

Study 10 Research Findings

Introduction

My name is Inbal Alon, and I am a first grade teacher in Cambridge. As part of the Building Bridges to Equity through CPAR (Critical Participatory Action Research) I conducted a research project with 22 students in my class. In this resource for teachers, I would like to share with you some of the questions and activities that I developed during the study, and how I used the data from these activities and a conceptual framework about belonging at school to assess and support my students' social emotional needs. We know that students need to feel safe, respected and loved at school in order to learn and develop. In an equity framework, it is essential that every student feels this strong sense of belonging to school and can therefore connect emotionally with their learning. The task of the teacher in this pursuit of equity is figuring out what each student needs to feel connected and appreciated.

Research Questions

- What does it mean to 'be connected' from a student point of view?
- How do students talk about the parts of school that effectively help them to feel connected? How might students' talk about connectedness differ across participants or groups?

Conceptual Framework

From the participatory research with my students it became clear that each student has a different path for feeling connected or isolated at school, and the sample size was not sufficient to look for patterns across groups. However, the data does identify key categories to help teachers check in with students to see what aspects of school are helping them to develop a sense of belonging.

Connections to Adults: Students define feeling connected at school by hearing, seeing, and feeling that adults care about their learning and about their personal wellbeing. Students were able to give examples of how both types of care are important to them, and make them feel loved as well as capable of learning. The quantity and quality of care that students require to feel connected to school differs significantly across students, with some students needing a few relationships to feel they belong at school and others needing more relationships.

How do you know teachers care about your learning and wellbeing?

"When they see you they greet you which makes you feel good."

"When your teacher respects you."

"They want to talk about how you feel."

Physical Spaces: Students feel more or less connected at different places in the school. Students with a lower sense of belonging in school, also tended to have less places at school which they feel happy. It is important to check in and make sure that students have a few places in school in which they feel safety and joy.

Connections with Peers: Students vary in how many friends they need to feel connected to school, however, it appears essential for students to have positive peer relationships in order to feel they belong at school.

What makes you like coming to school?

"I like being with my friends. We have fun at recess, or reading together or playing a game."

Connections to learning: Students want school to be interesting, which they often describe as learning new things or engaging in authentic and hands on tasks. However, students can also feel anxious or disengaged when they worry that academic tasks will be too challenging or that they will not be able to complete them. Thus, high expectations must be paired with the supports and scaffolds that each student requires to maintain a sense of belonging.

How do you feel about your learning at school?

"I like when teachers help me when I get something wrong."

"Sometimes, I feel sad, not it is nervous I feel. I am trying to do the work and maybe I won't finish in time."

Pacing of the school day: In follow-up interviews, students who scored low on "I enjoy coming to school," referred to having too much work, not having enough breaks, needing longer lunch or recess, or anxiety about not being sure that they can finish expected tasks as reasons they do not feel excited to come to school.

What makes school hard for you?

"Sometimes I need a little break, having a break, just some rest times, with a book so you can lie down."

"I feel I want more time to play outside, or to eat, or just to talk to my friends."

Activities to Assess and Identify Areas for Support

In order to support other early elementary teachers in investigating and understanding their own students' feelings of belonging in school, I have compiled a toolkit of activities that can help teachers assess and identify specific areas of support in their classrooms. The tool kit is organized in the a sequence of activities that I used with my class. You can use it in different ways, with the goal of checking in with students about the different categories of the conceptual framework. Examples of some of these activities are in the appendices.

