Reframing DEIJ to Drive Belonging: Stakeholders' Engagement and What This Means for International Schools

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	Globalisation has reconfigured international schools into dense microcosms of cultural plurality, mobility, and negotiation, where identities, languages, and pedagogies intersect in real time (Appadurai, 1996; Castells, 2010). Amid these shifting circuits of people and meaning, Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Justice (DEIJ) frameworks have emerged as institutional responses to longstanding inequities; yet research increasingly shows that representation and procedural fairness alone are insufficient to transform the everyday emotional landscapes of learners. Belonging, understood as the affective, cognitive, and relational condition of being recognised, valued, and safe, has re-emerged as a pivotal lens through which international schools can reimagine inclusion (Walton & Brady, 2020; OECD, 2018). Guided by Noddings' ethics of care, Shields' transformative-leadership theory, Bourdieu's social-field dynamics, and Tinto's model of institutional integration, this paper critically examines how reframing DEIJ through the prism of belonging reshapes stakeholder engagement and catalyses systemic change within international school ecosystems. Drawing on comparative scholarship in intercultural competence (Byram, 1997), global-competence education (OECD, 2018), and school-climate theory, the article analyses how relational trust, distributed leadership, and multilingual identity negotiation structure students' lived experiences across culturally diverse settings. The discussion situates this reframing within global policy agendas, including SDG 4.7 and international-school accreditation standards, arguing that centring belonging offers a scalable, ethically grounded pathway beyond compliance-driven DEIJ to genuinely inclusive schooling. Recommendations for leadership preparation, curriculum redesign, and community partnership conclude the paper, offering international schools a research-informed blueprint for embedding belonging as the cornerstone of equity-oriented transformation. **Keywords:** DEIJ; International Schools; Equity-Oriented Leadership; Intercultural Competence; School Climate; Global Citizenship Education; Stakeholder Engagement Belonging;

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Globalisation, Identity Politics, and the Imperative for Belonging

Over the last two decades, scholars have traced how accelerating mobilities of families, capital, and ideas have transformed international schools into dense intercultural nodes woven into global circuits of aspiration, labour, and identity (Appadurai, 1996; Castells, 2010). These schools operate at the fault lines of geopolitical mobility and cultural hybridity, where learners navigate multiple affiliations, national, linguistic, racial and digital often in the same day. The COVID-19 pandemic intensified these entanglements, revealing how emotional safety, community trust, and social cohesion are as critical to learning as curricular rigour (UNESCO, 2023). Parallel to this, the OECD Global Competence Framework positions the ability "to understand and appreciate the perspectives and world views of others" as an indispensable twenty-first-century competency shaped not only by content knowledge but by school climate, identity affirmation, and

relational belonging (OECD, 2018). Within this landscape, Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Justice (DEIJ) initiatives have been taken up globally as corrective responses to structural inequities. Yet an emerging body of research suggests that DEIJ frameworks often remain procedural, compliance-driven, or limited to representational optics, rarely reaching into the lived textures of student experience (Gorski, 2019). In contrast, belonging, defined as the affective and cognitive state of being recognised, valued, safe, and connected, has surfaced as a more powerful predictor of wellbeing, persistence, and academic engagement (Walton & Brady, 2020). The imperative, therefore, is not simply to diversify who occupies international schools but to redesign how institutions cultivate and sustain relational warmth, identity safety, and epistemic inclusion.

1.2 From DEIJ to Belonging: Reframing the Educational Project

Belonging theory draws from a long lineage of social-psychological scholarship. Baumeister and Leary (1995) argue that humans possess a universal drive to form lasting, positive relational bonds; Noddings' ethics of care positions schooling as a moral encounter predicated on attentiveness and reciprocity; Lambert et al. (2002) highlight the role of collective efficacy in enabling emotionally supportive learning communities. Equity-oriented leadership scholars such as Shields (2018) similarly emphasise that authentic transformation requires interrupting marginalising structures and reconstructing school cultures to centre human dignity. When applied to international schools where linguistic repertoires, cultural codes, and identity positions vary widely, these theories reveal that belonging is neither sentimental nor peripheral; it is structural, relational, and deeply tied to justice. This framing is particularly relevant for high-mobility, high-diversity environments where students must continually negotiate "who I am here" and "who I am becoming." International schools often celebrate diversity rhetorically while inadvertently reproducing status hierarchies rooted in language dominance, racial privilege, citizenship capital, and Western curricular norms (Adams & Bell, 2016). In such conditions, DEIJ work focused only on representation or policy reform is insufficient. What is required is a conceptual shift that positions belonging rather than diversity alone as the organising centre of inclusion. This paper argues that belonging functions simultaneously as a philosophical anchor, a measurable climate indicator, and an actionable design principle for whole-school transformation.

