



# Pastoral Care in Education

An International Journal of Personal, Social and Emotional Development

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rped20>

## Teachers' and students' experiences using the *New Citizens* tool: a study of belonging in culturally diverse classrooms

Charlotte Helen Haaland Hancock

To cite this article: Charlotte Helen Haaland Hancock (13 Jul 2023): Teachers' and students' experiences using the *New Citizens* tool: a study of belonging in culturally diverse classrooms, Pastoral Care in Education, DOI: [10.1080/02643944.2023.2231968](https://doi.org/10.1080/02643944.2023.2231968)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02643944.2023.2231968>



© 2023 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.



Published online: 13 Jul 2023.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 188



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

# Teachers' and students' experiences using the *New Citizens* tool: a study of belonging in culturally diverse classrooms

Charlotte Helen Haaland Hancock

Norwegian Centre for Learning Environment and Behavioural Research, University of Stavanger, Stavanger, Norway

## ABSTRACT

This study explores how teachers and students from culturally diverse upper secondary classrooms experienced the potential for enhanced belonging through the use of question cards from *New Citizens*. The methods include the collection of self-reported reflection logs from teachers, a focus group interview with teachers and individual interviews with students. The findings indicate three main themes: 1) *development of communication skills, trust, and safety in student–student relationships*, 2) *students' experiences of self-efficacy and self-worth*, and 3) *recognition of similarities and differences among students*. These findings confirm the importance of student–student relationships in upper secondary schools and show how the recognition of similarities and understanding were enhanced through the use of question cards. An implication of this study is that the further development of such tools could help teachers promote belonging in culturally diverse classrooms.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 20 August 2022  
Accepted 18 June 2023

## KEYWORDS

School belonging;  
friendships; specific tools;  
culturally diverse classrooms;  
upper secondary schools

## Introduction

Throughout the Norwegian educational curriculum, diversity is seen as a resource. Perspectives on diversity and identity across cultural, linguistic, and political backgrounds are described as important for students' development and learning, and for student belonging: 'Students will learn to respect diversity and understand that everyone is entitled a place in the community. Each student has a unique personal history, as well as hopes and ambitions for the future. When children and youth experience respect and acknowledgement, this contributes to feelings of belonging' (The Educational Act, 2020, pp. 14–15). School belonging relates to students being included and valued members of the classroom, conceptualized as a community of practice (Wenger, 1998), where all students have opportunities to participate through collaborative activities and learning

**CONTACT** Charlotte Helen Haaland Hancock  [charlotte.hancock@uis.no](mailto:charlotte.hancock@uis.no)

© 2023 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

(Osterman, 2000). Feelings of belonging are, however, highly subjective. For students with an immigrant background, family situation and reasons for migrating are important factors associated with belonging. Belonging can be developed in different contextual settings, and the school classroom is one such important setting. A sense of belonging is related to students feeling acknowledged, included, supported, and valued by teachers and other students (Allen & Kern, 2020; The Educational Act, 2020; Libbey, 2004; Osterman, 2000). Previous studies have documented the significance of student–student relationships for experiencing belonging in adolescence (Allen & Kern, 2020; Hamm & Faircloth, 2005; Korpershoek et al., 2020). Such relationships could provide both academic and emotional support depending on the quality of the relations and students' attitudes towards school (Allen & Kern, 2020). Since belonging is related to many important academic outcomes, e.g. motivational, social-emotional and behavioural outcomes, developing safe student–student relationships is important (Allen & Kern, 2020; Osterman, 2000; Thapa et al., 2013).

### ***The educational context***

In Norway, all students have a statutory right to attend an upper secondary educational programme after lower secondary school, regardless of their previous academic achievement. Ninety-eight percent of students begin upper secondary school immediately after finishing lower secondary school (NOU, 2018). Students can choose between two educational paths, vocational or academic. The vocational option consists of two years of school and two years of practical work experience. In this study, students were selected from the vocational programme *Health and adolescence*.

### ***Culturally diverse classrooms, teachers' roles and strategies***

Like the societies of many other countries, Norwegian society is diverse and pluralistic. In Norway, 18.2% of students in upper secondary schools have immigrant backgrounds (Statistics Norway, 2020). This reflects the development of culturally diverse classrooms in upper secondary schools. Teachers often request strategies to support and teach socially and culturally diverse student groups. Central to such a perspective is how to build connected communities in schools (Allen et al., 2021). However, students are diverse not only in cultural and linguistic terms but also through their backgrounds, experiences, and preferences: '... as individuals move from one situation to another, with different affiliations – or different constellations of intersecting affiliations – being highlighted depending on the particular social context encountered' (Barrett, 2018, p. 94). Students are also diverse in terms of gender, class, language, religion, interests, sexual orientation, personal experiences and learning abilities (Allan, 2007; Biesta, 2006; Fandrem, 2015;

Skreftsrud & Østberg, 2015). Thus, a culturally diverse *classroom* and *group of culturally diverse students* can be understood to include several dimensions of sociocultural *differences*. Intersectionality is a concept often used to explain how identities consist of several dimensions and how these dimensions interact and become visible in different contexts (Crenshaw, 1989). In addition, the concept is used to explain the privileges and power dimensions involved in how 'others' are defined, and it can therefore clarify how discrimination occurs (Lykke, 2005). Previously, Fandrem et al. (2015) used the concept of intersectionality to show how different sociocultural dimensions may become visible in a specific situation in the school context. Culturally diverse classrooms may thus be a good place to focus on similarities and differences (Gay, 2018). This opens up several perspectives and methods for improving students' feelings of belonging in a class community.

