Leading Inclusion

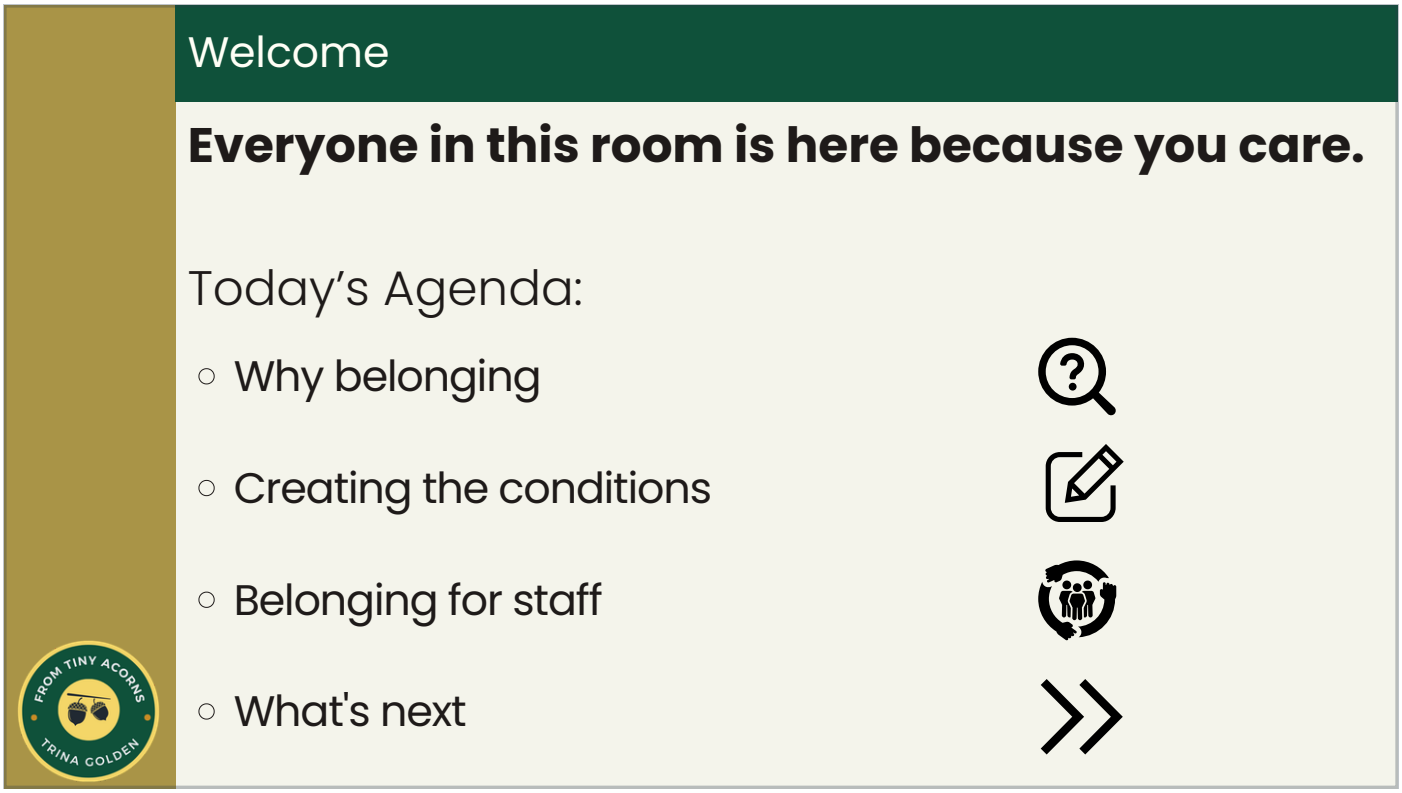
Building a School Culture Where Everyone Belongs

IPPN Conference, 18th November 2026
Trina Golden

Welcome

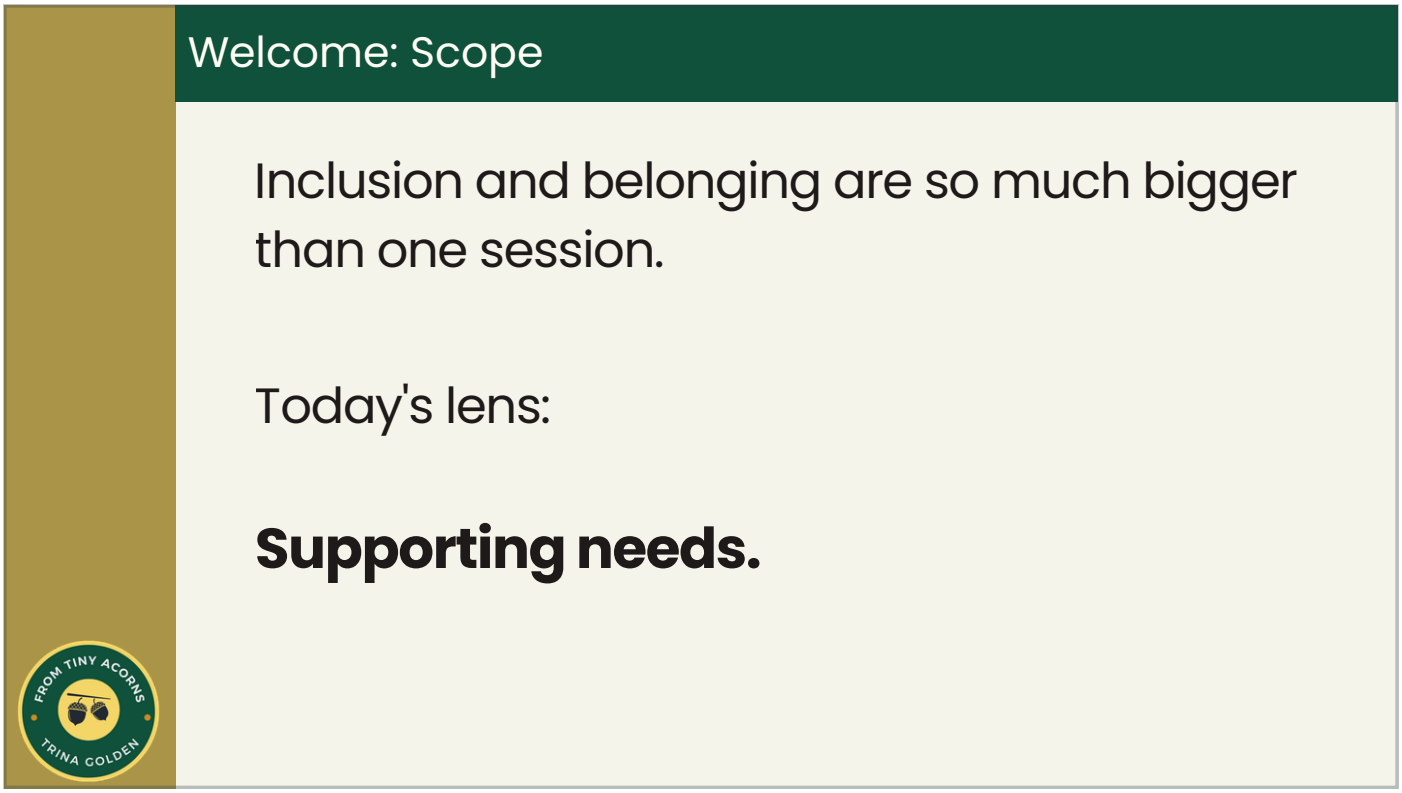
- Help yourself to a fidget.
- Move, stand or step out whenever you need to.

I won't be offended if you move, stand or leave. No need to take notes, the slides and a Padlet of ideas and templates will be shared. The Padlet is open for your ideas too, add what works in your school at any point today.



"Everyone here wants the best for children. You're sitting in this room listening to yet another person talk about inclusion because you care. The same is true of the teachers in our classrooms. The will is always there. Sometimes the knowledge, the training and the resources are missing. So let's see how we can help.

