



## BUILDING BACKGROUND

*Belonging* in school means that a person feels acceptance, respect, inclusion, and support. That goes for the adults and the students. In high-belonging schools, the learning environment honors who that person is and the various identities that comprise the individual. Notice that we said *identities*. There is a constellation of factors that make up our identities. Some of these are visible and others can be hidden. To understand identity, Satterfield (2017) suggests that we look at it through an iceberg activity. The majority of the iceberg is below the surface of the water, where we cannot see it. It's out of sight and yet we have to navigate around it, hoping we are not wrong.

Dominique uses this identity exercise with students. They start off with voicing safe assumptions about him. They say he is male. Right; he identifies as male. They say he is tall. This is mostly right, as he stands at 6 feet. They say he's white. This is not true; he's mixed race. They say he is not married because he does not have a wedding ring; wrong. They say he is from Arizona and that his family is rich. Nope; he was born and raised in California, and his father was a construction worker and his mom worked in a residential facility for people with developmental disabilities until returning to school when Dominique was in high school. The students say that his name sounds like a girl's. Right, he explains, but he's named after a basketball player (Dominique Wilkins). They say he was into sports. Right. They say his first job was as a teacher. Wrong; he worked at Linens 'n Things before they went bankrupt.

**There is a constellation of factors that make up our identities. Some of these are visible and others can be hidden.**

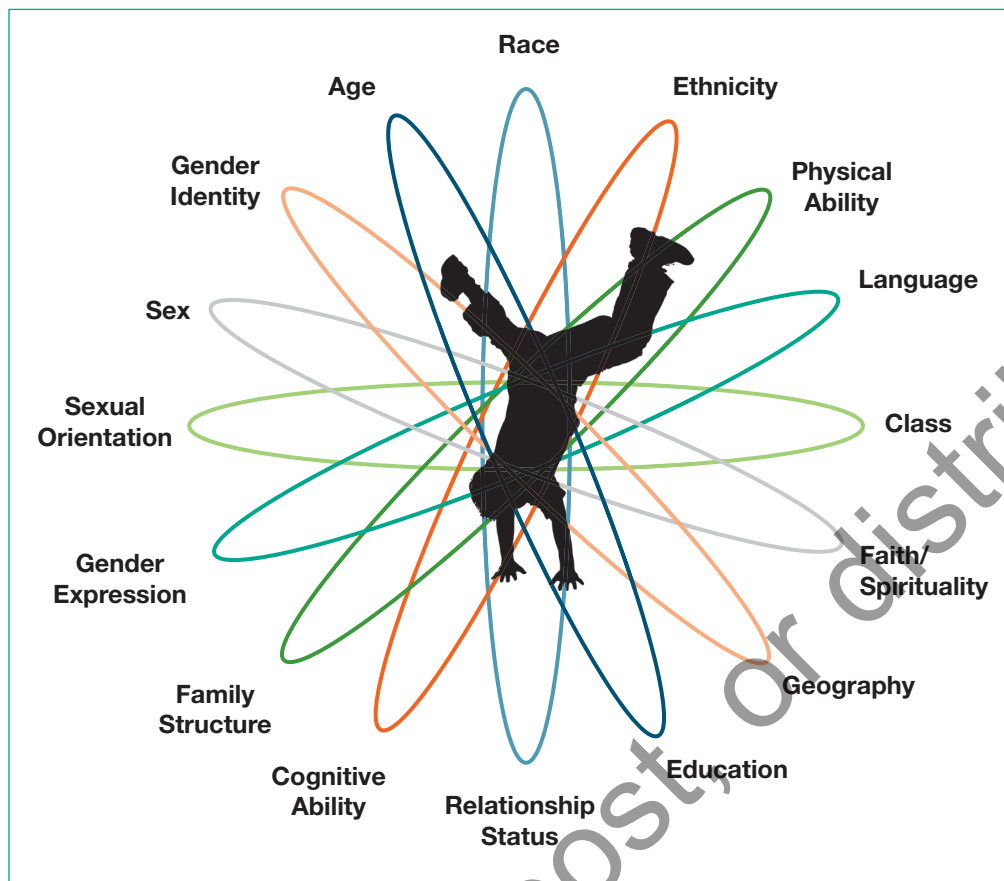
What's the point of the iceberg activity? Personal experiences are deceiving, and people are much more complicated, complex, and interesting. We get a lot wrong when we simply look at a person and make assumptions. As Satterfield (2017) suggested, "Your job is to learn how to elicit each person's story and savor it." And he notes that it's important to know your own story and identity.

