

Project 297
February 2022

Student Voice Project to Improve Sense of Belonging in Middle Years Classrooms

Kelli Fredlund
Kelly Gibson
Chrisa Farrell
Chantelle Balicki

This research was partially funded through a grant from the McDowell Foundation. However, the points of view and opinions expressed in project documents are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Foundation.

The purpose of the Dr. Stirling McDowell Foundation for Research Into Teaching is to fund research, inquiry, and dissemination of information focusing on instruction (both teaching and learning) in the context of the public elementary and secondary education system.

Specifically, it will:

- 1) Contribute to knowledge about teaching and learning.
- 2) Encourage educational inquiry through a wide range of methodologies.
- 3) Support the involvement of practising teachers in active research projects.
- 4) Encourage organizations as well as individuals to determine and act in areas of research and inquiry.
- 5) Encourage experimentation with innovative ideas and methodologies related to teaching and learning.

The Foundation is an independent charitable organization formed by the Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation in 1991. It is governed by a Board of Directors. The selection and evaluation of projects funded by the Foundation is carried out by a teacher-led Project Review Committee. Inquiries concerning research supported by the McDowell Foundation may be directed to the following address:

Research Coordinator

Dr. Stirling McDowell Foundation

2317 Arlington Avenue

Saskatoon SK S7J 2H8

Telephone: 1-800-667-7762 or 306-373-1660

© 2022 by the Dr. Stirling McDowell Foundation for Research Into Teaching Inc. Permission is given to use this work for educational purposes, except that authorization from the original source must be obtained for the use of any material that appears in the work with credit to another source.

Table of Contents

Overview of Our Project	1
Research Question	1
Research Objectives	1
Rationale and Statement of Need	1
Description of the Study Population	2
Research Methodology	3
Description of Problems and Limitations of the Research	4
Summary of Data	4
Our Findings	10
Results and Conclusions	10
Discursive Strategies for Curricular Connections	10
Regular classroom routines for belonging (“heart work”)	11
Purposeful inclusion of team and community building activities	12
Opportunities for students to lead and find agency	13
Recommendations from Results	15
Areas for Further Research	16
References	18
Appendix A	20
Appendix B	22
Appendix C	25
Appendix D	27

Overview of Our Project

Research Question

How can educators make space for student voice to positively impact sense of belonging for middle years' students?

Research Objectives

Our project was designed to assist middle years' teachers (Grades 6-9 homerooms) and administrators to better create space for student voice to improve sense of belonging in their school learning communities. Our intention was to make a positive impact on relationships and sense of belonging in our grade 7 learning community, and to also have a wider impact in other schools who would like to learn from our model or build upon it for improvement.

The purpose of this research was to understand how empowering student voice enables students to contribute to their own sense of belonging, the belonging of others, and to create positive change within a middle years' environment. We sought to find strategies and daily classroom processes that would best lend to these goals. From previous research, we understood that allowing students to activate their voices in the classroom empowers students to advocate for themselves and their peers. (Faust, Ennis, & Hodge, 2014). It also encourages academic and social growth in areas of cooperation, compromise, negotiation, and conflict resolution. Creating opportunity for students to have their voices heard helps to establish positive relationships with teachers and peers and also increases students' satisfaction levels within the learning environment (Faust, Ennis, & Hodge, 2014).

Our goal was to engage a community of students in discussion topics and experiences that were important to them and that would empower them to create change within their school environment. Swain (2014) posed a question that compelled us as teacher researchers: "What would happen if we treated the student as someone whose opinion mattered?" This is exactly what we set out to do, and to learn from as educators.

Rational and Statement of Need

School belonging is fundamental to positive student health and well-being. A student's sense of belonging at school has shown to have correlation to a large variety of psychological, health-related and academic factors in school and also have a deeper impact on preventing

adolescent emotional distress, eating disorders and suicide (Feinauer, Whiting, Everson, & Feinauer, 2018). Additionally, the underlying consensus of belonging research indicates that students who feel a strong sense of belonging to their school environments are more likely to develop positive psychological, academic and social outcomes as well as better overall health and well-being compared to students who feel unsupported or disconnected from their school (Bouchard & Berg, 2017). Our goal as teacher researchers was to determine how we could best build a “family-like” learning environment for students and staff in our learning community.

This was even more pertinent to our specific school context for a variety of reasons. Two years before the onset of this project, our school first opened in a new suburban community that would bring more than 700 students together from multiple previous catchment areas, including a neighboring First Nation and New Canadian students who were arriving to this school for their first Canadian school experience. We did not have an existing established school culture and “the way we’ve always done things,” so we had a great opportunity to get it right, or close to right the first time to build a strong foundation. As teacher researchers, we felt a sense of curiosity and eagerness to learn as educators and a moral imperative to do right by our students in this newly established school.

Description of the Study Population

While this project included the participation of two Grade 7 classes that we have called our Grade 7 learning community, the study population was three classroom teachers (two who shared teaching responsibilities for one Grade 7 class, and another teacher who had her own Grade 7 class). These three teachers journaled and documented their observations during the analysis stage of each action research cycle and during meeting times with colleagues outside of our school who had engaged in belonging and student voice work whom we hoped to learn from.

Our teacher researchers were veteran teachers, each with more than 15 years of teaching experience who shared a professional passion to learn more about belonging and building relationships within a learning community. The learning and documentation of these teacher-researchers formed the basis for our analysis.

This research took place in one grade seven learning community, consisting of two classrooms in a large, suburban elementary school (~600 students kindergarten to grade 8) in Western Canada.

This school population is unique in that it was a newly built school (two years old at the start of this project), in a newly established neighborhood, and was built in partnership with a neighboring First Nation where approximately 8% of the student population are bussed from, into the city to attend school from grades 5-8. There is also a high proportion of students who are new to Canada who attend this school.

This project was a timely opportunity to build positive school culture in a middle years setting since we did not already have an established “the way we have always done things,” in our new school just yet.