As we go through the session, I'll aim to use some of the strategies I talk about. Visual timetables, predictability and knowing what's happening is a universal support. Dual coding is very effective with both pupils but also with adults, staff meetings etc"



Inclusion and belonging are so much bigger than supporting needs, disability, neurodiversity and learning needs. Inclusion and belonging involve culture, language, background, gender and so much more. We could spend a full day on it, if not a week. Today looks at one aspect, but please don't take that as ignoring the others, which are every bit as important.

Intersectionality cannot be separated from belonging



"- DEIS Band 1 gaelscoil.
- Teaching and leading abroad across age groups.
- A special school.
- Opened autism classes in two schools.
- Principal of Ennis ETNS,
- then Owenabue ETNS.
- Now School Support & Volunteer Officer at Educate Together national office."

Why belonging: Who I am

- Parent
  Our house is bouncy.



Family photo. Keep it light here so the story still lands later. Inclusion and belonging aren't theoretical to me. They're my life.

Why belonging: Inclusion vs belonging

Inclusion



About 500 people answered, maybe some of you on Instagram: the first words that come to mind when you hear inclusion.

Meaningful, everyone, support, but also resources, delusion, lip service, buzzword, in theory.

And the most common answer to inclusion was belonging.

Why belonging: Inclusion vs belonging

Belonging

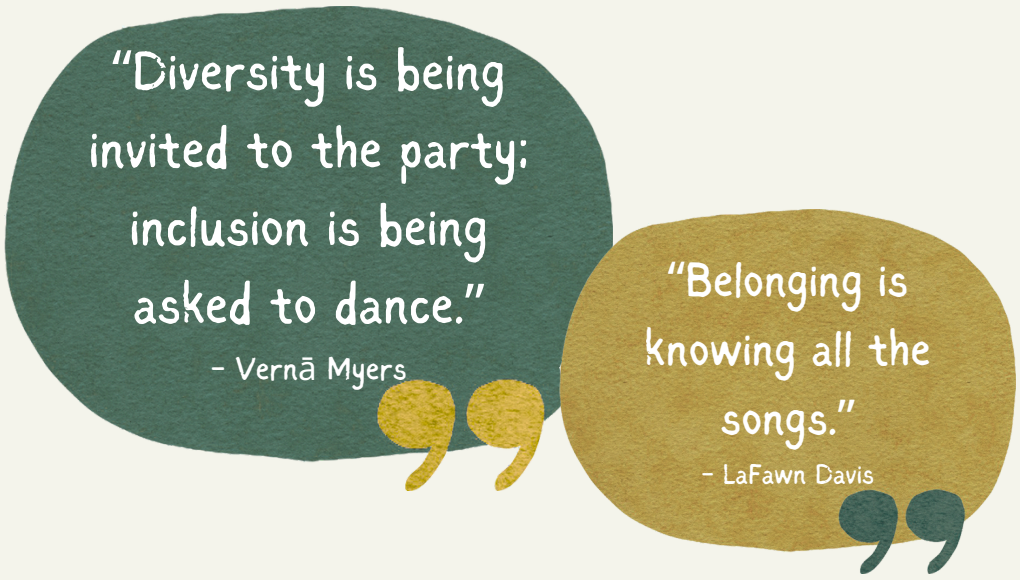


Same question, different word. Safe came up 74 times for belonging and only 7 times for inclusion.

Inclusion describes a system.
Belonging describes a feeling.

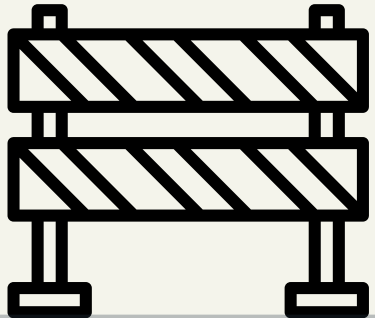
One person said it exactly: less of an action and more of a feeling.

Why belonging: Inclusion vs belonging



The barriers

We can't have fully inclusive schools in a system that isn't designed for inclusion.



"Before we move on. Let's address the elephant in the room.

Taken from a colleague. We can't truly have inclusive schools in a system that isn't designed for inclusion.

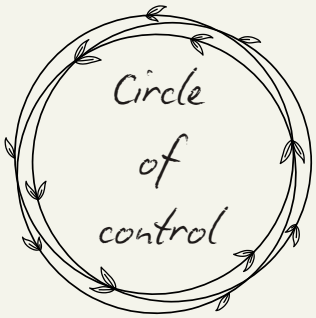
Name the realities: not enough resources, need higher than your capacity right now, worry about staff burnout and your own.

Why belonging: The barriers

Good enough is good enough.

Today:

What is within our control.



Don't let perfect be the enemy of good.

For the next hour, what we can do, and the little things that have made a difference in our school, in other schools and in my life.

The little boy

A little bouncy boy that many of you have met...

I was on the other side of the desk.

He smiled going in. He smiled coming out.



That little boy is James. The worry, the sleepless nights before a meeting, not knowing how to help when I'm not there.

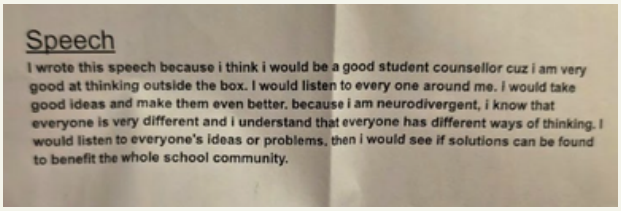
What it gave me as a professional.

Then: through it all, he knew undeniably that he was cared for. He was loved.

Why belonging: The little boy

James' speech:

I wrote this speech because i think i would be a good student counsellor cuz i am very good at thinking outside the box. I would listen to every one around me. i would take good ideas and make them even better. because i am neurodivergent, i know that everyone is very different and i understand that everyone has different ways of thinking. I would listen to everyone's ideas or problems. then i would see if solutions can be found to benefit the whole school community.


Speech

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He's in 4th class now. He wrote this with his SET to go for student council. Let the room read it in silence.

This is belonging.

This is the frame for everything that follows.

Why belonging

Turn and talk - 3 mins

Think about a time you did or didn't belong.
What made the difference?



Belonging - What does it mean for you?

Give a heads-up before the chat. Sharing aloud is optional.

Creating the conditions

Carter's 10 dimensions

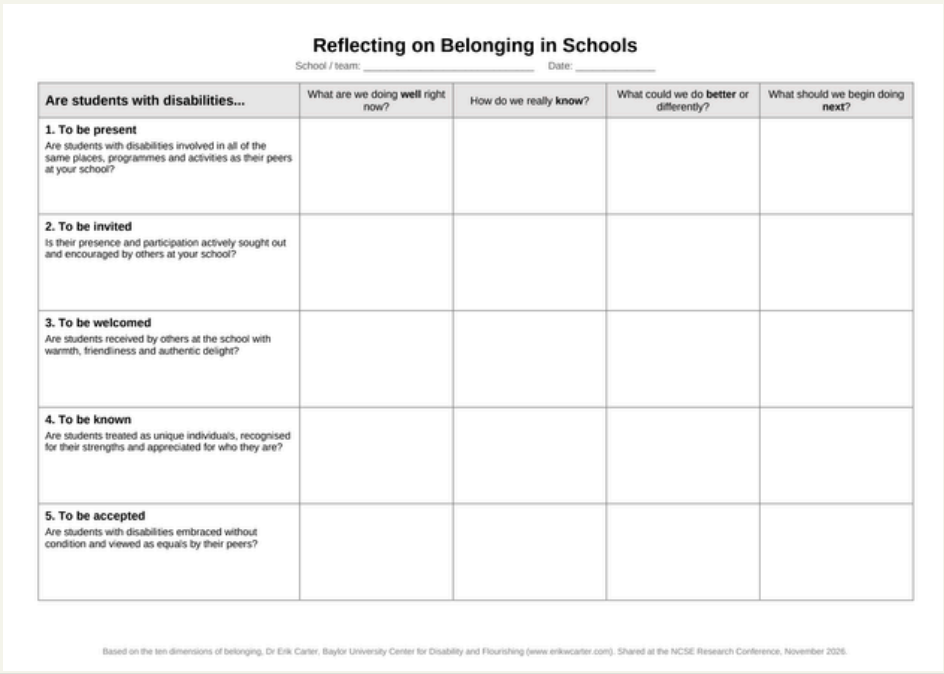


Dr. Erik Carter - Baylor University

"From Erik Carter at the NCSE research conference last week. Belonging is the difference between being present and having a presence. Integration is near but not among, inclusion is being with one another, belonging is sharing lives. Belonging is not a special need, it's a universal need.

