.

**Virginia Bowdidge:**

Thanks, Sue. The dimensions you touched on help us to reflect on the ways an individual can experience belonging during the transition. Bob, are there any complexities associated with belonging that transition teams should consider when planning the evaluation of a transition to school program?

**Bob Perry:**

Thanks, Virginia. I think, as Sue said, the first complexity is the whole concept of belonging. And if we look at the Sumsion and Wong dimensions, there are 10 of those and each one of those needs to be considered. So, that's the first complexity, the whole concept. The 10 dimensions just show how much needs to be considered within the context of a busy school environment. So, for example, it's possible that an individual is able to demonstrate many of the dimensions of belonging but still not feel that they belong. Now, one example is the temporal dimension of belonging around time and often that can catch children and educators out. For example, a transition program that provides support, and even just a little bit of extra settling time, can add to a great sense of connectedness for some Prep children, so that they feel at ease and are comfortable at school and in the classroom. So, that extra time can sometimes help.

Similarly, educators need time to connect to each other. They need time to connect to the families and to the children they're involved with so that they understand where the child's coming from and what's already been achieved. When you think about the evaluation of transition to school programs, the next complexity regarding belonging requires that it's all participants that be considered. So, a program will not be effective if the children and educators feel that they belong in the new school environment, but the families don't. All need to be considered. And this adds to the complexity of the notion. Another one is that belonging or not belonging can be demonstrated in many different ways and the evaluators of the program need to be able to discern within these different ways, and not mistake or dismiss certain actions through the applications of stereotypes.

For example, some children are quiet and don't speak much because they're scared or they're worried about being at school, while others may show the same quiet, non-speaking behaviours because they actually feel quite comfortable and settled and don't feel the need to ask anymore. So, sometimes we need to discern the differences between the motives for certain behaviours as well as the behaviours themselves. There are, of course, stereotypes around cultural, gender or socioeconomic groups and their applications to individuals that transition to school, or in fact at any other time for that matter, can mean that sometimes challenges and concerns are missed.

**Virginia Bowdidge:**

Thanks, Bob. That's very informative. Awareness of the complexities of belonging help us understand the impacts on wellbeing and engagement for those involved. Sue, can you provide an example of the emotional dimension of belonging and how a transition team might know if children, families, and educators feel like they belong at school?

**Sue Dockett:**

Thanks. Well, the emotional dimension of belonging is about feeling comfortable and at ease, being accepted, liked and recognised and respected in a particular context. In the transition to school, children can demonstrate this dimension, for example, by entering the classroom confidently, sometimes with that great big smile on their face. Also, and by being confident that their teacher likes them. They feel comfortable seeking help when it's needed and see their efforts respected such as being displayed with care. These things create a sense that the person is valued and recognised and accepted.

Emotional belonging for educators could involve them also being respected and valued for what they do by the children and the families, as well as their colleagues. It's really interesting and important for early childhood educators and school educators to feel a personal sense of emotional belonging when they get together, such that they feel welcome in each other's contexts. For family members, really simple things can impact that emotional dimension of belonging, things like family members being recognized and greeted by name when they visit the school. That can be a sign of an emotional connection, as educators show they're interested in and responsive to the family experience of transition.

**Virginia Bowdidge:**

Thanks for providing that example, Sue. Even though all the dimensions of belonging are important, as an advocate for early childhood education I can't help but ask this question. How might a transition team know if children, families, and educators feel like they belong at school in the social sense? Bob, do you have any thoughts on this one?

**Bob Perry:**

Yes, Virginia. There are a number of ways that this might occur. For example, for years children have been telling us that what is really important when they start school is having friends or knowing how to make friends in the new context. And if they have friends, they feel as though they belong there in a social sense. They belong to a social group. Children also belong through identification as a member of other groups. Sometimes they're formal groups like class six or such-and-such state school. They can tell you very proudly that, "This is the uniform for my school," and they feel that they belong to that uniform and they belong to that school. They'll also use the language of school. So, they know what parade means. They know what to do at lunchtime. They know, and sometimes even welcome, the notions of homework. So, they're using the language as well as the social belongingness that comes from being a member of a group.

Family members will be welcomed into the school and the classroom. Socially they feel as though they are part of the school and the classroom. They'll be invited to share in meaningful activities. They contribute to the transition program. Maybe they can be parent ambassadors or helpers at parent evenings or whatever. They can contribute to activities and they can contribute to the evaluation. They interact with each other. They become friends among themselves and they form a social group, which helps them belong. Maybe this will happen at the school gate or at some other pickup point. As well, early childhood and school educators can feel that they belong in a social context and in a social notion through being part of a transition to school community, that they work together to support the transitions, to plan and evaluate those transitions, and they're supported by their network colleagues.

**Virginia Bowdidge:**

Thanks, Bob. That's very interesting. Through our discussion it is evident that the transition to school is a significant part of building a sense of belonging, and it is a key element in considering the effectiveness of a transition to school program for all involved. This key understanding is imperative when transition teams are planning and evaluating transition to school programs. Throughout this podcast series, it has been so insightful discussing your work to learn from the research and what this may look like in practice. Thank you again, Sue and Bob.

**Sue Dockett:**  Thanks, Virginia.

**Bob Perry:**  Thank you, Virginia. Thank you very much.

**Announcer**

You have been listening to the Queensland Department of Education podcast.

The Department of Education acknowledges the traditional owners of the lands from across Queensland. We pay our respects to the elders' past and present, for they hold the memories, the traditions, the culture, and hopes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

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