Teachers are especially important in facilitating a learning environment where all students feel safe and supported (Allen et al., 2018; Osterman, 2000; Solbue et al., 2017; Thapa et al., 2013; Vestad & Tharaldsen, 2021). Solbue et al. (2017) note that acceptance of diversity is a component of enhancing interactions in class. According to their findings, teachers need to focus more on interactions during teaching than on categorization based on ethnicity, gender, linguistic or social background. Recent studies have indicated that promoting belonging in culturally diverse classrooms contributes to *all* students experiencing belonging (Schachner et al., 2019). Students who experienced discrimination were found to report less belonging, while students who experienced a positive class environment were found to report more belonging by Heikamp et al. (2020). The findings also indicated that lack of belonging was associated with lower task engagement (Heikamp et al., 2020).

In Norway, teachers in upper secondary schools have some strategies to promote student–student relationships, e.g. using strategies from *Safe Learning* (Trygg læring) or *VIP-makkerskap*. Similarly, Allen and Kern (2020) presented approaches for teachers to promote belonging in class, consisting of methods to develop relationships and self-awareness. Diversity is also included as an aspect of some of the activities, e.g. diversity cards (Allen & Kern, 2020).

There are, however, few contemporary studies exploring how specific tools or interventions may be used by teachers to promote belonging in culturally diverse upper secondary schools. Mäkinen et al. (2019) implemented a teacher-based intervention to reduce prejudice in culturally diverse classrooms. Similar prejudice interventions have previously been conducted by researchers (Mäkinen et al., 2019). Their findings were mixed, indicating that interactions between students should be studied further. Allen et al. (2021) reviewed recent quantitative research on interventions to improve school belonging among secondary school students. The studies that found positive effects on school belonging focused on students' strengths and their relationships at school.

### ***The role of friendship for immigrant students***

Feelings of school belonging are often related to the relationships between students (Libbey, 2004; Osterman, 2000). According to Allen and Kern (2020), friendships contribute to a sense of belonging. In line with their research, supportive relationships such as friendships in class provide happiness and well-being and lead to fewer negative experiences of stress. Recent research has found that the quality of contact, not just the quantity of time spent together, correlates with the perpetration of bullying (Caravita et al., 2021). Therefore, in culturally diverse classrooms, more attention should be given to the quality of contact between students with different ethnic backgrounds (Caravita et al., 2021). Notably, for students in upper secondary school, it can be difficult to establish stable friendships. Upper secondary schools tend to require more focus on academic goals and accomplishments and allow less time to work on establishing stable and supportive relationships in class. Nevertheless, some students can feel connected and motivated without having friends. These students often feel connected to school because of their high academic motivation (Allen & Kern, 2020).

Nergaard et al. (2020) found in their study about culturally diverse classrooms in lower secondary schools that friendships contributed to students feeling accepted and respected. They also found that culture influenced the formation of friendships. Overall, students reported feelings of connection, perspective-taking, humour, time, and common interest to be important aspects of establishing friendships (Nergaard et al., 2020). Establishing friendships could differ between individualistic and collectivistic cultures. In collectivistic cultures, harmony and agreement are important (Fandrem, 2015). Collectivistic cultures may also have fewer dyadic relationships based on closeness and warmth outside their kin groups (Fandrem, 2015).

Experiencing exclusion from relationships could lead to students' stress (Allen & Kern, 2020). Over time, students who experience a lack of acceptance through student–student relationships may feel alienated (Hamm & Faircloth, 2005). One recent study found that more immigrant students experienced loneliness than native students in upper secondary schools (Fandrem et al., 2021). In this study, loneliness was measured as perceived lack of social participation with peers, feelings of loneliness and social isolation; thus, loneliness could be understood as lacking the experience of belonging in class or at school. In addition, Hamm and Faircloth (2005) found that there might be difficulties in establishing cross-cultural friendships. Students often became friends with familiar students sharing a common culture or ethnicity. Despite tolerance and respect for culturally diverse students, a recent study found that exclusion and segregation occurred between students in diverse classrooms in upper secondary schools (Hancock et al., 2021).

These findings indicate a need for more studies on how to promote belonging and cross-cultural friendships, particularly studies in which teachers have tools and strategies to promote healthy, positive, and supportive relationships among students. Teachers often request tools and strategies that can help them support the development of safe relationships in classrooms. In line with previous research, creating supportive student–student relationships could prevent students’ experiences of loneliness or exclusion.

### ***The current study***

There is currently a research gap regarding how students experience belonging (Allen & Boyle, 2018). Since previous research has reported challenges in developing student–student relationships beyond culture, ethnicity, and nationality (Hamm & Faircloth, 2005), there is a particular need for studies in culturally diverse classrooms. Moreover, there are few studies on the use of tools, strategies, and interventions to enhance student belonging (Allen et al., 2021). Studies in upper secondary schools are particularly scarce.

This study contributes to knowledge on teachers’ use of a specific tool, the question cards from *New Citizens*, to enhance belonging in culturally diverse upper secondary classrooms. The main research questions are as follows: 1) How do teachers experience using question cards from *New Citizens* to promote student–student relationships to enhance belonging? 2) How do students experience using question cards from *New Citizens* to improve student–student relationships to enhance belonging? 3) What challenges and possibilities do teachers and students report after using the question cards?

