Article

Why Black Adolescents Are Vulnerable at School and How Schools Can Provide Opportunities to Belong to Fix It

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Abstract

This article discusses factors contributing to the belonging vulnerability of Black adolescents as well as educational policy considerations for providing Black adolescents with opportunities to belong at school. Scholarship at the intersection of educational psychology and teacher education provides cultural interpretations for why and how Black adolescents are vulnerable to issues of belonging when educators are not in their corner, and when curricula do not reflect their cultures. Policy recommendations include (a) strategic investments in principal preparation, (b) information and human resources to develop culturally relevant learning opportunities, and (c) substantive roles for students as school and community leaders who can help address structural causes of belonging vulnerability among this population.

Keywords

school belonging, Black Americans, adolescence, cultural processes

Tweet

The desire for belonging is universal, yet cultural. We offer steps that schools can take to reduce belonging vulnerability and promote school success for Black students.

Key Points

- A sense of belonging at school is associated with many positive school adjustment outcomes.
- Some school policies and practices place Black students (as well as other historically marginalized groups) at a heightened risk for receiving disconfirming messages about how they are valued in their schools and classrooms.
- At least four racialized areas of education (what students work on, how they are taught, type of feedback they receive, and disciplinary practices they are subjected to) can leave Black students particularly vulnerable to issues with belonging, and subsequently, academic success.
- When viewed from a belongingness lens, existing educational policies and practices can be enhanced and/or modified to structure learning environments that effectively foster belonging and subsequently influence school adjustment outcomes among Black students.

Introduction

Much is at stake when school structures do not intentionally address the belongingness needs of the students they serve. A sense of belonging is a basic human desire that, when not fulfilled, can affect many areas of a person's life including mental wellness, somatic health, possibility for criminal activity, and stress levels (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Considering the developmental significance of belongingness during adolescence (Eccles et al., 1993; Juvonen, 2006), secondary schools in particular can be important sites for belongingness interventions and policies. Adolescents who are disrespected, rejected, excluded, ostracized, and/or disaffirmed in academic spaces have higher rates of absenteeism (Sanchez, Colon, & Esparza, 2005), are less engaged in class activities (Di Battista, Pivetti, & Berti, 2014), and earn lower grades (Goodenow & Grady, 1993) than their peers whose belongingness needs are fulfilled. For these reasons, scholars emphasize the need to prioritize belongingness as a part of education for adolescents (Allen & Bowles, 2012).

A sense of belonging can stem from connecting with people one can trust and be open with, interacting with people who have shared attributes and/or social identities (e.g., one's same racial group), receiving friendly gestures (e.g., smiles, eye contact), and being admired for one's success or accomplishments (Hirsch & Clark, 2019). Sense of

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belonging can also be nurtured or undermined through school policies and practices (Juvonen, 2007). Engaging in research-informed policy discussions about belonging can set the stage for determining how schools can best honor and affirm all students while supporting their achievement motivation, career aspirations, and life trajectories.

Children become progressively aware of societal stereotypes and injustices starting in middle childhood and increasingly so as they approach adolescence (McKown & Weinstein, 2003). For Black students, such awareness may serve as the foundation for *stereotype vulnerability*—the expectation that people are negatively evaluated based on societal stereotypes about their social identity group (J. Aronson & Inzlicht, 2005). Walton and Cohen (2007) write that "in academic and professional settings, members of socially stigmatized groups are more uncertain of the quality of their social bonds and thus more sensitive to issues of social belonging"—which is referred to as *belonging uncertainty* (p. 82). This uncertainty is rooted in both overt and implicit societal messages to marginalized groups. The term *uncertainty* can imply that threats to one's sense of belonging are based only on perceptions. But in some settings including schools, students are judged and questioned in terms of their "fit" for those spaces based on who they are, where they come from, how they speak, and how they look (Gray, Hope, & Matthews, 2018). The uncertainty is then not only perceived but also confirmed through interactions with people, instructional activities, and rules of the school. We wish to emphasize that belonging is not color-neutral or solely rooted in students' perceptions: Educators can disrupt racialized aspects of schooling environments that leave students vulnerable to anxieties about belonging.

Factors Contributing to Belonging Vulnerability: Black Adolescents as a Case in Point

At least two culturally based mechanisms explain why both teacher instruction and curricular activities can either assuage or exacerbate students' concerns about belonging in schools: the nature of their interracial encounters and their value systems.