Elements of our identity include race, ethnicity, sex, gender identity, age, sexual orientation, physical attributes, personality, political affiliations, religious beliefs, professional identities, and more. Consider the visual in Figure 2.1, created by a Pennsylvania community training team. Of course, there are additional factors that could be included, such as trauma, political beliefs, and so on. The point is that people are complex and that there are many aspects of our identities.

Note that some of these identity factors are stable (e.g., height, skin color) and some develop over time (e.g., relationships, education). One of the most complex factors that influence identity formation is ethnicity, race, and culture. The ways members of a group define their group and how society defines these groups are continually evolving. Social identity theory (Figure 2.2) explores how a person's identity develops from their sense of who they are as part of the groups in which they belong. As Satterfield (2017) says, "we try to find our tribe while being able to connect with and to understand others."

There are several points worth noting in Figure 2.2. For example, there is an "in-group" and an "out-group," or *we* and *they*. This societal issue can be replicated in the classroom, making some students feel that they belong and others that they do not. A sense of belonging impacts educational success, motivation, attendance, and a host of other outcomes. As Bowen (2021) notes in a

**FIGURE 2.1 IDENTITY WEB**



**SOURCE:** Allegheny County, Pennsylvania, DHS LGBTQ Community Training Team/SOGIE Project Team. Reprinted with permission. Image courtesy of iStock.com/sx70.

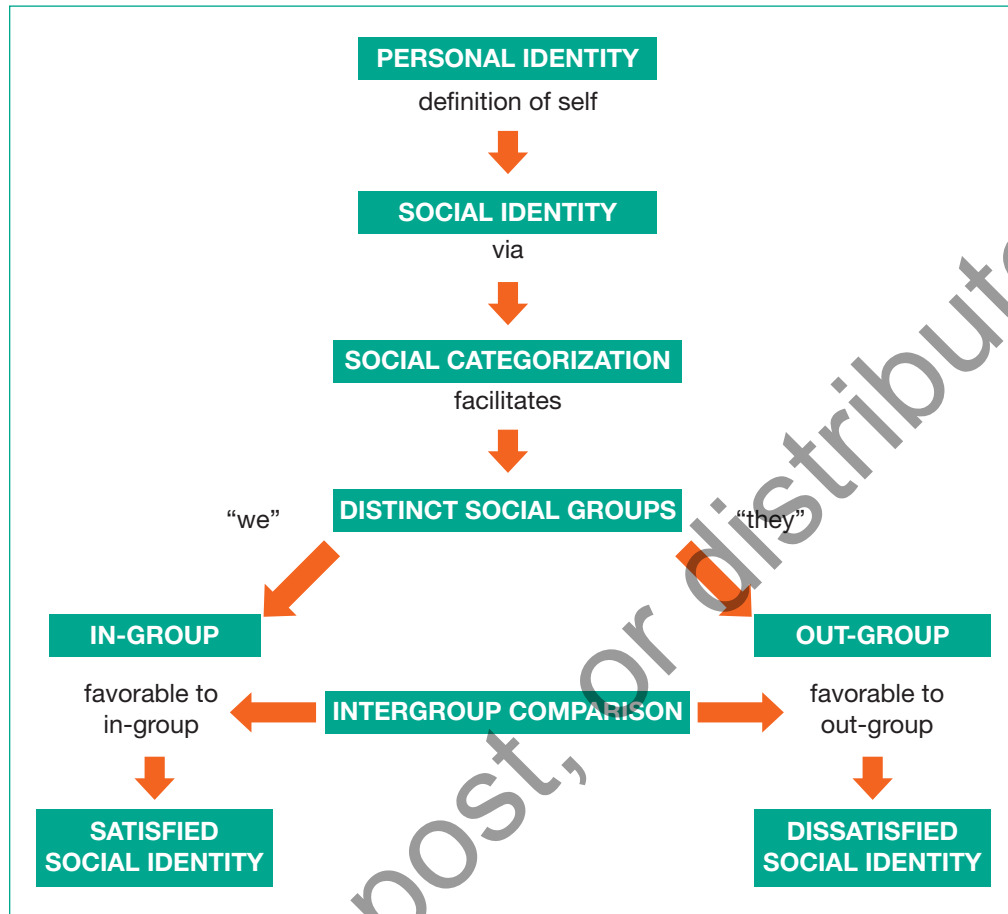
discussion with Gray, “Students choose to be in environments that make them feel a sense of fit.”