1.3 Situating Belonging in International-School Scholarship and Practice

Educational research underscores that belonging enhances students' willingness to take intellectual risks, engage in sustained inquiry, and participate in collaborative meaning-making (Walton & Cohen, 2011). For multilingual learners, belonging mediates the psychological safety necessary for translanguaging practices that affirm identity and expand expressive range (García & Li Wei, 2014). For teachers, belonging is tied to relational trust, professional efficacy, and openness to culturally responsive pedagogy (Day et al., 2016). For families, particularly expatriate, migrant, and intercultural households, belonging determines the quality of home–school partnerships and influences continuity of learning during transitions. International schools thus represent a distinct organisational ecology where belonging must be actively constructed through governance structures, staffing practices, curriculum design, assessment routines, and student-voice mechanisms. Belonging emerges not from isolated initiatives but from the alignment of systems, relationships, and identity-safe pedagogy. This paper responds to these imperatives by proposing a reframed DEIB model, Diversity, Equity, Inclusion leading toward Belonging, that synthesises global policy frameworks, social-psychological research, and intercultural-competence theory to offer a scalable blueprint for durable school transformation.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

A substantial body of scholarship across educational psychology, intercultural studies, and organisational leadership positions positions DEIJ as a core mediating construct through which DEIJ efforts translate into meaningful student outcomes. Social-psychological research foregrounds belonging as a fundamental human motive: Baumeister and Leary (1995) argue that the need for stable, positive interpersonal bonds undergirds emotional well-being, while Walton and Cohen (2011) demonstrate that even brief, targeted belonging interventions can produce long-term gains in academic persistence among marginalised learners. In school settings, this emotional dimension interacts with institutional structures, language policies, assessment norms, and curricular metaphors in ways that either affirm or erode students' sense of inclusion (Walton & Brady, 2020). For international schools, where identities are continuously negotiated across transnational, multilingual, and intercultural lines, belonging acquires amplified significance (OECD, 2018). At the theoretical level, scholars have traced belonging through multiple interpretive lenses. Noddings' (2013) ethics of care conceptualises schooling as a relational endeavour shaped by attentiveness, reciprocity, and trust, while Bourdieu's (1990) notion of habitus situates belonging within broader social fields where linguistic capital, cultural repertoire, and symbolic power intersect. Shields' (2018) transformative-leadership model extends this analysis to school systems, contending that leaders must disrupt inequitable structures and cultivate cultures in which dignity, voice, and participation become non-negotiable norms. When mapped onto DEIJ discourses in international schooling, where Eurocentric curricula, English-dominant norms, and implicit racial hierarchies often persis,t these frameworks reveal that belonging cannot be reduced to celebratory

multiculturalism; it requires structural redesign, identity-safe pedagogy, and sustained community dialogue (Gorski, 2019; Adams & Bell, 2016).

A growing line of intercultural-education research aligns belonging with intercultural competence, global-competence development, and multilingual identity formation. Byram's (1997) intercultural-communicative competence (ICC) model outlines attitudes, knowledge, interpretive skills, and critical cultural awareness as mutually reinforcing dimensions through which learners navigate cultural differences. Kramsch (2009) sharpens this by framing language as a symbolic system that simultaneously expresses and constructs identity; her notion of "symbolic competence" positions belonging as an interpretive practice shaped by discourse, memory, and imagination. In multilingual classrooms, particularly international schools, García and Li Wei's (2014) translanguaging theory illustrates how students draw on their full linguistic repertoires to negotiate belonging, legitimacy, and epistemic agency. Taken together, these frameworks suggest that belonging is produced through relational, linguistic, and symbolic practices that extend far beyond demographic diversity. Empirical studies corroborate these theoretical claims. School-climate research consistently demonstrates that belonging predicts engagement, motivation, and academic self-efficacy across cultural contexts (OECD, 2017; Goodenow & Grady, 1993). In multicultural and international settings, belonging is linked to reduced cultural dissonance, stronger peer relationships, and enhanced cross-cultural empathy (Spencer-Oatey & Dauber, 2019). Large-scale global studies show that students who report high belonging are more likely to engage in perspective-taking, civic participation, and pro-social behaviours, critical competencies aligned with SDG 4.7 (OECD, 2018). Teacher-focused studies reveal parallel patterns: educators who experience professional belonging report higher relational trust, reduced attrition, and increased commitment to inclusive pedagogy (Day et al., 2016; Brown, 2020). Leadership literature reinforces this, emphasising that culturally responsive leaders foster belonging through inclusive decision-making, equitable resource distribution, and visibility of diverse identities (Khalifa, 2018).

Despite such encouraging evidence, gaps persist. Many DEIJ initiatives in international schools remain characterised by one-off workshops, symbolic events, or reactive policy compliance rather than systemic transformation. Scholars critique the "checkbox" approach that foregrounds representational diversity while leaving underlying hierarchies of language dominance, Western epistemologies and social privilege unchallenged (Gorski, 2019; Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017). Others highlight that school-climate measures used to assess belonging are often developed in Western contexts and insufficiently sensitive to the nuanced identity negotiations characteristic of highly mobile, linguistically diverse student populations (Spencer-Oatey & Zhuang, 2017). Moreover, few studies examine belonging across the full ecosystem of students, teachers, parents, and governance structures despite research showing that institutional coherence is essential for sustained DEIJ impact (Bryk et al., 2015).