Students are vulnerable when educators are not in their corner. One example of Black students' vulnerability at school is derived from a survey item on Goodenow's (1993) psychological sense of school membership scale: a student's appraisal that "people here know I can do good work." However, such appraisals may be filtered through the lenses of race and prejudice. In the United States, Black people—due in part to a history of denigration and mistreatment—are more likely to attribute feedback from White counterparts to prejudice in situations in which the White evaluator is aware of their race (Crocker, Voelkl, Testa, & Major, 1991). Given that the teaching workforce in the United States is

overwhelmingly White, that finding is particularly salient: In the 2015-2016 school year, the teacher workforce was 80.1% White (Snyder, de Brey, & Dillow, 2019). Considering this racial disparity, Black adolescents may filter White teachers' attitudes toward and decisions about them through a racialized lens—particularly when such appraisals are negative.

A study by Yeager et al. (2014) included an English class assignment that addressed students' issues of mistrust, perceptions of teacher bias, and interpretations of the intent behind the critical feedback that both Black and White students received from their teachers. Each student wrote an essay and received critical feedback on ways their essay could be improved. Students in the supportive feedback condition also received messages on post-it notes reflecting the teacher's belief that the students were capable of reaching high standards. Students in the control condition received only critical feedback. The students in the supportive feedback condition were more likely to revise their essays and to earn higher grades on their final essays than were students in the control feedback condition. This effect was more pronounced among the Black students than among the White students. These results suggest that to avoid prejudice attributions, and by extension meet belongingness needs, teachers can proactively demonstrate their belief in, and care for, students as individuals who are capable of reaching the high standards teachers set for the students.

Another basis for perceived belonging at school is derived from another survey item in Goodenow's (1993) psychological sense of school membership scale: a student's appraisal that "it is hard for people like me to be accepted here." Disconfirming messages about the appropriateness of students' physical presence in a classroom can leave them vulnerable to questions about belonging in that environment. Disciplinary policies such as zero tolerance can be detrimental (American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008). For example, by physically removing Black adolescents from classrooms and schools at a disproportionate rate, these students can be at a distinct disadvantage for learning and for establishing meaningful social connections (Losen & Skiba, 2010). Given the racialized nature of school disciplinary practices (Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2002), some Black students may be on their guard around teachers and may feel that they are not accepted and do not belong in school.

Experimental research on teachers' race-based disciplinary decisions and actions validates these concerns. Across two studies examining predominantly White educators' perceptions of student misbehavior (Okonofua & Eberhardt, 2015), results indicate that educators are equally troubled by a student's first minor infraction regardless of whether a student is Black or White (e.g., insubordination, class disruption). The researchers also found that educators believe such misbehavior should be punished to the same degree

regardless of the student's race. However, after a student had committed two infractions, educators are significantly more likely to feel troubled by this misbehavior when the student is Black—and more likely to recommend harsher disciplinary action. Thus, Black students are more likely to be viewed as troublemakers and their infractions are more likely to be perceived as indicative of a pattern of misbehavior. When enacted by educators, disciplinary choices such as these can send a message to the student, and their peers, that Black students do not belong in those schools.

Intervention research demonstrates that professional development opportunities can help teachers reframe their perception that students who misbehave are troublemakers. An online module encourages teachers to sustain positive relationships in spite of student misbehavior, using the premise that "a teacher who makes his or her students feel heard, valued, and respected shows them that school is fair and they can grow and succeed there" (Okonofua, Paunesku, & Walton, 2016, p. 2223). This intervention directly impacted students' feelings of belongingness. Middle school students were half as likely to be suspended if their teacher completed this online module training. Students whose mathematics teachers had completed the module were more likely to report feeling respected by their teachers than were students whose mathematics teachers had not completed the training.

Students are vulnerable when their values are not represented in structured learning activities. Adolescents sometimes question the legitimacy or relevance of a class (or of school in general) when what they are learning does not connect to who they are or to "real life" around them. This is a belongingness concern because a lack of opportunity to pursue valued goals is one reason why members of marginalized groups may devalue achievement settings (Walton & Brady, 2017). Such lack of opportunity also has consequences for patterns of engagement. In experimental research, psychological standing (i.e., the extent to which an individual feels a sense of personal legitimacy or empowerment to speak about a certain topic) can predict the degree to which individuals are willing to express their opinions or views (Rios Morrison, 2011). From this perspective, a student may appear disengaged during classroom activities that are not intentionally structured to tap into the experiences and insights that students bring to the classroom. Moreover, the process of psychological membership is not passive. Students can actively contribute to experiences that help foster a sense of belonging. But the environment must be structured in ways that help them view classroom activities as vehicles for establishing a sense of belonging by legitimizing their life experiences and related value systems.

Several frameworks conceptualize how youths' backgrounds and values are brought into the classroom including culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995), community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005), cultural mismatch (Boykin, 1986), and reluctance to accommodate culturally diverse students (Kumar & Lauermann, 2018). Each perspective assumes that racial groups have important cultural values and perspectives that, when acknowledged and incorporated into classroom lessons and practices, enhance the learning environment.