Also, note that the in-group has a satisfied social identity, whereas the out-group has a dissatisfied social identity. When this occurs, social identity can become more important than one’s individual identity.

*“Students choose to be in environments that make them feel a sense of fit” (Bowen, 2021).*

School is a place in which individuals develop aspects of their identities. Given the number of hours that educators spend with students, there are powerful and life-changing experiences that we can facilitate to encourage positive individual and social identities or to thwart them. As an example, Jordan was asked to join a group for a project during the first week of school. Jordan’s response: “Why? I’m just gonna fail. I’m the bad kid.” When Jordan’s teacher was able to have a private conversation, it became clear that Jordan had a history of failure, including multiple suspensions and disciplinary actions that Jordan had interpreted as identity. As Jordan said to the teacher, “Look, I’m not good at school, and you’re just gonna kick me out like everyone else. So let’s not pretend.” Jordan’s identity had already been shaped in significant ways by the social interactions that were experienced in his previous school.

**FIGURE 2.2 SOCIAL IDENTITY THEORY**



**SOURCE:** Y Studios (2020).

Of course, there are also positive interactions that educators have that shape student identities and their sense of belonging. Having high expectations with sophisticated support structures and letting students know that it is safe to be wrong are some of the things that we can do to ensure student success. As one teacher told her students, “When you get something wrong, it shows me you are being ambitious. Mistakes show me that you’re taking a risk and not just playing it safe.” In addition, the classroom and curriculum need to reflect the lived experiences of students and invite them into their culture and the cultures of others.

In this module, you will learn

- How your identity and belonging are shaped by your experiences
- About experiences that build a sense of belonging
- How to create a positive school identity

## VOCABULARY SELF-AWARENESS

**Directions:** Consider the terms below.

- If it is new to you, write the date in the Level 1 column.
- If you have heard the word before but are not sure that you can use it in a sentence or define it, write the date in the Level 2 column.
- If this word is very familiar to you and you can define it and use it in a sentence, write the date in the Level 3 column.

Update your understanding of the terms as you engage in this module and in your work. Note that there are spaces for you to add terms that are new to you.

WORD	LEVEL 1	LEVEL 2	LEVEL 3	SENTENCE	DEFINITION
Identities					
Culture					
Belonging					
Identity-safe classrooms					
Prosocial skills					

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WORD	LEVEL 1	LEVEL 2	LEVEL 3	SENTENCE	DEFINITION
Reputational capital					
Branding					

Level 1 = This word is new to me.

Level 2 = I have heard this word before.

Level 3 = I know the definition and I can use it in a sentence!

