Belonging - What is it?

According to the research, belonging in school means that: students experience a sense of membership among their peers; in their classrooms, they are recognized as equals; they experience shared power (e.g., contributions are valued, confidence to participate); they engage in critical citizenship, and not least, they experience a sense of safety and inclusion. Parekh’s (2014) study revealed that the experience of belonging and exclusion in school was very closely tied to student identity relating to ethno-racial, sexual orientation, disability, generational statuses. Structural factors such as program placement and participation also demonstrated notable relationships to student belonging and exclusion. Using responses from the TDSB’s 2011 Student Census, a scale of belonging was developed and explored across identity characteristics. The study used information from the TDSB’s 2011 Student Census completed by secondary school students. Following, the results for identity characteristics can be found. Related results can be found in Research Factsheets issues 9, 10, and 11. Note that the study also revealed that students’ experience of belonging is not synonymous with student engagement. While there is a relationship, students can be highly engaged, socially and academically, but feel a sense of exclusion in school.

The experiential citizenship framework guided the development of the scale of belonging. Pulled from the TDSB’s Grade 9-12 Student Census, the scale included 12 interactions and impressions of students’ experiences with their peers, their schools, and within their classrooms. After the scale was established, it was analyzed across student identity characteristics as well as school structural factors, such as programming. The experiential citizenship framework also guided the statistical analysis on student identity as well as the analysis on the structure of education and how the organization of students across programs, academic streams, etc. may be contributing to students’ sense of belonging and exclusion in school.

The scale could be parsed into three spheres, which captured students’ peer, school, and classroom experiences. Overall, the peer dynamics were largely equitable across most groups. Differences between identity groups began to emerge across school-related dynamics. However, the greatest stratification in student experiences of belonging and exclusion existed across classroom-related dynamics. Comparatively, identity groups who have experienced historical marginalization tended to experience the greatest exclusion in the classroom as compared to groups who have experienced historical privilege. This pattern was true for all student identity groups except for students who did not identify as heterosexual. For students who did not identify as heterosexual, the classroom dynamics appeared to be the most equitable as compared to peer or school related dynamics.
Students’ Experiences of Belonging in School

ISSUE 1, NOVEMBER 2014

Experience of Belonging across Self-identified Ethno-Racial Groups, 2006-11 Grade 9 Cohort

THE TREND:

Figure 1 demonstrates that across all self-identified racial groups, students identifying as South Asian experienced the highest degree of belonging, while students identifying as East Asian experienced the highest degree of exclusion.

Experience of Belonging across Special Education Categories, 2006-11 Grade 9 Cohort

THE TREND:

Figure 2 shows that there were notable differences between the experiences of belonging and exclusion across Special Education categories. Students identified with a learning disability, mild intellectual disability, and other exceptionalities, as well as students who had an Individual Education Plan (IEP), experienced notably greater exclusion than the total student population, particularly when compared to students who were identified as gifted.

Experiences of Belonging and Exclusion across Sexual Orientation Categories

THE TREND: The data presents dramatic differences in the experience of belonging and exclusion for students who self-identified as either heterosexual or “other than heterosexual.” The group identified as “other than heterosexual” included students who had self-identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, transsexual, queer, two-spirited, or questioning, or who were “not sure.” Students who self-identified as “other than heterosexual” reported experiencing close to a 20% increase of incidences of exclusion than students who self-identified as heterosexual.
Experiences of Belonging and Exclusion across Parental Education

**Figure 4: Experiences of Belonging and Exclusion across Parental Education, 2006-11 Grade 9 Cohort**

**THE TREND:** Overall, as demonstrated in Figure 4, students whose parents had gone to university experienced a far greater sense of belonging and decreased sense of exclusion compared to students whose parents had not gone to university.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>University</th>
<th>No University</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Experience Belonging</td>
<td>68.6%</td>
<td>55.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experience Exclusion</td>
<td>31.4%</td>
<td>44.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Experiences of Belonging and Exclusion across Generational Status

**Figure 5: Experiences of Belonging and Exclusion across Generational Status, 2006-11 Grade 9 Cohort**

**THE TREND:** Although the experience of belonging and exclusion was roughly similar for students identifying as first and third generation, second generation students experienced a slight increase in the experience of exclusion comparative to other generational categories.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>First Gen</th>
<th>Second Gen</th>
<th>Third Gen</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Experience Belonging</td>
<td>65.3%</td>
<td>57.5%</td>
<td>62.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experience Exclusion</td>
<td>34.7%</td>
<td>42.5%</td>
<td>37.8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Students’ Experiences of Belonging in School

THE TREND: Based on a scale which captures students’ experiences of safety, shared power, inclusion, and acceptance within their school communities, students in the Academic POS were more likely to experience a sense of belonging at 60.5% compared to students in the Applied POS at 50.7%. Conversely, the rate of student reported exclusion dropped from 49.3% of students in the Applied POS to 39.5% of students in the Academic POS. Students in the Essentials POS were more likely to experience exclusion (50.9%) than to experience belonging (49.1%) within their school communities.

THE TREND: In terms of experiencing a sense of belonging, students attending schools defined as Alternative schools (71.8%) and Arts schools (72.4%) demonstrated the highest sense of belonging of all school-wide structures. Just over half of students attending Special Education schools (55.6%) and schools that only offered Limited Academics (54.1%) demonstrated the lowest sense of belonging and the highest sense of exclusion from their school community (see Figure 7).

THE TREND: Students who experienced the greatest levels of belonging were students taking Advanced Placement courses at 65.7%. Conversely, students who experienced the greatest level of exclusion were students taking the Ontario Youth Apprenticeship Program at 51.2%. Programs with the levels of belonging over the average were Gifted, International Baccalaureate, French Immersion, Advanced Placement, and Elite Athlete. Programs in which students’ sense of belonging fell below the average were the Specialist High Skills Major Program, the Ontario Youth Apprenticeship Program, and students placed in segregated Special Education programs (see Figure 8).


Cite as: Parekh, G. (2014). Students’ experiences of belonging in school (Fact Sheet 1). Toronto, Ontario, Canada: Toronto District School Board.