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## THE CONNECTION BETWEEN BELONGING AND REPRESENTATION



Students' sense of belonging matters. Research shows that students who feel they have a voice in class are seven times more likely to feel motivated than those who do not (Quaglia Institute, 2016). Giving voice and increasing students' feelings of belonging at school is pivotal for equity and encouragement of all learners. When students have greater autonomy and feel more connected in the classroom, it allows teachers and school administrators to understand their specific points of view. Empowering students to speak about their experiences and choose how they interact with the curriculum makes learners more likely to invest in their own education with longer-lasting results and higher academic achievement (Lee & Riordan, 2018).



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## Building a Culture of Belonging

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When students feel welcome and valued in their classroom environment, it increases their motivation to learn. One of the ways teachers and school leaders can foster belonging in a school environment is through community connections. Including community members, town/city memorabilia, and age-appropriate and relevant videos that relate to local issues can help build a bridge between home life and school life for kids (Bowen, 2021). Haines Elementary, a K-8 school in Chicago's historic Chinatown neighborhood, honors students' language identities not only through dual-language programs, but also by teaching strong social and emotional competencies like empathy in order to build a school culture where all students feel seen and heard (Williams, 2019). Their ability to implement SEL and academics equally has ranked them as one of the highest-achieving public schools in Illinois.



Research shows that representation within the classroom not only increases feelings of belonging but also supports a positive school environment where students feel more confident in their abilities and accelerates academic achievement (Regional, 2021). When students feel advocated for, academics and feelings of belonging are interrelated. Fostering an authentic, diverse, and supportive community in school advances students' physical and social-emotional safety, peer relationships, teaching environments, and school connectedness.



## Fostering A Supportive School Environment

The culture of each unique classroom should be representative of its students. When learners see themselves in the posters on the walls, the books they read, or in school curricula, it fosters a sense of belonging within a positive and inclusive school environment (Williams, 2019). This is especially important for students of color, who are more likely to feel left out in school resources, media, and books. Often overlooked, the “racial school climate gap” is a space in which students are excluded because of their race and ethnicity (Regional, 2021). In order to create lesson plans where all students feel seen and heard, seek out school resources that represent a wide range of differences in: race, ethnicity, culture, nationality, gender, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, age, physical and or mental capabilities, and religious beliefs.

Using SEL exercises, such as intentional morning check-ins, are important but shouldn't be the only place where students can authentically be themselves and be honest about their feelings (Zalaznick, 2021). Although Morning Meeting can help students feel more connected to their school life, providing additional opportunities for students to share stories about their diverse home lives, values, observations, and dreams is important to creating a supportive school community that fosters belonging. Over time, educators develop a clearer view of who their students are and can advocate for school administrators to address students' specific needs.

Centering equity in the school workforce by diversifying both teachers and administration is another important factor in helping students navigate racial school climate gaps (Regional, 2021). Educators at all levels can create and advocate for safer environments for students to learn and grow by seeking resources for more racial equity, holding open conversations about race, making on-campus counseling readily available, and creating clear intervention policies.

When our classrooms center equity and feelings of belonging, students are more likely to receive a representative education that reinforces cognitive empathy. By reading diverse stories, reflecting and writing about their experiences, and learning about other communities, students are more likely to have a sense of agency and advocacy in and out of the classroom (Lee & Riordan, 2018).



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