Taken together, the literature points to a conceptual and practical need for frameworks that go beyond additive notions of diversity and instead re-centre belonging as the guiding architecture of inclusion. For international schools, this requires models that integrate theory, stakeholder voice, systemic reform, and intercultural learning into a coherent design. The absence of such integrative models signals a clear gap: while DEIJ frameworks articulate the "what," belonging offers the "why" and "how" of a relational, structural, and pedagogical shift that connects equity work with students' lived experiences. The present paper responds to this gap by proposing a DEIB framework that synthesises insights from belonging theory, intercultural-competence scholarship, and equity-oriented leadership to offer a roadmap for international schools seeking transformative, durable, and ethically grounded inclusion.

3. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The reframing of DEIJ(Diversity → Equity → Inclusion → Justice) through the prism of belonging draws together four complementary strands, each offering a conceptual anchor for analysing how international schools negotiate identity, equity, and relational culture within diverse transnational communities.
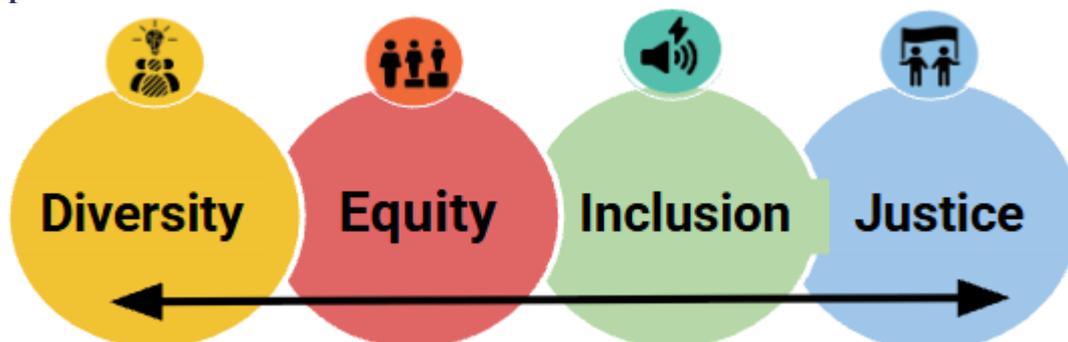
DEIJ Components

Figure 1: Components of DEIJ

Diversity: Recognising and valuing the presence of differences within a group of people, encompassing a wide range of human characteristics like race, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, age, disability, religion, and socioeconomic status.

Equity: Conscious and deliberate efforts to provide everyone with the specific resources and opportunities they need to reach an equal outcome, recognising that people do not start from the same place.

Inclusion: A culture that ensures everyone feels welcomed, respected, valued, and able to participate fully in decision-making

Justice: Commitment to fairness and equity, especially for diverse groups, by identifying and dismantling unfair systems and power imbalances.

Ethics of Care: Noddings' (2013) ethic of care positions schooling as a relational enterprise in which attentiveness, reciprocity, and affective presence form the bedrock of student wellbeing. In international schools marked by mobility, cultural plurality, and shifting social anchors, care becomes not merely interpersonal but structural, shaping how policies, routines, and pedagogical practices communicate recognition and emotional safety.

Intercultural-Communicative Competence (ICC): Byram's (1997) model provides a multi-dimensional frame of attitudes of curiosity, cultural knowledge, interpretive-relational skills, and critical cultural awareness that maps directly onto how belonging is cultivated in multilingual, intercultural classrooms. Each dimension corresponds to specific school practices: voice opportunities build attitudes; multilingual resources enhance knowledge; dialogic routines develop interpretive skills; and equity-oriented curriculum fosters critical awareness.

Transformative Leadership & Equity-Oriented Systems Thinking: Shields' (2018) transformative leadership theory emphasises disrupting inequitable structures and fostering inclusive participation, while Fullan (2016) and Bryk et al. (2015) highlight the role of coherence, relational trust, and continuous improvement in school transformation. These perspectives frame belonging as a whole-school responsibility requiring alignment of governance, policy, staffing, and everyday classroom enactment.

Symbolic and Linguistic Capital: Drawing from Bourdieu (1990) and Kramsch (2009), this strand conceptualises belonging as an interaction between linguistic legitimacy, symbolic resources, and identity positioning. For international school students who may navigate multiple languages, accents, cultural norms, and transnational experiences, belonging becomes a negotiation of whose identities and ways of knowing are institutionally recognised.

Taken together, these strands form an integrated, iterative model of DEIB (Diversity → Equity → Inclusion → Belonging), which conceptualises belonging not as a downstream outcome but as an organising principle shaping each stage of school life. The model proceeds through four cyclical phases: Recognition → Participation → Alignment → Integration that parallel the shift from surface-level representation toward deep-rooted relational and systemic inclusion:

Recognition: Affirming identity, culture, language, and lived experiences as valued components of the learning environment.

Participation: Designing structures that amplify student, teacher, and parent voices in governance, curriculum, and community life.

Alignment: Ensuring policies, communication systems, assessment practices, and staffing reflect equity commitments.

