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Exploring a Structured Social Year Wheel for Belonging in Higher Education

Yvonne Sørensen

yvonne.sorensen@uit.no

UiT The Arctic University of Norway

Kristin Emilie Willumsen Bjørndal

UiT The Arctic University of Norway

Anne-Line Bjerknes

University of South-Eastern Norway

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Abstract

In this study, we examine how belonging can be promoted in higher education through continuous, systematic social initiatives, specifically through a “social year wheel” (SYW) for first-year student teachers. The aim is to explore how structured, year-long social activities can address challenges such as declining student belonging, weakened social integration, and increasing psychosocial distress. The research question guiding this study is: What do first-year students highlight as positive about participating in a SYW? We collected data through semi-structured interviews with 14 first-year student teachers and analyzed them using reflexive thematic analysis.

The findings suggest that the SYW is well-suited to fostering belonging in higher education by providing a structured, continuous framework for social connection. It facilitates relationship-building among students and between students and teacher educators, enhances inclusion, and improves students’ well-being and sense of safety. Belonging is strengthened through sustained opportunities for connection rather than isolated events. Informal activities allow students to build relationships over time, while the presence of teacher educators, maintaining appropriate professional boundaries, further supports their sense of belonging.

This study demonstrates how systematic social initiatives like SYW can enhance belonging, improve social integration, and support student well-being throughout the first year. SYW provides a practical framework for institutions in higher education to create inclusive learning environments that promote both academic and psychosocial success.

Introduction

Globally, participation in higher education has increased dramatically in recent decades, shifting the sector from an elite system to a mass and near-universal pathway [1, 2, 3, 4, 5]. At the same time, higher education has been influenced by neoliberal trends, which aim to fit many students into specific occupations and qualify them through study programs. Also, efficiency-driven reforms have intensified the growth of online education and reshaped universities, often weakening students’ sense of community and connection. Research shows that these structural changes contribute to declining belonging, as students are increasingly positioned as consumers rather than members of a learning community, with consequences for their well-being and psychological health [6, 7]. Together, these developments reveal how neoliberal trends have reconfigured higher education into a streamlined pipeline for producing qualified workers, often at the expense of students’ sense of connection, well-being, and belonging.

Further, large-scale surveys confirm a steady decline in students’ sense of belonging, a trend that accelerated during COVID-19 when remote learning heightened isolation and reduced opportunities for relational support [8, 9, 10]. Thus, the shift to remote and online learning during the pandemic acted as a catalyst, deepening students’ sense of disconnection, demonstrating how vital teacher presence is for fostering belonging when education becomes digital.

On the other hand, several sources point to specific reasons for educators to pull back from their students [11, 12]. Legal and ambiguous ethical guidelines may cause educators to distance themselves from students to avoid improper appearance [13]. For example, Ray et al. [13] found that legal concerns, particularly around sexual harassment accusations, cause some educators to distance themselves from students deliberately. Overall, increased concern about boundary violations has encouraged some educators to withdraw from close interaction, deepening the relational distance students report.

In higher education, belonging is a crucial factor for students' psychosocial health and academic success [14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19]. Studies show that students who experience belonging have higher motivation, self-confidence, and engagement in learning, and they achieve greater success in higher education [20, 21]. For example, the experience of social support in informal settings can be transferred to academic situations, making it easier for students to actively

participate in class [22, 23]. Conversely, a lack of belonging can lead to the opposite [24, 25, 26]. This is particularly true for students who experience a mismatch between their background and the institution's culture [21, 26]. This underscores the importance of creating holistic learning environments that combine academic and social initiatives to promote well-being and learning.

Alongside reduced feelings of belonging in higher education [8], students' psychosocial health and well-being have become increasingly challenging [27, 28]. Loneliness and lack of belonging are particularly prevalent among first-year students who often face a vulnerable transition phase characterized by new social and academic demands [29], as they often lack established social networks on campus and may face challenges in finding their place in a new environment [30, 31]. These challenges can have serious consequences for students' well-being, motivation, and academic performance [20, 31].

In Norway, the Quality Reform in higher education has contributed to an increased focus on students' learning environments, encompassing both academic and social aspects [32, 33]. The learning environment is defined as “the conditions that influence students' opportunities to acquire knowledge and that are significant for students' physical and psychosocial health” [33]. This emphasizes the responsibility of educational institutions to create an environment that promotes belonging, well-being, and learning outcomes [34, 35]. However, the quality of life among Norwegian students has significantly declined from 2014 to 2022, and one in three students reports experiencing severe psychological distress, and approximately 41 percent state that they have few or no friends [36].

Initial teacher education has a special responsibility in this context, as STs in Norway are a particularly vulnerable group in higher education. According to the study barometer from the Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education (NOKUT), STs are among the least satisfied with their education, and the dropout rate among these students is high, at around 40 percent [37].

Structured initiatives that include low-threshold activities and random group assignments can help promote inclusion in higher education. Such initiatives ensure that all students, regardless of social background or prior networks, can participate and feel included [26, 38]. Research shows that initiatives such as orientation weeks and student organizations can improve students' quality of life and social integration. However, such measures alone are often insufficient to address the challenges [36, 39]. This highlights the need for more continuous, systematic initiatives to strengthen students' sense of belonging and well-being throughout their studies [26, 40]. Against this backdrop, we aim to examine how belonging can be promoted in higher education through continuous and systematic social initiatives organized as a “social year wheel” (SYW), designed to support social connection while maintaining an appropriate balance in the closeness between educators and students. In line with this aim, we explore the following research question: What do first-year students highlight as positive about participating in a SYW?

Context

Two of the authors of this article are teacher educators (TEs) who teach pedagogy and student knowledge (PEL) in Initial Teacher Education at a Norwegian university. As part of the PEL course, a SYW, consisting of six social activities aimed at promoting social initiatives, was planned for the 2020–2021 academic year. TEs in PEL planned to participate in three of these social activities throughout the academic year to initiate and support the STs' participation in the SYW [Fig. 1].

SYW took place during the COVID-19 pandemic, a time when many students faced isolation and limited social interaction. First-year STs in this study were prioritized for on-campus teaching throughout the academic year, under strict infection control measures. This prioritization aimed to support their transition into higher education and foster a

sense of connection despite the challenges posed by the pandemic. A total of 104 first-year STs, divided into six student groups (A, B, C, D, E, F), further divided into five smaller subgroups (four to five STs per subgroup: A1, A2, A3, A4, A5), were offered participation in the SYW.

