We Belong in School: Interventions to Promote Social Belonging for Educational Equity and Student Success

March 15, 2016
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Today’s Presenters

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Agenda

• Welcome and Introductions
• Research Overview
• Keynote Presentation
• Q&A
• Wrap Up
Objectives

• Define social belonging
• Introduce the research linking social belonging to academic outcomes
• Discuss empirically supported interventions that promote belonging
• Suggest resources and information to use in your educational setting
What Is Belonging?

Feeling like an accepted, valued, and legitimate group member
Why Does Belonging Matter?

Belonging is a fundamental need

- Constantly monitor belonging status
- Sensitive to even very subtle indicators that belonging is being threatened
Why Does Belonging Matter?

Exclusion is painful and has many negative consequences

• Psychological consequences
  o Sadness, anger
  o Decreased self-esteem
  o Impaired self-regulation
  o Poorer cognitive functioning

• Physical consequences
  o Loneliness poses the same health risk as smoking, drinking, and obesity
Belonging in Academic Contexts

• Education is rich with complex social interactions and relationships
• Belonging is useful for understanding young people’s experiences and outcomes in academic contexts
Belonging in Academic Contexts

Decreased:

- Substance use
- Early sexual initiation
- Violence
- Suicidal ideation
- Disordered eating
Belonging in Academic Contexts

School Belonging

Positive Health Outcomes

Decreased:
- Substance use
- Early sexual initiation
- Violence
- Suicidal ideation
- Disordered eating

Positive Academic Outcomes

Increased:
- Self-efficacy
- Motivation
- Attendance
- Persistence
- Achievement
When Does Belonging Matter?

It matters across a person’s lifespan, with some particularly important moments

- Adolescence
- Times of transition

Do I belong here?
Belonging in Academic Contexts

Do I belong here?

I’m not sure…

More vigilant
Belonging in Academic Contexts

Do I belong here?

I’m not sure…

More vigilant

Classmate doesn’t say “hi” in hall
Assume the worst
Teacher canceled meeting
Bad grade on quiz
Belonging in Academic Contexts

Do I belong here?

Yes!
Belonging in Academic Contexts

Do I belong here?

Yes!

Benefit of the doubt

Less vigilant

Yes!
We Belong in School:
Interventions to Promote Social Belonging for Educational Equity and Student Success

Dave Paunesku
-Stanford University PERTS-
Outline

1. Why should educators focus on belonging?

2. Three research-based strategies for improving belonging.
Why focus on belonging in school?
Why focus on belonging in school?

Belonging is a fundamental human need
Why focus on belonging in school?

Belonging is a fundamental human need

Educators’ decisions affect students’ belonging
Why focus on belonging in school?

Belonging is a fundamental human need

Educators’ decisions affect students’ belonging

Belonging gaps reinforce achievement gaps
Explaining Achievement Gaps

• Structural inequality, e.g.,
  • Family income (more $ on learning, better schools)
  • Parental education
  • Social networks
  • Discrimination
From Inequality to Underperformance: A “Direct Path”

Structural Inequality & Discrimination

Fewer Opportunities Available

Fewer Opportunities Taken

Lower Achievement
From Inequality to Underperformance: An “Indirect Path”

Structural Inequality & Discrimination

Fewer Opportunities Available

Fewer Opportunities Taken

Lower Sense of Belonging at School

Lower Achievement
My experiences at Princeton have made me far more aware of my “Blackness” than ever before . . . no matter how liberal and open-minded some of my White professors and classmates try to be toward me, I sometimes feel like a visitor on campus; as if I really don’t belong . . . It often seems as if, to them, I will always be Black first and a student second.  

- Michelle Robinson (1985)
Former Ole Miss student sentenced to six months for putting noose around statue
When we’re uncertain of our belonging, our attention is drawn to negative interpretations of ambiguous social cues
584 Black high school graduates who were accepted to college were asked if they agree with the statement:

“Sometimes I worry that I will not belong in college”
The more Black high school graduates agreed that:

“Sometimes I worry that I will not belong in college”

The less likely they were to be a fulltime college student 6 months later.
(Even controlling for GPA, SAT, gender)
How can we reduce students’ belonging concerns?
Bolstering Belonging

Provide a positive narrative for setbacks

Foster respectful, trusting relationships

Help students relate to school
Provide a positive narrative for setbacks
Why did you get a bad grade?

You’re stupid and won’t ever succeed in school.

You haven’t learned the right study strategy yet.
Why weren’t you invited to the party?

They hate you.

