The Intersection of Belonging and Equitable Outcomes

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Out-of-school time (OST) professionals seek the best ways to supplement and enhance young people's experiences to achieve equitable outcomes for participants. Often this enhancement presents as academic support, arts or sports programming, job development, or project-based learning. OST professionals strive to create environments where participants feel they belong.

The goal of fostering belonging drives programs to create systems and develop relationships with youth and families. The intersection of creating equitable outcomes for youth and creating a sense of belonging is tangible in OST. The combination is directly woven into the work's core tenets, as evidenced in staff training and program evaluation systems. Consequently, OST programs can have an incredible impact on young people's sense of belonging.

What Is Belonging?

Baumeister and Leary (1995) hypothesize that "human beings have a pervasive drive to form and maintain at least a minimum quantity of lasting, positive, and significant interpersonal relationships" (p. 497). Goodenow (1993) defines belonging as "the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others in the school social environment" (p. 80). A sense of belonging gives

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youth a sense of security and connectedness, lack of which can negatively affect their perceptions of themselves and ultimately their motivation to learn and study (OECD, 2018).

St-Amand and colleagues (2017) identify four defining attributes of belonging:

- Positive emotions, including feelings of intimacy, usefulness, pride, and support
- Positive relations with peers and adults
- Energy and a willingness to get involved in a meaningful way within a group
- Harmonization, "the ability for individuals to change personal aspects to align with any situations or people that would warrant such an adaptation" (St-Amand et al., 2017, p. 109)

These attributes suggest that OST program participants are already primed to realize their hope of belonging. For example, the fact that they participate indicates that they are willing to get involved. Belongingness depends on every young person actively participating as a responsible, contributing citizen of the community (OECD, 2018).

Who Feels They Belong?

International data collected by the OECD Equity in Education study in 2018 indicate that, though most students felt that they did belong, disadvantaged students were less likely to feel that way, by 7.7 percentage points. The study also found that students' sense of belonging had declined since 2003 (OECD, 2018). The Quaglia Institute for Student Aspirations *School Voice Report 2016* indicate that only 64 percent of students surveyed reported that school is a welcoming and friendly place. Feeling welcomed is essential to a sense of belonging.

Students who didn't express a sense of belonging were found in one study to score, on average, 22 points lower on science exams than those who did (OECD, 2017). Many studies have shown that lack of connectedness or belonging is the cause of anxiety, low self-esteem, depression, substance use, delinquency, and antisocial behavior (Korpershoek et al., 2019). A weak sense of belonging also holds students back from higher education. In the OECD study (2018), students who were in the bottom quarter on a scale of belonging were more likely than those at higher levels to end

their education at the secondary level. Immigrant students may find it particularly difficult to find a sense of belonging in school. As Beck and Malley (1998) say, "Neglected children with damaged spirits and a diminished sense of self are at high risk for failure."

The implication of these studies is clear: Students at a disadvantage—a condition that in the U.S. is clearly demarcated by race and opportunity—are less likely than others to feel that they belong in school. Students who do not fit the Eurocentric pedagogy and industrial setup of American schools feel rejected. Socialization in schools functions differently for students of different races or classes. According to Beck and Malley (1998), children who are considered to be disadvantaged are "socialized for subordination"; the rest are "socialized for responsibility." Being socialized for subordination causes students to feel alienated and disengaged with learning so that their educational outcomes are affected (Beck & Malley, 1998).

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The Place of OST

OST offers young people opportunities to break from these molds to have more freedom to be connected. Afterschool has more space for creating a sense of belonging. Belonging is core to the values of the field. OST's intentional learning environments are youth-centered, take an assets-based approach, and prioritize mentorship and relationships (Vossoughi, 2017). All of these characteristics contribute to participants' sense of belonging. In this way, OST programs "stand as examples of what is possible when learning is conceptualized not only as a cognitive process but also as a social, emotional, cultural, and historical activity grounded in community-based values and visions for the future" (Vossoughi, 2017, p. 5).

The volume of research about belonging strongly supports its importance in youth development. Furthermore, strong evidence shows that OST can create spaces where young people can develop positive identities while receiving support for academic achievement. The research also suggests that youth who experience the effects of inequitable systems are at a disadvantage in feeling that they belong. Krys Burnett, writing about the corporate world rather than education, posits, "At the core of inclusion is diversity. Inclusion means that people with marginalized identities feel as if they genuinely belong, are valued and relied upon, empowered

and ultimately matter" (Burnett, 2019). Correlating equitable outcomes and belonging in OST is essential, as OST spaces connect young people to their communities and a sense of belonging.

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