The first social activity in SYW was a full-day trip for each student group and the TEs at the start of the academic year (August). During the trip, the subgroups planned a social activity for SYW, they could organize for their respective student group during the academic year (August, October, December, January, and March). Conditions for social activities included low costs and participation threshold, and scheduling during the afternoon. The subgroups responsible for the social activities in October and January were also tasked with inviting TEs from PEL and other subjects, such as Mathematics, English, and Norwegian, to participate. Social activities planned and carried out by the subgroups included bowling, mini-golf, hiking, barbecuing, and football tournaments, among others [Fig. 1].

Theoretical Framework

Belonging is a fundamental psychological need [41]. To satisfy the need for belonging, positive affective relationships within stable contexts are required [15]. Belonging is not solely about forming friendships; it also involves feeling included and being part of a larger community where one is accepted, respected, valued, and recognized for one's unique qualities and individuality [42, 43].

Allen et al. [44] propose that belonging can be understood through four main dimensions: competencies, opportunities, motivation, and experiences [Fig. 2]. Competencies, such as social and emotional skills, are crucial for forming bonds with others and adapting to social norms [45]. Deficiencies in these skills can limit relationship quality and social standing [46], whereas skills like emotion regulation can reduce the risk of social rejection [47]. Access to social arenas and activities is also essential for enabling belonging [48]. Even with strong skills, a lack of opportunities can hinder a sense of belonging [49]. Furthermore, motivation plays a central role. The need to be accepted and form bonds is a fundamental human drive [15]. Low motivation can stem from past rejection and trauma [16], while high motivation can foster belonging even under challenging circumstances [9, 50]. Finally, subjective experiences and perceptions of belonging are critical. Negative perceptions, often shaped by past experiences, can reinforce feelings of exclusion, whereas positive interventions can enhance belonging by altering negative thought patterns [51].

Farmer et al. [40] have developed an interdisciplinary model for social connection and the development of individual relationships [Fig. 3]. The model consists of three main components: individual social connections, the community's social infrastructure, and the social relationship development process, which highlights how relationships form, are maintained, and develop over time [40].

The first component, individual social connection, is structured into four circles [52, 53]. The innermost circle consists of close relationships, such as family and close friends, which provide emotional support and intimate bonds but require significant time and proximity [54]. The second circle, the support circle, includes good friends and certain family members who offer help, advice, and social interaction, even if contact is not daily [55]. The third circle represents communities, such as classmates, colleagues, sports teams, and local community groups, which provide social identity and belonging, though they are less emotionally intense [56]. The outermost circle, the broader community, includes daily interactions with acquaintances and local community members. While these connections may seem superficial, they contribute to a sense of belonging and well-being [57].

The second component, the social infrastructure of the community, emphasizes that individual connection requires supportive structures [40]. Fundamental qualities such as safety, accessibility, predictability, and a diversity of options are necessary to foster social interaction [58, 59]. Physical aspects, such as meeting places, are crucial for building

relationships. Designs that encourage informal encounters, such as “bumping spaces”, facilitate natural interactions [60]. Activities, such as group events and collective rituals, strengthen connection through shared experiences [61, 62]. Community connectors, such as educators, play a key role in linking people and activating the infrastructure [63]. The third component, the social relationship development process, describes how relationships evolve and why many social interventions fail, as the time and support required to build lasting relationships are often underestimated [40]. The process begins with initial contact, characterized by uncertainty and anxiety, where support from, for example, a peer or an educator can be crucial. Through trust-building, participants become familiar with group dynamics and rules, fostering a sense of safety. Gradually, commitment develops through responsibility and mutual relationships. Finally, participants may either maintain their engagement or reduce their participation, depending on their needs [64].

Belonging in Higher Education

In higher education, the concept of belonging encompasses students' subjective sense of connection to their institution, peers, and educators [65, 66]. This sense of belonging is nurtured through meaningful social interactions between students and staff [22] as well as among peers [21].

Building strong relationships—both among students and between students and faculty—plays a crucial role in fostering a supportive environment where individuals feel recognized, valued, and included [67]. Positive relationships with educators and other university staff enhance students' academic self-confidence and well-being, which are critical for their success and retention [23, 68, 69, 70]. Educators’ participation in social activities can break down hierarchical barriers and strengthen students' sense of support and safety [23, 68]. When educators participate in social activities, they are perceived as more approachable and less formal, which can help build trust and reduce students' stress in academic settings [22].

Building relationships occurs not only within academic contexts but also in informal settings. Social activities outside the classroom offer students unique opportunities to connect in ways that differ from traditional academic interactions. These informal encounters can lower the barriers to social engagement and foster a stronger sense of community [54, 56]. Such activities are particularly valuable for students who may struggle with social insecurity or feelings of exclusion, as they provide a safe and supportive environment for forming new connections [42, 43].

Informal settings play a crucial role in promoting inclusion and enhancing well-being. By facilitating relationships that are less hierarchical and more personal, these environments contribute to a greater sense of belonging among students [22, 54]. For instance, activities such as barbecues, bowling nights, or mountain hikes can help alleviate social anxiety while fostering a sense of community. Additionally, these settings provide students with social support, which can subsequently be carried over into academic contexts [23].

Non-academic contexts, such as social activities outside campus, provide low-threshold arenas where students can engage without the pressures often associated with academic settings [31, 39]. These activities offer students opportunities to experience a sense of community and belonging in environments free of academic demands. This is particularly beneficial for students who struggle with social insecurity, as non-academic activities create a safe and supportive framework for building new relationships [42, 43]. In addition to fostering connections, non-academic contexts can help alleviate stress and promote overall well-being, thereby enhancing students' capacity to actively engage in academic situations [22, 23]. Continuous, systematic initiatives in these areas can be especially effective in supporting inclusion and well-being throughout a student’s academic journey [26, 40].

Methodology

In this article, we examine how teacher educators (TEs) in initial teacher education can foster belonging among first-year STs through continuous, systematic social activities in SYW. We use interview data from a larger intervention study (LUPE) investigating STs' professional development in the context of the PEL course.