Carter's 10 dimensions of belonging. Relate points to these too (p. 38). Invited: 51% of autistic young people hadn't been invited to a social activity in the past year (Carter, 2018). One of you said inclusion is a child invited to the birthday party."

Creating the conditions



Reflecting on Belonging in Schools

School / team: _____ Date: _____

Are students with disabilities...	What are we doing **well** right now?	How do we really **know**?	What could we do **better** or differently?	What should we begin doing **next**?
1. To be present Are students with disabilities involved in all of the same places, programmes and activities as their peers at your school?				
2. To be invited Is their presence and participation actively sought out and encouraged by others at your school?				
3. To be welcomed Are students received by others at the school with warmth, friendliness and authentic delight?				
4. To be known Are students treated as unique individuals, recognised for their strengths and appreciated for who they are?				
5. To be accepted Are students with disabilities embraced without condition and viewed as equals by their peers?				

Based on the ten dimensions of belonging, Dr Erik Carter, Baylor University Center for Disability and Flourishing (www.erikwcarter.com). Shared at the NCSE Research Conference, November 2026.

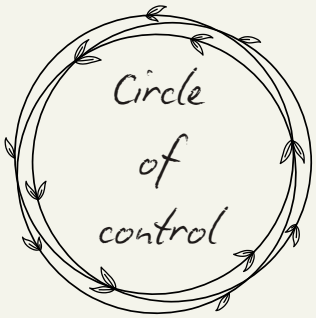
Carter's four questions, made practical. Pairs pick any one of the ten dimensions and answer the four questions for their own school.

Invited is a good one to suggest if people are stuck: 51% of autistic young people hadn't been invited to a social activity in the past year. Sharing aloud optional; a couple of quick examples to finish.

Creating the conditions

We can't make anyone feel they belong.

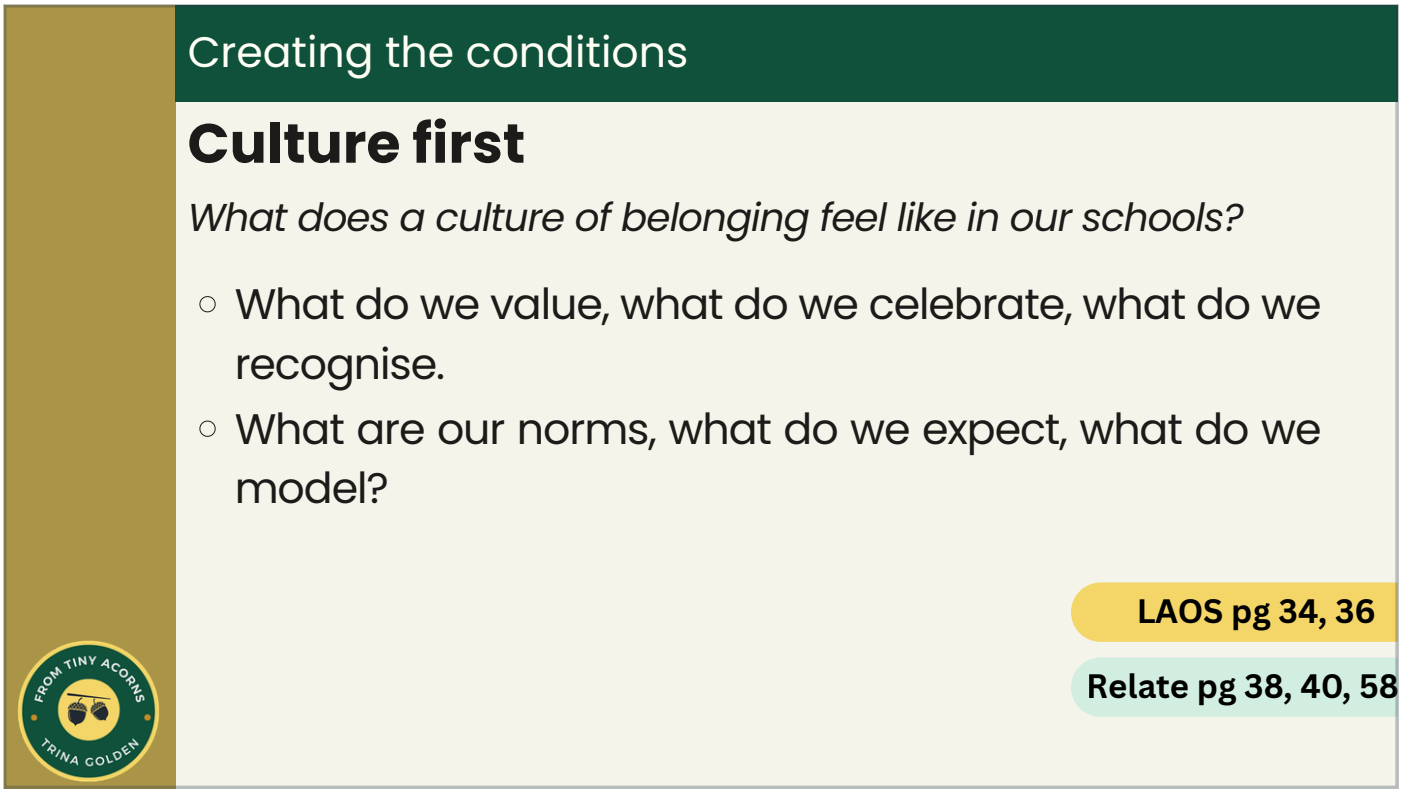
We can create the conditions that make it more likely.