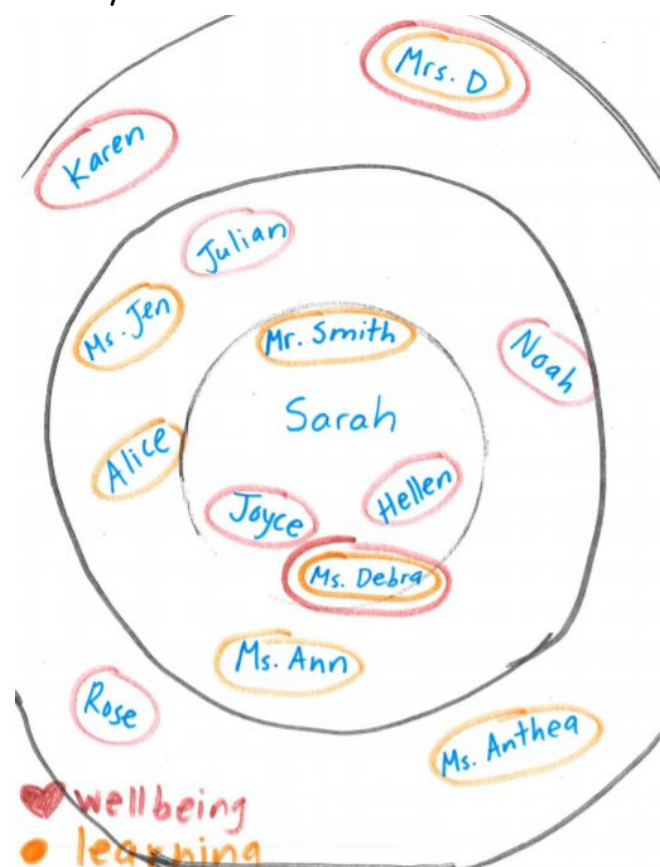
Activity 1: Concentric Circles of Support

Complete in small groups - 6 students at a time

Write name of child in the middle of circles.

Directions: "In each circle write names of people you go to for help the most (inner circle), sometimes (middle circle), and least (outer circle)."

Ask students to color code people who help with learning and people who help with other things - feeling healthy, safe, loved, having friends. People can be both colors. Model of circles of support below was done by teacher to model the activity.



Activity 2: Looks like, feels like, sounds like

Whole class activity

Introduce definition: "When students feel **connected** to their school, they feel like adults **care about their learning** and **care about them as individuals**."

Give students sticky notes to write or draw pictures of what it looks, sounds and feels like when "adults care about students learning and what it looks, sounds and feels like when adults care about students as individuals." During a class discussion collect and sort the sticky notes into looks like, sounds like, and feels like categories.

Examples: teacher saying try again, a hug in the morning, a smile, etc.

Activity 3: Pictures and discussions

Say to students: "Do you know adults in the building who **care about your learning**? Do you know adults in the building who **care about you as an individual**?"

Students can take photographs of adults who they think demonstrate that they care in these ways; the picture can show the adults in action of how they show they care in this way. We did drawings in order to simplify the resources needed. Then, regroup to have conversations about these adults. Write down quotations of what students say about these adults.



Activity 4: Places in the school

Take pictures of classroom, bus, hall, recess space, cafeteria, art room, music room, gym, library, lobby and ask each student sort into categories of where they feel happiest, least happy, and middle. An optional second step is to talk to students about the places where they feel happy or not happy, to learn more about the student's needs. See chart for sorting in the appendices.

Activity 5: Survey

Read aloud to students with pictures of levels of support. Sample survey is in the appendices.

- I enjoy coming to school
- I have good relationships with teachers and other adults in my school
- I am proud to be at my school
- I feel like I belong in my school

Possible supports for Students

Based on what you learned about your students who require additional supports to feel connected, here are a few activities that can help meet the belonging needs of students.

- Lunch groups with teachers (increase connections to adults)
* Lunchbunches: <http://savvyschoolcounselor.com/tag/lunch-bunch/>
- Affinity groups (expand connection to adults, as well as peers)
* Affinity groups:
<https://www.tolerance.org/magazine/summer-2015/making-space>
- Body breaks, brain breaks, movement breaks, mindfulness (pacing of the day)
* Body breaks:
<https://minds-in-bloom.com/20-three-minute-brain-breaks/>
<http://www.actionforhealthykids.org/tools-for-schools/1252-brain-breaks-instant-recess-and-energizers>
- Checklists, scaffolds, previewing and visual supports to complete academic tasks (ease anxiety about academic success)
- Increased structured and supported social times for students who struggle to connect to peers (walk and talk partners, turn and talk, partner work, problem solving group work)
- Check in with teachers or staff about spaces in which students do not feel they belong and brainstorm ideas about improving student experiences.

Sample Tools and Student work

Sort for places in the school

NAME: _____

<p>I feel really happy in this place</p> 	<p>I feel ok in this place</p> 	<p>I do not feel happy in this place</p> 

Student survey

Name: _____

For each question, pick an emoji that describes how you feel

- I enjoy coming to school

				
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

- I have good relationships with teachers and other adults in my school

				
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

- I am proud to be at my school

				
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

- I feel like I belong in my school

				
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