Integration: Embedding belonging across daily interactions, school rituals, accountability frameworks, and shared meaning-making.

Because each phase is grounded in peer-reviewed theory and linked to concrete school practices, the DEIB model provides a coherent pathway for international schools to move beyond performative DEIJ efforts toward sustained, relational, and ethically grounded cultures of belonging.

4. PROGRAMME CONTEXT AND DESIGN

International schools operate within distinctive organisational ecologies characterised by high mobility, linguistic diversity, and layered identity negotiations. The shift from DEIJ to DEIB (Diversity → Equity → Inclusion → Belonging) reframing proposed in this paper was developed through an iterative design-based process in a mid-sized international school in South Asia that publicly aligns its mission with global citizenship, intercultural learning, and holistic wellbeing. The school enrols approximately 1,800 students representing over 60 nationalities, with instruction delivered through a bilingual model and curricular pathways aligned to IB and Cambridge frameworks. The senior leadership team has, over the past four years, placed DEIJ as a strategic priority, yet ongoing conversations revealed gaps between aspirational policy language and the lived experiences of students and staff, particularly regarding identity safety, relational trust, and emotional belonging.

Stakeholder engagement
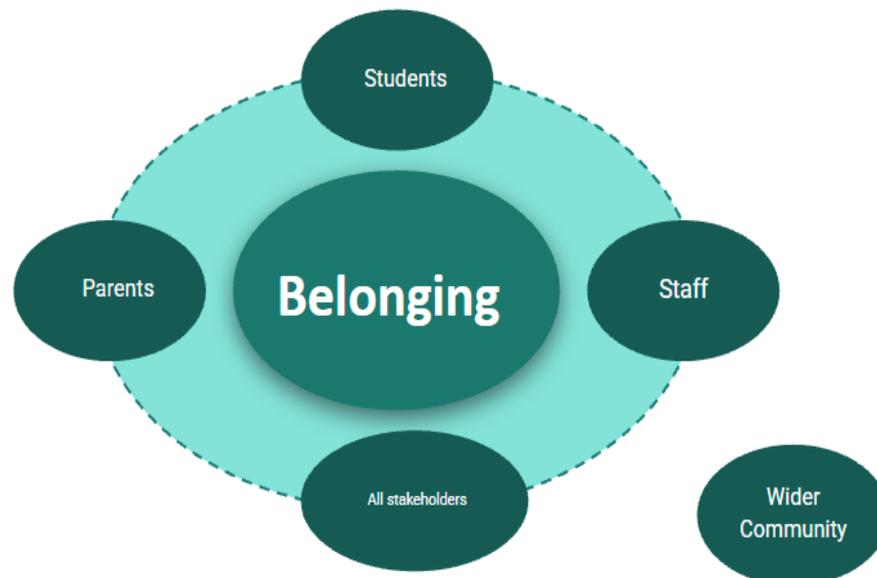
Figure 1: Stakeholder engagement for Belonging

The DEIB approach centres belonging as the capstone outcome and organising principle of DEIJ work. It emerged from a year-long action-research cycle in which students, teachers, parents and governors engaged in structured dialogue around identity, culture, safety, and inclusion. This process operated across two interconnected strands:

Whole-School Dialogues: Monthly community circles brought together mixed groups of students, teachers and families. Facilitated using dialogic protocols, these sessions examined real scenarios involving microaggressions, linguistic hierarchies, cultural misrecognition, and exclusionary practices. Insights from these conversations informed revisions to behaviour policies, reporting mechanisms, classroom routines, and wellbeing supports.

Belonging Taskforce: A cross-departmental taskforce comprising senior leaders, teachers from multiple divisions, school counsellors, student representatives and parent volunteers worked across the academic year. Using appreciative inquiry and systems-mapping tools, the taskforce analysed school-climate data, documented experiences of marginalised groups, mapped identity-safe practices, and prototyped interventions targeting relational inclusion, cultural responsiveness, and equitable participation.

These strands were supported by four design objectives that steered the DEIB ecosystem:

1. Identity, Safety and Recognition: Ensuring that all students, particularly multilingual learners, racially minoritised students, LGBTQIA+ youth, neurodiverse learners and transient families experience affirmation of their identities in curriculum, pedagogy and peer interactions.

2. Participatory Structures and Voice: Establishing mechanisms such as student-led advisory councils, multilingual family forums, and community ambassadors to democratise school decision-making and increase stakeholder agency.

3. Policy–Practice Coherence: Aligning admissions, assessment, behaviour, safeguarding and staff-recruitment policies with DEIB principles, thereby eliminating contradictions between written policy and daily practice.

4. Relational Pedagogy and Classroom Culture: Embedding belonging into teaching and learning through collaboratively constructed norms, culturally sustaining curriculum, translanguaging routines, dialogic protocols, and trauma-informed pedagogy.