## **Materials and methods**

### ***Participants***

The 12 teachers in this study were all women between 32 and 50 years of age. Within the educational programme *Health and adolescence* there was a gender imbalance among both teachers and students. There were no male teachers within this educational programme in the period the study was conducted. The 17 students included 3 boys and 14 girls between 16 and 21 years of age. The teachers and students were from two public schools located in one urban municipality in Norway. Both schools were defined as large (700–800 students) with several educational programs. Nine students were second-generation immigrants with a cross-cultural background, and eight were newly arrived immigrant students from Afghanistan, Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Somalia who had lived in Norway for 3–5 years. They all participated in a vocational educational programme, *Health and adolescence*. Convenience sampling was performed based on a set of selection criteria: 1) Upper secondary teachers with at least

1 year of experience 2) teachers that participated in a national programme called *Competence for diversity*. The latter criterion ensured that the teachers had an interest for, and experience with, culturally diverse classrooms. Two of the upper secondary schools that participated in *Competence for diversity* were approached. The head of department of each school contacted the relevant teachers and arranged for an information meeting about the project. The meeting was conducted by the researcher, who gave guidelines for how to use the question cards, write reflection logs and plan for interviews, as well as instructions for how to divide the students into groups. The selection of students was instructed by the head administrator of the schools. The student interviews were organised by three of the teachers, who together with the head administrator divided the students into two main groups: The first group consisted of newly arrived immigrant students with adequate language proficiency (first-generation immigrants), while the second group consisted of second-generation immigrant students. The teachers and the researcher informed the students about the research project and the possibility to withdraw from participating.

### **Data collection and procedures**

The data were obtained by method triangulation from reflection logs with 12 teachers, a focus group interview with these teachers, and individual interviews with 17 students. The self-reported reflection logs were anonymous and collected in SurveyXact over a period of nine weeks. Every week, the teachers answered certain questions in their logs, e.g. 'What topic did you use this week?'; 'How did you organize it?'; and 'How did the students work together on the activity?' Interviews with teachers and students were semi-structured. The questions were open-ended but structured around central topics related to the theoretical framework on belonging, e.g. 'How did you experience using the question cards?'; 'How did this activity develop your relations with other students?'; 'How did your teachers support you?'; 'How did you feel connected to your class afterwards?'; and 'Did you experience the use of the cards as uncomfortable?' After the teachers had used the tool for nine weeks, a focus group interview was conducted to facilitate discussion among them that could allow them to share their experiences and opinions. A few weeks later, individual interviews were conducted with the students to ensure that they had privacy in sharing their experiences from the classroom. Individual interviews were more suitable because the students could be open about any difficult experiences. All the individual interviews were conducted by the researcher at the schools and lasted for approximately 25–30 minutes. The focus group interview with teachers lasted for 55 minutes. The interviews were audiotaped and transcribed afterwards.

After three weeks of practice, the researcher observed the students and teachers for two hours. The aim was to define central issues that could be included as questions in the interviews with the students and teachers. Observation notes were written by hand. The observation helped create relevant interview questions as preparation for the interviews.

The researcher was white Norwegian but was bilingual in Norwegian and English with experience from cultural and linguistic diversity in schools and research. Because the researcher has grown up in an individualistic culture, a potential bias could be less openness towards values in collectivistic cultures.

### **Qualitative analysis**

The analysis was based on thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The theoretical framework on school belonging (e.g. Allen & Kern, 2020; Libbey, 2004; Osterman, 2000) was used to construct questions for interviews and reflection logs and later to analyse and compare data. The reflection logs and interviews were summarized to condense the meanings as part of the first-cycle coding (Miles et al., 2014). Later, NVivo 11 (QSR International) was used to code and categorize the data. Here data was analysed based on the theoretical framework outlined in the introduction, and driven by the identification of codes, categories, and themes. These steps were part of the second-cycle coding, and it was important to identify meaning and relations among the codes, categories, and themes. The main steps of the analysis were based on 1) condensing data, 2) coding data, 3) categorizing teacher and student codes, and 4) comparing and searching for patterns and themes across student and teacher data. Initially, student and teacher data were coded and categorized separately. This ensured that both student and teacher experiences were included in the analysis. Data were organized into a matrix of codes and categories. The matrices (Appendix A, Figures A1 and A2) visualise the main categories with example quotes. For further analysis, the categories from teachers and students were compared. Based on this comparison, three themes emerged: 1) *development of communication skills, trust, and safety in student–student relationships*; 2) *students' experiences of self-efficacy and self-worth*; and 3) *recognition of similarities and differences among students*.

### **Ethical considerations**

The teachers and students signed a letter of consent approved by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD). Confidentiality and anonymity were ensured throughout the research process. The NSD has strict restrictions concerning confidential information about students, including their name, age, ethnicity, diagnosis, or personal issues. Teachers and students were reminded about the confidentiality of the data at the beginning of every interview. The



anonymity of teachers and students were ensured in the transcriptions and publications by using pseudonyms.

### ***New citizens***

In this study, the *New Citizens* tool was used. It consists of 9 topics and 171 question cards written in both Norwegian and English. To ensure quality and relevance, *New Citizens* has been developed in collaboration with professionals competent in the field of cultural diversity and migration. The researcher had no role in the development of the question cards. Similar tools and activities were initially discussed, such as activities presented in Allen and Kern (2020). In the end, the *New Citizens* was chosen because it was a concrete tool with enough topics to be able use it over several weeks. Furthermore, many of the topics on the question cards were especially relevant for subjects within the educational programme *Health and adolescence*.

The aim of *New Citizens* is to provide good conversations and strengthen relationships. It can be used as part of different activities. *New Citizens* has mainly been used in volunteer organizations to stimulate development, language skills and relationships. To some degree, it has also been used in schools. *New Citizens* is produced by the initiative FuelBox, which has a several collections of question cards intended for various contexts, e.g. FuelBox for elderly individuals, individuals undergoing cancer rehabilitation, kindergarteners, and organizations (FUELBOX Norge, 2022).

