

INVITED ARTICLE

Indigenous Perspectives and Sense of Belonging in the Classroom: A Literature Review

Madison Carter-Plouffe

Abstract

This article examines how educators can create a sense of belonging in their school and classroom communities by infusing Indigenous perspectives. A literature review was conducted by examining various peer-reviewed sources. It was found that students who feel a sense of belonging are more likely to be more motivated at school, take risks, and have positive mental health experiences. Educators can promote a strong sense of belonging through the classroom community, peer relationships, and the physical learning environment by incorporating Indigenous perspectives such as a whole-child approach, land-based education, the Seven Grandfather Teachings, and the Circle of Courage. Results showed that a sense of belonging can be accomplished through Indigenous perspectives by considering social-emotional status of children, the peacefulness of the physical space, and seeing children as positive contributors to society.

In Canada, students typically spend 5,500 cumulative hours between ages 6-11 in school (Statistics Canada, 2020). Children spend a large portion of their lives in classrooms, and many learning outcomes are affected by whether students feel they belong within their school communities or not. Bouchard and Berg (2017) described “sense of belonging” as feeling accepted and a sense of fit within a community. The literature shows centuries of Indigenous practices that support sense of belonging within a community. There are ways that educators can connect Indigenous perspectives to sense of belonging for students in their classrooms. As a result, this article presents how implementing Indigenous perspectives creates a sense of belonging for all students. It analyzes the importance of sense of belonging within a classroom community, peer relationships, and the physical learning environment using specific Indigenous perspectives such as a whole-child approach, land-based education, the Seven Grandfather Teachings, and the Circle of Courage.

The Importance of Belonging

To understand how to use Indigenous perspectives to create a sense of belonging, we must first analyze why belonging is important. Student sense of belonging is important because it impacts their success in school. Research confirms that a strong sense of belonging in elementary-age students has a positive impact on academic and health outcomes (Allen et al., 2021). When students feel they belong within their classroom and school community, they may feel more likely to fully participate in their learning experience and take more risks. For students to take risks, they must feel a sense of safety and support. This may also influence attendance because students who feel they belong to a community may feel more excited to be with that community. Consistent attendance has a positive correlation with students’ academic success. Brendtro et al. (2013), creators of the Circle of Courage model, stated that students’ understanding of how their behaviour and actions can benefit their community is a strong indicator of academic success. Students will contribute positively to their school and classroom communities when they are empathetic, helpful, generous, cooperative, and pleasant. These contributions and behaviours help to create a safe and supportive learning environment.

Student sense of belonging is important because it affects their mental health. If students do not feel a sense of belonging, they are more likely to experience negative mental health struggles such as depression and other risky behaviours (Millings et al., 2012). Insecure attachment styles that involve feeling abandoned or unsupported by others lead to a higher possibility of developing depression. Students' attachment styles can vary and change greatly during their adolescence. It is important that educators give students the tools to create healthy attachments and relationships with their peers, reducing the risk of developing depression. Insecure peer attachments also influence mood and self-esteem (Millings et al., 2012). Students who have insecure attachment styles and lack a sense of belonging feel distrust towards others and do not feel as though they have a support system during times of stress. They may not picture themselves as worthy of having positive connections with others. Using Indigenous perspectives in the classroom, such as the Circle of Courage and the Seven Grandfather Teachings, is a holistic way to ensure that all students have the tools to create positive relationships among others and create a sense of belonging within the school community.

Belonging Within the Classroom Community

One Indigenous perspective educators can use to create a sense of belonging is the Circle of Courage. The Circle of Courage was first introduced by Brendtro, Brokenleg, and Van Bockern (Manitoba Education, n.d.). The four quadrants of the Circle are belonging, generosity, independence, and mastery, and the model is based on a traditional Indigenous medicine wheel or sacred hoop. The Circle of Courage gives educators a framework to create a sense of belonging in the classroom because it is a model for positive youth development. Jackson (2014) stated that positive youth development is an outlook that sees all youth as being positive contributors to society. When educators use the Circle of Courage model in their classroom, they are giving students the tools to become positive contributors within their classroom communities. A large part of being a contributing member to society is feeling as if one belongs to a community and therefore has responsibility towards that community. Jackson claimed that another part of positive youth development is socialization, focusing primarily on the skills, attitudes, and values of the groups of which they will become members of. Similar to the Seven Teachings, educators can incorporate the Circle of Courage into their classrooms by creating a class value or goal system around the four quadrants. Students can learn to value their classroom and community within the four quadrants of the Circle of Courage, which leads them to feel a sense of belonging and responsibility within that community. Positive youth development promotes self-efficacy because of the 5C's: competence, character, confidence, caring, and connection (Lerner, 2009). Each of these qualities builds students' independence, enabling them to accomplish tasks or goals. Therefore, the Circle of Courage can be used as a goal-setting system whereby students can set goals, self-assess, and reflect on their learning.