Research Methodology

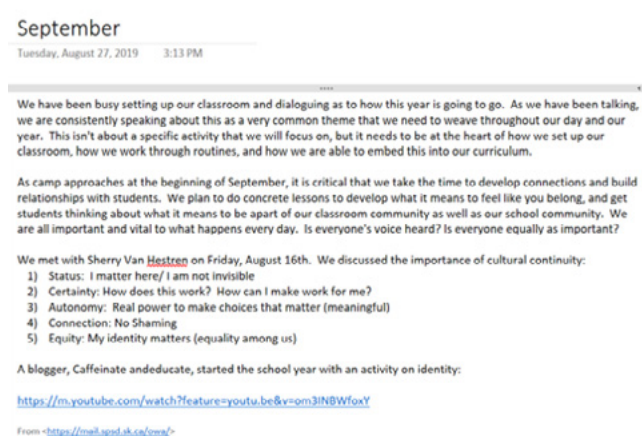
This project was set to take place over one school year, from September 2019 - June 2020. With the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic and unforeseen school closure from March - June, 2020, this project was extended into the next 2020 - 21 school year.

In response to student voice, our teacher researchers met multiple times over the school year (approximately once per month or so) utilizing an Action Research model (Mertler, 2012). Often these meetings occurred alongside other professionals such as our Indigenous Student Liaison Teacher or our secondary school colleagues who had been part of student voice work at the collegiate level and could offer their advice for next steps.

Our team of teacher researchers utilized formal data sets in their classroom work, such as results from the Student Belonging Scale (Whiting, Everson, & Feinauer (2017) and the Our School Saskatchewan provincial ministry survey as well as informal data such as observations, conversations and products from targeted lessons and experiences meant to bring forth student voice.

Each of these meetings were used as a mini-analysis session within the Action Research model to determine what our students would need from our learning community to improve sense of belonging and to plan for where we would go next as a grade 7 community.

The three participating teacher researchers journaled and documented their observations using Microsoft OneNote during the analysis stage of each action research cycle. At the end of this project, a thematic analysis took place alongside the lead researcher, a school-based administrator who had subsequently moved to another school. Four emerging themes and two foundational understandings were found to contribute to student sense of belonging in our Grade 7 community.



Through the thematic analysis, and as a compilation of the discursive learning activities, team building activities, and regular routines that took place in our learning community in attempts to build a stronger sense of student belonging, a book was published by the Grade 7 learning community titled #iBelongHere.

Description of Problems and Limitations of the Research

At the proposal stages of this project, our intentions were to include multiple educators in the action research cycles and to create small group opportunities for student voice work in our Grade 7 learning community, all guided by Elders who supported part-time in our school. This team was originally to consist of three teacher researchers, two in-house Elders, one teacher librarian with 50 percent release from the classroom, and one vice-principal with full-time release from the classroom.

After our vice-principal was transferred schools and our teacher librarian position was lost due to budgetary cuts in our school division, the logistics of our small group student meeting groups originally planned for needed to change. Our previous vice-principal stayed on as lead researcher but supported this project through virtual meetings instead of being able to support in-person or be part of the student voice opportunities within the school day as originally intended.

Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic, resulting in school closure from March - June of our intended project year, and health restrictions imposed throughout the pandemic which restricted our ability to gather outside of classroom cohorts caused us to shift our plans for student voice opportunities within our learning community. Our two part-time Elders were significantly restricted from the in-person learning environment to protect them through the pandemic, which led us to include our part-time Indigenous Liaison Teacher in an advisory role instead.

Summary of Data

The three participating teachers journaled and documented their observations during the analysis stage of each action research cycle in response to student voice. At the end of this project, a final thematic analysis took place alongside the lead researcher.

During each action research cycle, which occurred approximately every one - two months, teachers analyzed formal data, including:

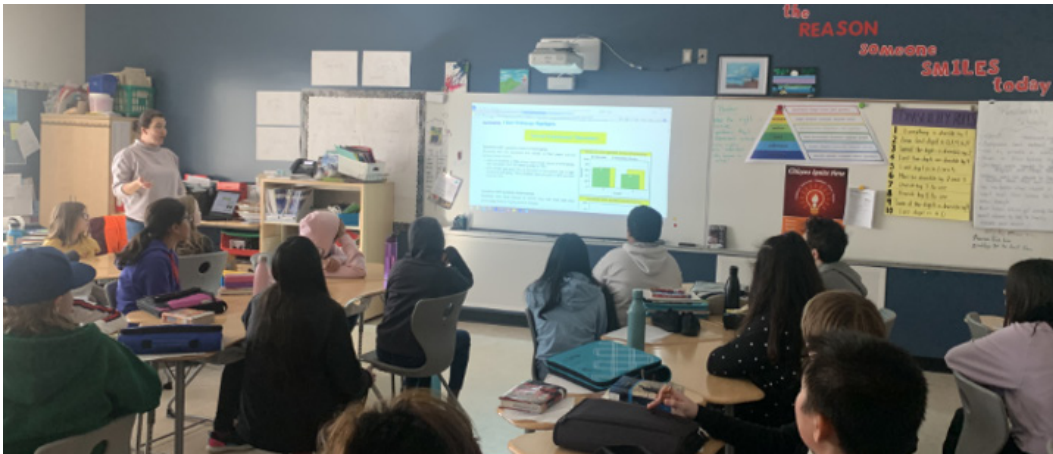
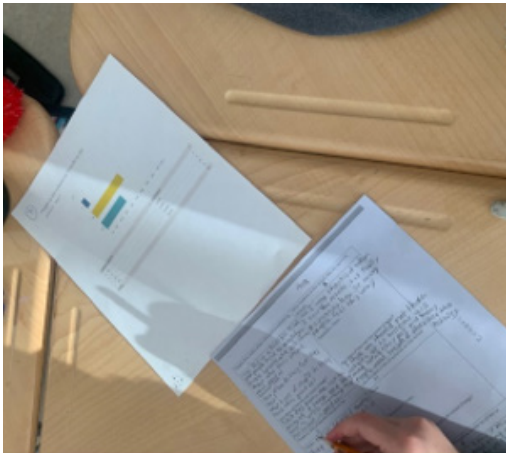
1. OurSchool provincial "tell them from me" survey
2. Belonging Scale

Additionally, informal data such as conversations, observations and products that emerged from classroom activities, discursive strategies and purposeful opportunities for students to lead and engage in team building activities were analyzed and reflected upon for their value in contributing to student belonging.