Within this ecosystem, implementation operated as a longitudinal, multi-layered cycle grounded in continuous learning. For example, belonging audits were conducted termly, followed by redesign workshops with students and staff. Insights from these audits directly informed classroom routines (e.g., identity maps, check-in rituals, low-stakes belonging circles) and staff professional learning (e.g., modules on cultural humility, bias interruption, language inclusivity). Complementing this, governance bodies engaged in structured professional learning on equitable decision-making and intercultural competence, ensuring that belonging was not confined to classrooms but embedded across institutional governance.

5. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Against this theoretical and policy backdrop, the present paper examines how a reframed DEIB (Diversity → Equity → Inclusion → Belonging) model can operationalise belonging as the central organising principle of DEIJ work in international schools. The initiative explored in this conceptual analysis integrates community dialogues, systems-mapping, policy review, and stakeholder-led design processes to illuminate how belonging can shift from an aspirational ideal to an actionable, measurable, and sustainable school-wide practice. Drawing on Noddings' ethics of care, Bourdieu's social-field theory, Byram's intercultural-competence framework, and Shields' transformative leadership model, this paper interrogates three interrelated questions aimed at understanding the mechanisms through which belonging reshapes DEIJ implementation.
Specifically, this study asks:
a. How do stakeholder-led dialogues across students, teachers, parents, and governors reveal the relational, linguistic, and structural barriers to belonging within international-school environments?
b. In what ways does the DEIB design process enable coherence between policy and practice, particularly regarding identity safety, multilingual inclusivity, and equitable participation?
c. What leadership, pedagogic, and systemic lessons emerge for international schools seeking to move beyond compliance-oriented DEIJ initiatives toward a belonging-centred model of sustainable cultural transformation?
The critical analysis that follows maps how these questions intersect across school culture, governance routines, and everyday classroom practice, offering a conceptual pathway for international schools committed to embedding belonging at the heart of their institutional architecture.

6. METHODOLOGY

6.1 Design
This study employs an interpretive, single-case conceptual design (Yin, 2018) focused on the DEIB (Diversity → Equity → Inclusion → Belonging) transformation initiative undertaken at a mid-sized international school in South Asia. The site was selected as an information-rich exemplar (Patton, 2015) because it enacted a full-system, year-long redesign process integrating leadership practices, community participation, policy alignment, and wellbeing structures. The purpose is analytic generalisation, not statistical representativeness: the goal is to illuminate conceptual processes and tensions that may inform belonging-centred DEIJ work in similar international-school ecosystems.

6.2 Participants
The participants in this conceptual case include:
● Students (ages 11–18) who engaged in belonging audits, community circles, identity-mapping exercises, and advisory dialogues.
● Teachers and pastoral staff from multiple curricular divisions who contributed to policy review, pedagogic redesign, and relational-culture mapping.
● School leadership team, including principals, DEIJ coordinators, and wellbeing leads, who oversaw systems-level coherence and governance shifts.
● Parents and guardians representing multilingual, expatriate, bicultural, and local families, involved in structured focus groups and community forums.
● Governors, who engaged in intercultural-competence and equity-leadership training and contributed to the strategic reframing of DEIJ work.

Although no primary data are presented numerically, these stakeholder groups shaped the interpretive insights through repeated cycles of reflection, dialogue, and document analysis.

6.3 Data Sources
Four primary data sources inform the conceptual analysis:
School artefacts and policy documents
Revised behaviour policies, safeguarding protocols, DEIJ statements, staff handbooks, professional-learning modules, and admissions guidelines provided insight into the structural translation of belonging commitments.
Stakeholder-generated reflections
Student voice notes, teacher professional-learning reflections, parent focus-group transcripts, and leadership debrief memos offered evidence of evolving understandings of identity safety, relational culture, and inclusivity.
Belonging audits and systems maps
Termly belonging surveys, heat-mapping exercises of inclusion/exclusion zones, and collaborative systems diagrams produced by the DEIB task force captured the dynamic interplay between relational practices and institutional infrastructures.

Brainstorming for Dimensions of Diversity
Attributes of Diversity, as identified by the stakeholders, a deep dive helped to have a collective understanding of the foundational concept.

Attributes of Diversity

Religion	Race	Family Structure & Social Status	Gender	. Ethnicity	Economic Status	Ability, Disability	Sexual Orientation	Language, Culture
- traditional beliefs - rituals - spiritual beliefs - belief systems - celebration -thoughts -festivals - religious diversity - religion	- skin colour - racial diversity - different characteristics - individual differences - appearance - physical appearance	- family structure - parental - intercultural dialogue - family ethics - parental marital status - family routines - caste - class - socioeconomic - income -power status - social status - different backgrounds - cultural practices - social identity - demography - individuality	- gender roles - gender identity - gender diversity - gender orientation - respecting all genders - Psychological outlook	- ethnic diversity - ethnic differences - language spoken - different values - different perspectives - different appreciation - different characteristics - different values - physical appearance	- economic factors - socioeconomic background - political beliefs - income - economic status	- physical abilities - diversity of abilities - physical disability - mental health - learning ability - neurodiversity - specially abled - abilities - disabilities - physical ability - intellectual diversity - intellectual ability - physical disability - physical appearance - psychosomatic - disability - linguistic - skills - cognitive abilities - disability - linguistic disability - physical ability -gifted	-Sex - sexual orientation	- culture - multilingualism - language - language and accents - cultural differences - cultural contexts - multicultural - cultural awareness - cultural representation - cultural practices - cultural beliefs - language spoken - different values - cultural contexts - experiences - language disability - linguistic

Table 1: Attributes of Diversity

Together, these data sources provide a multi-layered record of how belonging was negotiated, enacted, and embedded across the school ecosystem.