**CASEL Connections for educators, students, and schools in this module:**

SELF-AWARENESS	SELF-MANAGEMENT	SOCIAL AWARENESS	RELATIONSHIP SKILLS	RESPONSIBLE DECISION MAKING
Identities Assets		Identities Belonging Prosocial skills	Belonging Active listening Cultural competency	Reputational capital

# IDENTITIES AND BELONGING BEGIN WITH SELF

*Who am I?*

That is certainly a question that has fueled philosophers, poets, scholars, and spiritual leaders across the span of human existence. The quest to understand oneself never ends, although how we define ourselves changes across experiences. Forging an identity as an educator begins with deepening your understanding of yourself. A common misconception is that being an educator requires that you are doing something to others: to students, to colleagues, to systems. And while taking action is crucial, it isn't effective if one's own identity is not understood. This first section of the module is designed to begin to explore your own identity in detail. Knowledge of one's own identity is a starting point for exploring self in relation to others.

*Knowledge of one's own identity is a starting point for exploring self in relation to others.*

Self-knowledge is foundational to the work of social-emotional learning (SEL) in schools. The exploration of our own cultural influences and identities gives us insight into the frame we use to see the world and how that frame also limits our view. That's why cognitive reframing, discussed in the previous module, can be a useful tool. The interactions we have with others who have a different frame too often lead to misunderstandings between people. But our frame also informs how we perpetuate institutional and structural barriers that continue to do a disservice to children and communities. When others speak of dismantling systemic barriers, we must understand that we are a part of that system—we contribute to its maintenance. If we don't possess the knowledge of who we are and seek to cultivate a culture of belonging, how can we possibly expect others to do so?

## WHAT'S CULTURE, ANYWAY?

Traditional definitions of *culture*, the ones we learned in school, usually focus on the explicit and implicit patterns of behavior, language, symbols, and values that make a human group distinct from others. We suppose that definition works in a historical sense when you're talking about a geographically isolated group of people who never intermingled with anyone else. But in a world connected by telecommunications and modes of travel, the idea that a person is a member of only one culture doesn't really fit. Think of all the possible cultural influences inside this person:

A 32-year-old history teacher from Boston works in a rural school in Utah. He identifies as male, loves to listen to reggaeton music, and is learning Spanish on his own. His family is religious, although he doesn't practice the formal faith he was raised in. He is a first-generation American, and his family emigrated from India to escape oppression as a religious minority. He served in the American military as a special forces officer in Afghanistan. He creates fiber art on his own and has just joined a local art collective to display his work. He loves Mexican food and was thrilled to find a great restaurant nearby, where he and his boyfriend of four years eat weekly. He is out to the community but not to his parents, who keep hoping he'll meet a nice woman and get married.

Could you ever assign a single “culture” to this person? Our first cultural influences are derived from our families and expand over time as we have more experiences and interact with those outside of our family. Understanding our frame begins with looking at our own family experiences.



**NOTE TO SELF**

Begin your own cultural autobiography with a reflection about your family, either your family of origin or your family of choice.

<b>When and where were you born?</b>	
<b>Where did you live between birth and age 18?</b>	
<b>Where did your parents grow up?</b>	
<b>Where did your grandparents grow up?</b>	
<b>What events did you celebrate as a family growing up?</b>	
<b>When there was a big decision to make in your family, who participated? Was there anyone who had the final word in major decisions?</b>	
<b>When you have a major decision to make as an adult, do you discuss it with your family, or do you only inform them once you have made a decision?</b>	
<b>As an adult, do you discuss your thoughts and feelings with your family?</b>	
<b>As an adult, do you discuss your thoughts and feelings with people outside of your family?</b>	



## RACIAL IDENTITY

Our cultural influences emanate from our family experiences but certainly do not end there. One's identity is further informed by race, sex, gender identity, sexuality, ethnicity, economic class, nationality, citizenship, religion, and ability.