It is important to note that student survey responses were not the specific measure of study for this project, but the process did provide teacher researchers with some information of how to respond to students to improve belonging. Classroom discussion followed as students discussed the results of both surveys.

For the purposes of this project, our analysis comes from what our teacher researchers learned throughout their action research cycles, and the advice they feel they can bring forward for future use in their own practice and to guide other educators who wish to create a stronger sense of belonging in their middle years' learning communities.

Our teacher researchers detailed their thoughts and learning through journaling after each action research cycle, some of which occurred alongside colleagues we sought out who had experience with student voice work. It was important to us as educators and teacher researchers to get the perspective of colleagues who had different racial, cultural, and collegial differences from us, to help enrich our analysis. We were grateful for the insights into student voice and belonging work that was shared with us along the way by our high-school level colleagues, Indigenous Liaison teachers, and university professors who have lived and breathed this work.



Below are some key insights worth sharing that highlight the successes and challenges faced throughout this research, and the advice we received along the way.

Teacher researcher reflecting on the fact that students may need more coaching in how to use their student voice:

“After reading through all of the student responses to their belonging survey data, I was a bit disappointed. We allowed them to work through the data with a small group of their choice, we also gave them adequate time with their peers, and did the responses over two days. Even though we did this over two days, it was still a long process for kids. I was dissatisfied over the lack of concrete changes that we could actually make. I expected students to have really strong ideas that would enable us to create some change. We received very shallow, egotistical responses. They often said smile more, be nice to people ... but we wanted them to give us more specific activities, or ways that we could create more change to help students feel more supported and like they belong. Apparently this was not as easy as we thought it was going to be. When we look at the Our School survey data, we will try a different approach, and hope for more depth of response from our kids.”

Teacher researcher reflection after consultation with high-school learning consultant Sherry Van Hesteren:

Students may need to be explicitly taught how to work through discursive strategies and thinking routines they are not used to engaging in. Sherry reminded us of Zaretta Hammond’s work (2015) which highlights the importance of bringing opportunities to our classroom for students to feel:

- status (I matter here, I am not invisible).
- certainty (how does this work, how can I make it work for me?).
- autonomy (real power to make meaningful choices that matter).
- connection (without feeling shame).
- equity (my identity matters, I am equal among peers here).

Sherry also shared with us the importance of planning for processes that will bring equity of voice and participation, and utilizing strategies that honor the holistic student (physical, spiritual, emotional, intellectual).

She reminded us that we need to create equitable learning conditions and norms—not all students will feel comfortable speaking in front of a class or putting their thoughts into a polished writing piece. Students need time, safety, and opportunity to think

Her advice helped us reflect on many questions such as:

- How do we make our learning community a home?
- How can we create conditions for students to have agency?

Teacher researcher reflection after a conversation with high school administrator Marnie Ross, member of the Red Earth Cree Nation:

It's not necessarily about the process you choose, it's about how you carry them out and how you authentically engage with students to make them feel safe. It's about how you help students find their voice.

It is important, as teacher leaders in the learning community, to reflect on, "What processes can I bring to our classroom that will not allow students to opt out?" Sometimes the students' voices who need to be heard the most, whose voices are often not heard, will not take the initiative to speak up unless we really pay attention to the processes we are using to encourage it. Pay attention to the students who always have voice and the ones who always opt out.

It is also important for teachers to understand and learn how to facilitate in ways that ensure safety and respect, and to facilitate classroom discussions in a way that not one person or a few people can monopolize the conversation. Setting rules and norms are important.

Teacher researcher reflection after a conversation with Indigenous Liaison Teacher Ian Worme:

Ian reminded us that there are worldviews we may not see as easily as non-Indigenous educators, for example, everything in First Nations' culture is holistic. Spirituality and ways of knowing are all connected. This isn't always immediately remembered by all educators who have not grown up with these teachings or this worldview.

This makes us think, how can we bring a holistic frame to a student voice "event" such as a student forum in response to our OurSchool survey data? What processes would lend themselves to this holistic way?

Ian suggested we consider our questions when we are engaging our students who are coming to our school from the neighboring First Nation, or from other Indigenous backgrounds, as we engage more deeply in our OurSchool survey responses and our Belonging Survey data:

Can students come up with a well-defined response to truancy?

- What do they think?
- What makes you want to come to school?
- What makes you not want to come to school?
- What are the barriers to coming to school?
- Do you think it is important to come to school?

School Safety:

- What makes school feel safe to you?
- What makes school feel unsafe to you?
- What can we do to make our school feel safe?

Community:

- Where you come from is important. What does the community of your First Nation mean to you?
- Is it important that our school is named after the Chief of our First Nation? Why?
- Do you feel like there is a connection between the school and the community?
- What kinds of things are there that we can do to create a connection to the community?

It was helpful to get Ian's insight into how we can be framing key questions in our student voice work to honour our Indigenous students, both who are coming to our school from our neighbouring First Nation and from the suburban community where our school resides.

Teacher researcher reflection after a conversation with Adjunct Professor and Associate Professor Dr. Sean Lessard with the University of Regina and University of Alberta:

After reviewing Dr. Lessard's article in Global News (<https://globalnews.ca/news/5245625/saskatchewan-man-aims-to-lower-indigenous-high-school-dropout-rates/>), we reached out to him and he agreed to meet with us virtually to discuss our project and offer advice.

Sean's advice was to start small, but start. Have cups of tea with kids. Think about key questions you want to engage with them through, such as:

- What keeps you coming to school?
- What keeps you happy?
- Where do you live in school?
- What are we missing?

He reminded us that large school districts can form the habit of looking for student voice opportunities that can sometimes turn to rhetoric without action. We'll have to intentionally work to personalize this and to ensure students see the value in providing their voice — that they get a positive return from it.

Sean reminded us to consider that the conversations with the kids will help us to "lead in spirit" with the students being the real leaders. We want kids to know who they are. It is important to sit with kids ... and engage with them, doing less adult talking and providing more opportunities for the kids to speak.

The activities we plan in our learning community are not the end result — it's about the dialogue. Creative processes will lead us to the best answers.