The sample was strategically selected as follows: 104 first-year STs received oral and written information about the LUPE study and their rights regarding participation at the start of the 2020–2021 academic year. Out of these, 38 STs agreed to participate in interviews, and 14 STs (ST1–14) were randomly selected for the final interviews.

We collected data using a semi-structured interview guide because it enabled us to explore STs' experiences in depth and to ask follow-up questions to clarify or elaborate on responses [71]. The interview guide included questions about STs' experiences participating in various social activities in the “SYW” throughout the academic year. This article focuses on the positive experiences of first-year STs during their participation. Each interview lasted approximately 1-1.5 hours and was conducted either on campus or, for practical reasons, via Teams. Audio recordings were made of all interviews, which research assistants subsequently transcribed. The interviews were conducted in accordance with ethical research principles [72], and the LUPE study was approved by the Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research (SIKT) [73], reference number: 258920.

Reflexive Thematic Analysis

We analyzed the data using [74] Reflexive Thematic Analysis method (RTA), which emphasizes the researcher's subjectivity, reflexivity, and creativity. The method describes coding as a flexible, interpretive practice in which meaning is context-dependent rather than fixed. RTA serves as a guide with six iterative steps to make the analysis process transparent [75] [Table 1].

In the first step, we read the interview data thoroughly to familiarize ourselves with the content and patterns in the STs' experiences. During this phase, themes such as *relationship-building, well-being*, *inclusion*, and *safety* emerged. For instance, one ST noted, “It must be about creating relationships” (ST14), while another reflected, “These social activities have helped us get to know each other” (ST4). These observations provided a foundation for understanding the significance of the SYW in fostering connections and creating a sense of belonging.

In the second step, we coded data to identify meaningful units that captured the essence of STs’ experiences. For example, we created codes such as *relationship-building among STs, relationship-building with TEs*, and *inclusion*. These codes summarized key aspects of the data, such as ST6’s comment: “It’s important to build relationships among ourselves and with the teachers, the lecturers”. Another ST shared, “When it’s play, and you [TE] are also present, it opens things up” (ST9).

Thirdly, we grouped codes to identify overarching patterns and generate initial themes. For example, the codes, *relationship-building among STs* and *relationship-building with TEs* were grouped under the broader theme, *various relationships*. Similarly, codes such as low-threshold activities and meetings outside campus were grouped under the theme, *non-academic contexts*.

In the fourth step, we reviewed and refined the initial themes to ensure clarity, relevance, and support by data. This involved splitting or merging themes as needed. For example, the initial theme, *various relationships, was* divided into two more specific themes, *various relationships are established,* and *non-academic contexts foster stronger and more nuanced relationships*. This distinction allowed us to highlight both the breadth of relationships formed and the unique impact of informal settings.

In the fifth step, we refined the themes, defined, and named them based on STs' own statements to clarify their content and relevance to the research question. We identified six main themes: 1) Various relationships are established, 2) Non-academic contexts foster stronger and more nuanced relationships, 3) Fixed frameworks and clear structure facilitate relationship building, 4) Socialization increases STs' well-being, 5) Inclusion is promoted in the student group, and 6) STs' sense of safety increases.

Finally, the extracted data and the analytical narrative were woven together to provide a nuanced answer to the research question. This ensured that the analysis reflected both STs' experiences and the researchers' interpretations [74] (Result section).

Quality of the Study

We implemented several measures to ensure validity throughout the study. We used triangulation by involving two researchers in coding and discussing themes, ensuring that our analysis captured the variation in the data. We illustrated and supported the identified themes with quotes from STs, thereby grounding our findings in their own experiences. We documented the entire analysis process, detailing how we developed the codes and identified the themes, to make the analysis replicable.

To ensure reliability, we systematically developed the codes using RTA [74] and maintained consistency throughout the analysis. We reviewed the themes multiple times to confirm that sufficient codes and quotes supported them. Additionally, our discussions within the research team helped reduce bias and ensured our analysis remained consistent and reliable.

Although the study was conducted in a Norwegian context, the findings have the potential to be transferable to other educational systems. The principles behind the SYW – continuity, low-threshold activities, and the participation of TEs – can be adapted to different fields of study and institutions. For example, similar initiatives could be implemented in international programs to foster a sense of belonging among students from diverse cultural backgrounds.

In this context, naturalistic generalization [76] offers a valuable perspective. Unlike statistical generalizability, naturalistic generalization enables readers to connect a study's findings to their own experiences and contexts. This approach makes research insights meaningful and applicable across diverse settings. By providing detailed descriptions of the study's context and the implemented initiatives — such as the SYW— readers are enabled to evaluate how these principles might be adapted to their own institutions and practices.

Table 1:Reflexive Thematic Analysis

RTA	Theme 1	Theme 2	Theme 3	Theme 4	Theme 5	Theme 6
1. Familiarization with data	ST14: "It must be about creating relationships". ST9: "When it's play and you [TE] are also present, it opens things up".	ST7: "You meet each other outside of school [campus] and get to know each other better". ST6: "You build relationships in a completely different way when you step outside [campus]"".	ST1: "Being assigned a random group made it easier to connect with one or two people in the group". ST5: "It's really convenient when something is organized by the school because then everyone has to come".	ST6: "Socializing as a student is very, very important". ST5: "The [SYW'] increases well-being, and then you feel better. The better you feel, the better you learn".	ST10: "This 'year wheel' ensures that no one feels uninvited or excluded". ST1: "The social activities helped loosen things up".	ST7: "We've become quite close-knit, and everyone is comfortable with each other". ST1: "You feel safer with the people [peers] you're with".
2. Coding the data	- Relationship-building with peers - Relationship-building with TEs	- Deeper connections outside campus	- Structured activities	- Socializing improves well-being	- Promoting inclusion	- Feeling safe with peers
3. Grouping the codes	*Various Relationships*	*Non-Academic Context*	*Fixed Frameworks and Clear Structure*	*Socialization*	*Inclusion*	*Sense of Safety*
4. Reviewing and refining themes	ST6: "We [peers] were saying early last fall, Wow, have we been in the same class for three weeks, or have we been together for two years"". ST3: "It was really nice that [TEs] actually set aside time in the evening".	ST4: "When they [TEs] mess up at bowling, you feel like you get a bit closer to them". ST5: "You get a more relaxed relationship with them. It's not always just her [TE] leading the class".	ST13: "We just sat there grilling and chatting, and we had a quiz. It was so informal. We were just ourselves". ST4: "It's important for people to get to know each other… to meet several times to be social and to get out".	ST8: "It's nice to have that start with SYW, to meet and have a good time together". ST13: "You felt more part of the class than before".	ST2: "Your kind of forced to interact with people you might not have approached otherwise". ST10: "It creates an environment where everyone is included".	(ST1): "It's about daring to speak out loud, being part of a conversation, and not being afraid that what you say is wrong". ST5: "When teachers participate, it shows that they care about us, which creates a sense of trust and safety".
5. Naming and defining	**1) Various Relationships**	**2) Non-Academic**	**3) Fixed Frameworks**	**4) Socialization**	**5) Inclusion is Promoted**	**6) STs' Sense of**

