

The Mattering Model: What if Belonging Is Only 50% of the Answer?

Exploring how belonging and becoming shape cultures where everyone matters.



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This follows the provocation on my [previous blog](#): that while belonging is vital, it is only half of the picture. If we want students, staff, and families to flourish, not just to feel safe in our schools and across our trusts, we need to think beyond belonging. We need to create cultures of mattering, places where people feel valued and are given the opportunity to contribute value. In this blog I explore the relationship between three connected concepts: belonging and becoming.

Mattering, Belonging, and Becoming



The concept of **mattering** has emerged over time as a key psychological need, initially articulated by Robert M. Lerner and developed by Schlossberg (1989) and more recently by Flett. Mattering is broadly defined as the perception that one's presence and contributions are recognised and valued. In the *International Handbook of Human Significance* (2025), we describe the development of mattering as a "human quest".

In education, mattering has been associated with student well-being. Flett's (2025) most recent book, *Mattering as a Human Quest*, presents studies that link students' sense of mattering to engagement, motivation, and resilience. However, a lack of mattering has been connected to poor attendance, disruptive behaviour, anxiety, depression, and in extreme cases, self-harm and suicidal ideation. Flett's concept of "anti-mattering" captures this experience of psychological invisibility and perceived insignificance, which can erode wellbeing and performance over time. Importantly, mattering is not purely an intrapersonal trait; it is shaped by relational, institutional, and cultural dynamics, particularly in schools.



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Schlossberg's work has emphasised the role of mattering in young people's development of purpose, agency, and voice. In positive youth development literature, mattering is often described as a dual process: the experience of being valued by others, and the capacity to add value in return (Prilleltensky, 2020; Billingham & Irwin-Rogers, 2022; Flett, 2025). This duality is central to the model proposed.

Belonging, often defined as the experience of social connectedness, acceptance, and inclusion, is a related but a distinct concept. A robust body of research shows that belonging is a protective factor for academic attainment, mental health, and engagement (Korpershoek et al. 2020). Theories of belonging stress the importance of identity affirmation, psychological safety, and connection to institutional culture (Allen et al. 2018). However, belonging alone does not guarantee that individuals are significant or empowered; it is possible to belong to a school community while feeling voiceless, passive, or underutilised.

This leads to the third concept: **becoming**. Becoming has strong roots in theories of self-determination and flourishing (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Damon, 2008). Here, it is defined as the active process of adding value, participating, contributing, and growing within a community. It reflects not just who a person is, but who they become through the process of becoming through meaningful engagement. In other words, it is the process of becoming through the engagement of one's values, skills, and purpose (Ryff, 1989; Seligman, 2011).

Feeling Their Absence

The benefits of students feeling a strong sense of mattering, belonging and are well-evidenced. The damage done by their absence is clear, too. These abstract concepts, they show up in data, behaviour trends and engagement.

These states are not isolated. A student who feels belittled is more likely to student who feels thwarted may feel diminished by the experience. These social and emotional concepts can be damaging for staff and families, too. A teacher feels insignificant may reduce their contribution or leave. A parent who does not feel they belong may disengage. These experiences reinforce one another and chip away at trust, morale, and outcomes.

The Mattering Model: Belonging + Becoming + Mattering

In this model, mattering sits as the umbrella concept. It is achieved when people feel valued (*belonging*) and are given opportunities to add value (*becoming*). These two separate activities, they are mutually reinforcing conditions of thriving.

Belonging enables becoming: When people feel accepted, safe, and seen, they are more likely to step forward, take risks, and contribute meaningfully. Feeling valued opens the door to agency: if a student feels a valued member of the school community, this will encourage them to seek ways to support, develop and enhance that community.

Becoming reinforces belonging: When people are trusted to shape their community, whether through leadership, strong relationships, voice, or participation, they don't just feel involved, they feel essential: not just a component part of the school, but an integral part of it.

This is the reinforcing loop at the heart of mattering. The more people feel they belong, the more they're able to contribute. The more they contribute, the deeper their sense of connection and significance becomes.

50% of the Answer

To avoid any misunderstanding: belonging is essential. However, I believe that 50% of the answer to 100% of the problem. But if the whole problem is disconnection, and low trust, then belonging alone won't fix it.

The other 50% is becoming. The question for schools and MATs is this: once we feel included — *then what?*

Because to belong is not enough. To matter is to feel valued and to add value. Organisations and institutions that build cultures of mattering don't just reach people, they enable them to thrive.

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Lisa Dadds 20 maj 2025

♥ Liked by Mohamed Abdallah

I really like this concept of more than belonging- actually mattering. It matters that you add value, you make a difference. Equally valuable for students and adults - tha

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Phil Banks 20 apr. 2025

♥ Liked by Mohamed Abdallah

Love this blog Mohamed, however, I don't feel that it is possible to belong to a school while still feeling voiceless, passive, or underutilised.... this is the very essence of being truly belong, you must be significant, you must feel that you contribute.....

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