

Teaching Pre-Service Teachers About Belonging

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Abstract

This article describes how a Teacher Educator teaches her university students (pre-service teachers) about belonging; how it feels to belong to a group, why they need to spend their time and energy during the school day working to make K-12 students feel that they belong, what belonging looks like, and how to make it happen in the pre-service teachers' future classrooms with their future K-12 students. The Teacher Educator attempts to accomplish this preparation through daily community-building and inclusive activities in the university classroom, written reflections about belonging, and taking university students out into the local K-12 schools to see what belonging actually looks like. Included in this article are direct quotes from pre-service teachers that illustrate their learning, value of, and future planning for belonging.

Keywords: belonging, community-building, teacher education, pre-service teachers, relationships

Introduction

Teacher Educators are faced with the challenge of preparing their university students (pre-service teachers) to be effective, efficient, skilled, and successful educators for K-12 students who are diverse in many ways. Teacher Educators have a wealth of published, scholarly resources to aid them in teaching university students about curriculum, lesson planning, best teaching practices, assessment methods, and remediation strategies, yet the realization is that there will be little academic learning in a K-12 classroom until students feel like they belong there, and teaching belonging to pre-service teachers is not so concrete and clear. So, one of the most important ways Teacher Educators can prepare their university students for successful teaching in a diverse K-12 classroom, is to use creative methods at the university level in their teacher preparation programs to teach pre-service teachers the significance of belonging so it becomes a priority in their future work with K-12 students.

Belonging is important to all human beings, young and old, and feelings of belonging can extend across people and places. It is my hope as a Teacher Educator that my university students feel like they belong to our university, in our class, to their cohort, with their classmates, and with me as their instructor. Consequently, my aim is to teach my university students to work to make their future K-12 students feel like they belong to their school, their class, with their classmates, and with them as their teachers. When a person has a sense of belonging, they feel valued by others and they are given the opportunity to add value to the group (Frenk, 2016).

Principles of whole schooling recognize the existence and interdependence of many variables working together to create a learning environment where all students can be successful academically, socially, behaviorally, and emotionally, and belonging is one of those variables central in the success of the whole child. This article is not a research study, but a sharing of my own personal experiences for the purpose of guiding others involved in Teacher Education. This article will describe the way I, a Teacher Educator, go about teaching my university students about belonging, which aligns directly with three of the eight principles of whole schooling: 1) creating learning spaces for all, 2) including all learners to learn together, and 3) building a caring community. I believe my focused efforts to teach my university students about belonging will support them in accomplishing these three critical principles when they are teaching their own students in their own K-12 classrooms.

Belonging and Community-Building

A student's feeling of belonging with her classmates extends beyond just being important; it is critical. Identified as a basic human need on Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943), belonging is synonymous with the human need for love, and must be present along with the other basic needs in order for a person to lead a happy, satisfied life (Maslow, 1943). Belonging is sensed and experienced through feelings and relationships with others and can be a strong determinant of school success. A person's sense of belonging involves another person, a group, or a community that is not complete without that person, and consequently that person is incomplete without the other, group, or community (Baskin, Wampold, Quintana, & Enright, 2010). The significance of students' feelings of belonging is great and directly impacts other important things; belonging affects students' academic motivation (Faircloth & Hamm, 2011), academic aspirations, choices, persistence, and performance (Murphy & Zirkel, 2015), as well as academic, social, and emotional outcomes (Appleton, Christenson, Kim, & Reschly, 2006).

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Making university students aware of the importance of belonging is easy enough, but teaching specific strategies Teacher Educators may use to teach their university students how to promote belonging in their K-12 classrooms on a significant level require some innovative thinking and extra work.

At the university level, Teacher Educators are modeling for pre-service teachers a context of teaching and learning. As universities embrace and enact values to be reflected in society, Teacher Educators aim to prepare pre-service teachers to carry these values into K-12 schools. Through a “scholarship of belonging”, universities and Teacher Educators can create inclusive spaces, lift barriers, challenge negative stereotypes, model deep listening, and engage in respectful dialogue so pre-service teachers feel valued by others and have the chance to add their own value; so they belong (Frenk, 2016). Pre-service teachers may then carry this experience into K-12 schools and work to create the same experiences for their K-12 students.