themes	**are Established**	**Context Develops Stronger and More Nuanced Relationships**	**and Clear Structure Facilitate Relationship Building**	**Increases STs' Well-Being**	**in the Student Group**	**Safety Increases**

Results

In this section, we present a nuanced answer to our research question: What do first-year STs highlight as positive about participating in a SYW, based on results from our analysis.

1) Various Relationships are Established

Participation in the SYW appears to foster relationships among STs. Many STs emphasized that these activities helped them connect with peers they might not have otherwise interacted with. ST14 stated: "It must be about creating relationships". ST4 explained: "These social activities have helped us get to know each other". ST8 added: "I feel like I know everyone in my class [student group] because we've met".

STs also reflected on how the SYW allowed them to connect with peers outside their usual social circles. ST5 shared: "You get to know people you might not have approached otherwise because you have nothing to do with them other than being in the same program".

In addition to fostering new connections, the activities helped STs feel a sense of familiarity and belonging early on. ST6 described this experience: "We [peers] were saying early last fall, 'Wow, have we been in the same class for three weeks, or have we been together for two years?' That's something really special to say, considering we've been together for such a short time".

The SYW also helped build relationships between STs and TEs. ST6 emphasized: "It's important to build relationships among ourselves and with the teachers, the lecturers". ST9 added: "When it's a game, and you [TE] are also present, it opens things up. If we had all just gone straight up the mountain without any games, there would probably have been many more [thinking], 'Oh, there's the teacher, how will this go'"?

STs appreciated the effort TEs made to connect with them. ST3 shared: "We went bowling, and there were also teachers present. It was really nice that they actually set aside time in the evening to gather, and that the focus wasn't on academics".

2) Non-Academic Context Develops Stronger and More Nuanced Relationships

Participation in the SYW in a non-academic context appears to foster stronger and more nuanced relationships. Many STs highlighted how meetings outside of campus helped them connect on a deeper level. ST7 explained: "You meet each other outside of school [campus] and get to know each other better. And yes, it helps us at school too".

The informal nature of these activities was seen as a "low threshold" way to improve relationships. ST7 shared: "Just gathering to bowl or something like that, it's clear that after that, we had a much lower threshold for reaching out to each other and got to know each other much better".

STs also noted how meeting outside of campus allowed them to build relationships differently. ST6 reflected: “You build relationships in a completely different way when you step outside [campus]. It’s like a football team – one thing is on the field; another thing is when you go bowling together”. ST1 added: “You feel closer to each other when you also meet outside of school (…) you get to know each other differently than in the classroom”.

In addition to peer relationships, STs highlighted how these activities strengthened their connections with TEs. ST4 shared: “I remember the bowling when the teachers [TEs] joined us. When they mess up at bowling, you feel like you get a bit closer to them. It’s completely different to see the teacher at work than in their free time”.

ST5 added: “You get a more relaxed relationship with them. It’s not always just her [TE] leading the class”. ST1 concluded: “It’s about getting to know you [TEs] in a different way. Not just having you standing in front of us but being part of the group too”.

3) Fixed Frameworks and Clear Structure Facilitate Relationship Building

The fixed frameworks and clear SYW structure seem to make relationship building easier for STs. Many STs appreciated how the structured activities removed barriers to participation. ST1 explained: “Being assigned to a random group made it easier to connect with one or two people in the group. Talking and collaborating with them made it easier to integrate into the larger group”.

The school’s organization of the activities also created a sense of obligation to participate, which STs viewed positively. ST5 shared: “It’s not always easy to arrange things in your free time. It’s really convenient when something is organized by the school because then everyone has to come”.

STs reflected on how the first social activity set the tone for the class environment. ST14 stated: “The very first [social activity] was really nice in terms of getting to know the class [student group], and I think that’s important”. ST13 added: “You noticed such a big difference in the class before and after. It was a completely different class that showed up at school the day after, compared to the day before”.

When asked about the activity, ST13 described:

We just sat there grilling and chatting, and we had a quiz. It was so informal. We were just ourselves, and someone brought a guitar, so we sat and sang a bit. There was no stress. We were just together, and I think that helped. (ST13)

The importance of continuity in these activities was also emphasized. ST4 noted: “It’s important for people to get to know each other. It’s right, like we did, to meet several times to be social and to get out”. ST9 added: “Building relationships takes time, and I think the SYW had a big impact on that”.

4) Socialization Increases STs' Well-Being

STs emphasized how participation in the SYW contributed to their overall well-being. ST6 explained: “Socializing as a student is very, very important. Just getting out, like being pushed to join a bowling event, makes such a difference for the social aspect. It’s one of the most important things we have, being social”. ST11 added:

It’s important to have social activities because you don’t know the class on day one. Being invited to a party, for example, can be difficult for those who are unsure about saying, ‘Yes, I’ll come.’ So, it’s nice that these activities are planned, and that we invite TEs to some of them. It makes it easier to take the initiative on your own later. (ST11)

STs also noted that these activities increased the group's overall well-being. ST5 reflected: “The [SYW] increases well-being, and then you feel better. The better you feel, the better you learn”. ST8 added: “It’s nice to have that start with a SYW, to meet and have a good time together”.