The guidelines for the use of the *New Citizens* tool consisted of the teachers introducing the activity, setting the frame for how and why it would be used in the lesson, presenting the aim of the lesson, and telling the students that they had the right to not answer a question. The teachers also guided and summarized the activity. Sometimes the students were able to go for a 'walk and talk', but most teachers preferred to monitor the activities more closely by encouraging active listening, follow-up questions, and dialogue between students.

The tool was used by the students in groups of two or four. Each group would draw one or two question cards and discuss their answers in the group. Afterwards, the students presented some of their answers to the rest of the class. In a few cases, the teachers incorporated questions that were relevant for *Health and adolescence* into oral or written presentations. The students were also given the opportunity to discuss the question cards outside of the classroom, as part of a 'walk and talk' activity. The tool was not formally a part of the national curriculum but was seen as relevant by school administrators and teachers, to be used as an additional activity in the subject *Communication and interaction*. Since this was to be a whole class activity, the teachers were mostly available in the classrooms during discussions. The individual question cards were reviewed in advance, and it was deemed that none of the topics were so personal as to warrant strict confidentiality measures. The use of the

tool requires language skills; therefore, some immigrant students experienced challenges with concepts and words. The solution was to ask the students to help explain words and concepts to each other. The question cards provide opportunities for students to support their fellow students in understanding the content and meaning of difficult concepts such as ‘freedom of speech’ and ‘injustice’. Due to language difficulties, immigrant students may also struggle to fully express their thoughts and opinions, but these difficulties represent a possibility to practise and learn more.

In addition to *New Citizens*, there was a guide providing teachers with suggestions for other activities in class. The teachers were also presented with some key guidelines from the researcher, such as starting and summarizing the activity, being available to guide students, helping students with difficult words, encouraging active listening, and setting boundaries for sharing personal experiences. The teachers used nine different topics from the *New Citizens* tool over 9 weeks. The topics were Me; Family; Relationships; Values, opinions, and attitudes; This and that; School and work; Culture; Traditions; and Norway. Examples of questions from the Values, opinions and attitudes topic are ‘What does “respect” mean to you?’, ‘What expectations are difficult to live up to?’, and ‘What characterises people who dare to be different?’ Example questions from the School and work topic are ‘What concerns do you have about school or work?’ and ‘What achievements at school or work have made you most proud?’ Examples from the Relationships topic are ‘Who can you always turn to when you need help?’ and ‘What is the best thing a friend has ever done for you?’

## Results

The research aim was to explore how teachers and students experienced using question cards from the *New Citizens* tool. The findings contributed to increased knowledge on how this tool can be used to promote belonging and were grouped according to the three main themes that emerged from the data. The findings will be presented separately under these themes in the following paragraphs.

### ***Development of communication skills, trust and safety in student–student relationships***

The teachers and students talked about how the question cards helped them gain more familiarity and understanding about fellow students. The teachers reported that the students talked and listened to each other to “understand students’ backgrounds”. Mary (a teacher) noted that ‘using the question cards helped students talk together, laugh and be serious together’. Several teachers and students described how the activity contributed to interaction, dialogue, and understanding. Sarah, a senior teacher, explained the activity as ‘a good

opportunity to practise cooperation, help and understand each other, and respect differences'. Overall, the teachers expressed that the activity created a feeling of safety in class and trust among the students.

However, they were aware that some questions could trigger previous negative experiences for students who had experienced bullying or exclusion. Beatrice, a young teacher, seemed very concerned with these students' well-being. In particular, she talked about how students may have been previously traumatized and how this trauma could impact students' health and relationships. She therefore suggested that the activity should always be initiated, organized, and closely supervised by teachers. Several students talked about prior negative school experiences. Fatima described negative experiences of discrimination and bullying in secondary school, recalling: 'I experienced being bullied throughout secondary school. It was very difficult for me, but now I like school and have friends'. Other students talked about previous experiences of discrimination, e.g. their opinions not being considered or teachers talking rudely to students. To protect and support their students, the teachers told them to set boundaries regarding questions that were too uncomfortable or private to answer. A central part of the activity was the option to say 'no' or 'next question'. The teachers and students mutually agreed to set these boundaries without having to give an explanation.

Overall, students described their experiences with the question cards as engaging and positive. However, some of them mentioned that other activities were more important for them to establish student–student relationships. Two male students shared their experiences of belonging, mainly making friendships through common activities such as football. Tharik was a young student who had fled from war, and he was trying to start a new life. He expressed that shared activities could promote feelings of friendships with students in class. Another male student living with his family said that he had no friends in the beginning as he struggled with language and adapted to a new place, but he noted, 'I played football so that helped me get friends and be a part of the social environment' (Omar, student).

### ***Students' experiences of self-efficacy and self-worth***

All the teachers mentioned how important students' self-efficacy was for experiencing recognition and value during the activity. In the reflection logs, several teachers wrote about how the question cards helped students express their opinions, thoughts and preferences in a way that could enhance positive thoughts about themselves.