Some K-12 Teachers who teach from a humanistic orientation (Schramm-Possinger, 2016), use interactive activities and cooperative strategies to break the ice among their students and build a sense of community within their classrooms in hope of making each student feel like he/she belongs there. Ice-breaker activities can help students get to know each other and facilitate bonding. Learning contexts that include active participation and cooperation among classmates help students get involved and experience a sense of belonging in addition to positive learning results (Meeuwisse, Severiens, & Born, 2010). To build student relationships and sense of community in another classroom, Bryant (2013) created an embodied classroom with more face-to-face interactions. It appears that planning interactive, engaging, cooperative activities among classmates that aim to connect them and make them feel comfortable, may help each member of the class develop feelings of belonging. There are also many published idea books that offer suggestions for fun and engaging ice-breakers and community-building activities that teachers can employ for the purpose of increasing positive interactions and promoting stronger relationships among students (Knox, n.d.).

Building a caring community, an integral principle of whole schooling, is central in belonging and is accomplished through meaningful relationships between educators and their students. At the university level, positive relationships between faculty and university students make formal, complex environments seem more academically and socially supportive, which enables students to feel like they belong in higher education (Johnson, et al., 2007). There also exists a positive relationship between supportive faculty relationships in formal and informal contexts and university students’ feelings of belonging (Hoffman, Richmond, Morrow, & Salomone, 2003).

When Teacher Educators concentrate their efforts on developing meaningful relationships with their university students, feelings of belonging are facilitated as the higher education learning environment becomes a caring community of valued members. This is exactly what Teacher Educators want to see happen for pre-service teachers in their K-12 classrooms. Relationships between educators and students, and among students and their peers promote students’ sense of belonging (Meeuwisse, Severiens, & Born, 2010), and community-building activities are an effective way to build, maintain, and reinforce those relationships. It is my hope that my efforts to facilitate meaningful relationships at the university level will give my university students the feeling of belonging, and then they will better be able to make similar efforts at community-building and relationship-building in their future work in K-12 schools to benefit their own students.

Relationships are essential in working towards achievement of the principles of whole schooling: 1) creating learning spaces for all, 2) including all learners to learn together, and 3) building a caring community, as well as facilitating feelings of belonging for students. When educators build an individual relationship with each of their students they are better equipped to create a learning space, a classroom environment, which is tailored for each student enabling a good fit. Individual, personal relationships with students also arm educators with pertinent information about the necessary supports for students to be included in the classroom group enabling everyone to learn together. The belonging that results from these positive, supportive, and connected relationships helps to build and maintain a caring classroom community. Loreman (2011) discusses a ‘loving pedagogy’ in which each student in a classroom has acceptance for, a relationship with, and love for every other student in their classroom. This love and belonging within a classroom sets the perfect stage for significant teaching and learning for everyone.

Teaching Belonging Through Daily Community-Building Activities and Hosting Friends in the University Classroom

The university course “Exceptional and English Language Learners in the Inclusive Classroom” is one taken by every Elementary Education undergraduate student the semester before their pre-internship in K-12 schools begins. This course meets for one hour and fifteen minutes two times per week, for an entire 16-week semester. A comprehensive, well-developed textbook is used in this course and curriculum resources are shared that inform the university students of research-based best teaching practices for all students, ways to differentiate instruction, multiple assessment methods, and accommodations and modifications, but actual time spent in class is split between this concrete information and teaching the university students about belonging in a more experiential way.

Every day our class meets, I ask the university students to participate in a “community-building” interactive activity together. These activities are designed for the purpose of including and connecting each student, building positive relationships, and to develop a sense that every student belongs in the class, with each other, and with me, their instructor. All activities are fun and engaging, and students are encouraged to help each other and support one another during activities, ensuring everyone is successful. I model behaviors and language to get all students involved, to make sure everyone is comfortable, to help and support everyone’s participation, and to facilitate enjoyment from us all being together. I also provide positive reinforcement, specific praise, and compliments to the students when they join in, participate, help each other, include each other, and have fun together. These community-building activities are intended to teach the university students about belonging through the feelings they themselves have in relation to their university classmates and myself, so they know and recognize what belonging actually feels like and can reflect upon those feelings.

Even though I am teaching at the university level with university students (pre-service teachers), the students are still learners and the principles of whole schooling are still relevant. What better way to prepare these pre-service teachers to work towards the principles of whole schooling in their future teaching than for them to experience the principles themselves when they are the students. The community-building activities that we all engage in during each class session 1) create learning spaces for all because we all work to include everyone and accommodate their needs, 2) include all learners to learn together because all community-

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building activities are cooperative and students support each other's participation, and 3) build a caring community because through the fun, engaging, supportive activities the students and I build strong, positive, trusting relationships. Post-Class Written Reflections from university students include,

“I think it is important to do community builders throughout the year to keep growing relationships among students.”

“I liked the tree activity because I was able to find similarities between me and my classmates. I also liked sharing what I like about my classmates!”