How can we tap into the school experience through their eyes? How would they

describe school through images? They can speak back to their pictures. It doesn't always have to be about answering in writing or speaking in front of the class.

Through our action research cycles and learning to reframe our student belonging and voice work while learning alongside colleagues mentioned above, we began to refine and tweak the way we planned for regular routines in our classrooms that utilized discursive strategies, team-building events, and moments for listening and conversation. Some had a larger impact than others and we have detailed some of the processes we found success within an Appendix so they might be of future use to educators.

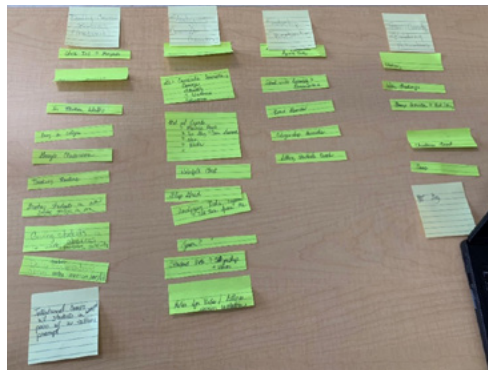
Our Findings

Results and Conclusions

Our three teacher researchers journaled and documented their observations and conversations during the analysis stage of each action research cycle in response to student voice. At the end of this project, a final thematic analysis took place alongside the lead researcher. Four emerging themes emerged and were found to contribute to student sense of belonging in our grade 7 community. Key quotations from teacher researcher reflections were also gathered to further emphasize our findings.

Four emerging themes:

1. Regular classroom routines for belonging (“heart work”).
2. Discursive strategies for curricular connections.
3. Opportunities for students to lead and find agency.
4. Purposeful inclusion of team and community building activities.



1. Discursive strategies for curricular connections

Discursive strategies are useful tools to support student interaction with one another as they progress through various thinking routines (Van Hesteren, 2018). As a pilot school for the Concentus Citizenship Curriculum (Concentus Citizenship Education Foundation Inc., 2012; 2016) our teaching team was already familiar with the use of discursive strategies in the classroom.

A list of the ten discursive strategies our Grade 7 learning community found most impactful to the development of student voice and belonging are included in **Appendix A**.

Reflections from a teacher researcher:

“Throughout the courage unit, I utilized the computers for journaling/responding/creating for every student. Every single student responded with more writing, creativity, and different responses than I have ever had before. It is incredible the difference technology makes to allow everyone access and a voice. Kids who never would have submitted their answers to my physical inbox were submitting their answers online. Different platforms allow everybody opportunity and many of our discursive strategies lent well to the use of technology.”

“Investing time in learning and developing strategies and practices that will allow students to have voice pays off in dividends. If students don’t feel “known, valued, and believed in,” they will not give you the benefit of hearing their stories and sharing their knowledge with you.”

“After moving through the belonging work this past year, it also made me think about the connection between belonging and academic rigour. I have always believed that academic rigour is essential, and I have felt driven by the curriculum. On the other hand, I also recognize that I did put a great deal of effort into creating relationships. The difference in the past school year and working with this [research project] was that I focused more on how to develop practices within my lessons that would improve both. Relationships and students’ connection to each other need to work alongside academic rigour. One cannot happen successfully without the other.”

2. Regular classroom routines for belonging (“heart work”)

In addition to the purposeful planning of specific classroom learning strategies that would best facilitate student voice in the classroom, our teacher researchers also identified specific classroom routines that became regular practice in the Grade 7 learning community. Our teacher researchers feel these routines greatly supported the “family like” classroom atmosphere and in building the relationships and classroom norms as a foundation to belonging work.

The following classroom routines are described in **Appendix B**:

- Daily check-ins.
- Talk moves (classroom discussion norms).
- Student writing in response to prompts in a “belonging journal.”
- Utilizing the 5 Es of the Conventus Citizenship Curriculum.
- Classroom games.
- Daily in-motion walks with opportunities for social connection.
- Personal notes regularly left for students.

Reflections from teacher researchers:

"I make sure that each child gets a sticky note (with stickers, a kind message, a "we adore you because ..." "we love working with you every day because ..."), every month or so. I place these in a place that only they will find/see, and it is interesting to see how many kids keep it on their desk or tell me that they have taken it home and put in in their room. "

"I was taken aback by [the students'] ability to be open to new ways of doing things, and in their ability to be vulnerable and share with courageous honesty, about how they feel about their world, others and most importantly themselves. Connecting with kids and basing our classroom on a foundation of trust, love, and care is not new, but as an educator I learned to be more deliberate in how I structure belonging-activities within my daily planning and classroom. This intentional "heart-work" can only help these growing and changing kids to feel more comfortable in their learning, and again, more importantly in who they are and who they want to be."

"... belonging work is not a unit, but it is a part of everything we need to be doing. It is in the routines; it is in the discussion; it is in academic work; it is lived out in the day-to-day."

"In the 20-minute conversations, I learned about where students are from, their family background, and many of their interests, concerns, and questions. Making an effort to carve out time to have one-on-one conversations with students is something I would implement in my practice every year. Through these conversations, I learned that students want to feel known."

3. Purposeful inclusion of team and community building activities

These moments did not happen every day, but they were purposefully planned for to create opportunities for students to build relationships and find belonging and familiarity with their classroom peers, other Grade 7 students, and their teachers.

These following team and community building opportunities are outlined in **Appendix C**:

- Senior Camp
- We all Belong Ball Activity
- Middle Years' Feast
- Opportunities to learn outside of the school – out of school or community excursions

Reflections from teacher researchers:

"Adolescence is a time of significant change for students. As children find their way through puberty and all the adjustments within it, they begin to make sense of their world for themselves. They begin to feel slightly more self-conscious about the perceptions of others and often wonder about how they fit into the world in which they are a part of or if they "fit" into this world at all. It is a time when students often feel powerless, and as educators, it is our job to help them become aware that they have power and can effect change."

“In education, we often spend professional development time on ways we can enhance academic achievement. Still, we must recognize that we help students achieve by helping them to see that they belong in a community.”

