Research on Belonging

I. What is a sense of belonging?
- School belongingness is a sense of being accepted, valued, and encouraged by others and or feeling included in the life and activity of the class or school. (Goodenow, 1993 ctd. In Bouchard and Berg, 2017)

- Belonging at school involves connections with adults; connections with peers: & engagement with school/extracurricular activities.

II. Why a sense of belonging matters for all students:
- Students need a sense of community or connection to others in order to maximize students learning, motivation, and engagement (Becker & Luthar, 2003; Dewey, 1958; Fredericks, Blumenfield, & Paris, 2004; Noddings 1992; Osterman 2000)

- A reported lack of sense of belonging is associated with dropping out of school (Berktold, Geis and Kaufman, 1998).

III. What are the connections between a sense of belonging and equity?
- A sense of belonging is important for all students but research indicates that it is even more important for students of color (African American, Latino/a, Native American, and some Asian American groups) (Murphy & Zirkel 2015)

- Research indicates that students from low-income schools have a tendency to feel less connected to teachers and to the school in general, but at the same time, they rely more on social connectedness with teachers for their overall psychological health and school outcomes (e.g., Batterstich, Soloman, Kim, Watson, & Schaps, 1995; Olsson, 2009) ctd in Bauchard and Berg, 2017)

- For students from racial groups that are often stigmatized by negative stereotypes, a sense of belonging has a different meaning and different impact on academic outcomes than for white students. Students of color may question whether they are perceived as belonging in particular academic settings because school, as an institution, is seen as a place created by and for white people (Steele, 2011, Steele et al. 2002, ctd. In Murphy & Zirkel, 2015).

- "When our identities are stigmatized by negative stereotypes, we experience stereotype threat – a psychological state characterized by arousal and anxiety that interferes with performance, well-being and the process of identification with the domain in question [school]. Within education, longstanding stereotypes about the intellectual or academic capacities of African American or Latino/a students can mean that those contexts become threatening to their social identities" Murphy and Zirkel 2015. p.3).

Many students of color will respond to stereotype threat by working to disprove the negative stigma attributed to them (Steels 1997), but this comes with a price, including a weaker sense of belonging at school, and it is emotionally draining. (Murphy & Zirkel, 2015). However, for students of color who do achieve a sense of belonging, the effect on their academic outcomes will be greater than for their white peers (Zirkel 2004, Murphy & Zirkel, 2015). They set higher academic goals for themselves and are more likely to attain those goals.

- LGBTQ students also experience a significant lack of belonging in school. In a Nationally representative study of over 3,000 high school students, 2/3 of the sample reported having been verbally or physically harassed or assaulted at school during the past year because of their appearance or their actual or perceived race/ethnicity, disability, gender, sexual orientation, gender expression, or religion (Gay, Lesbian, & Straight Education Network, 2005. Similar results found by Bochenek & Brown, 2001, D'Augelli, Pilkington & Hershberger, 2002). A hostile school climate leads to high rates of absenteeism, lower educational achievement, lower aspirations & poorer psychological well-being.

- LGBTQ students of color face more harassment than white LGBTQ students. (Gay, Lesbian, & Straight Education Network (GLESN) 2011 National School Climate Survey)

IV. What contributes to students sense of belonging in school?
- Positive teacher affective support encourages the development of school belonging. Teachers who care for, value, and support students and make them feel respected and encouraged contribute to a student's sense of belonging. Being perceived as holding high expectations for students and treating students fairly also helps foster a sense of belonging in students (Sakiz et al., 2012, p. 238 ctd in Bauchard & Berg, 2017).

- Teachers should adopt two roles: (1) academic support (teacher as instructional leader). Teaching strategies to use in class include: giving examples, checking for understanding, engaging in problem solving, and giving students' choices; and (2) personal support (teacher as a person), to emphasize that teachers must show students interpersonal support including: offering students guidance, knowing students' names, listening to students, using humor, and encouraging discussion. (Osterman, 2010 ctd in St-Amand et al. p. 113). Other recommended teacher behaviors include: having high expectations of each student, being fair and consistent in disciplinary management, making sure students adhere to school and classroom rules, creating a trusting climate, and considering students' needs (Wingspread, 2004). P. 112 ctd. In St-Amand et al).

- Friendship also contributes to a sense of belonging and acts as a buffer in school environments that do not foster connectedness in other ways (Hamm and Faircloth 2005). However, if a student is part of a friend group that engages in negative/defiant behaviors, feelings of belonging are not associated with positive outcomes for students.

- For LGBTQ youth: Gay-Straight Alliance clubs; Inclusive curriculum; Supportive educators; Comprehensive Bullying/Harassment policies & Laws that explicitly consider the safety of LGBTQ students.

V. Challenges:
- Teachers' and students' perceptions of belonging may differ, which might lead teachers to assume incorrectly that students feel a sense of belonging in school. As a result, teachers may underestimate, minimize, or potentially ignore indications that a student is struggling to integrate into the classroom or school. (Bauchard & Berg, 2017).

- As students move from elementary school to middle school or from middle school to high school, they will encounter less structure and less personalized relationships with teachers, and they are expected to assume more responsibility for their own learning. Peer relationships become more important than relationships with teachers (Goodenow, 1993) and this emphasis on peer relationships can coincide with less positive relationships with teachers (Lynch and Cicchetti 1997, ctd in Bauchard & Berg, 2017, p. 128).