A framework of school racial socialization clarifies several influences of learning activities on belonging (Byrd, 2015, 2017). First, when Black youth have cultural socialization experiences in schools (e.g., being taught about the historical contributions of Black people in a particular field or discipline), they learn about the many ways and milieus in which Blackness is consistent with academic excellence, and they can imagine themselves as active contributors to the school environment. Disengagement and alienation occur when Black students do not see themselves reflected in curricula (e.g., Sampson & Garrison-Wade, 2011). Quantitative research has shown that perceived opportunities to learn about people of one's own background are associated with greater feelings of belonging for students of all races (Byrd, 2017).

Second, the opportunity to fulfill communal goals in academic settings can enable students to experience a sense of belonging (Diekman, Steinberg, Brown, Belanger, & Clark, 2017). The concept of *communalism* is considered a *cultural continuity* in the lives of African Americans (Boykin, 1986; King & Swartz, 2016). Communal experiences may be particularly meaningful for helping Black students to establish a sense of fit within their classroom environments. In a study by Gray, McElveen, Bryant, and Green (2019), the authors found that *communal learning experiences* offered opportunities for students to develop an appreciation for when, where, and why academic content is useful for serving one's community, serving humanity, and serving others. Participants were 98 Black and Latinx middle school students enrolled in a science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM)-focused Career and Technical Education (CTE) class about Design and Modeling. Students reported being more engaged when they perceived their STEM learning activities as higher in communal affordances. Teachers enacted curricular activities in a manner consistent with what some teacher educators refer to as *emancipatory pedagogies*. In this study, these pedagogies included such instructional behaviors as (a) generating solutions to community problems while honoring the histories and cultures of community members, (b) encouraging students to share why certain personal achievements or events outside of the school were meaningful to them and/or their communities, and (c) engaging students in question-raising to challenge them to think about their roles as change agents within their communities.

Third, Black students need to understand how societal inequity has shaped their lives and school experiences. The multicultural education literature documents how American

school systems promote ideologies of colorblindness and meritocracy (King & Swartz, 2016), which deny the significance of race. When Black students become aware that such ideologies exist at their school, they may question their place there and question the school's commitment to educating students like them (Hope, Skoog, & Jagers, 2015). Students therefore need the support of administrators and teachers in their schools to develop their capacities for critical thought and leadership (Bertrand, 2018). Thus, schools must provide students with opportunities to develop critical consciousness (Byrd, 2017; Hope & Bañales, 2019) as well as commit to helping all students learn how to make the world a better place—especially for those who are disenfranchised or marginalized.

Educational Policy Considerations for Addressing Belonging Vulnerability

Schools can be structured in ways that afford Black students with opportunities to establish a sense of belonging. When schools invest in innovative approaches that prioritize Black students' experiences, cultural strengths, and citizenship practices, then those students view schools as places where they matter. Some examples follow.

Investing in the Preparation of School Leaders Who Use Data to Create a School Culture of Belonging and Achievement

School administrators can play a critical role in helping to ensure that students of all backgrounds feel honored and affirmed. To accomplish that goal, administrators need high-quality training and feedback to understand, contribute to, and prioritize the psychological needs of students from racially marginalized populations. Policymakers should invest in training programs for school administrators in (1) high-need school districts and (2) suburban districts in which Black students are disproportionately underperforming and/or reprimanded relative to their White counterparts. Such training mechanisms could focus on sustained professional development opportunities—particularly in terms of employing culturally sensitive research approaches to gather and interpret data for the sake of thoughtfully addressing issues of student belonging vulnerability.

State and national leaders should identify resources, models, and tools that will best support principals based on their school's context. For example, district leaders need to (a) understand the types of school belonging metrics that are more meaningful to principals and that compel them to take action, and (b) identify types of information and data presentations that enable principals to learn which of the school belonging–related policies and practices—if instituted—would have the most meaningful and positive impact on students. Moreover, if information was

continually presented to principals in frequent intervals, they could have the most recent data to best work with and support teachers—before issues resulting from student disengagement (some from thwarted desires to belong) are exacerbated.

Investing in a Supportive School Infrastructure That Provides Instructional Opportunities to Belong

Teachers also require supportive structures that facilitate their capacity to acknowledge their students' backgrounds and life experiences during scholastic activities. Research on culturally relevant teaching reveals that a lack of critical consciousness in teachers is not always due to a paucity of curricular support. Schools can be oppressive spaces, limiting teachers' ability to provide belongingness opportunities to their students. For example, in K-12 school environments, culturally relevant teaching practices that honor and affirm the identities of ethnic groups sometimes are not only unwelcome but also dismissed or ignored (Gay, 2013). Both quantitative (Dee & Penner, 2016) and qualitative (B. Aronson & Laughter, 2016) research demonstrates that culturally responsive teaching has a positive impact on scholastic outcomes. Schools should consider refining or redefining the responsibilities of school personnel to create an infrastructure that intentionally offers belonging opportunities for students in curricula.