4. Opportunities for students to lead and find agency:

As our teacher researchers reflected on their own classroom practices and met with colleagues outside of the school, it was clear that some high schools were finding success in this work through purposeful opportunities or moments where students had the chance to lead and experience a sense of agency.

The opportunities our learning community found to be important are outlined in **Appendix D**:

- “Everyone is a teacher” opportunities
- Creating a school-wide Remembrance Day ceremony as a Grade 7 learning community
- Popsicle Sale school fundraisers

Reflections from teacher researchers:

“This age of kids is maddening and magical ... as they are feeling the shift of wanting and needing some power in their lives as well as still needing to be told what they need to do ... all while slowly sidling up to get a hug from their teacher at the end of the day.”

“Kids this age are magical ... and need their hearts and voice to be at the center of all we do.”

“Our Remembrance Day Service was an opportunity for kids to come together and lead for a purpose. Kids were amazing and they rose to the opportunity.”

Additionally, as the lead researcher was compiling the final report for this project, she felt it was important to note two foundational understandings that have emerged from this work; two understandings that the participating Grade 7 teachers may have been too humble, or too close to the work to notice that this lead researcher feels compelled to mention.

These two foundational understandings are so imbedded in the daily work of our three teacher researchers that the processes come naturally to them.

2 foundational understandings:

1. Purposeful building of relationships.
2. Disposition of classroom teacher(s) who lead the learning community.

1. Purposeful building of relationships:

It will come as no surprise to any educator reading this report that relationships matter in schools, and they are so important to a middle years’ learning community. Research shows that sense of belonging is created through the fostering of reciprocal, caring relationships with teachers and through peer friendships (Bouchard & Berg, 2017). While purposeful

planning is helpful in belonging work, all the discursive strategies in the world will not build belonging in a learning community if strong relationships do not exist between peers and between students and their teachers. If you could meet our three teacher researchers, or observe them in their element, you would clearly see that relationships are central to their teaching philosophies and the ways in which they go about their day-to-day work. The intentional work of building relationships with students and modelling positive relationship building in the middle years' learning environment is essential to creating sense of belonging.

Reflections from teacher researchers:

"If students do not feel that they are being seen, known, heard, respected and appreciated for who they are ... no amount of curricular or life learning will take place. Kids this age need to feel connected and loved, for them to gain enough trust to be vulnerable and open with us and their peers. When these young people feel that they are truly part of "our team" and "our family," it is then that they will begin to be open to new ways of learning, being and connectivity."

"I have learned that I can have the best lesson plans or ideas, but unless I have taken the time to build relationships with my students, there is no trust. It is not only important to build trust with me as a teacher, but also trust with one another in the classroom."

"Belonging is so important at the middle years' level because this is such a transformative time for many students. Creating authentic relationships allows students to feel safe, cared for and vulnerable to have courageous conversations."

2. Disposition of classroom teachers:

Another important aspect of creating space for student voice is a willingness on the part of the educators to relinquish some control and allow for real change to come about in a learning community. Sometimes this means letting go of parts of our own teaching practice that brings us comfort and a sense of classroom control. Some key traits exhibited by our three teacher researchers included:

- Open-minded and flexible to make way for student voice and agency.
- Willingness to let go of ideas, beliefs, and routines that do not have a positive impact on student belonging as they emerge in the learning community or in their own practice.
- Self-reflective of their own practice without ego – is my facilitation as teacher helping or hindering belonging? Voice? Agency?
- A commitment to serve students within the learning community over the service to self.

Reflections from our teacher researchers:

"The beauty of each day is paralleled by the mundane moments that occur as we work through it. There is no perfect recipe that we can use or magic wand that will help us create this connection. It is about making intentional choices to deepen relationships and having the patience to not be worried about how long it's taking."

"I came across this article specifically on belonging in the classroom that mention content, feedback, study strategies and metacognition. Do we do these things in our classrooms to foster belonging? The article says, "When students have questions about their belonging, they search for cues in their environment to signal whether or not they fit in and are valued by others at school." This statement made me think about what cues do we have in our teaching environments that would signal to all kids that they belong here in our classroom. If they are looking around, what would they see that would cue them back to us?"

"It's important that we live belonging, that it's not like a prescription or a recipe. Curricular lessons do not build belonging on their own! What are we doing every day to build belonging intentionally?"

"As a classroom teacher, and in working with my teaching partner, we feel that it is very important for kids to feel that they are safe and welcome in our classroom, that they have a sense of us and our care and concern (love) from us... Since I have started teaching, I feel that it is very important for students to feel special, unique, and appreciated for who they are. Finding out who each child IS, and what is important and special to each individual, is how we build trust with these special souls."

In reading the reflections of our teacher researchers and the daily thoughts that keep their students in their minds and hearts as they plan for their work, it is clear their reflective nature and their disposition as teacher-facilitators is part of the success they have found in building classroom belonging.

Recommendations from the Results

The purpose of our project was intended to support other educators with a roadmap (or loose itinerary!) as much as we hoped it would improve our own practice as middle years' teachers. In the spirit of humility, we offer our recommendations from what we have learned and where we also hope to further grow in the future. Our recommendations include:

- Being mindful of surface-level discussion of OurSchool and Belonging Survey results at the beginning of a school year before relationships and routines are established.
- Students may need to be explicitly taught and modelled how to engage in student voice work and how to offer deeper feedback for classroom and school level change –we had more difficulty with this than our high-school level colleagues who shared their classroom experiences with us.
- Build your own practice, and ability to reflect and let go of control as an educator before you look to do this work—it is likely the discursive strategies and processes utilized in our project will not have the same effect for teachers who have not yet opened themselves up to this self-work.
- Part of building safe classroom spaces for open dialogue and student voice work is intentionally working towards building relationships. Relationships do not always develop naturally and can be slower to develop for some of the students whose voice isn't always as easily heard in the classroom community.

- Don't shy away from talking about the uncomfortable things that come forward from student voice work but building classroom norms to promote safety can make the discussion of these topics more comfortable for students.
- Find a team of teachers to do this work with and it will build—don't teach on an island. You need teacher colleagues to learn from and reflect with in this work.
- Think critically about who already has voice in your classroom space – how can you reach those who have less? Not all students will feel comfortable sharing dialogue in class discussion or sharing their writing. Digital spaces helped to take the pressure off for many of our students.
- Seek support and feedback from educators who have different experiences than you or who you differ from culturally and racially as you learn to create safe and welcoming spaces for all students, not just those who are similar to their classroom teacher.

