



Emerging Scholars

Beyond Inclusion: A Conceptual Framework for Cultivating Authentic Belonging for Middle School Students of Color and First-Generation Immigrants

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Abstract

The "whole child" approach emphasizes the need to nurture all aspects of a student's development. For middle school students of color and first-generation immigrants, a fundamental aspect of this development is a sense of authentic belonging. This conceptual paper critically argues for an understanding of belonging as more than mere inclusion or representation; it is the active, intentional cultivation of an environment where students' identities are not merely seen, rather, they are affirmed as integral to the learning process. We synthesize theories of culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995), the mirror and window framework (Style, 1988), and the psychology of belonging (Allen et al., 2021) to propose a multi-dimensional framework for fostering belonging. This framework posits that authentic belonging is achieved through the synergistic implementation of Representational Belonging (curriculum and environments), Pedagogical Belonging (instructional practices), and Relational Belonging (teacher-student and peer relationships). The paper concludes with implications for practice, urging educators to move beyond passive inclusion and toward the active and scholarly cultivation of spaces where every child's cognitive, social and emotional development is rooted in a profound sense of being valued and connected.

Keywords: belonging, culturally relevant pedagogy, identity, first-generation immigrant, students of color

Introduction

The education of the "whole child" is a holistic endeavour, concerned with the cognitive, physical, social, emotional, and psychological development of every student (ASCD, 2018). At the heart of this development lies a foundational, often elusive condition - a sense of belonging. For early adolescents in middle school, a period characterized by identity exploration and a heightened need for peer connection, belonging is particularly critical. However, for students of color and first-generation immigrant children, systemic barriers, curricular erasure and microaggressions can make school feel like a place where they must leave their identities at the door in order to be successful (Kumar et al., 2018).

This conceptual paper argues that to truly support the whole child, it is important for educators to move beyond a superficial understanding of inclusion. It is not enough to simply have diverse students in the room; we proactively create conditions for what we term authentic belonging. We define authentic belonging as the felt sense of being a valued and integral member of a community, where one's unique identity, background and lived experiences are not merely tolerated, but are recognized as essential assets to the collective learning. To this end, we propose a tripartite framework for conceptualizing and operationalizing authentic belonging in the middle school context.

Theoretical Foundations

The proposed framework is grounded in a synthesis of established pedagogical and psychological theories that collectively argue for an active, rather than passive, approach to fostering belonging. The foundational principle is drawn from Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995), which posits that meaningful education for students of color concurrently advance academic achievement, cultural competence, and sociopolitical consciousness. This triad provides the pedagogical imperative, insisting learning be connected with students' cultural identities to be truly empowering. Complementing this understanding, is the conceptual metaphor of "mirrors and windows" (Style, 1988), which articulates the critical need for the curriculum to reflect students' own realities back to them while also providing a view into the experiences of others. The absence of such mirrors constitutes a form of symbolic erasure that undermines a student's sense of legitimacy within the academic space. Finally, the framework is underpinned by the robust psychological science of belonging, which identifies it as a fundamental human motivation (Maslow, 1943) and additionally, a key predictor of academic and well-being outcomes (Allen et al., 2021). Together, these theories establish that belonging is not a soft skill, but a core condition for learning, necessitating intentional design in school environments.

A Tripartite Framework for Authentic Belonging

From this theoretical grounding, we conceptualize authentic belonging as an ecosystem cultivated through three interdependent dimensions: Representational, Pedagogical and Relational Belonging. The first dimension, Representational Belonging, addresses the visible environment and narrative landscapes of the school; it is vital students see their identities, histories, and languages reflected in the curriculum, physical spaces and instructional materials to feel they are legitimate members of the academic community. The second dimension,

Pedagogical Belonging, moves beyond static representation to the dynamics of the learning process itself, requiring instructional practices that actively position students' cultural knowledge and lived experiences as assets. This involves designing lessons that draw upon Moll et al.'s (1992) "funds of knowledge" and create opportunities for co-constructing understanding; thereby, students' voices are not just present but are integral to knowledge creation. The third and foundational dimension is Relational Belonging, which constitutes the affective core of the framework, built through teacher-student and peer relationships characterized by unconditional positive regard, cultural affirmation and deliberate community-building. It is the synergistic interaction of these three dimensions, embedded in the environment, valued in the pedagogy and known in relationships, that creates the conditions for the deep, authentic belonging essential for the whole child to thrive.

Limitations and Future Research

A primary limitation in the broader discourse on belonging for mobile student populations is the pronounced lack of empirical data and targeted research focusing on internationally mobile children under the age of kindergarten. This constitutes a significant niche population that is often statistically invisible in educational literature. However, their exclusion from the research landscape does not diminish their importance or the unique challenges they face. The children of diplomats, multinational corporate employees, military personnel and academic researchers often experience a highly mobile, globally dispersed childhood, moving between countries and educational systems with frequency. This transient lifestyle can profoundly impact their early sense of place, cultural identity and ability to form stable attachments, all foundational to the whole child's development. Therefore, future research intentionally expands to include this demographic, investigating how early childhood educators and systems can foster a portable sense of belonging that can traverse national borders and support these children's socio-emotional and academic needs from their earliest years.

Discussion and Implications for Educating the Whole Child

The power of this framework lies in the synergy of its parts. Representational belonging without pedagogical belonging is tokenism, a poster on the wall without a change in practice. Pedagogical belonging without relational belonging can feel transactional. It is the intertwining of all three that creates the ecosystem for authentic belonging to flourish. For the whole child, the implications are profound.

The critical partnership between school counselors and classroom teachers is essential for bridging the macro and micro levels of school life to cultivate authentic belonging. School counselors operate at the macro-level, designing systemic supports, auditing school-wide climates, and leading professional development to create an inclusive foundation. Classroom teachers implement this vision at the micro-level through their daily pedagogical choices and relational interactions within the classroom. Together, they ensure that broad institutional commitments to equity translate into the consistent, day-to-day experiences that make each student feel seen, valued, and connected.

When these three domains are actively cultivated, cognitive development is enhanced as students feel safe to engage and take intellectual risks. Simultaneously, social-emotional development is supported through the construction of a secure identity and the practice of empathy. Finally, this environment nurtures moral development, as students learn to value justice, equity and the inherent dignity of all people.

Conclusion

Fostering authentic belonging is not a program to be implemented; rather, a fundamental orientation to teaching and learning. It requires educators to engage in continuous, critical reflection on their curriculum, their pedagogy, and their relationships. The proposed framework of Representational, Pedagogical and Relational Belonging provides a concrete conceptual model for this work. By committing to this multi-dimensional approach, we move beyond simply including the diverse child to truly educating the whole child, ensuring that their journey through middle school is one where they are seen, heard, valued and empowered to thrive in all their complexity.

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