By Kate Shuster and Ximena Giesemann

AFFIRMING THE DIGNITY AND HUMANITY OF ALL PEOPLE

Antiracist educators put people, particularly students, at the center of instruction. The curriculum champions the diverse and complex human experience. Antiracist schools recognize the value and possibility in all students and ensure that no one feels unsafe, invisible, or unheard.

WHAT IS IT?

A classroom in which the dignity and humanity of all people are affirmed is one where caring relationships abound and where all students, regardless of their background, feel valued, included, and respected. Students who feel that their individual identity and academic abilities are affirmed experience a sense of belonging at school. Schools are affirming places when teachers genuinely care about students, recognize their potential, and provide them with positive support. Classrooms are affirming when the curriculum reflects the larger human experience and when school policies welcome all learners.

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT FOR STUDENTS TO FEEL AFFIRMED?

Students who feel affirmed at school are more likely to feel that they belong.[1] While all human beings have an innate need to belong,[2] this sense of belonging is especially important for students. The more that learners feel they belong in their school communities, the more likely they are to experience positive psychological outcomes including life satisfaction,[3] positive affect,[4] happiness, resilience,[5] confidence, and future aspirations.[6]

School belonging is also tied to beneficial social outcomes, as students who feel that they belong are less likely to experience rejection or display misconduct.[7] Finally, students' sense of belonging at school is

1   Hurtado, S., Ruiz Alvarado, A., & Guillermo-Wann, C. (2015). Creating inclusive environments: The mediating e ffect of faculty and sta ff validation on the relationship of discrimination/bias to students' sense of belonging. *Journal Committed to Social Change on Race and Ethnicity, 1*(1), 59-81.

2   Baumeister, R., & Leary, M. (1995). The need to belong: Desire for interpersonal attachments as a fundamental human motivation. *Psychological Bulletin, 117*(3), 497-529.

3   Anderman, E. (2002). School e ffects on psychological outcomes during adolescence. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 94*(4), 795-809.

4   Jose, P., Ryan, N., & Pryor, J. (2012). Does social connectedness promote a greater sense of well-being in adolescence over time? *Journal of Research on Adolescence, 22*(2), 235-251.

5   O'Rourke, J., & Cooper, M. (2010). Lucky to be happy: A study of happiness in Australian primary students. *Australian Journal of Educational & Developmental Psychology, 10,* 94-107.

6   Pittman, L., & Richmond, A. (2007). Academic and psychological functioning in late adolescence: The importance of school belonging. *The Journal of Experimental Education, 75,* 270-290.

7   Anderman (2002); Demanet, J., & Van Houtte, M. (2012). School belonging and school misconduct: The di ffering role of teacher and peer attachment. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence, 41*(4), 499-514.

strongly related to improved academic outcomes including motivation,[8] performance,[9] persistence,[10] and retention.[11] This sense of belonging is important for all students and is especially critical for Black and Brown students.[12]

Without affirmation and a sense of belonging, students are more likely to experience many adverse outcomes. Students who report a low sense of belonging are at an elevated risk for a host of psychological and emotional issues including increased risks of suicidal thoughts,[13] depression,[14] anxiety,[15] and emotional exhaustion.[16] Lower levels of school belonging are also associated with dropping

out of school,[17] disciplinary trouble,[18] lower academic achievement, and reduced interest in school.[19] A lower sense of school belonging is also related to increased levels of the stress hormone cortisol, causing a host of poor physiological outcomes including slower wound healing[20] and elevated risk of cardiovascular disease.[21]

When educators affirm learners, the benefits extend far beyond improved sense of belonging. For example, validation[22] acts as a buffer against the harmful effects of discrimination.[23] This shows how important affirming experiences are for all students, particularly those from historically marginalized communities. A study of 20,460 college students

8   Gillen-O'Neel, C., & Fuligni, A. (2013). A longitudinal study of school belonging and academic motivation across high school. *Child Development, 84*(2), 678-692. Faircloth, B., & Hamm, J. (2005). Sense of belonging among high school students representing 4 ethnic groups. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence, 34*(4), 293-309.

9   Korpershoek, H., Canrinus, E., Fokkens-Bruinsma, M., & de Boer, H. (2020). The relationships between school belonging and students' motivational, social-emotional, behavioural, and academic outcomes in secondary education: a meta-analytic review. *Research Papers in Education, 35*(6), 641-680.