6.4 Data Analysis
A reflexive thematic-analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2023) guided the analytic process. First, all artefacts, reflections, and systems maps were read openly to identify preliminary patterns around identity, participation, relational trust, and structural coherence. Next, these patterns were clustered into provisional categories aligned with the four phases of the DEIB conceptual model: Recognition, Participation, Alignment and Integration. Finally, the categories were distilled into three overarching analytic themes: identity safety, systems coherence, and relational agency. These themes frame the critical analysis in the subsequent section, tracing how belonging emerges not from isolated interventions but from the interaction of cultural, structural, and pedagogic forces.

7. LIMITATIONS

Single-site focus: This conceptual case is situated within one international school and may not capture the full heterogeneity of international-school ecosystems, particularly those operating in lower-resource, conflict-affected, or rural contexts. The patterns described here illuminate conceptual mechanisms rather than universally generalisable outcomes.

Context-specific identity dynamics: Belonging is shaped by local cultural scripts, migration histories, linguistic hierarchies, and geopolitical patterns. Insights drawn from this school's multicultural-demographic

profile may differ across regions with more homogeneous student populations or different colonial, linguistic, or socio-historic trajectories.

Reliance on stakeholder-generated reflections: Much of the analysis draws on reflective artefacts, voice notes, teacher journals, and parent narratives, which are susceptible to social-desirability effects and self-selection biases. Such data may foreground experiences of those already inclined to engage in DEIB dialogue.

Interpretive rather than comparative design: The absence of a formal comparison group or parallel dataset limits claims about the causal impact of the DEIB model. While patterns of change are documented, the analysis cannot conclusively attribute shifts in belonging to any single intervention strand.

Temporal constraints: The initiative examined spans a single academic year. Belonging, however, evolves over extended periods and may manifest differently during major school transitions, leadership changes, or sociopolitical disruptions. Longitudinal research is required to assess the durability and transformative depth of belonging-centred reform.

8. FINDINGS - CRITICAL ANALYSIS

The thematic analysis generated three mutually reinforcing domains: identity safety, relational agency, and systems coherence that together illustrate how the DEIB (Diversity → Equity → Inclusion → Belonging) initiative reshaped the lived experience of stakeholders within the international-school ecosystem. Each domain is interpreted through the conceptual lenses outlined earlier, demonstrating how belonging emerged not as a discrete intervention but as a cultural and structural shift.

8.1 Identity Safety
Belonging is inseparable from identity safety the sense that one's linguistic, cultural, racial, and personal identities can be expressed without fear of marginalisation. This aligns with Noddings' (2013) ethic of care, which frames recognition as the core of relational practice, and Bourdieu's (1990) insight that symbolic power determines whose identities are institutionally legitimised. Across stakeholder dialogues, multilingual students repeatedly highlighted how accent-based teasing, unintentionally exclusionary humour, or rigid English-only norms shaped their daily micro-interactions. Teachers, in turn, described uncertainty about how to navigate cultural references or identity markers without inadvertently causing harm. These narratives mirror Spencer-Oatey and Zhuang's (2017) findings that cultural misrecognition, even when subtle, can destabilise students' sense of belonging.

The DEIB process surfaced these micro-level dynamics and prompted concrete structural responses:
● classroom charters co-constructed with students using language that affirmed diverse identities;
● translanguaging routines allowing students to think, annotate, or draft in multiple languages;
● visible representation of culturally diverse authors, histories, and community narratives across subject areas.

Through these shifts, identity safety moved from an individual responsibility to an institutional commitment, an outcome resonant with SDG 4.7's emphasis on inclusive learning environments.

8.2 Relational Agency and Voice
Belonging is strengthened when students and adults experience themselves as active agents rather than passive recipients of policy. Here, Byram's (1997) attitudes-of-curiosity dimension and Kramsch's (2009) symbolic competence are instructive: learners develop agency when their perspectives reshape shared meaning-making. Student co-facilitators in the belonging dialogues described how having structured roles, agenda-setting, moderating, and synthesising feedback shifted their relationship to school governance. Parents, particularly those from expatriate or multilingual households, reported that multilingual family forums legitimised their cultural knowledge and positioned them as partners rather than guests. Teachers noted that the reflective nature of belonging circles enabled them to articulate tensions around equity, workload, and cultural expectations in ways that nurtured collegial trust. Importantly, relational agency also extended to moments of discomfort. When students raised concerns about implicit racial hierarchies in peer groups or inequitable treatment in extracurricular placements, the leadership team used these insights to revise criteria, communication, and accountability processes, an enactment of Shields' (2018) call for transformative leadership that is willing to engage in "courageous disruption." Taken together, these practices echo studies showing that voice-rich ecosystems enhance academic agency, well-being, and intercultural openness (Cook-Sather, 2020; OECD, 2018).

