Social Belonging and Student Success: Research and Promising Strategies

Shannon Davidson
Lauren Bates
Today’s Presenters

Shannon Davidson

Lauren Bates
Education Northwest’s Services

- Research
- Evaluation
  - Currently includes GEAR UP Wyoming and GEAR UP Hawaii
- Technical assistance
- Professional development
Education Northwest’s Areas of Work

- Leadership and System Improvement
- Family and Community Engagement
- English Language Learners
- Literacy, Mathematics, and Science
- Equity
- Youth Programs and Nonprofit Support
- Rural and Native Education
- Postsecondary and Career Readiness
Objectives

- Get an introduction to social emotional learning (SEL)
- Become familiar with research showing the importance of the SEL factor social belonging
- Get an introduction to strategies to boost social belonging
- Find out about resources you can find online
Ice Breaker: Similarity Survey

• Find the Similar Survey on your table
• Fill it out for yourself
• Find someone else who has at least two of the same responses
• Introduce yourselves

You have three minutes. GO!
What Leads to School Success?

- Content Knowledge and Academic Skills
- Other Stuff

School Success
The “Other Stuff”

- Future Orientation
- Belonging
- Engagement
- Interpersonal Skills
- Growth Mindset
- Self-Regulation
- Emotional Competence
What Do We Call the “Other Stuff?”

- Social Emotional Learning (SEL)
- Non-Cognitive Skills
- Non-Academic Skills
- Soft Skills
- 21st Century Skills
- Mindsets, Essential Skills, and Habits (MESH)
Why the Confusion?

“It is a very diverse group of factors and the reason it’s been hard to come up with a name is that they don’t necessarily belong together.”

Dr. Carol Dweck
Belonging: What Is It?

Feeling like an accepted, valued, and legitimate group member
Belonging Is a Fundamental Need

- We’re inherently social creatures that seek relationships with other people
- We constantly monitor belonging status
- We are sensitive to even very subtle indicators that belonging is threatened
Belonging in Maslow’s Hierarchy

Image source: http://www.simplypsychology.org/maslow.html
Exclusion Is Painful

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

Physical consequences
- Loneliness poses the same health risks as smoking, drinking, and obesity
Belonging Matters for Everyone

- Particularly key moments
  - Adolescence
  - Times of transition

Do I belong here?
Belonging Matters for Everyone

- Particularly key moments
  - Adolescence
  - Times of transition
- Particularly important for people with marginalized identities

Do people like me belong here?
Do you think all of these students feel they belong? Why or why not?
Do I Belong Here?

I’m not sure ...

More vigilant
Do I Belong Here?

I’m not sure ...

More vigilant

Classmate doesn’t say “hi” in hall
Assume the worst
Bad grade on quiz
Teacher canceled meeting
Do I Belong Here?

Yes!

Less vigilant
Do I Belong Here?

Yes!

Benefit of the doubt

Less vigilant
Do I Belong Here?

I’m not sure I belong.

No one at this school likes me.

Less effort towards relationships.

Classmate doesn’t say “hi” in hall

Interpretation

Yes, I belong!

It was loud in the hallway.

Response

Be more direct next time.
Belonging and Identity

- **Belonging**
  - Perceived fit within a group

- **Identity**
  - Importance placed on being a member of a group
Belonging and Identity

Belonging

- Female symbol
- Multicolored rainbow flag
- Diverse hands coming together
- Cartoon family
Belonging in School: So What?

Increased:
- Self-efficacy
- Motivation
- Attendance
- Persistence
- Achievement

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

School Belonging

Positive Health Outcomes

Positive Academic Outcomes
Belonging Reflection

- Think about a time you experienced a sense of belonging in a group.
  - How did you know you belonged?
- Think about a time you didn’t experience belonging in a group.
  - What happened?
Strategies to Promote Belonging
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Important interplay of the student and the school

Two routes to intervene:

– How can we change the environment to promote relationships and foster more belonging?

