



PrincipalConnections

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STUDENT VOICE

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FOSTERING BELONGING

By Dr. Andrew B. Campbell and Kaschka Watson

A reality that is apparent to most educational leaders is that students' contributions are key to their overall learning and educational experiences. Unfortunately, many of our students are made to feel as though they are an annoyance all day long by their teachers.

Pandolpho, 2020

This should not be the experience of any of the students under the care of educational leaders in our schools. The road towards achieving racial equity for all our students is visible before us. Educational leaders have to see the need for change and act intentionally to ensure that all students are given fair opportunities toward achieving educational success. They should make it their duty to learn, unlearn and relearn about the experiences of their students so that they can incorporate equitable strategies and implement actions that foster student belonging and elevate their voices.

Elevating Voices

Who determines who belongs? What does belonging look like? Students understand at an early age when someone or something doesn't belong. Yet, many educational leaders keep pretending as if students don't see the messages, cues, symbols and language that point to how they are being treated. The reality is that students see them and they will tell you which teacher loved and cared for them. This is why educational leaders must create a school culture and climate where students feel that sense of belonging. Fostering belonging in schools is critical to students' motivation and educational engagement. For example, Maslow's hierarchy of human needs outlines the importance of creating a sense of belonging for students where their learning needs are met and a sense of safety is insured. When intentionally fostered and sustained, this

sense of belonging leads to student growth, development and higher levels of achievement. Educational leaders who fail to create schools that nurture belonging can expect to see increases in students' disengagement and lack of educational success.

Educational leaders have the power and influence to help students achieve self-actualization where they actively participate in their learning and perform at their fullest potential. Creating a sense of belonging is not just about being kind or friendly. It calls on educational leaders to grasp the ways in which students experience the classroom as foreign, intimidating, hostile, and/or injurious. It has to do with creating a consistent psychological, intellectual and emotional counter narrative to the micro-aggressions, imposter syndrome and stereotype threats that minoritized students experience (Mulnix, 2020). Educational leaders can ensure students' belonging by incorporating more opportunities, encouraging diversity in all facets of the school, not singling out students of colour when discussing racism, and having more Black history throughout schooling for every student (Equity and Inclusive Education, 2018-2021). Students must feel connected to their schools and the school culture, and see themselves reflected in the curriculum. Only educational leaders can ensure those connections are created, fostered and sustained through the elevation of students' voices.

The voices of our students matter in the ways in which they learn and how our schools are designed (Benner, Brown & Jeffrey, 2019). All students, irrespective of their social, cultural, economic and diverse backgrounds, should be given the opportunity to have a say in their education and what that experience should look like for them. The fact is not all students' voices are being heard. If our education systems are to achieve equity, it is time that educational leaders recognize and take deliberate actions that will empower all students' voices. It is important that students' voices are amplified when it comes to their education because their voices are a part of their identity and can be used to shape educational policies and promote meaningful change that will support their success.

Many of our students are disengaged and are feeling isolated in our classrooms because their voices are not being elevated by their teachers. As authors who are educational leaders, we cannot express how often we have heard students of colour sharing how voiceless they are in the classrooms. A typical example is when some racialized students shared how frustrated they were when they were

passionate about a topic and their expression of that topic was viewed and accepted as being too forthright. This has stemmed from the fact that their teachers are white and have not accepted the reality that students' experiences are different because their culture is different from that of their white teachers. Educational leaders who have not shifted their mindset to learn more about their racialized students' experiences and why their voices also matter in the learning process are not placing all students at the centre of their education experience.

The time for educational leaders to engage in deliberate and intentional action is never too late, but we must all act now. We can act by embedding Black history in the curriculum, continuously providing students with economic disparities with the resources they need to feel a sense of belonging that can translate into academic success, always remembering that racism and microaggressions are happening in our schools even if they are not reported all the time, and ensuring that we create safe and brave spaces for disrupting racial inequities and address racism when it surfaces (Equity and Inclusive Education, 2018-2021). As educational leaders, we want to also encourage our colleagues in education to:

- Engage in self-directed learning about the experiences of all students.
- Incorporate more Black events as opportunities for non-white educational leaders and students to learn, unlearn and relearn about the power of students' voices.
- Invest in training opportunities that are led by people of colour with lived experiences to provide educational leaders with the knowledge and tools they need to engage in hard conversations about the experiences of students of colour.

Without taking action on these acts, educational leaders are reinforcing the status quo and depleting students' sense of belonging. We are challenging educational leaders to adhere to their moral and ethical responsibility to do what is right and just for all students. Being a change maker through the understanding of self and taking actions to foster an inclusive school culture and climate can positively influence students' educational experience. [✚](#)

Dr. Andrew B. Campbell, Faculty Adjunct, Graduate Studies, Department of Leadership Higher and Adult Education, Ontario Institute of Studies in Education, University of Toronto, Queens University

Kaschka Watson, PhD Candidate, O.I.S.E