8.3 Systems Coherence
The DEIB initiative underscored that belonging cannot flourish when school structures inadvertently reproduce inequities. Fullan's (2016) coherence-making and Bryk et al.'s (2015) continuous-improvement frameworks help interpret how multiple system layers' policies, professional learning, governance routines, and communication channels interact to either strengthen or undermine inclusive cultures. Policy audits revealed that while the school had articulated inclusive values, several operational documents (e.g., behaviour

guidance, admissions language, assessment protocols) still reflected Western-centric norms or ambiguous expectations around cultural, linguistic, or behavioural diversity. The task force, therefore, engaged in policy rewriting grounded in equity-oriented language, bias-interruption techniques, and explicit commitments to identity safety.

Professional learning also became a coherence driver:
● teachers engaged in modules on cultural humility, restorative practice, and trauma-informed pedagogy;
● leaders participated in equity-leadership workshops anchored in intercultural competence;
● governors engaged in learning cycles on inclusive decision-making and shared accountability.

The cumulative effect was a shift from fragmented DEIJ initiatives toward a systemic culture in which belonging became the evaluative criterion for everyday decisions and enactment aligned with UNESCO's (2023) call for "new social contracts" that integrate inclusion across governance and pedagogy.

8.4 Equity and Power Redistribution
A notable finding was the rebalancing of epistemic and institutional power. Inspired by Andreotti's (2014) critique of soft-charity globalism and Sensoy and DiAngelo's (2017) analysis of structural inequity, the DEIB initiative deliberately redistributed leadership responsibilities and amplified historically marginalised voices. For instance, multilingual staff and parents contributed to redesigning communications and signage, ensuring accessibility across linguistic communities. Students from racial or linguistic minorities served as cultural-competence ambassadors during transition programmes for new families. Leadership teams adopted restorative approaches to behavioural incidents, recognising how disciplinary norms often reflect hidden cultural assumptions. This shift mirrors research demonstrating that inclusive governance must centre the voices of those most affected by inequities (Fraser, 2005), through repeated cycles of consultation and co-design, belonging transformed from an affective aspiration to a structural practice.

8.5 Persistent Tensions
The analysis revealed ongoing tensions. English remained the de facto language of academic legitimacy, despite translanguaging efforts, echoing Philipson's (2009) critique of linguistic imperialism. Teachers noted workload pressures in implementing relational routines. Some families expressed discomfort with discussions of race, gender, or privilege concerns reflective of broader sociopolitical polarisation. Additionally, time-zone challenges affected global online sessions; high-mobility families reported that belonging must be continually rebuilt after relocations, and staff turnover sometimes disrupted consistency of practice. Fullan (2016) describes these as "implementation dips" inevitable obstacles within complex reform environments. Yet the DEIB model's emphasis on collaborative inquiry meant that these tensions became opportunities for learning, adaptation, and recalibration rather than derailment.

9. IMPLICATIONS

Belonging-centred DEIJ reform requires structural, pedagogic, and governance alignment. The DEIB conceptual model suggests four interlocking domains of action curriculum design, pedagogy and assessment, policy and resourcing, and research and monitoring through which international schools can translate aspirational language into durable systemic change. The progression from relational practices to institutional coherence can be understood as a movement from identity safety → relational agency → inclusive systems → sustainable belonging, mirroring global frameworks such as SDG 4.7 (inclusive, equitable learning) and SDG 16 (inclusive institutions).

9.1 Curriculum Design and Standards
Curriculum design must move beyond superficial multicultural representation toward identity-safe, culturally sustaining education. Following Taba's (1962) inductive curriculum model, belonging-centred curriculum development should begin with student identity maps, linguistic repertoires, and community cultural narratives, and progress toward thematic units that bridge local knowledge and global perspectives. Interdisciplinary modules such as "Migration & Memory," "Language, Identity & Power," or "Belonging in the Anthropocene" align with OECD's (2018) global-competence framework and invite inquiry into lived cultural experiences.

International schools can embed belonging into subject standards by:
● integrating multilingual artefacts and home cultures into literacy routines;
● diversifying canonical texts and authors, including historically marginalised voices;
● embedding reflective tasks that prompt learners to examine cultural positioning;
● designing inquiry questions that foreground empathy, solidarity, and relational ethics.
Such curriculum design shifts belonging from an affective by-product to a systemic anchor.

9.2 Pedagogy and Assessment

Pedagogic routines must make belonging visible in everyday classroom interactions. Dialogic literacy, structured turn-taking protocols (Nystrand, 1997), and translanguaging practices (García & Li Wei, 2014) democratise participation and legitimise diverse expressive modes. Trauma-informed and culturally responsive pedagogies, grounded in Noddings' (2013) ethic of care, cultivate the relational safety required for risk-taking, especially among students navigating linguistic or cultural marginality. Assessment systems also require realignment. Portfolio-based evidence annotated excerpts, identity-reflection journals, collaborative artefacts, and wellbeing indicators capture socio-emotional dimensions that standardised tests overlook (Black & Wiliam, 2009). Belonging rubrics tied to ICC constructs (Byram, 1997) can assess growth in empathy, cultural curiosity, and critical cultural awareness. Such assessment models operationalise SDG 4.7's call for evaluative mechanisms that recognise intercultural competence and sustainability dispositions.