ST13 shared their experience:

I didn’t know anyone in the PEL group at the start, so it was a bit like being forced to be social when I didn’t know anyone. It felt awkward and uncomfortable. Then we had the first SYW. Quite a few people came. We sat and grilled, chatted for hours, and just had fun. It became much nicer and much safer after that. You felt more part of the class than before. (ST13)

ST5 concluded:

I think it’s great. The [SYW] includes everyone. Even those who aren’t part of the main group in the class are always invited. That’s really important, especially for people who are new to the city and don’t have any friends here. (ST5)

5) Inclusion is Promoted in the Student Group

Several STs highlighted how SYW promoted inclusion within the student group. ST10 stated: “This ‘year wheel’ ensures that no one feels uninvited or excluded. It creates an environment where everyone is included”.

Some STs reflected on their initial struggles with inclusion and how the activities helped. ST1 shared:

It was a bit difficult at first to include myself. I wasn’t placed [in a group] with anyone from my class [student group] or year. Knowing that they already knew each other made it harder to include myself. But the social activities helped loosen things up. (ST1)

ST8 added: “It’s very easy to withdraw if you don’t meet as a group at the start. Meeting as a group is really good for the class environment”. STs also noted how the activities helped prevent cliques from forming. ST2 explained: “It’s very easy for cliques to form, but during these social activities, they get broken up a bit. Your kind of forced to interact with people you might not have approached otherwise”.

6) STs’ Sense of Safety Increases

Many STs emphasized that participating in the SYW made them feel safer and more comfortable with their peers. ST7 stated: “We’ve become quite close-knit, and everyone is comfortable with each other”. ST1 added: “You feel safer with the people [peers] you’re with”. ST4 elaborated: “These social activities have made us feel very safe with each other. Even though many are shy, I don’t think they feel afraid to say something wrong. It’s more about being shy”.

STs also noted that feeling safe improved their learning experiences. ST5 shared: “It’s good for relationships in the class [student group] to have a safe and good environment. Seeing each other in other contexts has a positive impact on both learning and the class environment”. ST11 added: “I’ve gotten to know the other STs, and it’s made it easier for me to work in groups and move forward with the theoretical part”.

TEs’ participation in these activities also contributed to STs’ sense of safety. ST5 explained: “When teachers participate, it shows that they care about us, which creates a sense of trust and safety”. ST6 added: “You don’t just go to any teacher at school. You always have a teacher you feel safe with. It’s the same principle here”. ST2 reflected on

how these activities made exams feel less intimidating: “It’s nice to have been on a social activity with the teacher who will be examining you. It makes the whole process feel less scary”.

Finally, STs noted that the SYW helped them become more confident in speaking up during lessons. ST8 explained: “It makes it easier to participate in digital classes and feel comfortable with the people on the other side of the screen. It makes it easier to be verbally active and speak during digital sessions”. ST2 added: “The social activities have made it easier to discuss and speak up, which leads to better learning”. ST1 concluded: “It’s about daring to speak out loud, being part of a conversation, and not being afraid that what you say is wrong”.

Discussion

In this study, we introduced SYW, a fixed, structured framework, to investigate whether—and in what ways—it could influence STs’ sense of belonging during the first year of their initial teacher education. The findings suggest that when implemented in a non-academic context, the initiative fosters relationship-building both among STs and between STs and TEs, promotes inclusion, and enhances STs’ sense of well-being and safety.

In the following section, we first examine whether SYW can be considered a constructive initiative for promoting STs’ sense of belonging, drawing on the perspectives of Allen et al. [44] and Farmer et al. [40] on belonging and social connection. Secondly, we discuss how belonging can be fostered in higher education through continuous and systematic social initiatives, such as a SYW, designed to support connection while maintaining an appropriate balance in the closeness between educators and students. This discussion is grounded in our findings, the theoretical framework, and existing research in the field.

Fostering Belonging and Social Connection Through SYW

The SYW initiative, as implemented in the PEL course, provides a rich example of how Allen et al.'s [44] dimensions of belonging and Farmer et al.'s [40] interdisciplinary model of social connection can be operationalized in practice. SYW fostered competencies by encouraging STs to develop social and emotional skills through collaborative planning and participation in activities such as hiking, bowling, and football tournaments. These activities required teamwork, communication, and emotional regulation, which are essential for forming bonds and adapting to group dynamics [44]. Furthermore, SYW created opportunities for social interaction by offering structured, low-cost, and inclusive activities, ensuring accessibility for all participants. This aligns with Farmer et al.'s [40] emphasis on the importance of social infrastructure, including physical and social spaces that facilitate connection. For example, the activities themselves acted as “bumping spaces” [60], where informal encounters and natural interactions could occur, fostering a sense of community.

TEs played a pivotal role as community connectors within this framework. By participating in select activities and supporting the STs in their planning and execution, TEs helped bridge gaps among individuals and subgroups, activating social infrastructure and reinforcing a sense of belonging [63]. Their involvement also reduced initial uncertainty and anxiety, which Farmer et al. [40] identify as critical in the social relationship development process. This process unfolded over time, as SYW spanned an entire academic year, allowing relationships to evolve gradually. The initial full-day trip at the start of the year laid the foundation for trust-building, during which STs became familiar with group dynamics and established a sense of safety. Subsequent activities, planned and executed by subgroups, deepened commitment and mutual responsibility, fostering stronger connections within the “community” and “support” circles [40].

Motivation, as highlighted by Allen et al. [44], was also central to SYW’s success. The initiative's structure, which empowered STs to take ownership of planning and invited TEs to participate, likely enhanced intrinsic motivation by

making participants feel valued and recognized. Additionally, the experiences dimension was addressed through the creation of positive, shared memories over time, reinforcing STs' perceptions of inclusion and belonging [51]. By integrating these theoretical principles into a year-long initiative, SYW not only satisfied the psychological need for belonging [41] but also demonstrated how intentional design and sustained effort can foster meaningful and lasting social connections, even under the isolating conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Continuous and Systematic Initiatives that Promote Social Integration and Inclusion in a Non-Academic Context

The findings from this study show that the continuity of the SYW has been crucial in promoting social integration among STs. Social integration refers to students' experience of belonging to a social community, an important component of belonging [24, 25]. This is particularly important for first-year students, who often lack established networks and may experience social uncertainty during the transition to higher education [30, 31].

Through repeated meetings throughout the academic year, STs had the opportunity to develop relationships and experience a subjective connection to their class and institution [65, 66]. The results show that STs experienced a significant improvement in the class environment after participating in SYW. This illustrates how continuous initiatives can help reduce feelings of exclusion and loneliness, which are prevalent among students in higher education [36]. Continuous initiatives like SYW provide STs with a predictable and safe framework for building relationships over time, which is essential for maintaining social integration and strengthening students' psychosocial health [26, 40].