10 Hausmann, L., Schofield, J., & Woods, R. (2007). Sense of belonging as a predictor of intentions to persist among African American and white first-year college students. *Research In Higher Education, 48*(7), 803-839. Sari, M. (2012). Sense of school belonging among elementary school students. *Cukurova University Faculty of Education, 41*(1), 1-11.

11 O'Keeffe, P. (2013). A sense of belonging: Improving student retention. *College Student Journal, 47*(4), 605-613.

12 Maestas, R., Vaquera, G., & Zehr, L. (2007). Factors impacting sense of belonging at a Hispanic-serving institution. *Journal of Hispanic Higher Education, 6*(3), 237-256.

13 Hatcher, S., & Stubbersfield, O. (2013). *Sense of belonging and suicide: A systematic review. The Canadian Journal of Psychiatry, 58*(7), 432-436.

14 Shochet, I., Smith, C., Furlong, M., & Homel, R. (2011). A prospective study investigating the impact of school belonging factors on negative affect in adolescents. *Journal of Clinical Child & Adolescent Psychology, 40*(4), 586-595.

15 de Moor, E., Denollet, J., & Laceulle, O. (2018). Social inhibition, sense of belonging and vulnerability to internalizing problems. *Journal of Affective Disorders, 225,* 207-213.

16 Skaalvik, E., & Skaalvik, S. (2011). Teacher job satisfaction and motivation to leave the teaching profession: Relations with school context, feeling of belonging, and emotional exhaustion. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 27*(6), 1029-1038.

17 Ream, R., & Rumberger, R. (2008). Student engagement, peer social capital, and school dropout among Mexican American and Non-Latino white students. *Sociology of Education, 81*(2), 109-139.

18 Osterman, K. (2000). Students' Need for belonging in the school community. *Review of Educational Research, 70*(3), 323-367.

19 Hascher, T., & Hagenauer, G. (2010). Alienation from school. *International Journal of Educational Research, 49*(6), 220-232.

20 Ebrecht, M., Hextall, J., Kirtley, L., Taylor, A., Dyson, M., & Weinman, J. (2004). Perceived stress and cortisol levels predict speed of wound healing in healthy male adults. *Psychoneuroendocrinology, 29*(6), 798-809.

21 Manenschijn, L., Schaap, L., van Schoor, N., van der Pas, S., Peeters, G., & Lips, P. et al. (2013). High long-term cortisol levels, measured in scalp hair, are associated with a history of cardiovascular disease. *The Journal of Clinical Endocrinology & Metabolism, 98*(5), 2078-2083.

22 While there are many ways to operationalize the idea of validation or affirmation in schools, one way to discern the extent to which the educational context and those nested within it are affirming is to measure students' felt sense of belonging. The Psychological Sense of School Membership (PSSM) developed by Goodenow (1993) is very frequently used in research to measure a students' felt sense of school belonging. This scale contains 18 self-reported items that tap into the students' perceived sense of belonging in the school environment. Sample items from this scale include: "The teachers here respect me", "I am included in lots of activities at my school," and "There's at least one teacher or other adult in this school I can talk to if I have a problem."

23 Guillermo-Wann, C. (2013). *(Mixed) race matters: Racial theory, classification, and campus climate*. [Doctoral dissertation, University of California Los Angeles]. UCLA Electronic Theses and Dissertations.

found that those who received validation from faculty and staff experienced an increased sense of belonging and fewer instances of discrimination.[24] Affirming all students is critical to their social, psychological, and physiological well-being as well as to their academic success.

HOW CAN WE ENSURE THAT SCHOOLS ARE AFFIRMING PLACES WHERE ALL STUDENTS FEEL LIKE THEY BELONG?

Students can experience affirmation in various contexts within the educational system at large. These include relationships with teachers, curricula, and schools.