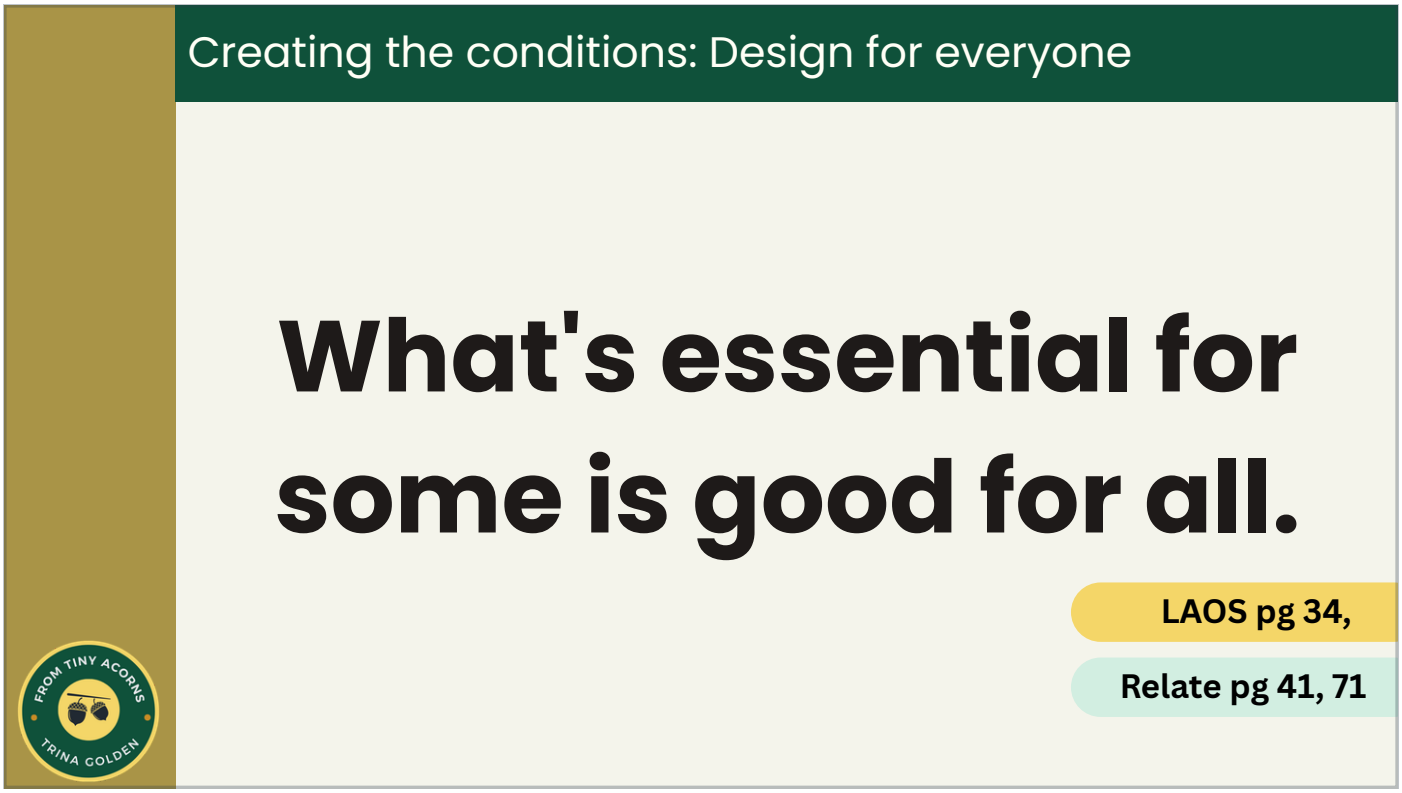
That's not in our control. However hard we try, a child or a colleague might still not feel safe being honest about who they are.

James said it himself: we can't control how that feels.

But we can create the conditions that make belonging more likely, and that help people to thrive. That's what the rest of this session is about.



You can feel it walking in. What do we value, celebrate, recognise? Our norms, expectations and how we respond. Above all, care.



Practical ideas

UDL at its core, not the buzzword: designing for everyone supports everyone. That line came from one of you on Instagram, and it's in Relate almost word for word.

Creating the conditions: Calm corners









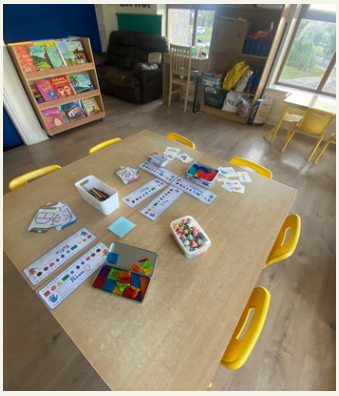


The point of today isn't to take 10 things and feel like they're things you 'should' do. The point is to share ideas so you might find one that you feel might help in your context.

Creating the conditions: Soft starts and Morning meetings







Some of the things you might have seen in the video.

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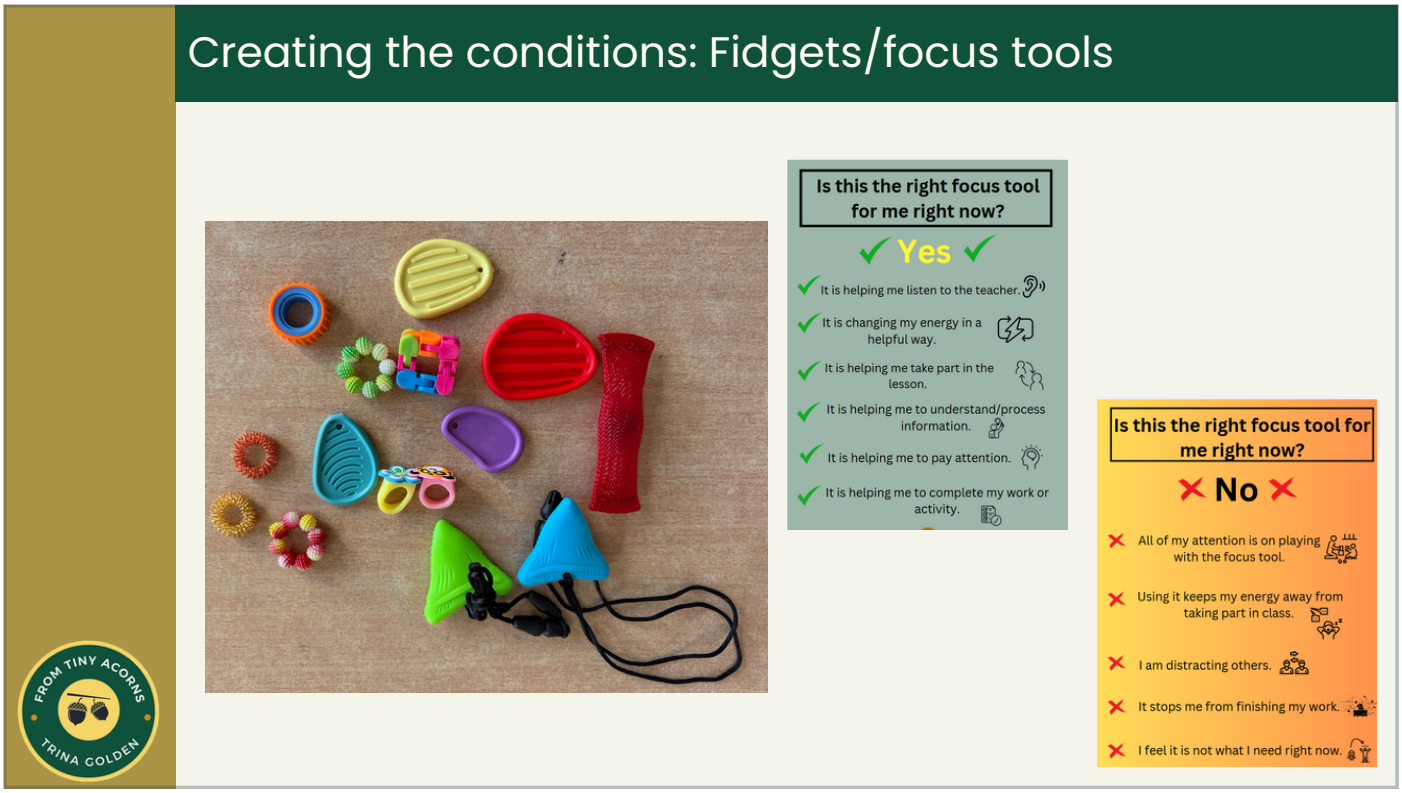

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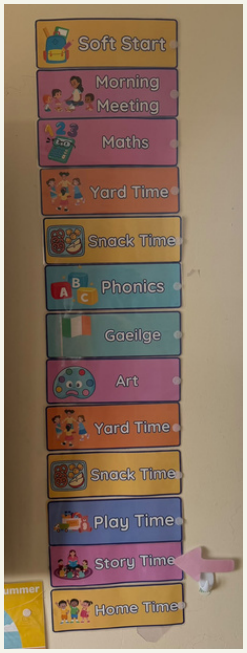
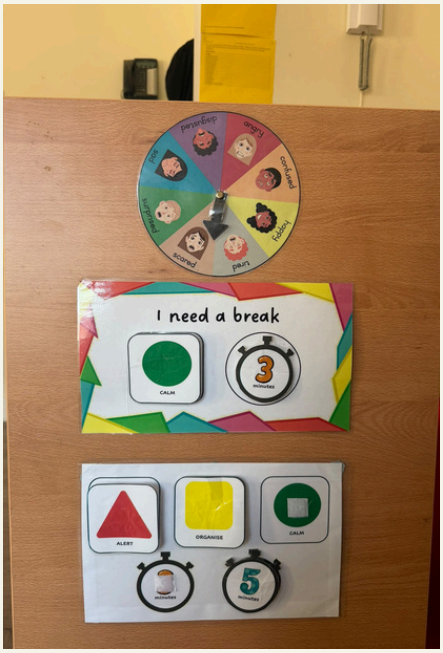
Creating the conditions: Visuals







Some of the things you might have seen in the video.