'I noticed that many students experienced positive self-efficacy when they shared their thoughts and were acknowledged in a positive way by fellow students. These situations can give them better self-esteem, so they will participate more in academic

discussions in lessons. Many of my students were met with “Oh, that’s the way I feel too” or “I have also experienced that . . . ” when they answered the questions. This contributes to a feeling of community. The students experience belonging because they share something new with fellow students’. (Trudy, teacher)

The question cards gave opportunities and ideas for starting conversations in new contexts with new people. Experiencing a positive connection with oneself and fellow students could be the foundation of a sense of belonging, as one student noted: ‘I feel more open to fellow students now after using the question cards. They seemed interested in knowing more about my interests and preferences. In the beginning, I was a bit embarrassed to share, but now I am proud’ (Samina, student). Using the question cards appeared to influence students’ own experiences of self-efficacy and self-worth. One student stated, “I became more confident, more aware of myself and other students’ personality and experiences” (Kimmy, student). Some of the students also tried the activity in other contexts, explaining: ‘I liked using the cards in class. It gave me ideas for topics and questions I could use in practical work situations. I tried it [the activity] out in a nursing home with elderly people. Sometimes it is difficult to start a new conversation, but now I was inspired to engage in conversations and ask questions’ (Farah, student).

### ***Recognition of similarities and differences***

The teachers and students expressed how using the question cards emphasized developing an understanding of oneself and others. Sharing experiences and thoughts gave the students a more profound understanding of each other and difficult topics concerning attitudes, values and traditions. In particular, the topic ‘Values, opinions, and attitudes’ provided the teachers and students with a starting point for discussions in class. In such discussions, the students focused more on their similarities than on their differences, allowing them to develop empathy and understanding. One student, Christina, described how the students learned about similarities by sharing common views and thoughts, noting: ‘Oh, you also experience this . . . and I also like to do that, etc. We had similar preferences and experiences. Before, I did not know we had this in common’. The question cards opened up common ground among the students, and during the activity, this built interest, trust and connection. By sharing thoughts, opinions, and preferences in class, the students sometimes shared their thoughts on different topics. In sharing mutual examples and familiarities, the students gained awareness of similarities in their lives, school, friends, and interests. Several students pointed out that by sharing their experiences, opinions, and thoughts, “we gained more understanding for other students’ situations” (Omar, student).

Trudy (teacher) clarified that 'representing different cultures, languages and experiences is normal here in this school. We are a diverse school, and there is a high level of tolerance among the students'. However, she and some other teachers observed that friendships were based on cultural or linguistic familiarity. Mona reflected upon the topic and stated, 'How many of us teachers have cross-cultural friends who we invite home?' She noted that some of the students had formed new friendships in class but that these friendships were often based on common experiences of migration or settlement. Nevertheless, the activity of using question cards helped the students learn perspective-taking, active listening and sharing of experiences and opinions. Interestingly, the question cards did not emphasise being different; they highlighted similarities. In this way, the question cards were used as a tool for the students to understand each individual student beyond his or her cultural background.

### ***Challenges with using new citizens***

Teachers experienced several challenges during the activity with *New Citizens*. First, not all concepts were easily understood by the students, as one teacher observed: 'I helped to explain words and expressions that were difficult'. In such cases, students and teachers spent time explaining the concepts. Overall, teachers expressed that the activity could provide language training in a more non-academic context as long as teachers guided and supported the students. Second, on some occasions, students finished the activity too quickly, as a teacher noted: 'Some students finished the task too soon without asking follow-up questions'. In the introduction of the activity, teachers explained the importance of active listening and asking follow-up questions. Teachers noted that they specifically guided students in asking follow-up questions in an effort to extend the dialogues between students. Third, time and consistency could affect the activity. To what degree the activity was successful was dependent on teachers being motivated to complete the nine weeks of practice with question cards. Thus, the activity was vulnerable to teachers' extensively busy timetables, lack of motivation to complete it, or unplanned absences, such as sick leave. Students reported some challenges with the activity when asked. In particular, newly arrived immigrant students reported that they did struggle with some of the concepts and words on the question cards, but they still considered it a good opportunity to practise language training. However, two of the newly arrived immigrant students reported that they did not like the activity because they found it difficult to share their thoughts, opinions, and values. In addition, some of the students elaborated on how other activities, such as football and music, were important for their sense of belonging and making friends. These challenges raised by teachers and students should be considered when using the tool.

## Discussion

The aim of this study was to explore teachers' and students' experiences using question cards from *New Citizens*. More specifically, this study explored how these question cards could enhance a sense of belonging. The theoretical framework of the study was research on school belonging and the promotion of belonging in a classroom community. Previous research has shown that belonging is important for all students (Schachner et al., 2019). Moreover, the acceptance and visibility of diversity seems to be important for increasing feelings of belonging (Heikamp et al., 2020). First, the findings indicated an increase in communication skills among the students, which could promote trust and safety. Second, the students experienced self-efficacy and self-worth. By sharing experiences, they focused on resources within themselves and became more aware of their own strengths. Third, the question cards helped the students emphasise similarities above differences. Differences did appear but were discussed openly in class with the teachers.

### ***Developing communication skills and feeling valued in student–student relationships***

The findings in this study indicated that sharing experiences, opinions, and thoughts with fellow students by using question cards contributed to experiencing more trust and understanding in student–student relationships. In developing understanding, the students were acknowledged for what they brought to the conversations. Using the question cards on a weekly basis helped them practise their communication-related skills, e.g. active listening, dialogue, and perspective-taking. This was exemplified by the students becoming attentive to others, asking follow-up questions, comparing their answers, and learning more about how to start a conversation. These findings are in line with previous findings on students feeling acknowledged, supported, and valued (Allen & Kern, 2020; The Educational Act, 2020; Libbey, 2004; Osterman, 2000; Solbue et al., 2017). Some students also found that these conversations increased their competence for vocational training situations. Talking about different topics and questions gave the students experience with starting and holding conversations, e.g. working with elderly people in nursing homes.

