



Examining How School Climate is Measured and How Elementary School Students Think about What It Means to Belong in School

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Executive Summary & Key Findings

This project was completed as a Madison Education Partnership (MEP) internship in collaboration with Brianne Monahan and the MMSD Research, Assessment, and Improvement team. Views are those of the intern and need not reflect the views of MMSD or any funders.

Introduction

Students who feel they belong in school—i.e., students who are accepted, respected, included, and supported by their school and people in it—are more academically motivated, academically successful, engaged in school, socially competent, and experience greater overall well-being. These benefits emphasize that it is important that school districts can accurately measure and evaluate whether or not their students feel like they belong in school. However, much of the literature on school belonging has focused on adolescents, which limits both researchers' and practitioners' understanding of school belonging during other developmental periods.

Given these considerations, the focus was twofold; first, the current project evaluated the psychometric properties of how school climate and belonging are currently measured in MMSD. Specifically, a factor analysis was conducted in order to better understand how to interpret climate data and what subconcepts are included within the district climate survey. Second, the current project conducted interviews with 46 students in grades 3-5 across three schools on what they think it means to belong in school. These interviews with the youngest students in the district who take the climate survey served to better our understanding of whether or not younger students conceptualize belonging in similar ways to adolescents, with whom measures of belonging have previously been developed.

Climate Survey Psychometric Findings

Factor analysis identified five subconcepts that the items within the district climate survey could be organized into. These subconcepts consisted of:

1. *Feeling adults in school care about, support, and value you* (e.g., "My teachers listen to and value my ideas," "Adults in the school care about me")
2. *Students care about, support, and value each other* (e.g., "Most students in my school care about other students," "Most students in my school help each other learn")
3. *Perceptions of fair treatment* (e.g., "Students are treated fairly regardless of their gender or sexual orientation," "Students are treated fairly regardless of their race or ethnicity")
4. *General positive attitudes about school* (e.g., "I am proud to be a student at this school," "I feel like I belong at this school")
5. *General inclusion/exclusion* (e.g., "I worry about being teased at school," "People in this school are friendly to me")

School Belonging Interview Findings

Qualitative coding of the student interviews identified 8 themes that students shared when discussing what belonging means to them:

1. *Peer inclusion* - Participants described belonging or feeling that peers cared about them as when they have friends who include them in activities or play with them. They described not belonging as peers not wanting to be their friend or not talking to or including them (e.g., "I feel like I fit in, and I'm happy. And I feel like I have friends that like, I can talk to"). *79% of participants were coded under this theme.*
2. *Being treated with kindness/not being mean or bullying* - Participants described that they felt like they belonged or that others care about them when they were nice or kind to them. They described that when people were mean or bullied them it made them feel like they did not belong (e.g., "In school, it looks like not being like, teased, and not getting your feelings hurt," "They make me feel like I belong here because they're such nice teachers"). *72% of participants were coded under this theme.*
3. *Confusion* - Participants were coded as confused when they responded to questions with, "I don't know" or expressed that they did not understand what a

word meant (e.g., "I don't know. To be there or to, like, be like you. I don't know you just belong there," "I don't even know what that word [belonging] means"). *51% of participants were coded under this theme.*

4. **Feeling paid attention to/ignored by a teacher** - Students expressed that they felt cared for or that they belonged when teachers paid attention to them. If asked about not belonging, they referenced feeling like their teacher ignored them or did not pay attention (e.g., "When you like, raise your hand and you're like the only hand raised and then they call on somebody else," "To be valued, I think is to be really paid attention to"). *41% of participants were coded under this theme.*
5. **Receiving help/support from others** - Participants described that they felt like others care about them or that they belonged when others helped them (often in relation to school/academics or helping them when they get hurt; e.g., "So, like, during classes or something if someone was having trouble and if they're allowed to do it, people will like walk over and be like, 'Hey, do you need help?' And they'll like help them do the work if they can," "Like, I know that I'm cared about, that my teachers will help me if I'm stuck on something. If I get something wrong, and they're gonna help me"). *38% of participants were coded under this theme.*
6. **Teachers recognizing individuality** - Participants indicate that it helps them to feel valued and that they belong when others recognize who they are as an individual and recognize that people have unique ideas and may learn in different ways and that is okay (e.g., "Like if I had a teacher, that if I made a mistake, like, weren't fine with that, that'd be like, not making me feel like I belong. But like having teachers. Like, they are always saying everybody's at a different level. And that's good. You chose the level you're at. And that is good for you. Like, just learning you're getting better and better. Doesn't matter what level you are doesn't matter if your friends or your classmates are at higher levels. And if you do higher stuff feel like you still, like everybody's still so smart. Just the way they are." *36% of participants were coded under this theme.*
7. **Teachers valuing general well-being** - Participants indicated that they felt cared for and that they belonged when others cared about their well-being, especially when they showed that they cared about how they were doing as an individual beyond just a student/academics (e.g., "They like they do care what you actually do think and they care about like what's happening in your family and they make you feel like you do belong there. Makes me it makes me feel more comfortable to talk with them about more personal things," "To know that like they're there for you, that they really care how you do in school, That they're glad that you're there in school"). *26% of participants were coded under this theme.*

8. *Valuing of diversity* - Participants indicated that when others or the school expressed appreciation/value for diversity it contributed to them feeling like they belonged. If others expressed negative attitudes towards diversity it also contributed to feeling like they did not belong (e.g., "We do have a lot of like, like, African American History Month and stuff like that. And they do a lot of activities for that, for like everybody to make them feel included," "Because in my classroom, the days when they don't support the LGBTQ, and I don't, I do support it. But like, it makes me feel bad. Because they like make fun of it. So I don't wanna hear about it and stuff"). 15% of participants were coded under this theme.

Conclusion

By evaluating the psychometric properties of the climate survey, this project has provided a framework for how district members can interpret the climate survey data that is determined by the student data. Specifically, when district members are summarizing the climate survey, the five subcomponents identified in this project can be used rather than evaluating singular items or subjectively grouping items.

The school belonging interviews conducted within the scope of this project have helped to identify how young students think about what it means to belong in school. The themes identified in student interviews are largely reflected in the climate survey (e.g., climate survey item, "People in this school are friendly to me" could capture feelings of peer inclusion, and climate survey item, "If I tell a teacher that someone is bullying me, the teacher will do something to help" could capture feelings of receiving help from others). However, careful consideration of how well the climate survey captures these themes should be taken. For example, items could be added to better capture themes, such as students feeling that teachers value their individuality or general well-being. Additionally, confusion was a common theme (i.e., 51% of participants were coded as being confused at some point during their interview), which would suggest that young students may not be fully comprehending all of the items on the climate survey. Therefore, it may be beneficial for teachers to provide more scaffolding to elementary school students when they are taking the climate survey. For example, teachers could walk through the survey with students and explain what the items mean when administering the climate survey.