The image below illustrates how the purposeful planning of this belonging work begins with intentionally building relationships and being a reflective practitioner who is open to growing and learning about their own teaching disposition and the ways in which they lead a classroom of young adult learners. It is important to build a solid foundation for this work.



Areas for Further Research

Though we learned so much throughout this processes that helped us to grow as educators, the scope of our project was limited and allowed for many areas to be considered for further research. Some examples include:

How to change an existing school culture that may not already foster sense of belonging:

Our research existed in a unique school setting, where our school was newly built in a new neighborhood and an existing school culture did not already exist. We had the opportunity to create a culture that fosters belonging without having to contend with an already existing school culture that may have hindered this.

Incorporating the knowledge of Elders or regular collaboration with Indigenous educators:

As non-Indigenous teacher researchers, we recognize our own shortcomings in bringing Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing into purposeful planning for belonging.

How to use a classroom culture built on belonging as a springboard for further important work:

For example, building from the safe space and relationships created, now making space for the inclusion of anti-racist, anti-oppressive work in a middle years' class or the inclusion of classroom structures and discussions through the lens of critical race theory.

Our study did not include students as research subjects — it would be interesting to engage in a thematic analysis of student thoughts and experiences as a suggestion for further research.

An area not studied in this project is the impact of teacher autonomy and the extent to which classroom teachers require a certain level of autonomy to facilitate the school and culture changes that arise from student voice work. To what extent do teachers require classroom-level autonomy to carry out student voice and belonging work? To what extent do administrators need to trust the professionalism of individual teachers and provide the autonomy required to teachers to facilitate actual change in a learning community?

References

Bouchard, K. L., & Berg, D. H. (2017). Students' School Belonging: Juxtaposing the Perspectives of Teachers and Students in the Late Elementary School Years (Grades 4-8). *The School Community Journal*, 27(1), 107-136.

Braat, T. (2019, May 7). A cup of tea: Saskatchewan man aims to lower Indigenous dropout rates. *Global News*. <https://globalnews.ca/news/5245625/saskatchewan-man-aims-to-lower-indigenous-high-school-dropout-rates/>

Concentus Citizenship Education Foundation. (n.d.). Concentus. Discursive Strategies. <https://www.concentus.ca/teacher-toolkit/discursive-strategies/>

Ellerbrok, C., Kiefer, S. M., & M, A. K. (2014). SCHOOL-BASED INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS Setting the Foundation for Young Adolescents' Belonging in Middle School. *Middle Grades Research Journal*, 1-17.

Faust, P. B., Ennis, L. S., & Hodge, W. M. (2014). The Relationship between Middle Grade Student Belonging and Middle Grade Student Performance. *Alabama Journal of Educational Leadership*, 43-54.

Feinauer Whiting, E., Everson, K. C., & Feinauer, E. (2018). The Simple School Belonging Scale: Working Toward a Unidimensional Measure of Student Belonging. *Measurement and Evaluation in Counseling and Development*, 163-178.

Hammond, Z. L. (2015). *Culturally responsive teaching and the brain*. Corwin Press.

Mertler, C.A. (2012). *Action research: Improving schools and empowering educators* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage

Mertler, C.A. (2017). *Action research: Improving schools and empowering educators* (5th ed.). Los Angeles, CA: Sage

Mertler, C. & Hartley, A. (n.d.). Classroom-based, teacher-led action research as a process for enhancing teaching and learning: Faculty article. *Lindenwood*, 4 (2). Retrieved from: <http://www.lindenwood.edu>

Robson, C. (2002) *Real world research* (2nd Edn.) Oxford, Blackwell.

Swain, K. M. (2014). *Middle Years Students Perceptions and Reactions to NAPLAN: The Student Voice*. Brisbane: Griffith University.

The Learning Bar. (2020). *OurSchool Survey*. <https://thelearningbar.com/ourschoolsurvey/>

Van Hesteren, S. (2018). Discursive strategies and thinking routines to support citizenship education inquiries. *Concentus*. <https://www.concentus.ca/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Citizenship-Education-Instructional-Strategies-Resource.pdf>

Whiting, E., Everson, K.C. & Feinauer, E. (2017) The Simple School Belonging Scale: Working Toward a Unidimensional Measure of Student Belonging. *Measurement and Evaluation in Counseling and Development*, 51, 163-178.

Wright, H. (2009) Trusting the process: Using an emergent design to study adult education. *Educate Special Issue*, December 2009, 62-73.

Appendix A

Title of Strategy	Source	Description
Step In Thinking Routine	Discursive Strategies and Thinking Routines to Support Citizenship Education Inquiries (Van Hesteren, 2018)	Each student reflects on a prompt and answers (through sticky notes, technology, gallery walk writing, etc.) to what extent they agree or disagree. Each person in a small group then has the opportunity to have a “first word” and a “last word” to explain their thinking.
Appointment Cards	Discursive Strategies and Thinking Routines to Support Citizenship Education Inquiries (Van Hesteren, 2018)	Supports students to interact equitably with diverse peers rather than being isolated or limited to the peers they are most comfortable with.
Discussion Passport	Discursive Strategies and Thinking Routines to Support Citizenship Education Inquiries (Van Hesteren, 2018)	Baseline discursive strategy for small and large group discussions that includes active listening, accurate paraphrasing of another’s thoughts, and thoughtful questioning.
Troika	Discursive Strategies and Thinking Routines to Support Citizenship Education Inquiries (Van Hesteren, 2018)	A supportive strategy that invites students to support one another to address their most challenging questions or dilemmas involving collaborative problem solving.
Circle of Viewpoints	Discursive Strategies and Thinking Routines to Support Citizenship Education Inquiries (Van Hesteren, 2018)	A routine that invites students to consider an issue from a diverse perspective different than their own.
Looking Out, Looking In	Discursive Strategies and Thinking Routines to Support Citizenship Education Inquiries (Van Hesteren, 2018)	Invites students to reflect on what they see, think, feel and wonder as they make sense of a visual or multimedia text.