The question cards worked as a classroom activity that gave opportunities for contact and dialogue between students. The activity helped to increase contact among the students, but it was uncertain if new and lasting friendships occurred. Developing closeness in friendships, through activities such as listening and sharing, is different in individualistic cultures than in collectivistic cultures (Fandrem, 2015). Students from collectivistic cultures may be more reserved in sharing personal opinions and thoughts (Fandrem, 2015). The question cards could trigger discomfort in challenging such students to share

personal experiences, e.g. previous experiences of discrimination or victimization. In sum, the students reported feeling safe to share as long as they set boundaries for what they wished to talk about.

Question cards could facilitate opportunities to talk to new students, but in line with previous studies, building lasting friendships often required time, interest, and shared activities (Nergaard et al., 2020). Some students, especially boys, preferred to have a common activity with other students. For example, Omar and Tharik offered insights into how playing football was important in developing friendships and learning language skills. The findings implied that shared activities and interest, such as football, training, and music, are important to establishing new friendships.

Interestingly, the findings revealed that self-efficacy and self-worth could strengthen the students' feelings of belonging. In this way, the question cards helped the students become more aware of their own value. This finding is in line with Allen and Kern (2020), who described how connection with oneself is part of developing emotional and social competencies. These competencies relate to students focusing on their strengths to empower self-efficacy and self-worth. Allen and Kern (2020) found this to be associated with school belonging. The question cards contributed to actively sharing and focusing on resources, which helped students express their self-worth. For some students, this was related to their dreams and aims in life, e.g. striving to complete an educational plan or establishing long-term friendships. Students also reported a willingness to believe in themselves and set educational goals for their future. Students with high self-efficacy often rate themselves competent to solve academic tasks (Rogstad & Reegård, 2016).

### ***Experiencing similarities and differences beyond culture***

By using the question cards, students became aware of individual differences as well as cultural differences. Interestingly, the students noted that they had common experiences and preferences as youths, e.g. interest in music and films, training, and dreams of travelling, obtaining a job, or pursuing a hobby. The findings indicated that the students talked about their identities, going beyond discussions of their native country, language, or religion. Going beyond culture allowed the students to understand more about their fellow students as individuals and not merely as representatives of their culture. The dilemma between individual differences and cultural diversity is highlighted in theory on intersectionality (Fandrem et al., 2015). Taking intersectionality into account, the teachers were aware that some of the students were uncomfortable talking about their identities and that power imbalances could occur between students, e.g. based on previous experiences of victimization or reasons for migration. The findings indicated that the students set boundaries to protect themselves from sharing experiences that were private or very unpleasant. In contrast, the

question cards helped students talk about positive experiences, memories, and dreams for the future. This could influence student–student relationships, building closeness, trust, and safety in class.

Concerning cultural differences, the cards introduced topics concerning attitudes and values that highlighted differences in experiences and opinions. In these cases, the teacher was a key facilitator for summarizing the activity in class. Often, this could lead to class discussions on different ways of living and believing, e.g. views on homosexuality in different cultures and countries (example from observation in class). Question cards with a focus on cultural differences reflected students' opinions, identities, and values in discussions. This finding can be related to general principles concerning the value of diversity in the Norwegian curriculum (The Educational Act, 2020).

The students experienced how to relate to fellow students beyond their cultures because the activity provided opportunities to get to know each student as an individual. This led them to focus on common identities, e.g. being a student or young person. When students talked about their opinions, thoughts, and experiences, it helped them express their own voices in the classroom. These findings can be understood in light of students' role in the class community and their responsibility for this community (Biesta, 2006). Notably, Biesta emphasized the need for differences to challenge the known and common. Understanding other people's points of view is an important part of students becoming individual and responsive adults (Biesta, 2006). This can also relate to the pedagogy of discomfort (Boler, 1999) and the importance of discussing societal issues, e.g. Black Lives Matter, gender inequality, or climate change. Teaching such topics is relevant and can challenge students' comfort zones (Zembylas, 2015). Developing more cards that pose questions on societal issues can allow students to discuss their opinions together. Uncomfortable feelings related to societal topics (stereotypes, racism, violence) could be related to the way teachers develop these discussions. Due to the potential for difficult feelings of anger or shame in class, teachers often avoid bringing up these topics (Zembylas & Papamichael, 2017).

This study showed the need to explore intersectionality as a part of belonging in culturally diverse classrooms. Intersectionality also takes students' individual identities, e.g. their interests, prior experiences, and attitudes, as important for their feelings of belonging. Intersectionality refers to imbalances in position, influence, and power (Collins & Bilge, 2016). Therefore, the term cannot be understood completely without discussing the challenges that can occur in attempts to respond to other students' identities. There are challenges regarding whose identities are more accepted and valued in different societies and the associations and acknowledgements that certain identities retain. For example, a homosexual identity is not accepted or is illegal in some countries.

The teachers and students in this study favoured using the question cards as a tool to promote belonging and student–student relationships. The way the



teachers organized and supported the activity was important: The teachers needed awareness, knowledge, and cultural sensitivity to guide and provide instructions for the activity in a wise and responsible manner. In discussing similarities and differences, the students touched upon topics such as attitudes and values. In their discussions, they raised topics related to intersectionality, discrimination, and exclusion. In this way, they discussed central dilemmas concerning imbalances of power and injustice. These findings indicated how students were responsive and responsible in conversing about the dilemmas and challenges of today's pluralistic societies. In conclusion, the findings highlight the need to express and discuss similarities and differences in safe and respectful ways, where disagreement, discomfort and differences are represented.