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Creating the conditions: Ear defenders & Flexible seating







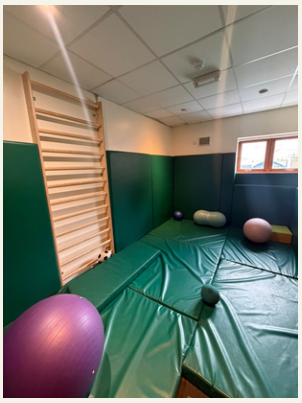
Some of the things you might have seen in the video.

The point of today isn't to take 10 things and feel like they're things you 'should' do. The point is to share ideas so you might find one that you feel might help in your context.

Creating the conditions: Regulation first











LAOS pg 36, 40

Relate pg 18, 27

Regulation can't always be scheduled, so children need to access it independently in class where possible

Movement break vs regulation break are not the same thing. Where possible, regulation happens in class.

Creating the conditions for learning

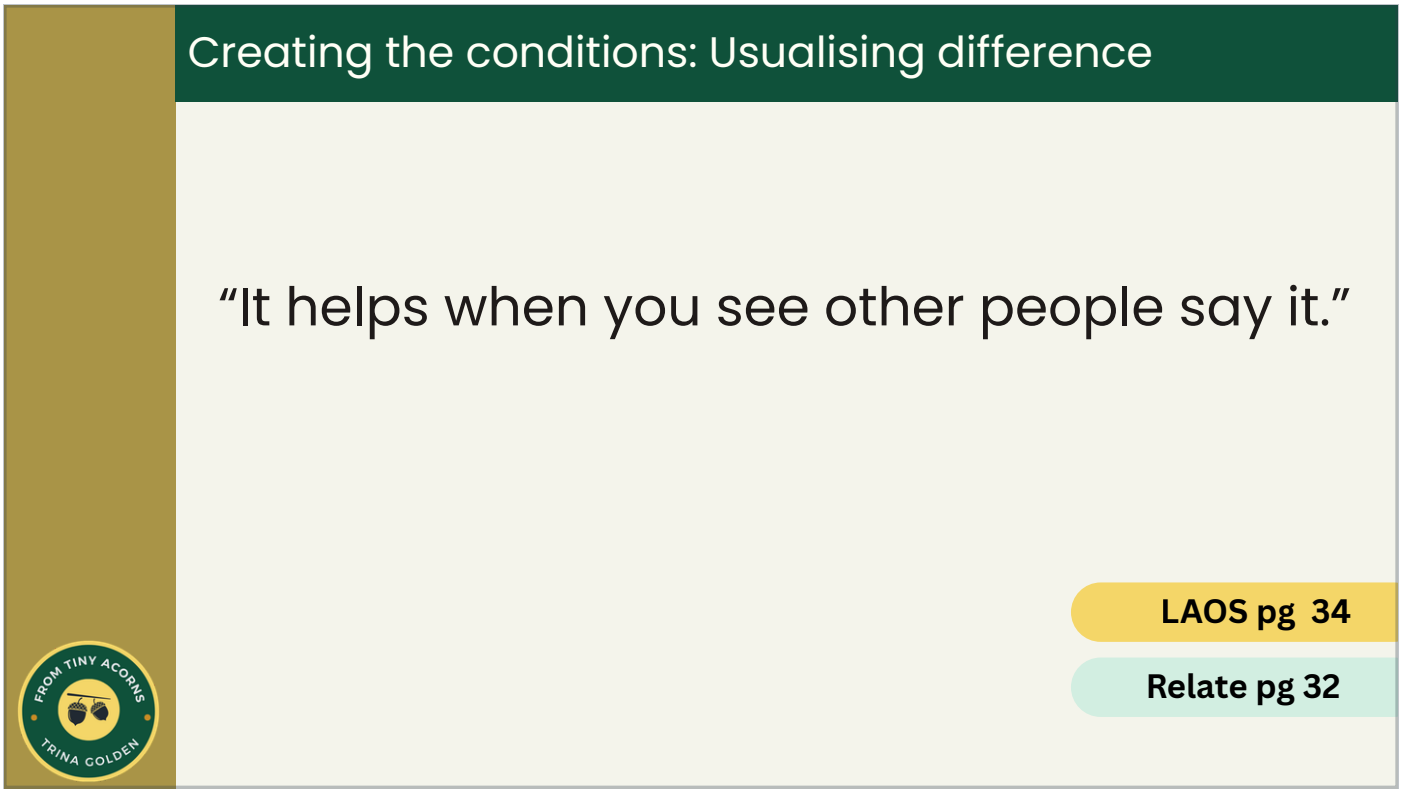
Regulation in the yard

The Zen Den

4 whistles.

In everything we do, 'Is this helping you learn'. Consider and ask.

Started on the yard in Ennis, also in Owenabue.



From James. A classmate told James he had ADHD because James had already told people about his own. He was worried others wouldn't be nice about it. When he told them, everyone was accepting, but the worry was real and we can't control how that feels. Modelling from staff and other children makes it easier.

Creating the conditions: What works for you

What works well in your school?

Scan the QR code code below to add it on the padlet or make a note.

Then share with your neighbours.

You can also enter this code on menti.com: 38025617

Creating the conditions: Knowing the child

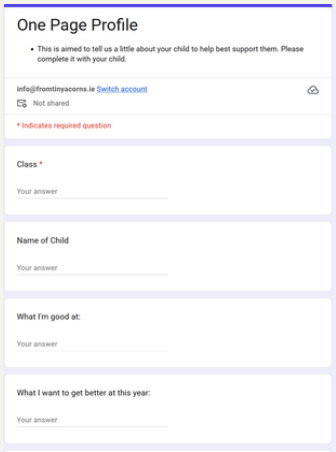
One page profiles

Meet the staff in September

Centre the child

How we communicate.