Title of Strategy	Source	Description
Debate Carousel	Discursive Strategies and Thinking Routines to Support Citizenship Education Inquiries (Van Hesteren, 2018)	A silent debate in groups of four that involves paper swapping to stake a person’s own claim and then build on the ideas of others.
Here’s What, so What, now What?	Discursive Strategies and Thinking Routines to Support Citizenship Education Inquiries (Van Hesteren, 2018)	Supports students to identify their most significant thoughts, make inferences about the meaning of them and consider implications for taking action.
Waterfall Chat Feedback Cycles	https://www.sessionlab.com/methods/chat-waterfall	In response to the Student Belonging Scale and the OurSchool Tell Them from Me survey, students had the opportunity to respond to the anonymous survey responses of their peers through the Zoom digital platform. Questions prompts that related to survey responses were used to promote digital discussion, such as, “What are your thoughts about the statements about whether students felt they belonged or did not belong in our classroom?” “Did any surprise you?” “What are your thoughts on how we can move forward?” Students respond with their initial thoughts then can respond to the thoughts of others. The Waterfall is a feature of Zoom, or alternatively you could use sticky notes, chart paper, or use of other technology (google doc, flip grid.)
The Power 5-Justice Orientation Inquiries	Instructional Strategies for Courageous Conversations (Citizenship Education, Saskatoon Public Schools)	Involves creating norms that desegregate for students the difference between a courageous conversation (everyone has a voice, range of ideas are presented, there is safety in the group, relationships strengthen) versus a destructive conversation (only a few people speak, ideas are polarized, people feel anxious, relationships are at risk.)

Appendix B

Classroom routines to build belonging and student voice

Routine	Description
Daily Check-Ins	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• When students arrive at school each day there is a common space on our whiteboard for a daily check-in with the categories: I'm great, I'm OK, I'm meh, I'm struggling, I'm having a tough time and wouldn't mind a check-in.• Students place their magnets in the corresponding category if they want to.• It is a visual reminder of how we all go through things at different times and may need different things as individuals within our learning community on different days.
TalkMoves for Classroom Discussion Norms	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Video from another teacher found online inspired us to use TalkMoves as a regular classroom routine to promote student voice and belonging.• We collaborated as a Grade 7 teaching team to determine how we could use these TalkMoves to establish norms in our classrooms to create safe spaces for discussion where all voices are heard and valued.• We worked explicitly to coach students through how to have a class discussion — students required explicit teaching in this area; it did not come naturally to most students.• https://www.kqed.org/mindshift/53108/giving-students-stepping-stones-for-participation-to-lift-up-their-voices
Student Belonging Journals	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• After a specific team-building activity, classroom discussion, or discursive learning strategy, students are given time to reflect in writing in their belonging journal.• Students are asked to reflect on how these moments impacted their own feelings of belonging.• Sometimes these are simple sentence or question prompts; sometimes they are more open-ended longer reflections.

Routine	Description
Classroom Games	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Approximately once per week students engage in classroom game play to promote peer relationships. • Money from school budget was used to purchase board games, card games, etc. that promote multiple students playing, conversing, and working together.
Daily In-Motion Walks for Social Connection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • First thing in the morning our whole Grade 7 learning community (three classes) start our day with an in-motion walk around the block. • Students walk with and converse with a student they have not yet walked beside lately. • Teachers have the opportunity to walk and connect in conversation with a different student each day.
Personalized Notes to Students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teachers leaving positive messages or affirmation or a personal note to connect with students and help them feel a sense of belonging. • Sometimes teachers took the opportunity to write one to each member of the class (personalized) and at other times they were left for students who may have needed it in a special moment. • Our teacher researchers reported that they would often see these notes hanging in student lockers or tucked in a special place in their desk, indicating that they meant something to them. • There's just something different in receiving a handwritten note that you can tuck away and keep compared to a verbal affirmation. <p>"I also make sure that each child gets a sticky note (with stickers, a kind message, a "we adore you because ...", "we love working with you every day because..."), every month or so. I place these in a place that only they will find/see, and it is interesting to see how many kids keep it on their desk or tell me that they have taken it home and put in in their room."</p>

Routine	Description
---------	-------------

Personalized Emails to Families/Parents

"I also think that sending all parents/guardians emails (every month or so) "out of the blue!" telling them how much I/we enjoy working with their child, and something wonderful that their child has done that week, or just something that they bring to our classroom is such an important piece in helping ALL families/kids feel that they belong within our room, school and bigger community. Every person, big or small, likes to feel special, appreciated, and made to feel like they MAKE a difference in the world. These little "things" bring me such joy as I/we work with our kids, and we feel that they make our kids feel more welcome and that they really do belong to our class community."