### ***Limitations and further research***

This study used convenience sampling and may be said to have a small sample size (12 teachers and 17 students from two schools). However, as in qualitative research in general, the aim was not to generalize the findings from this investigation. To generalize findings on this topic, similar studies could be conducted in several classroom contexts with mixed cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Systematic observation and/or a longitudinal design with RCT should also be used to gain knowledge about the impact of tools on belonging and student–student relationships. Even if the students seemed to improve their communication skills and self-efficacy, it is uncertain whether this can be attributed solely to the question cards, as the teachers worked to develop such skills throughout the school year in their everyday classroom practices.

Newly arrived immigrant students expressed language difficulties, and their teachers noted that some of them struggled to understand certain concepts. This should be considered when working with similar tools.

### ***Conclusion and implications***

The presence of students with different cultural backgrounds could influence all students' sense of belonging in class in positive ways (Heikamp et al., 2020; Schachner et al., 2019; Solbue et al., 2017). Moreover, teachers play a key role in acknowledging and valuing students for who they are through how they respond to diversity. The findings of this study shed some light on how teachers' use of a specific tool can promote student–student relationships and thus enhance belonging. This, however, raises questions about the roles and responsibilities of teachers. The findings do not cover the implementation of the tool or teacher motivation to use the tool, but there were indications that these

aspects, e.g. how teachers organized the activity, were vital for whether using the question cards became a successful activity.

Teachers need competence, resources, and tools to promote student belonging. Therefore, teachers' and students' voices should not be overlooked or neglected in the development of tools and interventions. Their perspectives are important for developing empirically based tools and knowledge about all students in culturally diverse classrooms. As teachers' and students' voices are empowered, awareness of their needs and competences to achieve and thrive in schools is also increased.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Funding

No funding was received.

## Notes on contributor

**Charlotte Helen Haaland Hancock** is a PhD fellow at the University of Stavanger. Her main research interests are cultural diversity, inclusion, upper secondary education, and teacher education. E-mail: [charlotte.hancock@uis.no](mailto:charlotte.hancock@uis.no)

## References

- Allan, J. (2007). *Rethinking inclusive education: The philosophers of difference in practice*. Springer Science & Business Media.
- Allen, K. A., & Boyle, C., Allen, K.-A., Boyle, C. (2018). *Pathways to belonging: Contemporary perspectives of school belonging*. Brill. <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004386969>
- Allen, K. A., Jamshidi, N., Berger, E., Reupert, A., Wurf, G., & May, F. (2021). Impact of school-based interventions for building school belonging in adolescence: A systematic review. *Educational Psychology Review*, 34(1), 229–257. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10648-021-09621-w>
- Allen, K. A., & Kern, P. (2020). *Boosting school belonging*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203729632>
- Barrett, M. (2018). How schools can promote the intercultural competence of young people. *European Psychologist*, 23(1), 93–104. <https://doi.org/10.1027/1016-9040/a000308>
- Biesta, G. (2006). *Beyond learning: Democratic education for a human future*. Routledge.
- Boler, M. (1999). *Feeling power: Emotions and education*. Routledge.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Caravita, S. C. S., Papotti, N., Arvidsson, E. G., Thornberg, R., & Valtolina, G. G. (2021). Contact with migrants and perceived school climate as correlates of bullying toward migrants classmates. *New Directions for Child and Adolescent Development*, 2021(177), 141–157. <https://doi.org/10.1002/cad.20400>

- Collins, P. H., & Bilge, S. (2016). *Intersectionality*. Polity Press.
- Crenshaw, K. (1989, 1). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics. *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 1989(1), 139–167.
- The Educational Act. (2020). *Den generelle delen av læreplanen*. Utdanningsdirektoratet.
- Fandrem, H. (2015). Friendship during adolescence and cultural variations. In J. Wright (Ed.), *International encyclopedia of the social & behavioral sciences* (pp. 432–441). Elsevier.
- Fandrem, H., Haus, S., & Johannessen, Ø. L. (2015). Dette er Sevgi, hun er tyrkisk, eller...? In E. Kipperberg (Ed.), *Når verden banker på. Nye utfordringer for profesjonsutøvelse* (pp. 135–156). Fagbokforlaget.
- Fandrem, H., Tvedt, M. S., Virtanen, T., & Bru, E. (2021). Intentions to quit upper secondary education among first generation immigrants and native Norwegians: The role of loneliness and peer victimization. *Social Psychology of Education*, 24(2), 489–509. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11218-021-09614-1>
- FUELBOX Norge. (2022). <https://fuelbox.no/>
- Gay, G. (2018). *Culturally responsive teaching: Theory, research, and practice*. Teachers College Press.
- Hamm, J. V., & Faircloth, B. S. (2005). The role of friendship in adolescents' sense of school belonging. *New Directions for Child and Adolescent Development*, 2005(107), 61–78. <https://doi.org/10.1002/cd.121>
- Hancock, C. H. H., Midthassel, U. V., & Fandrem, H. (2021). Upper secondary teachers' experiences promoting belonging and engagement in culturally diverse classrooms. *Acta Didactica Norden*, 15(2), 1–22. <https://doi.org/10.5617/adno.8381>
- Heikamp, T., Phalet, K., Van Laar, C., & Verschueren, K. (2020). To belong or not to belong: Protecting minority engagement in the face of discrimination. *International Journal of Psychology*, 55(5), 779–788. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ijop.12706>
- Korpershoek, H., Canrinus, E. T., Fokkens-Bruinsma, M., & De Boer, H. (2020). The relationships between school belonging and students' motivational, social-emotional, behavioural, and academic outcomes in secondary education: A meta-analytic review. *Research Papers in Education*, 35(6), 641–680. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02671522.2019.1615116>
- Libbey, H. P. (2004). Measuring student relationships to school: Attachment, bonding, connectedness, and engagement. *The Journal of School Health*, 74(7), 274–283. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1746-1561.2004.tb08284.x>
- Lykke, N. (2005). Nya perspektiv på interseksjonalitet. Problem och möjligheter. [New perspectives on intersectionality. Problems and possibilities]. *Tidskrift för genusvetenskap*, 26(2–3), 7–17. <https://doi.org/10.55870/tgv.v26i2-3.4003>
- Mäkinen, V., Liebkind, K., Jasinskaja Lahti, I., & Renvik, T. A. (2019). A teacher-led vicarious contact intervention in culturally mixed classrooms with in- and outgroup role models of intergroup friendship. *Journal of School Psychology*, 75, 27–40. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jsp.2019.07.002>
- Miles, M. B., Huberman, A. M., & Saldaña, J. (2014). *Qualitative data analysis: A methods sourcebook*. Sage.
- Nergaard, S. E., Fandrem, H., Jahnsen, H., & Tveitereid, K. (2020). Inclusion in multicultural classrooms in norwegian schools: A resilience perspective. In D. Güngör & D. Strohmeier (Eds.), *Contextualizing immigrant and refugee resilience: Cultural and acculturation perspectives* (pp. 205–225). Springer International Publishing.
- NOU. (2018). *Kvalifisert, forberedt og motivert — Et kunnskapsgrunnlag om struktur og innhold i videregående opplæring [Qualified, prepared, and motivated – A knowledge base on structure and content in upper secondary education]*. <https://www.regjeringen.no/no/dokumenter/nou-2018-15/id2621801/>