– How can we help students perceive more belonging?
Strategies to Promote Belonging

Important interplay of the student and the school

Two routes to intervene:

– How can we **change the environment** to promote relationships and foster more belonging?

– How can we **help students perceive more belonging**?
Strategies for changing the environment to foster relationships and belonging

- Emphasize similarities between yourself and your students
- Practice inclusivity, participation and mutual respect
- Create formal and informal ways for adults and students to learn about each other’s interests, aspirations, and the good things going on in their lives
- Try a Jigsaw Activity: Initially designed to reduce racial conflict, but has also been shown to increase belonging more globally
Jigsaw Classroom

- Method of organizing classroom activities in a way that fosters relationships
  - Communal learning strategy
  - Students divided into diverse teams
  - Each member has different expertise that other team members do not
  - Groups depend on each other and must interact to complete a task
Jigsaw Classroom: How Does It Work?

Students become experts on one piece of lesson
Life Cycle of a Butterfly

- Caterpillar
- Chrysalis
- Butterfly
Life Cycle of a Butterfly

Students share their expertise with their teammates to put all the information together.
Jigsaw Classroom

- Initially designed to reduce racial conflict, but has also been shown to increase positive education outcomes:
  - Social relatedness and belonging
  - Test performance
  - Liking for school
  - Absenteeism

Check out jigsaw.org for more details and tips!
Strategies to Promote Belonging

Important interplay of the student and the school

Two routes to intervene:

– How can we change the environment to promote relationships and foster more belonging?

– How can we help students perceive more belonging?
Help students perceive more belonging

- Emphasize that they belong
  - Normalizing Belonging Uncertainty
  - Similarity Survey
  - Values Affirmation
Help young people frame setbacks and worries about belonging as **common** and **transitory** instead of proof that they don’t belong.

I’ve been there, too. It gets better.
Normalizing Belonging Uncertainty

Reflective reading and writing exercise

– Part 1: Students read example letter(s) from more advanced students that convey the message: It’s **typical to worry about belonging but over time these concerns fade**

– Part 2: Saying-is-believing: Writing exercise to give students the opportunity to internalize the message
Normalizing Belonging Uncertainty

Letter from an eighth-grader to a sixth-grader

So, if you’re like me when I started at ______ Middle School, you have a lot of worries. It was so hard to find all of my classes and to get to know my teachers at first! Worst of all, I was really worried that I didn’t fit in. I thought I was just different from everyone else. The other students all seemed so sure they were right for this school. But then after my first year, I figured out that most students didn’t think they fit in, either. It’s so funny, right? We all felt we were different and didn’t fit in. I guess we’re more alike than we thought, at least in some ways.

Good luck,
_______________
Reflective reading and writing exercise

- Part 1: Students read example letter(s) from more advanced students that convey that it’s typical to worry about belonging but over time these concerns fade.

- Part 2: Saying-is-believing: Writing exercise to give students the opportunity to internalize the message.
Similarity Survey: “Get to Know You”

- Helps adults feel better connected to the students they work with
- Teachers and students completed the survey
- Teachers received survey analysis showing five ways they were similar with each of their students
Similarity Survey: “Get to Know You”

My favorite hobbies can best be described as:
- Outdoorsy
- Athletic
- Social

If you have some free time, you’d prefer:
- To have some alone time
- To hang out with a few close friends
- To go somewhere that you could meet new people

Have you ever played an instrument?
- Yes
- No

Have you volunteered in your community?
- Yes
- No
Similarity Survey: “Get to Know You”

- Student relationships improved
- Teachers perceived more similarity to their students
- Teachers perceived better relationships with students
- Student got better grades

The impacts were strongest for marginalized students
Values Affirmation Exercise

- Writing exercise in which students reflect on values that are central
  - Students are presented with a list of possible values
  - Students select the ones most important to them
  - Students write an essay describing why those values are important to them
Values Affirmation Exercise

Cooperation Loyalty Decisiveness
Honesty Courtesy
Practicality
Hard Altruism Success
Achievement
Humor Adventurous Love
Happiness Positivity Contentment
Self-control Spontaneity Inquisitive
Values Affirmation Exercise

• Please write down your top five values from the list above and rank them in order of importance.
• Now, spend the next 15–30 minutes writing about the two values that are most important to you. Write about why that value is important to you and when and how you experience this value in your life.
Values Affirmation Exercise

Reminds people of diverse aspects of themselves to alleviate “tunnel vision”
Values Affirmation Exercise

Friend
Mentor
Pianist
Worker
Runner

Student
Let’s Jigsaw!