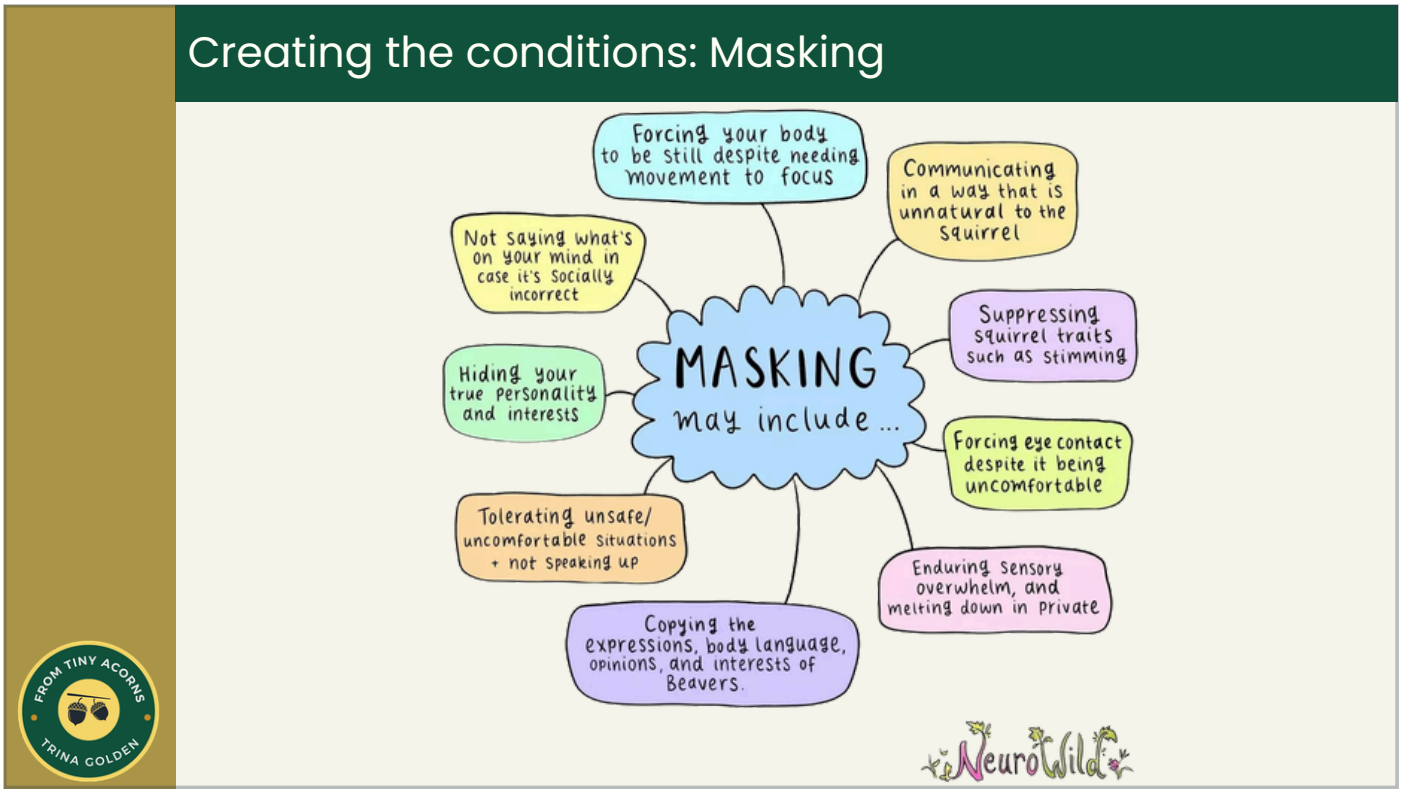
What you can expect.



LAOS pg 35, 39, 40

Relate pg 45

Every year. Neurodivergent children often have neurodivergent parents, so think about how families experience meetings, forms and communication.



James was the easy one

Everyone could see he was struggling. The child you don't see is often a girl, though not always. Quiet, compliant, "a pleasure to have in class".

Relate names it as a stressor: keeping up a social front when your social battery is low (p. 23).

Irish research shows wellbeing is lower for girls and students with SEN, and school factors explain nearly half the gap (Dempsey, Farrell and McCoy, 2025).



For a neurodivergent child or adult, fitting in often means masking, and masking is exhausting. Belonging is not having to.

Creating the conditions: Believing parents

"We don't see that here, and we believe you."

Not being believed is much harder. "She's grand here" can sound like "it's your parenting". It tells us she's working very hard to hold it together. Ask about evenings and mornings. The parent is the expert on their child. Put supports in place even when nothing shows in class.

Creating the conditions: Believing parents

Honest about limits.

From a place of care.

Respond, don't react.

LAOS pg 36, 37

Relate pg 27, 34

Be honest about resources and what we can and can't do. Parents trust a school more when it doesn't overpromise. What we will do, what we can't do right now and why, what we'll keep trying. Formal supports: SET and SNA provision with flexibility, responding to need rather than reacting.

Belonging for staff

Belonging is for the adults too.

Staff told me: seeing other staff open and honest about feeling overwhelmed and needing a break, and it being normal to have a bad day. People checking in with genuine interest. Feeling trusted with decisions about their class. One Instagram reply: don't feel belonging in my school, just isolation. Some of us in this room may feel that.

Belonging for staff

“The sense of belonging that you create is the strategy. It is the accommodation.”

“You nearly forget to mask, because the norm is feeling appreciated.”

“It's normalised to have a bad day.”

“We're very aware of kids being overwhelmed and needing a break. That's equally there for us.”

“Feeling trusted by leadership is massive, but also feeling that you can trust them.”

“Academics can only come when relationships are built and children feel safe. It's the same for the adults.”

All from staff, anonymous. Lead with the first one and the sports day story: nobody tried to fix it, it was enough to hear 'I know this is your worst nightmare'. Because she felt understood and allowed to still be there, she had the capacity to cope. Her colleague: "I've never felt this understood ever in my life." Then the others. Same standards for staff as for children: "It would be very hard to give your all to a class if you didn't feel it was being done for you also." Trust both ways, regular check-ins, consistency. "Feeling like we're all just humans trying to do this together is very different from feeling like there's a hierarchy."