Our results indicate that SYW has promoted inclusion by creating a social arena where all STs feel welcome. This aligns with research showing that structured and systematic initiatives are more effective than one-off events, such as orientation weeks, in promoting social integration and belonging [38, 39]. For example, STs reported that the initiative helped prevent unwanted cliques and created an inclusive class environment. This is particularly important for students who experience social uncertainty or exclusion [42, 43].

An important insight from our study is how low-threshold activities, such as barbecues and bowling, provide a safe framework for social interaction. Such activities, which take place in a non-academic context, allow STs to build relationships in ways different from those in classroom settings. This lowers the threshold for social contact and strengthens the sense of community [54, 56]. Furthermore, our results show that the initiative included STs who might otherwise have felt excluded, highlighting the importance of supportive structures and predictable frameworks for developing relationships over time [40]. However, it is important to acknowledge that not all students necessarily experience such initiatives as equally inclusive. For example, students with social anxiety or other challenges may find it difficult to participate in social activities, even in low-threshold settings. Hence, we need to adapt initiatives that also include students with specific needs.

The Role of TEs in Strengthening Belonging and Safety

One of the most prominent insights from the results is that TEs' participation in the SYW strengthened STs' sense of belonging and safety. When TEs participate in social activities, they are perceived as more approachable and less formal, which helps break down hierarchical barriers between STs and TEs. This aligns with Meehan and Howells [22], who show that educators' participation in social activities can strengthen students' sense of support and safety. Furthermore, research shows that positive relationships with teachers can enhance students' academic self-confidence and well-being [23, 68]. However, this is a fine line; balancing demonstrating care with maintaining a healthy, productive level of control among students can be challenging for some educators [77], and ethical concerns may arise [11, 13].

The results indicate that the presence of TEs in social activities created a sense of support and safety among STs. This can have a positive effect on STs' academic participation, such as oral contributions in class. When TEs are perceived as approachable and engaged, this can reduce students' stress and increase their motivation to participate in the learning environment actively. At the same time, TEs' participation can help create a learning environment where STs feel seen and valued. However, it is important to recognize that TEs' participation in social activities can also pose challenges, such as increased workload and the need for institutional support. To ensure that such initiatives are sustainable, institutions should consider how to facilitate and recognize TEs' participation in their work.

Practical Implications for Higher Education

The findings have several practical implications for how higher education institutions can promote student belonging and well-being. First, they show that continuous and systematic initiatives, such as SYW, can help reduce dropout rates, which are often linked to a lack of belonging and social integration. For such initiatives to be effective, long-term planning and institutional support are essential. Second, the findings highlight the importance of creating informal settings that allow students to build relationships safely and inclusively. This can be particularly important for first-year students, who often find the transition to higher education challenging. Institutions should also consider how such initiatives can be adapted to different fields of study and student groups to ensure they meet the needs of a diverse student population.

Limitations

The study has a relatively small sample size, which may affect the generalizability of the findings. While the qualitative approach provides rich, in-depth insights, future research could benefit from incorporating quantitative methods to examine larger samples and provide statistically generalizable results. Such studies could validate the findings and explore the broader applicability of similar initiatives in other contexts. Additionally, it would be useful to investigate how different types of social activities affect various student groups, including international students and students from diverse cultural backgrounds. Similarly, closer investigation into how faculty staff can promote belonging in higher education, and how this affects their workload and sense of belonging at work, is also relevant in such a context. Finally, it could be relevant to explore the long-term impact of participation in a SYW on students' sense of belonging.

Conclusion

The study contributes to existing research by highlighting how systematic social initiatives, through SYW, can strengthen first-year STs' sense of belonging within higher education. The SYW demonstrates how key principles from Allen et al. [44] and Farmer et al. [40] can be effectively operationalized through a structured, year-long model that builds social infrastructure and supports first-year students’ belonging. Our findings highlight that belonging is not restored through isolated events but through sustained, structured opportunities for connection in the SYW model.

Students’ belonging grows when they participate in low-threshold, informal activities that allow them to build relationships over time. Also, the feeling of belonging seems to be promoted by the TEs' presence and their balance of appropriate professional boundaries. These findings align with previous research, linking belonging to student engagement, motivation, and well-being, but extend this knowledge by demonstrating how relational practices can be systematically operationalized through a SYW over a full year, rather than on a short-term basis or left to chance. Overall, SYW offers a practical way for institutions in higher education to improve social integration and support student well-being during the vulnerable first year.

Declarations

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Use of AI tools

ChatUiT, Microsoft Copilot and Grammarly Pro were used during the writing process to assist with drafting, reorganizing, and improving clarity. Neither tools provide prompts or text for retraining their models; therefore, neither is secure nor responsible for academic writing. The AI tools did not contribute to the study design, analysis, conceptual content, or interpretations of findings. All ideas, interpretations, and final wording were reviewed and approved by the authors.

Author contributions

Yvonne Sørensen (corresponding author) (Y.S.), Kristin Emilie Willumsen Bjørndal (K.E.W.B.) and Anne-Line Bjerknes (A.-L.B.). Y.S. and K.E.W.B. jointly conceived the study, designed the research framework, coordinated data collection, and collaborated on data interpretation. Y.S. drafted the initial manuscript, focusing on the introduction, theoretical framework, methodology, and results sections. All authors, Y.S., K.E.W.B., and A-L.B., contributed to writing the discussion and conclusion sections and critically reviewed and revised the entire manuscript to ensure intellectual coherence, refine theoretical framing, and align the work with the journal's scope and submission requirements. All authors approved the final version of the manuscript and collectively took responsibility for all aspects of the work, ensuring its accuracy and integrity throughout the research process.

Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

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Data availability

All data generated or analyzed during this study are available and will be provided upon a justifiable request.

Ethics, Consent to Participate, and Consent to Publish declarations

Ethical approval

The LUPE study was approved by the Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research (SIKT) (reference number: 258920). All procedures involving human participants were conducted in accordance with ethical standards and guidelines. The HSL Research Ethics Committee at UiT The Arctic University of Norway reviewed the study and confirmed that it complies with the ethical guidelines of UiT, the National Committee for Research Ethics in the Social Sciences and Humanities (NESH), the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), and the Declaration of Helsinki. Based on the nature of the study and the approval provided by SIKT, the HSL Research Ethics Committee also confirmed that no additional approvals from external research ethics committees were required.