- Decide which strategy you’d like to learn more about today:
  - Normalizing belonging uncertainty (“I’ve been there, too. It gets better.”)
  - Similarity survey (Icebreaker survey)
  - Values affirmation (values and identity)
- Join an “expert” group about this strategy and read about it
- Go back to your original table and explain what you learned to your table mates
More To Think About

• Do your own investigating and action research about this, if you can
• Share what you’re learning with others
• Researchers like us can help you evaluate how well your ideas work with even more youth
Free Resources

- Social emotional learning
  - Education Northwest’s SEL Primer
  - Paul Tough’s book *Helping Children Succeed*

- Social belonging
  - Jigsaw.org
  - Transforming Education toolkit
  - Oregon Department of Education social belonging and formative assessment materials: [http://www.ode.state.or.us/search/page/?id=5570](http://www.ode.state.or.us/search/page/?id=5570)
Friends Furever video

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vnVuqfXohxc
Thank You!

Questions? Contact us!

Shannon.Davidson@educationnorthwest.org

Lauren.Bates@educationnorthwest.org
Strategy: Normalizing Belonging Uncertainty

Research Base:

A Question of Belonging: Race, Social Fit, and Achievement
Walton & Cohen, 2007

Stigmatization can lead to doubts about belonging, which in turn impacts motivation and achievement. Is it possible to disrupt this cycle by reframing uncertainty about belonging as typical for everyone? To test this, Walton and Cohen studied white and African American students early in their college career. Some of these students received an intervention in which they heard from more advanced students who described their experiences of feeling uncertain about their belonging when they first came to college but with time they came to feel like they fit in. African American students who received the intervention showed more academic engagement (e.g., time spent studying), better academic performance (GPA), and were more optimistic about their academic potential. Additionally, day-to-day sense of belonging was less strongly correlated with experiencing adversity (e.g., getting a bad grade, a friend who canceled plans) for African American students who received the intervention, suggesting that the intervention made these individuals’ sense of belonging more stable. The intervention did not impact white students’ outcomes.

Here’s how it works:

- **Tell first-person stories from upper-year students** (juniors or seniors) that illustrate the common struggle of freshman students to feel like they belong in college. These stories should convey the fact that, with time, all students can come to feel at home in college and that there are many types of support available. These stories should be carefully written.

  The stories should:
  
  (1) **Dispel the perception** that “Only I or people like me worry about belonging at first in a new place.”
  (2) **Represent trajectories of growth** by showing how, with time, students can come to feel like they belong.
  (3) **Contradict stereotypes**, for instance by showing how people in the majority group also have these worries.
  (4) **Reinforce a growth mindset** about intelligence by *avoiding* phrases like “I’m not smart” or “I’m not a math person.”

- Give people the opportunity to describe how this process of change has been or could be true for them. This “saying-is-believing” exercise can help people internalize the intervention message. Writing exercises are recommended.
- Avoid the potential stigma participants may feel if they are targeted for an intervention. Participants can be told their essays and speeches will be used to help future students, so that they see themselves as benefactors rather than beneficiaries.
- **Subtlety** — *less* conscious awareness of the intervention helps it to be *more* effective.
Example: As a freshman at the University of Washington, Jerry was feeling overwhelmed by college. He noticed that there were very few African-American men on campus and felt that he would not do well in school because he did not fit in. In his freshman seminar, he had the opportunity to meet one-on-one with an upperclassman who talked with him about his own experiences as a freshman. He told Jerry that it was normal to worry about fitting in during your first year—regardless of your ethnicity—and that over time he would feel more at home. After this meeting, Jerry went back to his dorm and reflected on the conversation. It did help him feel less isolated and like he might be able to fit in if he gave it some time. During the next seminar, the professor asked the class to write about their one-on-one conversations with upperclassmen. The process of writing about it helped Jerry feel even more reassured. Throughout the course of the year, Jerry did begin to feel more and more that he belonged at the University of Washington, and he went on to connect with many students and adults that would shape his successful college career.