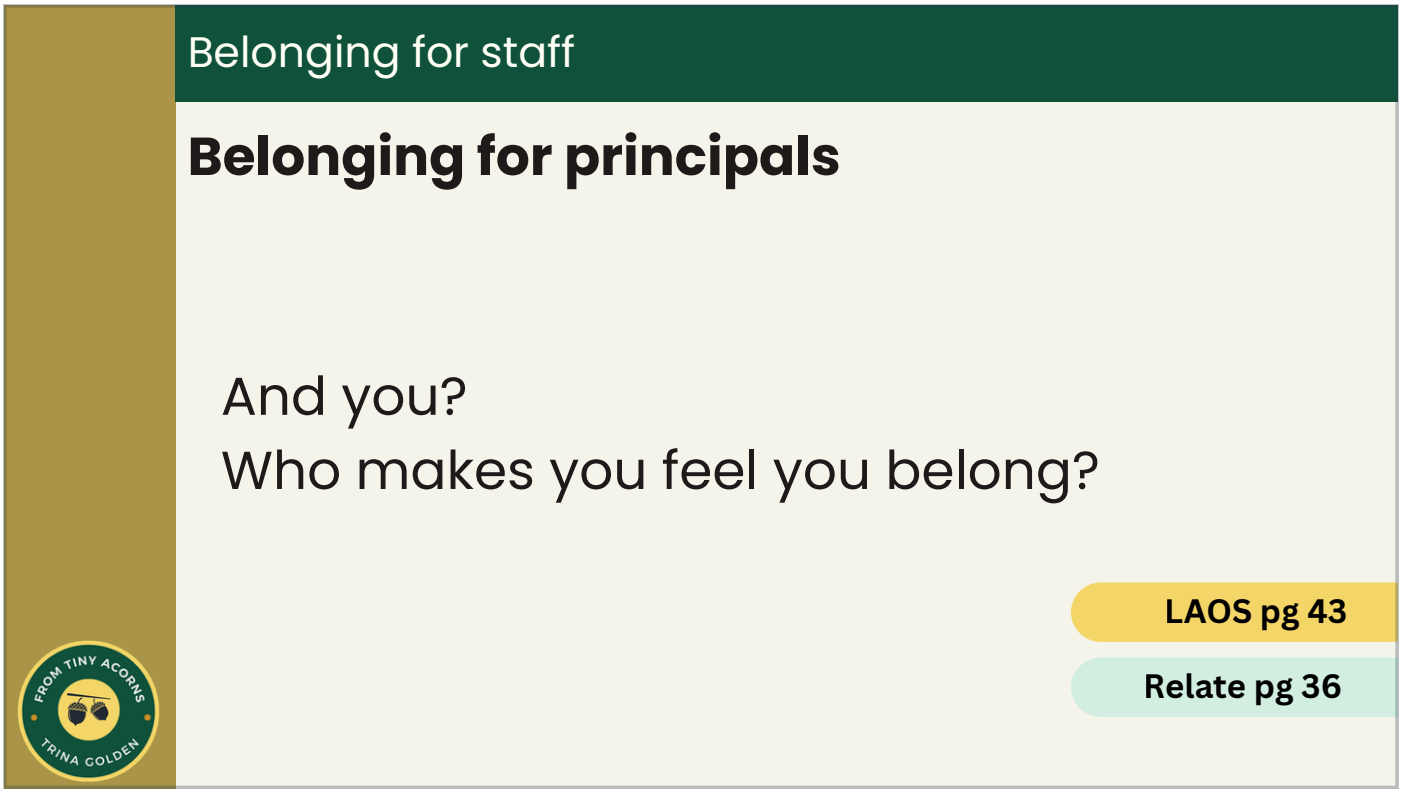
Belonging for staff

- Modelling
- Inclusive recruitment
- Clear timelines

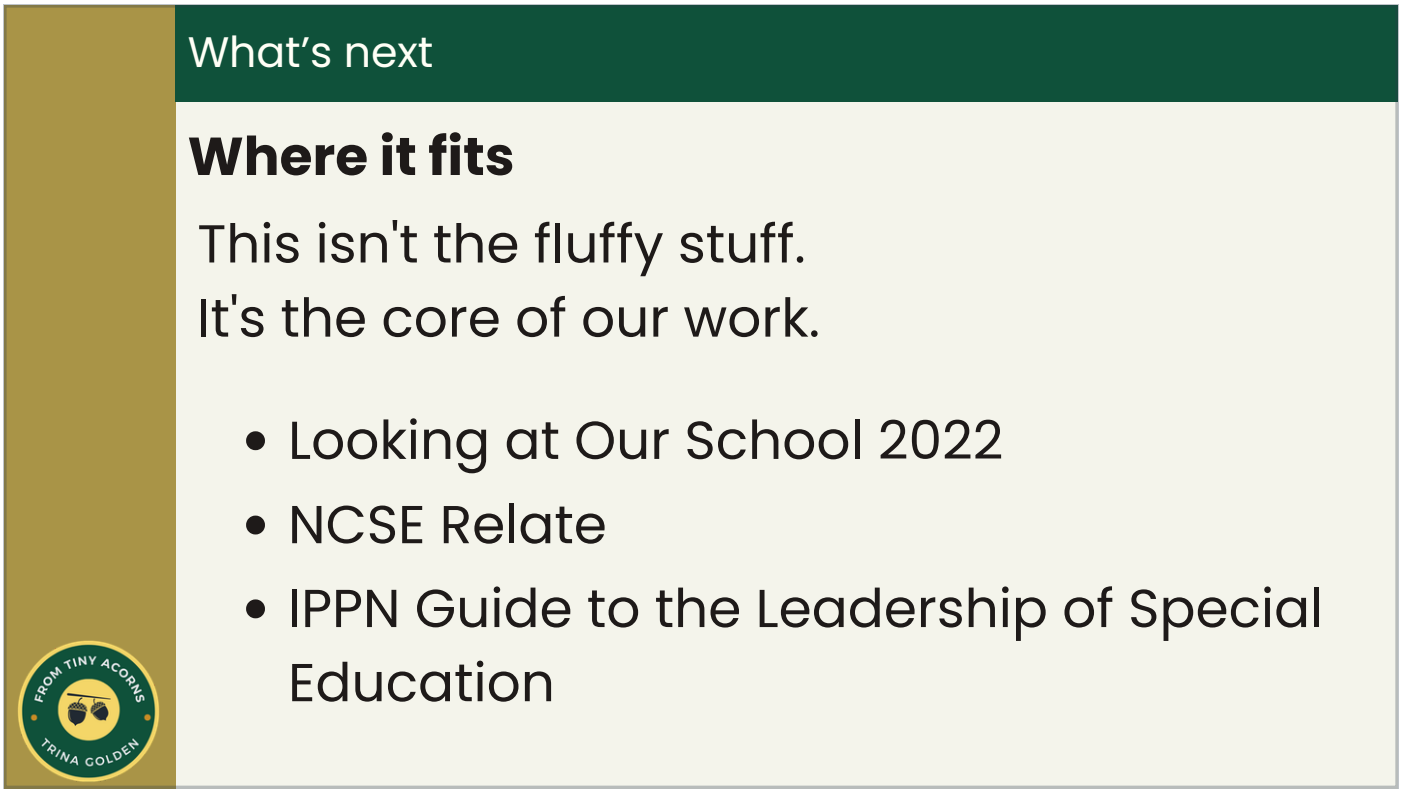
LAOS pg 9, 38, 42

Relate pg 36

Staff openness about their own differences, always by choice. Plain-language adverts, a statement that welcomes diversity of all kinds, asking every candidate what would help them at interview. A planned calendar, agendas in advance, decisions written down. No surprises.



Pause here. Leadership can be lonely. One Instagram reply said: don't feel belonging in my school, just isolation. Some of us in this room may feel that. Being human as a leader is part of it, so is having people of our own: a deputy, a colleague down the road, a cluster, IPPN. Looking at Our School names it too: building professional networks with other school leaders. Look after your own belonging, not just everyone else's.



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What's next

Where it fits

Leading Inclusion: Where It Fits

Everything in *Leading Inclusion: Building a School Culture Where Everyone Belongs* fits with the Leadership and management statements of highly effective practice in Looking at Our School 2022 and in NCSE Relate.

Session theme	Looking at Our School 2022	NCSE Relate
Culture first	"promote an inclusive school community which demonstrably values diversity and challenges discrimination" (p. 34); "model and develop a strong culture of mutual trust, respect, responsibility and shared accountability" (p. 36)	Unconditional Positive Regard (p. 40); Belonging (p. 38); The Relationships Element (p. 58)
Design for everyone	"ensure that all relevant school policies are inclusive" (p. 34); "promote professional learning that is evidence-based and adapted to the identified needs of the school" (p. 35)	Universal Design for Learning (p. 41); The Classroom Element (p. 71)
Regulation	"create and maintain an environment of security and wellbeing in the school" (p. 36); "approach the management of change in a collaborative, flexible and sensitive manner" (p. 40)	Regulation First (p. 18); Phases of Support (p. 27)
Knowing the child and family	"highly effective systems for monitoring pupils' progress and development" (p. 35); "build and maintain very constructive relationships with parents" (p. 39); "build and maintain constructive relationships through effective and regular communication with all school partners" (p. 40)	The Understanding Element (p. 45), including the One Page Profile and Getting to Know Me tools
Masking and believing parents	"seeks and listens to the opinions of others" (p. 40)	Neurodiversity Affirming (p. 32); Stressor Tool, within Regulation First (pp. 25 to 26)
Honesty about limits and formal supports	"adopt a solution-focused approach" (p. 37); "deploys teachers strategically to make the best use of their specific strengths and skills" (p. 36)	Phases of Support (p. 27); Solution Focused (p. 34)
Is it helping you learn?	"recognise pupils and parents as stakeholders, value their views"; "Those leading the SSE process meaningfully consult and engage with pupils and parents" (p. 42)	Student Voice (p. 16); Solution Focused Goal Setting (p. 68)
Usualising difference	"promote an inclusive school community which demonstrably values diversity and challenges discrimination" (p. 34)	Neurodiversity Affirming (p. 32)
Belonging for staff	"the wellbeing of school leaders and teachers contributes to a safe and healthy learning environment for pupils" (p. 9); "ensures that teachers who are experiencing difficulties are supported effectively" (p. 38); "attend successfully to their own wellbeing, as well as that of others" (p. 42)	Staff and Student Wellbeing (p. 36)
Belonging for principals	"actively involve themselves in professional associations for school leaders and managers at all levels" (p. 43)	Staff and Student Wellbeing (p. 36)
Looking at your own school	"Those leading the SSE process meaningfully consult and engage with pupils and parents" (p. 42)	The Reflecting Element (p. 88); Belonging, which refers to Dr Erik Carter's 10 dimensions of belonging (p. 38)

Quotes are word for word from the statements of highly effective practice (and, for p. 9, the key principles) in *Looking at Our School 2022: A Quality Framework for Primary Schools and Special Schools*. Relate entries use the section names from its contents page. Page numbers are the printed page numbers in each document.