Consent to Participate

Participation was voluntary, and all participants provided written informed consent after receiving oral and written detailed information about the study's purpose, their role, and their right to withdraw at any time without consequences. Data collection involved audio-recorded interviews, which were securely stored on a university-owned server with restricted access to ensure data protection and confidentiality. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and anonymized to ensure confidentiality by assigning identification codes (ST1–14) instead of names. No identifiable information is included in this manuscript.

Consent to publish

Not applicable.

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Figures

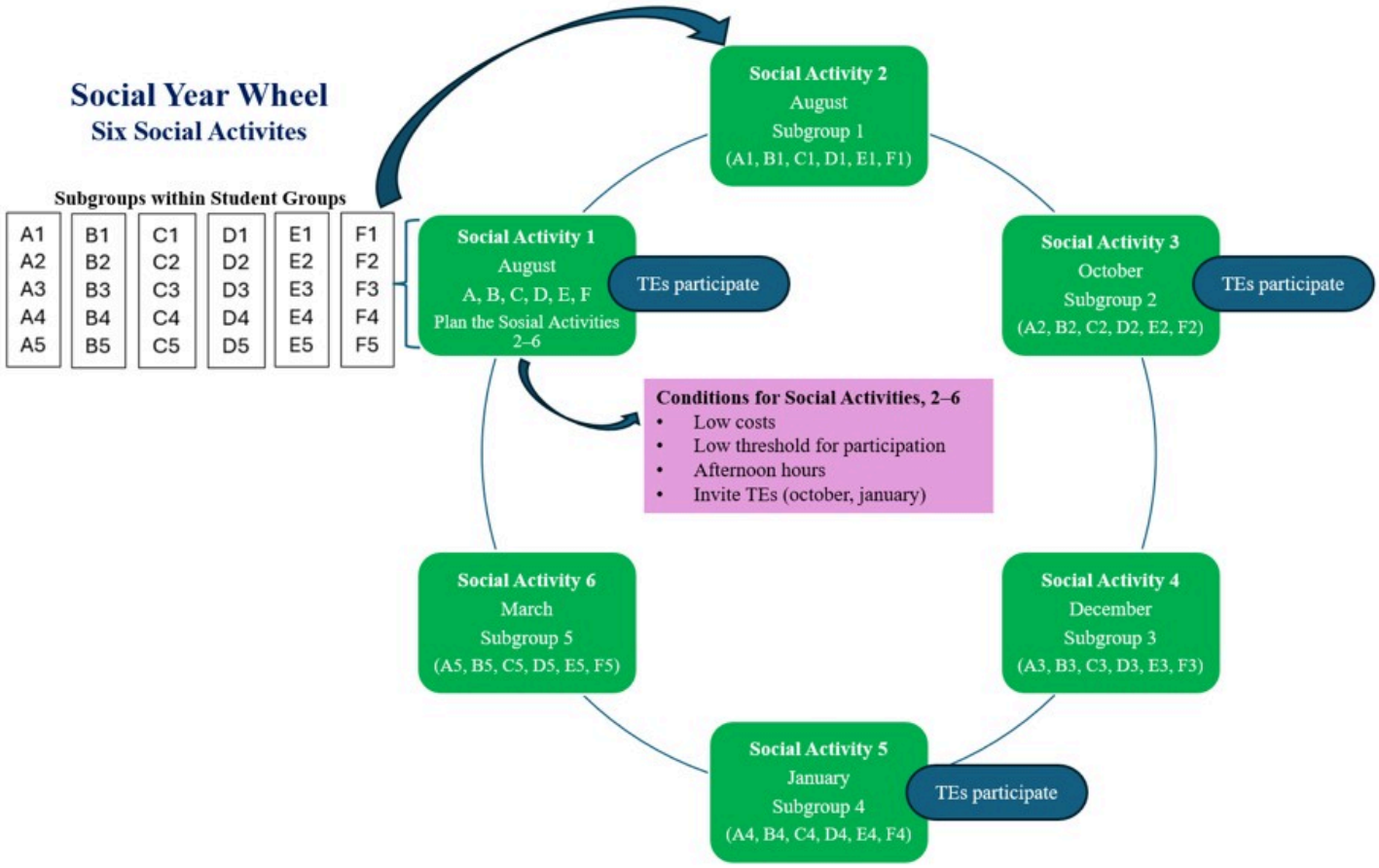


Figure 1

Social Year Wheel (SYW).