More information: [http://tinyurl.com/jdye94h](http://tinyurl.com/jdye94h) or [http://tinyurl.com/haewtbs](http://tinyurl.com/haewtbs)
Your name _____________________________

Thanks for participating in this quick, 15 minute survey! At the start of the year, it can be difficult for teachers and students to get to know each other. The questions below will help your teacher better understand your interests, beliefs, and preferences. This survey is optional and you don’t have to respond to any questions you don’t want to answer.

My favorite hobbies can best be described as:

- Outdoorsy
- Athletic
- Social

If you have some free time, you'd prefer:

- To have some alone time
- To hang out with a few close friends
- To go somewhere that you could meet new people

Have you ever played an instrument?
- Yes
- No

Have you volunteered in your community?
- Yes
- No
Which of the following activities do you like to do most?

- Play sports
- Travel
- Read
- Listen to music

Which of the following traits do you think best describes you?

- Funny
- Thoughtful
- Caring
- Outgoing

What do you like best about your school?

- School spirit
- Academics
- Extracurricular activities and clubs

Which of the following do you think is the most important for success?

- Trying hard
- Being organized
- Being able to work with others

The most important quality in a friend is someone who:

- Makes you laugh
- Listens to you
- Is loyal even in the hard times
Which of the following do you find most satisfying?

- Learning new things
- Trying your hardest
- Perfecting a skill you already have

Outside the classroom, what type of learning do you enjoy most?

- Talking to people from different cultures/backgrounds
- Trying out different ideas to see what works
- Reading

Which of the following do you think is most important for teachers and students to be able to communicate about?

- Students' progress in school
- Students' personal problems
- Students' future education/career choices

What is the best way teachers can support their students outside of class?

- Attend extracurricular events (e.g., go to sports games, attend performances, etc.)
- Help students prepare for college
- Be available if a student needs them

What is the best way that students can show their appreciation of a good teacher?

- Participating in class
- Stay in touch with the teacher after they are no longer in their class
○ Tell the principal how great the teacher is

**Which of the following is the most important quality for a teacher?**

○ Knowing the subject they teach
○ Working hard
○ Taking an interest in their students' lives
○ Being a good listener

**What is a student's most important responsibility in class?**

○ Being respectful to the teacher
○ Engaging in class discussions
○ Getting work done on time

**I think students learn best when:**

○ Teachers lead class discussions
○ Students work independently
○ Students work in small groups

**Which do you think is more important for students to know about their teachers?**

○ What kind of student they were
○ What expectations they have for their students

**Which of the following is your favorite way to learn?**

○ By talking with others
○ By listening
○ By reading
Which of the following is most important for a successful classroom?

- Relationships between students
- Students' excitement about the subject
- An engaging teacher

Which is more important for students to be able to do well?

- Learn from their mistakes
- Recognize their talents

When you aren't discussing school, which of the following do you like to talk to your teacher about?

- Sports
- Current Events (e.g., news, politics)
- Entertainment (e.g., movies, music)

If your school was given an extra two million dollars for you to spend, what would you do?

- Add books to the library
- Improve your school's technology
- Invest in anti-bullying programs
- Support the athletic program

For your ideal field trip, would you:

- Go to a museum
- Go to a sports event
- Go to a concert
- Go hiking
If you could go to one sporting event, which of the following would you go to:

- Soccer World Cup
- Olympics
- NBA Championship
- Super Bowl
- World Series
- I'd give my tickets to someone who cared about sports

Do you have a friend or family member who is in the military?