FROM TINY ACORNS TRINA GOLDEN

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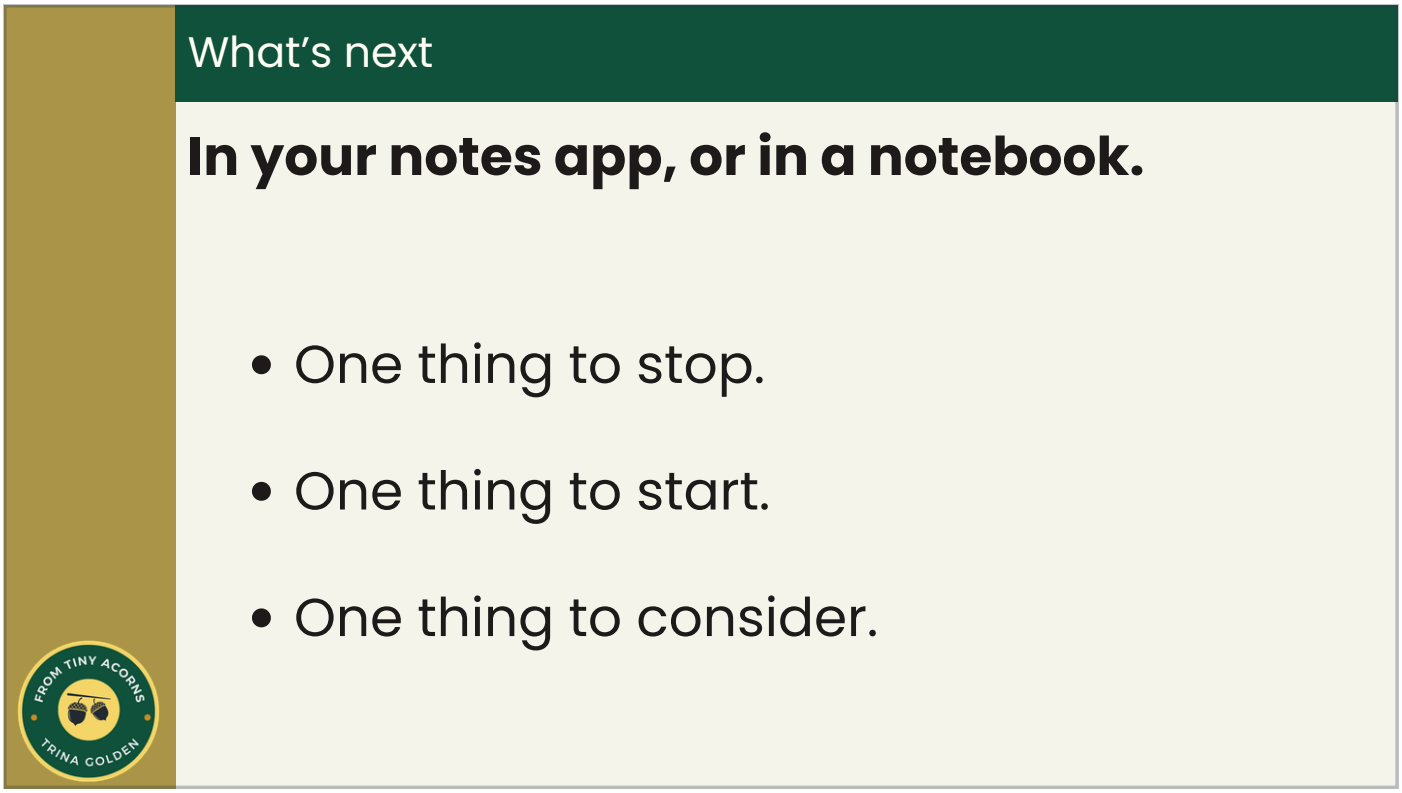
What's next

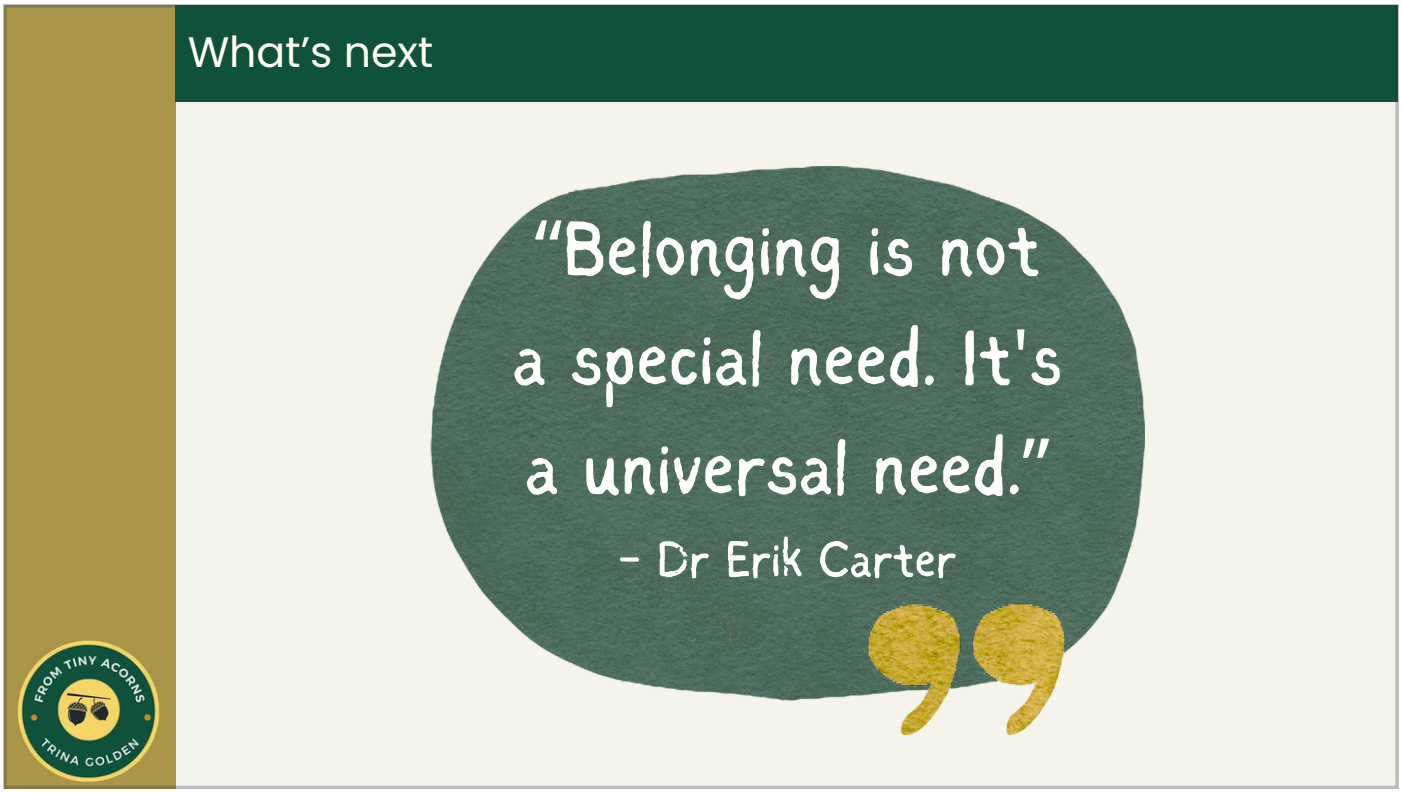
Two places to start

- Get to know the child: Relate p. 45
- Regulation first: Relate p. 18

One Page Profile and Getting to Know Me templates, including Getting to Know My Adult, which runs both ways. Then the Reflecting element (p. 88): where is your school on each principle? Pick one.



Use whatever works for you:Your notes app, a notebook. You'll walk out this door, go to lots of other interesting sessions and get loads more ideas. Our brains can't hold them all. Write down one. Take it with you.



Let the quote sit for a moment, then move to the thank you.

What's next





Trina Golden