We see similar themes of strength in community and collectively working towards the greater good of community-based caring in land-based education. Land-based education occurs when students learn from the natural world and their responsibility to the land. It uses the land and nature as the first teacher (Bowra et al., 2021). Gaudet (2021) explained that when children learn with the land, they feel the unpredictability of the climate and their surroundings, which helps them to understand the difference between individualistic attitudes and sharing their resources and knowledge. This is a natural way for educators to teach their students about the values needed to create a healthy classroom community, such as sharing, problem-solving, and teamwork. As a strong classroom community is established, all students should feel a stronger sense of belonging. Learning how to rely on the land gives students the confidence and tools to be independent and fosters a sense of pride in what they are collectively working towards, such as protecting the land and resources. To do so, educators must ensure that the classroom community is a safe space where student behaviour does not impact the learning environment.

The Circle of Courage creates a sense of belonging in the classroom by offering educators a framework to better understand child behaviour. Reyneke (2020) stated that the Circle of Courage provides strategies throughout the four quadrants to manage unexpected behaviours and improve the classroom culture. When the Circle of Courage is used as a restorative justice model, it provides educators with the knowledge of why children behave the way they do, as well as proactive ways to change the classroom culture. Reyneke (2020) explained how certain behaviours impact both the learning environment and peer relationships. In order to create a safe and balanced learning environment, educators must have an understanding of belonging, mastery, generosity, and independence, and of how to use classroom management strategies to manage the classroom and create an environment where children are ready to learn and develop positive peer relationships.

Belonging Through Peer Relationships

When educators use a whole-child approach to teaching, students are more likely to feel a sense of belonging. According to Chafouleas and Iovino (2021), the whole-child lens of teaching is embedded within the six developmental pathways of child development previously established by Comer (2020). The six pathways are cognitive, physical, social, language, ethical, and psychological. The social pathway features the ability to build and maintain relationships with peers across multiple settings. As educators engage in whole-child teaching, they also facilitate the development of student relationships. As students create and maintain strong relationships across multiple domains, they are more likely to feel a strong sense of social belonging. According to Yoder (2014), two of the five social-emotional competencies required for students to be successful in school and life are related to social regulation and relationship management. Social-emotional learning considers the whole child rather than just academic ability. Students who have strong social-emotional skills are more likely to identify social cues, evaluate emotional reactions from others, appreciate diversity, communicate effectively, and manage conflicts appropriately. Whole-child approaches such as considering the developmental pathways and social-emotional teaching help students to cultivate relationships and establish a strong sense of belonging.

Cultivating and creating relationships is a way that a sense of belonging can be established through the Seven Grandfather Teachings. Using the Seven Grandfather Teachings as a classroom value system creates a culture of respect, inclusion, and belonging among students. When educators use the Seven Grandfather Teachings in their classroom values, they are teaching their students about the purpose and value of respect, love, humility, wisdom, bravery, honesty, and truth. Absolon (2016) clarified that the Seven Grandfather Teachings model mutual respect and inclusivity for everyone. These guiding principles are the foundation for mutual respect of all students and adults in the classroom, regardless of ability, identity, background, or status. Mahar et al. (2013) noted how social belonging is defined by the subjective feeling of respect. When students feel completely respected for who they are, they are more likely to feel a sense of belonging within their classroom. Verbos and Humphries (2014) claimed that the Teachings are instructions on human responsibility and values that people need to create relationships with one another. Educators cannot assume that students have a complete understanding of human responsibility. They therefore need to explicitly teach these responsibilities in their classes by helping students understand the importance of respecting one another, acting with integrity and fairness, and being accountable for their share of the classroom environment. Using the Seven Grandfather Teachings as a value system gives students a reference point that is easy to understand and reminds them of their responsibilities towards the classroom and their peers.

