Steps to: Building Belonging

Steps to school climate success

School climate refers to the overall atmosphere, culture, and environment of a school. It encompasses the social, emotional, and physical aspects that contribute to the overall experience of students, teachers, and staff within the school setting. Building a sense of belonging is closely intertwined with the concept of school climate. A sense of belonging refers to feeling accepted, respected, included, and supported by others in the school social environment. When students feel a strong sense of belonging within their school community, it positively impacts the overall school climate.

As students move through the different developmental stages, we see them explore their identity, and the world around them as well as constantly strive for and progress towards independence. However, regardless of age and stage, each student feels an innate need to connect and belong. Students, teachers and parents alike, as human beings we all have a biological need and desire to belong to a group and feel connected to the people in our environment. When we feel a sense of belonging and connection, we are better able to regulate emotions, build relationships and engage in higher-order thinking and learning. School belonging is the 'extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others in the school social environment' (Goodenow, 1993b, p. 80). It is a psychological pull or attachment that gets students to attend school and their classes each day.

Sense of belonging and a positive school climate relies on factors such as relationships between students and teachers, the quality of interactions and communication, the level of safety and inclusivity, and the overall sense of belonging and connectedness within the school community. Research shows us that when students feel a strong sense of belonging to their school and well connected to their school community, there is increased learning engagement, increased academic performance and increased prosocial behaviours. In this environment, students can better connect with peers and teachers in meaningful social interactions and relationships and show increased motivation for academic and extracurricular activities. Without belonging and connection to school, we see an increased risk of school drop-out, poor academic engagement and performance, increased antisocial behaviours and mental distress.

Steps to: School climate success - Building belonging

When you consider the outcomes associated with a sense of belonging - or lack of, you can see why it is essential for schools to prioritise building connections with students, whether that is through teacher-student relationships or peer-to-peer relationships. When schools intentionally set activities and environments fostering a sense of belonging and connection, we see students thriving in their development.

So how do we build belonging as educators? How do we create connection opportunities? How do we help students to connect and build belonging within their school community?

By using our ABCD's!

Building Connection through the three A's:

Authenticity:
Authenticity is key to building connections with students. Research shows that students perceive authentic teachers as those who are approachable, passionate, attentive, and knowledgeable. We can demonstrate authenticity with our students through our words, tone of voice, body language, and behaviours. Sharing personal experiences, admitting mistakes, and finding common interests with students also contribute to creating authentic connections.

Awareness:
To foster true connection, teachers must be aware of themselves and their students. This includes considering how we are perceived through body language, tone of voice, and appearance. By regulating our interactions based on this awareness, we can create opportunities for genuine connection. Adjusting the tone or pace of speech for different students aids communication and understanding, particularly for those with language barriers, learning difficulties, or experiencing trauma or mental health issues. Proactive classroom and behaviour management also demonstrate consideration and awareness, showing students that we see and understand their needs without them having to ask for help.

Adolescence

Connection to peers, teachers and the school community is important through all ages and stages of development. However, research shows that adolescence is a particularly sensitive developmental period for social-emotional development. As a result, adolescents have an increased need to belong, so it is important to provide explicit opportunities for them to build connections. This can be done through student-led projects, leadership opportunities, seeking student voice, and involving them in wider school community projects.

Building Belonging with the three D's:

Develop teacher-student relationships:

Teacher-student relationships have a significant impact on a sense of belonging. Despite the challenges of heavy workloads and limited time, prioritizing these relationships has significant benefits for both students and teachers. Research repeatedly suggests that when teachers can prioritize the development of teacher-student relationships there is improved happiness, reduced feelings of burnout and increased motivation for teaching. Alongside this, students also report increased happiness, love of learning and school engagement. Teachers can build relationships by engaging in simple daily tasks like greeting students, actively listening, and showing genuine interest in their lives outside of school and future plans.

Develop peer relations:

Strong peer relationships in school contribute to a greater sense of belonging and commitment to the school community. Teachers can foster social development and facilitate peer relationships through various strategies such as class-wide projects, team-building activities, cooperative learning tasks, inquiry-based learning, and peer reviews. Ensuring that every student has a role within the team or group is crucial to promoting peer acceptance and belonging. Additionally, engaging students in extracurricular activities, unique school culture events, and student-led initiatives creates opportunities for them to develop shared interests with peers beyond the classroom.

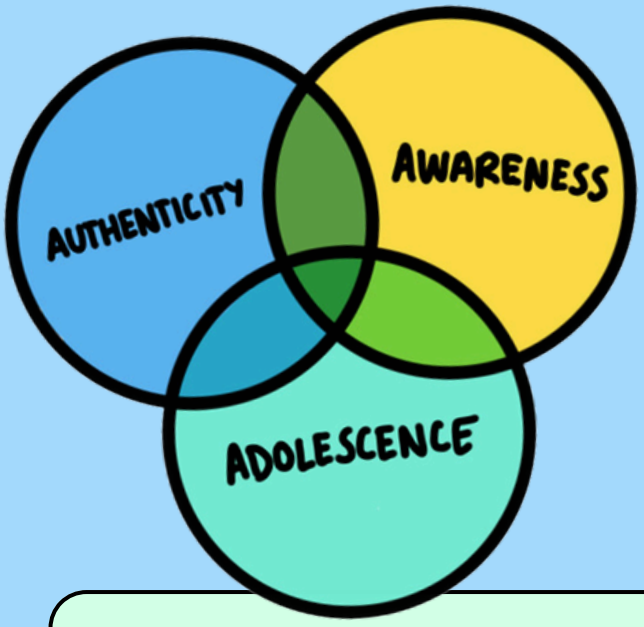
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Develop your school network:
Building a sense of belonging through developing your school network involves strengthening the relationships and connections between students, teachers, parents, and the wider community. Encourage and make time to build connections with local businesses, community organisations and families so that students understand their school in the context of a wider community and its resources. You can also create mechanisms for students, parents, and teachers to provide feedback on school programs and policies. Act on this feedback to show that their input is valued.

What can you do to start building belonging within your school community today? Add your ideas below, you may also consider asking your students what makes them feel connected or feel like they belong?

The ABCD's of school climate success

Authenticity, Awareness & Adolescence lays the foundation for Connection.
Developing peer & student-teacher relationships, & school community enhances Belonging



The 3 A's of Connection

A **Authenticity**
Be approachable, passionate & attentive, when appropriate share personal experiences & find common interests.

A **Awareness**
Be mindful of your interactions, show your students that you see & understand their needs. Consider your body language & tone of voice.

A **Adolescence**
Be aware of the need to increase opportunities for belonging & connection during this stage of student development.

The 3 D's of Belonging

D **Develop teacher-student relationships**
Prioritize teacher-student relationships for improved happiness, reduced burnout, & increased motivation.

D **Develop peer relations**
Foster social development & strenghthen peer relations through class-wide projects, team building, & cooperative learning.

D **Develop your school network**
Strengthen connections & communication with students, parents, local businesses, & community organizations.