They were too shy to ask.
Why did your instructor criticize you?
Why did your instructor criticize you?

He thinks all [Black, Latino, low-income, female] students are less capable.
Negative social and academic experiences

Interpretation

“People here don’t accept me or want me to succeed.”

“Why try to make friends here, ask for help, or work hard?”

Lower social and academic investment
Social Belonging Intervention

Goal: Provide a positive narrative for setbacks

Testimonials from upper-year students covey:

Everyone worries at first about whether they belong in college but, with time, they start to feel at home
Example Testimonial

When I first got to [school name], I worried that I was different from other students. Everyone else seemed so certain that they were right for [school name], I wasn’t sure I fit in. Sometime after my first year, I came to realize that many people come to [school name] uncertain whether they fit in or not. Now it seems ironic – everybody feels they are different freshman year from everybody else, when really in at least some ways we are all pretty similar...
“Setbacks are a normal part of the transition to college. They’ll pass with time.”

“People here don’t accept me or want me to succeed.”

“Why try to make friends here, ask for help, or work hard?”

Lower social and academic investment
Composite Achievement Behaviors

Standardized mean number of review sessions, office hours appointments, and study groups attended; e-mail queries sent to professors; hours spent studying and questions asked in classes.

Walton & Cohen, 2007
Self-Assessed General Health

Walton & Cohen, 2011
Residual Post-Intervention GPA

Walton & Cohen, 2011
1st Year Cumulative GPA

N=1,592

1st Semester Fulltime Enrollment

N=8,251

Yeager et al., in prep.
College Transition Collaborative, see perts.net/ctc
Provide a positive narrative for setbacks

Difficulty is normal: It’s not a sign you don’t belong.
Provide a positive narrative for setbacks

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Mistakes are an important part of learning.
Provide a positive narrative for setbacks

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Standards are high, and I know you can reach them.
Difficulty is normal: It’s not a sign you don’t belong.

Mistakes are an important part of learning.

Standards are high, and I know you can reach them.
Foster respectful, trusting relationships
REspect
Respect Begets Respect?

Students imagined that they “disrupted class by repeatedly walking around to throw away trash.”

Punitive Discipline Condition: Mrs. Smith gives you a detention and sends you to the principal’s office.

Empathic Discipline Condition: Mrs. Smith asks you what’s wrong and moves the trash can closer to you.
Respect Begets Respect

Does the teacher deserve your respect?

Desire to behave well in the future

Punitive  Empathic

Punitive  Empathic

Okonofua, Paunesku, & Walton, under review
Empathic Discipline Intervention

“[the] social and biological changes of adolescence can make middle school students insecure…worries [about unfair treatment] can cause students to experience stress, to overreact, and sometimes to disengage from school.

Okonofua, Paunesku, & Walton, under review
Empathic Discipline Intervention

Value students’ experiences in school.

Identify feelings that can cause misbehavior.

Sustain relationships when students misbehave.
“One day I got detention and, instead of just sitting there, my teacher talked with me about what happened. He really listened to me...It felt good to know I had someone I could trust in school.”
Study Design

31 middle school math teachers from 5 schools

Each teacher was randomized to

  Empathic discipline intervention

  Control condition (how to use technology in class)

Data collected from 1,580 students

Okonofua, Paunesku, & Walton, under review
Reduced Suspensions

Okonofua, Paunesku, & Walton, under review
Caring, trusting relationships

Listen to students: Show them authentic respect
Help students relate to school
Isaac Nieblas
“Learning about the Chicano revolution in the 1960s made me feel as though my concerns, my issues, my humanity were legitimate.

“I felt more enthused and I was having more conversations, because I knew that my people were just as smart as anyone else… Having that understanding revamped my perception of who I was as a person and as an intellectual being.”
An Ethnic Studies Course Improves GPA and Attendance

Sample
1405 9th graders from 5 San Francisco high schools

Results
Assignment to course improved students’
  GPA by 1.4 points
  Attendance by 21%

Dee & Penner, 2016
Culturally Relevant Content

Teaching Tolerance

Facing History and Ourselves

Ask your students what they want to learn about!
When students feel like they belong, they are happier, healthier, and more academically successful. Let’s help all students feel that way.

For recommendations, visit mindsetkit.org/belonging
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Q & A

Please type in questions you have for our panelists and researchers
Thank you!

We, and the U.S. Department of Education, value your feedback!

Please click here to take the survey.

The online survey is completely anonymous and takes less than five minutes. Thank you.
Contact Us

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