- Yes
- No

When you watch TV, what type of shows do you prefer to watch?

- Reality TV
- Comedy Shows
- Dramas
- Crime Shows
- I don't watch TV

Of the following options, how do you most like to connect with your friends?

- Through social media (e.g., Facebook, Twitter)
- By playing games or watching movies with them
- By talking over the phone/texting
- By talking in person
Which of the following languages do you speak (even just a little bit)? (Select all that apply)

- Arabic
- Chinese
- French
- German
- Japanese
- Korean
- Spanish
- Other
- None

My loved ones most want me to be...

- Kind
- Successful
- Well-liked
- Happy

Should part of a teacher's role include being a friend to their students?

- Yes
- No

If you could have one thing in common with your teacher, which of the following would it be?

- Similar sense of humor
- Interest in the same subject matter
- Mutual respect
**Strategy: Normalizing Belonging Uncertainty**

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More information: http://tinyurl.com/jdye94h or http://tinyurl.com/haewtbs
**Strategy: Similarity or ‘Get to Know You’ Survey**

**Research base:**

*Creating Birds of Similar Feathers: Leveraging Similarity to Improve Teacher-Student Relationships and Academic Achievement*

Gehlbach, Brinkworth, King, Hsu, McIntyre, & Rogers, 2016

When people perceive themselves as similar to others, it results in greater liking and closer relationships. Is it possible to leverage similarity to create better relationships between teachers and students? To test this, Gehlbach and colleagues gave ninth-graders and their teachers a basic “get-to-know-you” survey that inquired about their interests, hobbies, and preferences. Based on the responses to this survey, teachers received feedback on how they were similar to half of their students (they received no information on the other half of their students). Half of the students learned how they were similar to their teachers (the other half in a control condition learned how they were similar to students in another school). Teachers felt closer to the students that they received the similarity feedback about and these students went on to earn higher grades at the end of the term. These effects were strongest for African American and Latino students. The effects of this intervention were more present for teachers’ perceptions of their students than for students’ perceptions of their teachers.

**Here’s how it works:**

Panorama’s Get to Know You survey asks students to answer questions about their interests and hobbies outside of school, as well as questions about their values and learning styles. Panorama’s online survey lets teachers complete the survey before their students take the survey in class. In doing so, students will instantly see what they have in common (up to 5 shared items) with their teacher upon finishing the survey. Once students have completed the survey, teachers can sign in to their Panorama account to view what they have in common with their students and be prompted to reflect on these similarities.

More information: [https://backtoschool.panoramaed.com/](https://backtoschool.panoramaed.com/)
Strategy: Values Affirmation

Research Base:
Chronic Threat and Contingent Belonging: Protective Benefits of Values Affirmation on Identity Development
Cook, Purdie-Vaughns, Garcia, & Cohen, 2012

A field experiments followed middle schoolers over time to investigate whether self-affirmation could decrease achievement gaps and insulate sense of belonging from environmental threats. In this intervention 7th grade students self-affirmed by selecting important personal values and then writing an essay about why those values were important to them (a control condition wrote about why values that were not important to them might be important to other people). These students were then followed into 8th grade and their grades and sense of belonging were tracked. African American students in the intervention condition earned higher GPAs and this nearly halved the achievement gap between African American and white peers. Additionally, African American students in the control condition showed the typical pattern of declining belonging across the middle school years, but belonging was more stable for African American students who received the values-affirmation intervention. This suggests that the intervention helped build resiliency and bolstered these students’ sense of belonging against adversities. The intervention did not impact white students’ outcomes.

Here’s how it works:

Read the following list of common values. Which ones matter most to you? Which do you most naturally use to guide your choices? What do you appreciate about yourself? Pick your top three. If something comes to mind that is not on this list, write it down.

Choose one of your top values and write about it for 15–30 minutes. Describe why this value is important to you and a time in your life when you had the opportunity to really express this value.

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<th>Discovery</th>
<th>Fun</th>
<th>Innovation</th>
<th>Personal Growth</th>
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