Making a Classroom a Community: Research on Middle School Belonging

In partnership with the Madison Metropolitan School District (MMSD), the Madison Education Partnership (MEP) sought to understand how classroom belonging reflects and shapes student learning. We designed and conducted the *Making a Classroom a Community* project, supported by a grant from the Student Experience Research Network.[1] This project advances cutting-edge scientific knowledge about the role of belonging in helping students respond to educational adversity and embrace positive beliefs about their capability to succeed in school.

What motivated this project?

Researchers have established that students' sense of belonging in school is both an important reflection of forces that shape their educational careers and a key determinant of their educational investments and success. In reflection of this, each year the MMSD School Climate Survey asks students to report on their sense of belonging in school. But questions about *school* belonging may overlook important differences in *classroom* belonging. Classrooms present distinct social contexts in which students experience varying degrees of belonging. A positive overall sense of belonging at school may, for example, mask a student's sense of isolation and alienation in a specific course such as mathematics.

What did we learn?

We surveyed students on their general sense of belonging at school, as well as their belonging in their specific math and English language arts classrooms. We also asked math teachers to complete a companion survey designed to reveal how teachers' mindsets are related to student sense of belonging, academic identity, and student success. We found:

1. **Although the two are closely related, classroom belonging is distinct from school belonging.** Students can experience a low sense of overall school belonging but high classroom belonging and vice versa.
2. **Teachers who express a greater sense of efficacy with respect to math are teachers whose students, on average, express greater levels of math classroom belonging**, adjusted for their own attributes and prior year achievement in math.
3. **Classroom belonging did not systematically differ across racial/ethnic groups, nor by gender.**

These learnings suggest that as teachers and administrators strive to promote greater belonging, whole-school interventions may not be enough. We need to consider what happens inside the classroom as well – the things teachers do to make their classrooms into communities. The evidence presented in this report shows teachers matter; their beliefs contribute to how students experience their classrooms.

What data did we gather and how did we analyze it?

MMSD administered the MEP *Making a Classroom a Community* digital student survey from Monday, January 27, to Friday, February 14, 2020. Where possible, we drew items for the survey from existing surveys, including MMSD's climate surveys, the U.S. Department of Education's High School Longitudinal Study and

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[1] The Student Experience Research Network (SERN) of leading psychologists, sociologists, and education researchers focused on examining how students' identity, beliefs, and attitudes pertaining to schooling affect their educational trajectories. The research reported here was supported by a grant from SERN. Opinions expressed do not represent the views of the Network.

the University of Chicago Consortium on School Research's [Becoming Effective Learners Survey](student and teacher versions). MEP developed the survey in consultation with substantive experts including Principal Investigator, Patti Schaefer (MMSD) and consultants, Mesmin Destin

(Northwestern University), Jessica Calarco (Indiana University), and Jaymes Pyne (Stanford University). We also got methodological advice from the University of Wisconsin-Madison Survey Center. The survey sought to measure several aspects of students and teacher beliefs and practices, including:

Students	Math teachers
School belonging	School belonging
Classroom belonging in math & ELA classes	Relational trust (with other teachers, principal)
Confidence as a learner	Growth vs. fixed mindset for students
Fixed vs. growth mindset	Beliefs about learning for diverse learners
	Confidence in skill as a math teacher
	Hypothetical responses to student behavior (i.e., failure to complete homework, poor performance on an assessment)

Prior to administration, research team members met with school-site leaders (typically, math instructional coaches) to explain the goals of the survey, ensure plans were in place to administer it during math period, and answer questions. All middle school students (grades 6-8) at four schools and 6th grade students at one school could participate in the survey during their math periods. We asked these students' teachers to complete the survey outside of their contract hours and were provided with a modest cash incentive for completion.

MEP researchers analyzed student and teacher survey responses to identify factors associated with higher and lower senses of classroom belonging. We looked at how the experience of classroom belonging varied among students in the same class and between classes to understand the extent to which classroom belonging is explained by students' characteristics in comparison with classroom characteristics.

What do we plan to do next?
We plan to extend this work to further understand classroom belonging and the role of teachers. Future analyses include:
1. Investigating associations between teacher practice, student classroom belonging and student learning.
2. Evaluating the relationships between teachers' beliefs about how student experiences of educational adversity shape their learning styles relate to student outcomes.
3. Analysis of how teachers may respond to different types of students when they do not turn in their homework, score poorly on exams or request additional accommodations.