Belonging Within the Physical Learning Environment

Along with respect and inclusion, the Seven Grandfather Teachings highlight themes of peace and safety. Absolon (2016) stated that the Seven Grandfather Teachings are guiding principles that can restore balance and harmony. Mahar et al. (2013) claimed that physical and social environments affect sense of belonging. Because the physical environment impacts belonging, it is important to use principles that promote balance, harmony, peace, and safety in the classroom. While some students feel belonging as connection with others, others may see it as belonging within a physical space. Therefore, educators need to ensure that their classroom and school environments are safe and harmonious for students to feel welcomed into.

This relates to the Indigenous perspective of land-based education where the physical space is neutral, connected, and safe. Land-based education creates a safe space for students to connect with each other and nature. According to Fast et al. (2021), researchers view land-based education as a safe space where students can learn without feelings of shame or judgement. Land-based education occurs in a neutral place where students can learn and engage in inquiry about the natural world that surrounds them. Where some students may perceive the physical space of a classroom as a barrier to belonging, the outdoors is a space where most students feel calm, connected, and safe. The Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario (2020) described land-based learning as asking questions, making mistakes, and learning from those mistakes. When students feel they are in a natural space where they can make mistakes without judgement from their peers, they are more likely to feel like they belong and are actively part of the learning experience. Educators can use overall skills and attitudes such as observation, constructing, inquiry, research, predicting, recording, exploring, and reflecting to guide their land-based education journey in all subject areas.

Conclusion

To better understand Indigenous perspectives on belonging, this article first looked at why belonging is important and how it affects students' overall well-being and mental health. The literature confirms that a strong sense of belonging directly correlates to academic achievement. This relationship is due to the fact that a sense of belonging giving students the confidence to take risks in their learning, as well as an excitement to attend school. It also correlates with whether students may experience mental health struggles such as depression. It is important for educators to give students the tools to feel a sense of belonging and form healthy attachments with their peers.

Belonging within a classroom community can be accomplished through the Circle of Courage model and land-based education. The Circle of Courage creates a sense of belonging because it is a model for positive youth development, which is an outlook that children are positive contributors to society and therefore feel a sense of responsibility towards the community they belong to. When incorporating land-based education, students have the confidence to be curious and make mistakes, knowing they are supported within their community and feeling proud of what they are collectively working towards.

Belonging through peer relationships is modelled through a whole-child approach and the Seven Grandfather Teachings. The developmental pathways and social-emotional status of children as seen through the whole-child approach empowers students to cultivate relationships, which leads to a sense of belonging. The competency of emotional regulation highlights specific skills that would help students develop relationships. Using the Seven Grandfather Teachings creates an environment of inclusion and mutual respect, which leads to a feeling of social belonging. The Teachings are a model for human responsibility; therefore, educators must provide explicit instructions to students on their responsibilities towards each other and the classroom. This simultaneously creates an environment where students feel safe and welcomed into.

Lastly, this article analyzed belonging within a physical learning environment. The Seven Grandfather Teachings create safe and peaceful environments, which relates to land-based education that provides neutral and calm spaces where children can organically connect with one another and nature. Land-based education encourages children to be curious and make mistakes, leading to children feeling as if they belong through an active learning experience.

Future examinations of students' sense of belonging in school should consider how Indigenous perspectives fit into reconciliation efforts in Canada, including the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's 94 Calls to Action. While Indigenous pedagogy dates back centuries, reconciliatory education is a relatively new concept. Due to the nature of this topic, limitations include lack of documentation for traditional Indigenous teachings because the main source of those teachings is traditional oral storytelling. There is also a lack of research directly relating to Treaty 1 territory teachings. Further research will need to take into consideration that there is no standard way to gather this data.

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About the Author

Madison Carter-Plouffe is an elementary teacher in Winnipeg, Manitoba, located on Treaty 1 Territory. Madison completed her Bachelor of Science in Agribusiness and her Bachelor of Education at the University of Manitoba. She is currently pursuing a Master of Education in educational administration at the University of Brandon.