Figure 1: Daily Check-ins

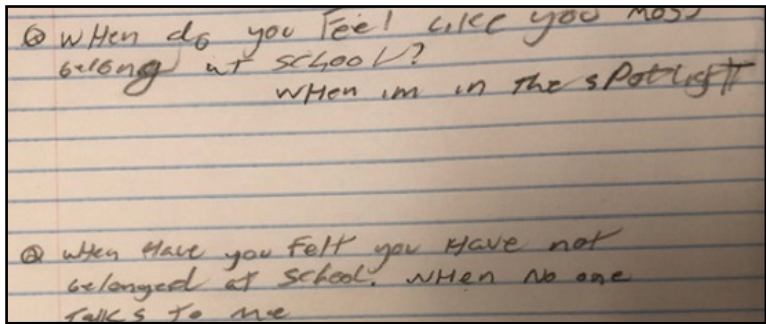


Figure 2: Belonging Journal



Figure 3: Daily In-Motion Walk & Conversation



Figure 4: Classroom games

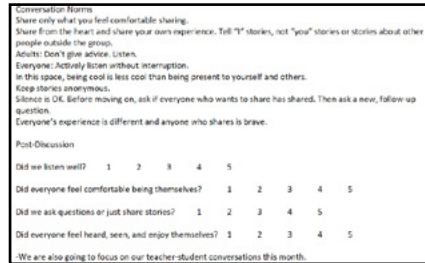


Figure 5: Co-Created Class Discussion Norms

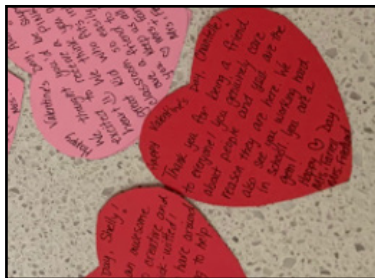


Figure 6: Personalized notes to students



Appendix C

Purposeful inclusion of team and community building activities

Activity/ Event	Description
Grade 7 Camp	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• At the beginning of the year all Grade 7 students have two days of learning at a location other than their school, usually involving some on-the-land experiences.• Typically, this would also include an overnight stay.• Students have the opportunity to engage in small group settings with a variety of different students in Grade 7 across all three classes.• Activities for the day include opportunities to be active, to be reflective, and to build team and relationship skills.• Activity examples: fire building, challenge obstacle course, marksmanship, wall climbing, schlocky).
We All Belong Ball Activity	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Activity that involves communication, teamwork, and the overall messaging that “we all belong.”• All students take a string that is attached to a common “web” in the middle. There are enough strings for each person. A ball is placed on the middle, where all the strings connect (pictured below). The ball rests on top of all the strings.• The purpose is to raise the ball up off the floor and move it to a specific location by working together as a group to create tension and slack on individual strings.• Discussion afterwards about “what do you notice,” “what do you wonder” about what it took as a learning community to make the activity work.• Hint: try with different balls of different sizes/shape to represent different types of obstacles, challenges, or problems that may arise in your learning community.

Activity/ Event	Description
Marshmallow Challenge	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • https://tinkerlab.com/spaghetti-tower-marshmallow-challenge
Feast	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Opportunity to prepare and share food together through connections to culture. • Incorporating Dakota ceremony and cultural teachings bring all students together for a common purpose and honor the culture and teachings of our Dakota students from our neighbouring First Nation and other Indigenous students in our school.
Wing Meetings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In our large school there are multiple Grade 6, 7 and 8 classes in one of the four “wings” of our school. Approximately once per month we get together as a wing for a sort of assembly to discuss issues related to our wing (e.g., intramural activities, recess difficulties, creating norms for shared “senior spaces,” opportunities for senior student leadership in our school).
Student-Teacher Conversations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Purposeful planning for one-on-one student teacher appointments for conversation over juice and a cookie. • Blocked a day off with sub release time to have 1:1 conversation with all 24 students in our class <p>Conversation topics included:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ How are you feeling in our Grade 7 community? ○ What is going well? ○ What has been challenging? ○ Opportunity for teacher to validate the strong character traits they see in each student and tell them the positive ways they see them and share a positive comment of how important they are to our community (you are a leader, you are a great listener, you add to the light-heartedness in our class).
Student-Teacher Conversations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Providing time and space in the weekly schedule for students to connect with new partners over random conversation topics. • Sometimes in pairs, sometimes in groups of 3-4.

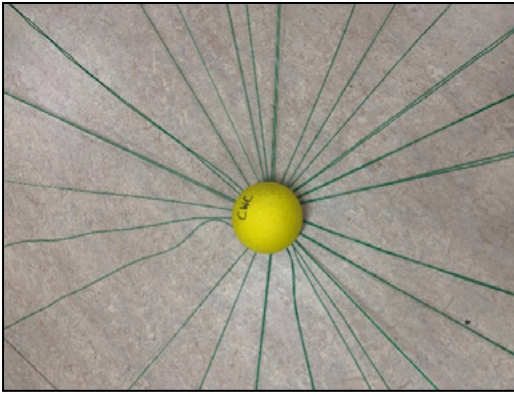


Figure 7: We All Belong Ball Activity



Figure 8: Grade 7 Camp

Appendix D

Opportunities for students to lead and find agency

Activity/ Event	Description
Leading School-wide Assemblies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Opportunity to lead and find agency by putting together assemblies the whole school will benefit from. • Celebrating together as a school through student leadership.
Five Wisdoms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students share their 5 wisdoms (an area of knowledge, an interest, a skill, something they know that could help others). • Each student is acknowledged as a contributor—we all have knowledge to offer. • Individual student wisdoms are displayed next to their photo inside the class. • Adapted from https://www.5wisdomsproject.com/ • https://www.facebook.com/5wisdomsproject/

Activity/ Event	Description
Everyone is a Teacher	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Building off of our "5 Wisdoms." • As students feel comfortable, they are given the opportunity to teach the class on a topic connected to their 5 Wisdoms (e.g. hip-hop dance, a favourite family recipe, key classroom vocabulary in their first language).

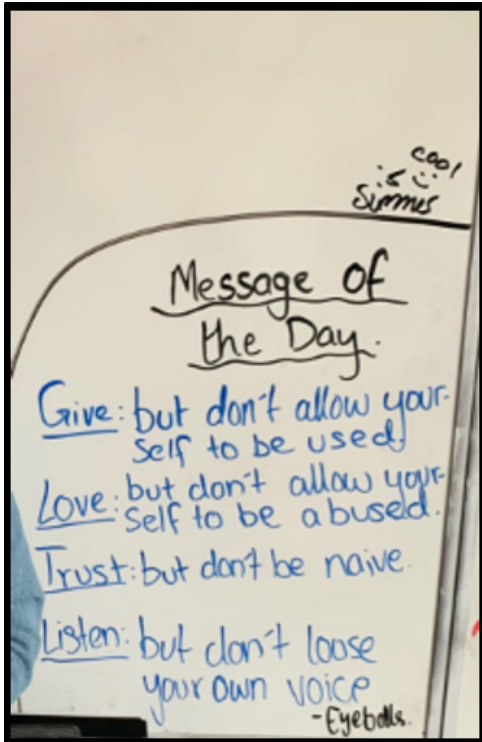


Figure 9: Everyone is a Teacher: student idea to have a message of the day routine

2317 Arlington Avenue
Saskatoon SK Canada S7J 2H8
Phone: 306-373-1660
Toll Free: 1-800-667-7762
Fax: 306-374-1122
Email: mcdowell@stf.sk.ca

www.mcdowellfoundation.ca