- Osterman, K. F. (2000). Students' need for belonging in the school community. *Review of Educational Research*, 70(3), 323–367. <https://doi.org/10.3102/00346543070003323>
- Rogstad, J., & Reegård, K. (2016). *De Frafalne: Om frafall i videregående opplæring - hvem er de, hva vil de og hva kan gjøres? [Dropouts in upper secondary education – who are they, what do they aim for, and what can be done?]*. Gyldendal Akademisk.
- Schachner, M. K., Schwarzenhal, M., Van de Vijver, F. J. R., & Noack, P. (2019). How all students can belong and achieve: Effects of the cultural diversity climate amongst students of immigrant and nonimmigrant background in Germany. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 111(4), 703–716. <https://doi.org/10.1037/edu0000303>
- Skrefsrud, T. A., & Østberg, S. (2015). Diversitet i lærerutdanningene - bidrag til en profesjonsorientert forståelse av fag og kunnskapsområder [Diversity in teacher education – contribution to a profession-oriented understanding of subjects and areas of knowledge]. *Norsk pedagogisk tidsskrift*, 99(3–04), 208–219. <https://doi.org/10.18261/ISSN1504-2987-2015-03-04-05>
- Solbue, V., Helleve, I., & Smith, K. (2017). "In this class we are so different that I can be myself!" Intercultural dialogue in a first grade upper secondary school in Norway. *Education Inquiry*, 8(2), 137–150. <https://doi.org/10.1080/20004508.2017.1290894>
- Statistics Norway. (2020). *Videregående opplæring og annen videregående utdanning. [Upper Secondary Education]*. <https://www.ssb.no/utdanning/statistikker/vgu/aar>
- Thapa, A., Cohen, J., Guffey, S., & Higgins D'Alessandro, A. (2013). A review of school climate research. *Review of Educational Research*, 83(3), 357–385. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654313483907>
- Vestad, L., & Tharaldsen, K. B. (2021). Building social and emotional competencies for coping with academic stress among students in lower secondary school. *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research*, 66(5), 907–921. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00313831.2021.1939145>
- Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of practice: Learning, meaning, and identity*. Cambridge University Press.
- Zembylas, M. (2015). 'Pedagogy of discomfort' and its ethical implications: The tensions of ethical violence in social justice education. *Ethics & Education*, 10(2), 163–174. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17449642.2015.1039274>
- Zembylas, M., & Papamichael, E. (2017). Pedagogies of discomfort and empathy in multicultural teacher education. *Intercultural Education*, 28(1), 1–19. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14675986.2017.1288448>

## Appendices

### Appendix A

Codes	Categories	Short quotations
Talking more together	Communicating	[...more open to fellow students now...]
Speaking to all students	Connecting with new students	[...I got to know stuff about classmates I never talked with before...]
Sharing experiences, thoughts, being brave	Trust, safety, self-efficacy	[I became more confident in myself.]
Activities for making friends	Belonging through activities	[I played football so that helped me get friends...]
Similarities, not differences	Acknowledgement	[...gained more understanding for other students' situations.]

Figure A1. Student categories.

Codes	Categories	Short quotations
Communication, practising active listening, feeling safe in class	Safe communication (In groups + summarizing in class)	[...helped students to talk together, laugh and be serious together.], [...students became safer and more open...]
Teacher organization and support	Facilitating	[... four groups with three students...], [...giving them easier questions to start with, then questions requiring more reflection...]
Finding similarities by getting to know students	Connecting through student–student relationships	[...open up common ground among the students], [...talking about taboos, could change prejudices...]
Sharing experiences, opinions, thoughts	Sense of belonging, building community and understanding	[...a good opportunity to practise cooperation, help and understand each other, and respect differences...], [...common experiences by sharing with each other...]
Students worth and self-efficacy	Self-efficacy	[...experienced positive self-efficacy when they shared...], [...take a stand, have an opinion...]
Language as an obstacle	Limitations	[I explained difficult words and expressions...]

Figure A2. Teacher categories.