9.3 Policy and Resourcing

Belonging must be codified in policy architectures to ensure coherence across the school ecosystem. This includes:

● Admissions and transition policies that recognise linguistic diversity and the needs of high-mobility families;
● Behaviour and safeguarding policies that incorporate bias-interruption protocols, restorative justice, and identity-affirming practices;
● Staff recruitment frameworks prioritising culturally responsive teaching competencies;
● Professional learning mandates that include ongoing equity-focused pedagogical training;
● Governance norms that embed inclusive decision-making and accountability.

Financial and infrastructural resourcing is equally critical. Micro-grants for translation services, multilingual communication platforms, and community facilitators ensure equity of access. A dedicated Belonging & Inclusion Fund, aligned with global equity guidelines (Commonwealth Secretariat, 2017), can support wellbeing programmes, affinity groups, inclusive materials, and staff learning. These measures align with UNESCO's (2023) call for "institutionalised cultures of solidarity" and ensure belonging becomes a whole-school responsibility rather than the remit of individual champions.

9.4 Research and Monitoring

Sustaining belonging-centred reform requires rigorous monitoring and multi-method research. Future studies might adopt:

● discourse analysis of classroom interactions to map relational dynamics (Gee, 2014);
● network analysis to visualise cross-cultural friendships and participation patterns (Wasserman & Faust, 1994);
● ICC inventories (Deardorff, 2006) adapted for international schools;
● belonging surveys sensitive to multilingual and mobile populations;
● longitudinal wellbeing tracking, especially across school transitions;
● mixed-methods case studies across international regions for comparative insights.

Networked Improvement Communities (Bryk et al., 2015) could support multi-school collaboration to refine DEIB models iteratively, ensuring both contextual responsiveness and research rigour. Intersectional analyses (Crenshaw, 1991) would surface how belonging is differently experienced across race, gender, language, and neurodiversity.

10. CONCLUSION

The DEIB reframing advanced in this paper suggests that belonging rather than diversity alone constitutes the most generative site for reimagining equitable schooling in international contexts. As Kramsch (2009) reminds us, belonging is forged in the symbolic ecologies through which individuals negotiate identity, memory, and voice; it is not a static status but a relational and interpretive practice enacted in the everyday transactions of school life. Positioning belonging at the centre of DEIJ work redirects attention from representational optics to the lived, phenomenological experiences of students and adults, and aligns with UNESCO's (2023) call for a renewed social contract grounded in solidarity, dignity, and collective care.

The DEIB model presented here functions as both an analytic lens and a practical blueprint. It demonstrates that belonging becomes durable when it is embedded across institutional layers: curriculum, pedagogy, governance, and community partnerships. Drawing on Noddings' ethic of care, Bourdieu's social-field theory, Shields' transformative leadership, and Byram's intercultural competence, the model reframes inclusion as a distributed practice of recognition, participation, alignment, and integration. Insights from stakeholder dialogues underscore that belonging is strengthened when schools attend to identity safety, cultivate relational agency, and ensure systems coherence, thereby creating environments where learners and teachers can inhabit their full cultural, linguistic, and emotional selves.

Importantly, this analysis cautions against treating belonging as a soft affective add-on. Instead, belonging operates as a structural condition that shapes cognitive engagement, well-being, intercultural openness, and

the ethical imagination. When multilingual students see their repertoires legitimised, when families experience themselves as epistemic contributors rather than peripheral observers, and when teachers engage in reflexive, equity-driven collaboration, a different civic ecology emerges: one marked by mutual recognition, dialogic resilience, and shared responsibility. These patterns resonate with empirical work linking belonging to academic persistence, socio-emotional health, and global-competence development (OECD, 2018; Walton & Brady, 2020).

At a time when international schools navigate polarising global discourses around identity, migration, and equity, belonging-centred DEIJ work offers a counter-trajectory, one that prioritises coherence over compliance, relational depth over representational breadth, and structural courage over symbolic gestures. Such an approach aligns with Fraser's (2005) principle of parity of participation, ensuring that all community members, regardless of nationality, race, language, or mobility, can engage as full partners in shaping institutional life.

Ultimately, the DEIB framework invites international schools to imagine themselves not merely as academic institutions but as micro-publics of democratic, intercultural, and ethical engagement. When students annotate one another's lived experiences, when teachers co-construct identity-safe classrooms, and when leaders align policies with relational justice, they rehearse the civic dispositions needed for an interconnected and uncertain world. Belonging, then, is not the end point of DEIJ work but its generative beginning the quiet, powerful infrastructure through which global citizenship, human flourishing, and sustainable futures take tangible shape.

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