One strategy could involve expanding the role of certain administrators by compensating them financially to identify how teachers in their school and others are currently using instruction time to affirm students, and which types of effective strategies can be widely adopted in their own schools. In urban school districts such as the Detroit Public Schools Community District, some schools have appointed educators to the position of Dean of Culture—a designated administrator who creates a positive climate for students and staff. Professionals in these roles can support teachers in creating culturally affirming spaces by (a) creating and managing information databases that highlight exemplary culturally relevant lesson plans, (b) curating literature and other research products that explain what culturally relevant teaching is and how it can be achieved, (c) serving as a networking liaison by connecting teachers with respected community members whose knowledge of the neighborhoods surrounding the school can help lead to the development of creative and culturally sensitive ways of improving home and school life, and (d) strategically organizing networked communities of teachers so that they, too, feel a sense of belonging, community, and psychological membership at the school—so much so that they are willing to ask for the support they need to improve, while also being empowered to freely share their most effective instructional practices with their colleagues.

Investing in Opportunities for Valued Student Participation in School Policy Decisions

Black adolescents can feel a sense of psychological membership at school when given opportunities to have their voices heard and then reflected in their school's academic and student affairs policies (Gray et al., 2018). Policies and approaches must be developed that enable students to offer substantive contributions, especially in ways that also prepare them for a life after secondary school. Such vehicles as leadership clubs and CTE courses can incorporate materials and practices that help students learn how to function as educational consultants on school belongingness issues impacting Black students. Offering educational leadership opportunities to students that incorporate empowering training models and methodologies (Bertrand, 2018) can help reform urban education (Warren & Marciano, 2018). Congress appropriates over one billion dollars annually to CTE programs, which in part could be used to create innovative, interdisciplinary student training opportunities that incorporate student leaders in school belonging improvement efforts.

Recently, urban educators have stressed the importance of teaching workforce skills to youth of color. Within these spaces, youth would be honored and affirmed for their cultural insights and background experiences—and encouraged to discover ways to help people in need both locally and globally. School–university–community partnerships have proved helpful for this purpose. For example, one such partnership, in a CTE media communications in Missouri, inspired a 12th-grade African immigrant from Kenya to raise students' awareness about diversity within Black culture and, more generally, about how international students are treated by their peers (Jocson, 2018). Another partnership supported teachers of CTE Design and Modeling courses in working with middle school students to design a *School of the Future* (Jarvis, 2019). The students then advanced from a state-level architectural design competition, and their innovative school design, which affirmed students culturally and linguistically, earned them a sponsored trip to a professional architecture conference to present their work in Chicago (where they placed third in the national competition). The following year, a group of Black and Latinx students from the same school designed a culturally affirming school for students from their same ethnic backgrounds—earning them first place in this same national design competition and an all-expenses-paid trip to an architecture conference in Anaheim, California. Experiences such as these highlight the changes in school culture that are likely to occur when career-based student training opportunities are used to generate concrete and contextualized strategies for addressing belonging vulnerability in academic spaces.

Conclusion

In Durham, North Carolina, teams of parents are completing a Black Genius profile that outlines their children's academic, emotional, and cultural strengths in preparation for an at-home parent–teacher conference. The next generation of school administrators in Durham is undergoing a rigorous recruitment and training process by the Durham Principal Leaders Academy in preparation for becoming transformative leaders in their future school placements at high-need schools. Teachers from two Durham middle schools are learning about elements of a motivationally supportive classroom climate, and will then be supported by iScholar—an interdisciplinary network of educators and researchers focused on addressing issues of belonging, culture, and motivation—as they work to embed research-based instructional strategies in predominantly Black and Latinx classrooms. Passionate educators face so many challenges while attempting to create and enact culturally relevant and responsive instructional practices in urban schools (Borrero et al., 2016). Each of the aforementioned initiatives provides support for schools and their educators as they structure learning environments that honor and affirm students from historically marginalized populations.

Black students desire interpersonal, instructional, and institutional opportunities to belong at school (Gray et al., 2018) that, when maximized, can promote academic success—but, when squandered, can be detrimental for their academic and career development. Schools can structure their policies and practices to both minimize belonging vulnerability for Black students and promote academic success. To do so, schools must be committed to recognizing and understanding the adverse effects of historical and contemporary racial oppression that undermine the belongingness needs of Black students in schools. Furthermore, we call for similar subgroup-specific discussions of belonging for other marginalized groups. By doing so, schools can not only remove policies and practices that lead to belongingness vulnerability but also uplift practices and policies that support students in the fullness of the culture and histories they bring with them to schools.

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