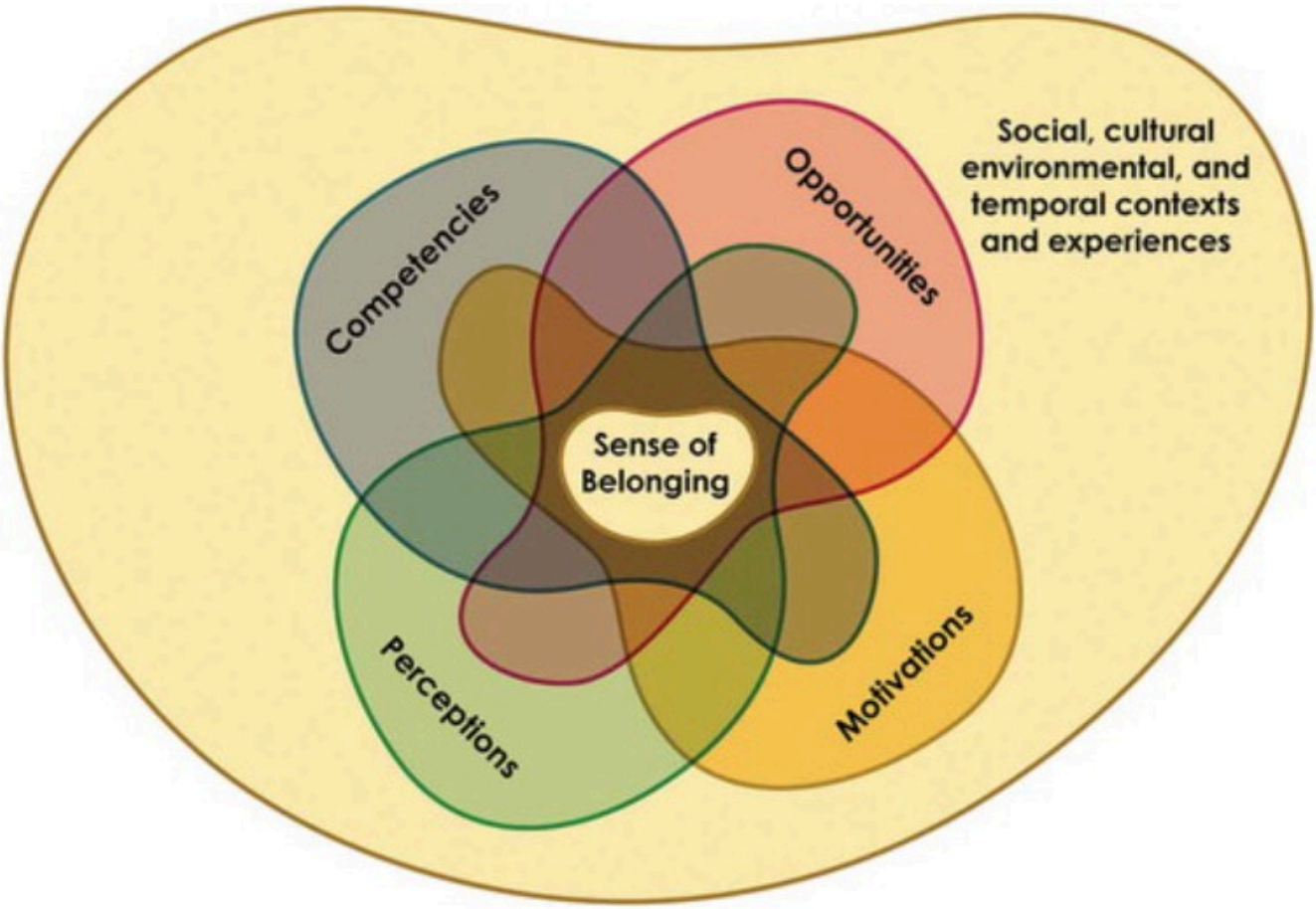


Figure 2

An integrative framework for understanding, assessing, and fostering belonging [44, p. 92].

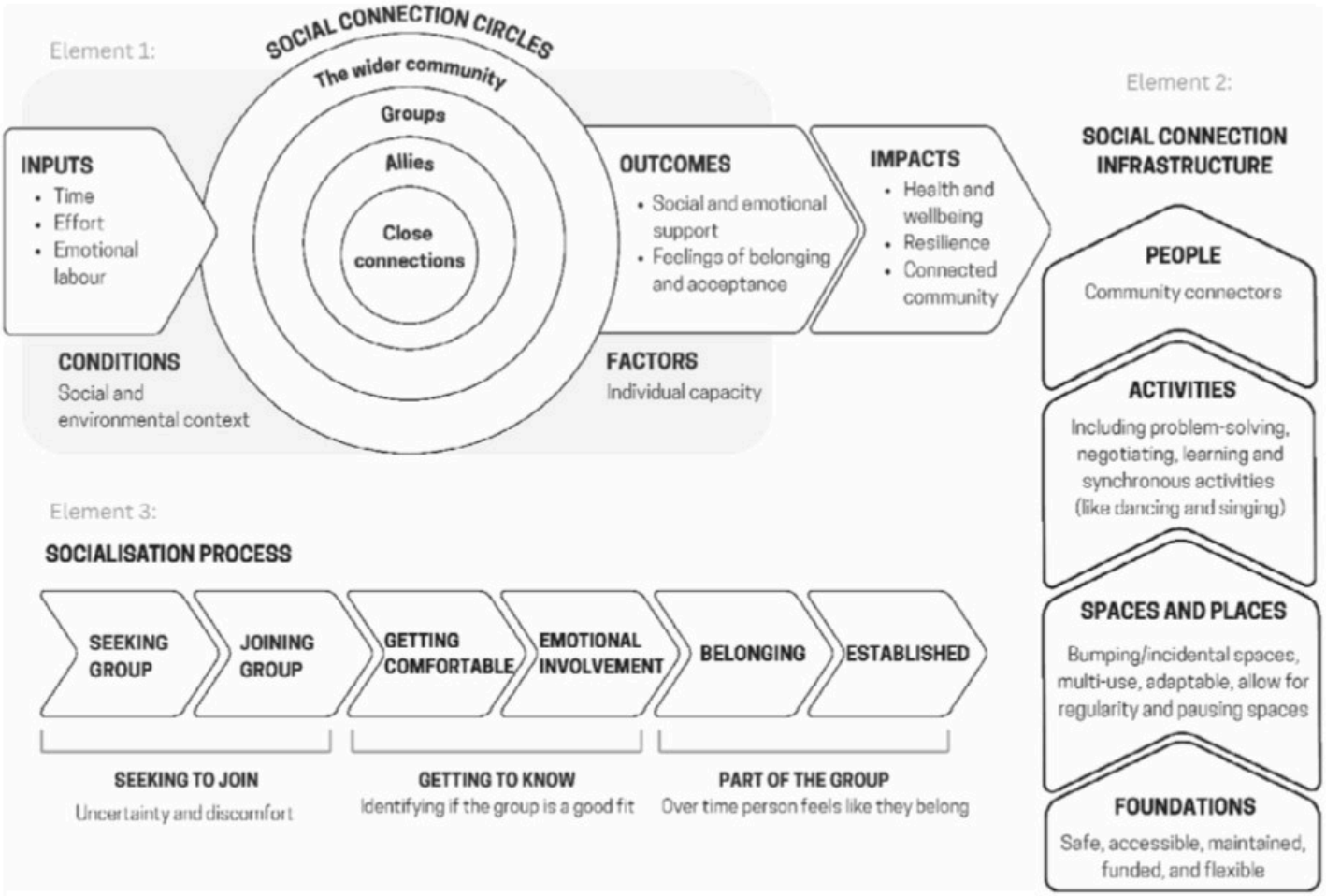


Figure 3

Interdisciplinary model for social connection [40, p. 110].