Another creative way I teach belonging is to invite young adults with autism (the same age as the university students) to join two of our university classes per semester. Hosting friends with autism from the community allows the friends to experience a university class with peers, and provides an effective way for my university students to practice the skill of facilitating belonging in a diverse class as well as feel belonging as the whole class gets to know one another and works and learns together. Including friends in our class who are diverse helps university students create learning spaces for all through the work they do together that includes efforts from all to accommodate differences and ensure everyone participates and has a good time together. Ussher (2010) identified three influencing characteristics of teacher preparation programs that helped pre-service teachers succeed: opportunities, relationships, and a feeling of inclusion. Inviting diverse friends into our classroom to join in our community is a rich opportunity that offers the students new relationships, and with the goal of ensuring everyone feels welcome and belongs there, everyone feels included. Post-Class Written Reflections from university students after our class hosted a group of friends from the community include,

“I loved class today because of the friends we had. It was great to see them interact and become a part of our community. It would be great to do it again.”

“I really liked having our guests! I enjoyed seeing their reactions and their willingness to participate in our community building activities!”

“I loved that we had our friends in class again. It was great to include them in our class community! They seemed to have a lot of fun!”

Teaching Belonging Through Direct Observations in K-12 Schools

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Another very valuable opportunity I am able to offer my university students that teaches belonging is time spent one-on-one with me in K-12 schools. I substitute teach for the local K-12 school system and was granted permission by the School Board and administration to bring a university student with me as a classroom volunteer when I substitute teach. I substitute teach in several select schools and inclusive classrooms where great efforts are made by teachers, administrators, and staff to build a close community; these environments exemplify feelings of a connected community, strong relationships among students, and belonging for all students so the experience for the university students who volunteer there are rich.

During times when university students and I are working in K-12 schools, we observe and talk about specific instances of how the learning spaces accommodate all learners, about how all students are working, learning, and playing together, and about how it “feels” like a very caring, connected community. I am able to be explicit in pointing out K-12 student behavior that is indicative of these tenets of belonging, I can show them real-life examples of the principles of whole schooling in action, and I am able to help the university students “see” what belonging looks like in the K-12 classroom with young children. Written comments from university students who volunteered with me in classrooms where belonging was strong include,

“They want to be included just as much and that’s our job!”

“Creating an inclusive classroom establishes a great community.”

Recommendations

It is recommended that Teacher Educators address belonging throughout pre-service teachers’ preparation programs so graduates are prepared to work on individual relationships with their students and create a caring community in their classrooms where all of their children feel like they belong. Creative efforts should be made at the university level to teach university students about belonging to their universities, their instructors, and their peers so the university students will work to build the same belonging for their future K-12 students.

Creative efforts to teach belonging to pre-service teachers should include a wide variety of opportunities and experiences: building a caring community at the university level, including diverse peers, discussing and reflecting on what belonging is and how to facilitate it for children, observing belonging in actual classrooms, practicing community-building strategies with children, imitating strategies learned from instructors, discussing with experienced teachers and instructors how to help children belong, etc.

Teacher Educators’ inclusion of the principles of whole schooling across a teacher preparation program will also benefit pre-service teachers in their understanding of how to reach and teach their diverse future students effectively and successfully. Emphasis on developing relationships, building a caring community, and ensuring their students experience belonging is just as important as emphasis on academic learning and instructional strategies, and both can go hand-in-hand to prepare pre-service teachers for the real work of teaching.

Conclusion

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Three of the principles of whole schooling 1) creating learning spaces for all, 2) including all learners to learn together, and 3) building a caring community, all carry with them a central theme of belonging because relationships, acceptance, and love for each individual are at the core. Future teachers need to learn that spending time building a sense of belonging among their K-12 students is critical and great care need be taken to ensure all students in their classrooms feel they belong. This is truer today than ever given the wide diversity of children pre-service teachers will encounter in their teaching careers. Teacher Educators can work in creative ways to teach their university students about the significance of belonging through facilitating the same feelings within the university classroom, by giving university students experiences to practice including peers who are diverse, and by taking university students out into the field to witness belonging first hand. Teacher Educators can discuss belonging, model strategies to facilitate belonging, show examples of belonging, and teach using “love as pedagogy” (Loreman, 2011), all to broaden pre-service teachers’ understanding and value of belonging. A wealth of experiences surrounding belonging with a variety of people facilitating learning about belonging provides pre-service teachers the rich and supportive “village” in which to be “raised”, or prepared as successful future teachers (Ussher, 2010). It is believed that the efforts to help university students understand, experience, and value belonging at a deep, significant level in their teacher preparation programs, will prepare them to facilitate belonging with their K-12 students making their classrooms strong, connected, caring communities where all diverse students grow and thrive.

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