THE TEACHER-STUDENT RELATIONSHIP

At the microlevel, the teacher-student relationship has an especially significant impact on student perceptions of affirmation and belonging. A study of 193,057 adolescents from 41 countries showed that the teacher-student relationship was twice as important for sense of belonging than family communication.[25] Students feel a greater sense of belonging and affirmation at school when they perceive that their teacher authentically cares about them and provides them with both interpersonal and academic validation.[26]

Teachers intentionally cultivate relationships with their students and provide them with interpersonal validation. Teachers affirm the humanity of their students. They are interested in students as people: teachers validate their students' unique experiences, encourage them to express their own views, and make them feel like they matter.

Teachers challenge students and provide them with academic validation. Teachers who demonstrate authentic care believe in their students' ability to learn, highlight their academic strengths, and push them to do their best work.

Teachers help students with academic and personal matters. Teachers genuinely want each student to succeed. They help students overcome both academic and personal challenges.

Teachers communicate with their students about both school-related and non-school-related matters. In addition to providing feedback about students' schoolwork and academic performance, teachers who show authentic care also communicate with students about non-school-related matters — including students' home lives and future aspirations.

Teachers spend both unstructured and structured time with students. Students say that teachers made them feel as though they belonged and mattered when they spent time together at non-academic school events (i.e., attending athletic contests and other extracurricular events).

5 THINGS TEACHERS CAN DO TO AFFIRM THEIR STUDENTS:

1 Cultivate Relationships
2 Challenge
3 Support
4 Communicate
5 Spend Time

24 Hurtado, S., Ruiz Alvarado, A., & Guillermo-Wann, C. (2015).

25 Chiu, M., Chow, B., McBride, C., & Mol, S. (2016). Students' sense of belonging at school in 41 countries: Cross-cultural variability. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology, 47*(2), 175-196.

26 Booker, K., & Lim, J. (2018). Belongingness and pedagogy: Engaging African American girls in middle school mathematics. *Youth & Society, 50*(8), 1037-1055. Brooms, D. (2019). "I was just trying to make it": Examining Urban Black males' sense of belonging, schooling experiences, and academic success. *Urban Education, 54*(6), 804-830. Rendón, L. (2002). Community College Puente: A validating model of education. *Educational Policy, 16*(4), 642-667.

THE CURRICULUM

What is taught greatly influences whether students feel included and affirmed — whether they feel as if they belong in school. Inclusive curricula — including texts, literature, media, and images — serve as both windows and mirrors for students.[27] "Window" experiences ensure that students encounter the larger human experience, not just that of one group. "Mirror" experiences help students to see themselves reflected in the class content, as if looking at a mirror. Teachers who affirm the dignity and humanity of all people ensure that course content is not based on a single-story narrative. Instead, they ensure that multiple perspectives and experiences are highlighted — especially those of individuals outside of the dominant social group. When the curriculum features a diverse array of perspectives and experiences, students not only learn about those who are different than they are — they also feel validated because content is relevant and relatable.

SCHOOL POLICIES

Curriculum is not enough to ensure validation and a sense of belonging. School policies can substantially impact whether a student feels affirmed and as though they belong. Welcoming schools exhibit an ongoing, active commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion; have antiracism, anti-discrimination, anti-harassment, and anti-bullying policies in place; and have ongoing programming for school administrators, educators, and counselors to provide them with knowledge and skills in culturally responsive practices.[28]

All students have the right to feel included, respected, and affirmed. Educators, administrators, and policymakers have both the responsibility and the ability to ensure that teachers build caring and validating relationships with students; that the curriculum is affirming of all students in the classroom, reflecting a diverse array of people and experiences; and that school policies are welcoming, inclusive, and equitable.

27 Bishop, R. S. (1990). Mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors. *Perspectives: Choosing and Using Books for the Classroom, 6*(3)

28 Guo-Brennan, L. & Guo-Brennan, M. (2019). Building welcoming and inclusive schools for immigrant and refugee students: Framework and promising praxis. In K. Arar, J.S. Brooks & I, Bogotch, (Eds.), *Education, immigration and migration: Policy, leadership and praxis for a changing world* (pp. 73-93). Bingley, UK: Emerald Publishing. Jacob, S. (2013). Creating safe and welcoming schools for LGBT students: Ethical and legal issues. *Journal of School Violence, 12*(1), 98-115.

Kate Shuster, Ph.D., is the director of curriculum and evaluation at the Center for Antiracist Education.

Ximena Giesemann, M.A., is a doctoral student at Claremont Graduate University.

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