We'll take one important identity, and that is race. Have you analyzed the experiences that have impacted your own racial identity? We have to confront the experiences we have had and analyze them for the messages that we have taken for granted. Doing so will open us to the possibilities that we have been shaped by society and that some of our beliefs are counter to the goals we have in becoming increasingly just. And coming to that understanding will allow us to take action and advocate for people who do not look like us. We all need to understand our racial autobiographies so that we can create safe places for our students and colleagues to learn (see Figure 2.3).

*We all need to understand our racial autobiographies so that we can create safe places for our students and colleagues to learn (see Figure 2.3).*

It's hard to talk about, but all of us have been shaped by our ancestors. Doug vividly remembers a great uncle visiting San Diego from Alabama who refused to use a brand of soap because the TV commercial advertising it featured a Black man showering. This same great uncle's second wife told Doug to turn off Johnny Cash because she didn't like the sound of his [retracted] voice, but she used a derogatory term for skin color in her statement.

Dominique remembers his dad, who is Fijian, being stopped by the police in a suburban part of town where they live. The officer asked where he was visiting from and said that they didn't get a lot of Blacks in that part of town. Dominique's dad has driven very cautiously ever since and warns his children about their interactions with the police.

Each of these experiences and thousands more shape our views. Without analyzing them, and putting them to the equity test, we might end up thinking that other people are less or more deserving than us.

### FIGURE 2.3 RACIAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY REFLECTIVE PROMPTS

Start with your **Racial Autobiography Bookends**. What can you recall about the earliest and most recent events and conversations about race, race relations, and/or racism that may have impacted your current perspectives and/or experiences?

- **Earliest:** What was your first personal experience in dealing with race or racism? Describe what happened.
- **Most Recent:** Describe your most recent personal experience in dealing with race or racism. Describe what happened.

To help you think about the time between your earliest and most recent racial experiences, jot down notes to answer the following questions. Let the questions guide but not limit your thinking. Note any other memories or ideas that seem relevant to you. When you have identified some of the landmarks on your racial

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journey, start writing your autobiography. Remember that it is a fluid document, one that you will reflect on and update many times as your racial consciousness evolves.

**1. Family:**

- Are your parents the same race? Same ethnic group? Are your brothers and sisters? What about your extended family—uncles, aunts, etc.?
- Where did your parents grow up? What exposure did they have to racial groups other than their own? (Have you ever talked with them about this?)
- What ideas did they grow up with regarding race relations? (Do you know? Have you ever talked with them about this? Why or why not?)
- Do you think of yourself as white? As Black? As Asian? As Latinx? As Native American? Or just as “human”? Do you think of yourself as a member of an ethnic group? What is its importance to you?

**2. Neighborhood:**

- What is the racial makeup of the neighborhood you grew up in?
- What was your first awareness of race—that there are different “races” and that you are a member of a racial group?
- What was your first encounter with another race? Describe the situation.
- When and where did you first hear a racial slur?
- What messages do you recall getting from your parents about race? From others when you were little?

**3. Elementary and Middle School:**

- What was the racial makeup of your elementary school? Of its teachers?
- Think about the curriculum: What Black Americans did you hear about? How did you celebrate Martin Luther King Jr. Day? What about Asian Americans, or Latinx individuals, or Native Americans?
- Consider cultural influences: TV, advertisements, novels, music, movies, etc. What color God was presented to you? Angels? Santa Claus? The tooth fairy? Dolls?
- What was the racial makeup of organizations you were in (Girl Scouts, soccer team, church, etc.)?

**4. High School and Community:**

- What was the racial makeup of your high school? Of its teachers?
- Was there interracial dating? Racial slurs? Any conflict with members of another race?
- Have you ever felt or been stigmatized because of your race or ethnic group membership?
- What else was important about your high school years, racially speaking—maybe something that didn’t happen in high school but during that time?

- What is the racial makeup of your hometown? Of your metropolitan area? What about your experiences in summer camp, summer jobs, etc.?

**5. Present and Future:**

- What is the racial makeup of the organization you currently work in? Of your circle(s) of friends? Does it meet your needs?
- Realistically, think about where you want to live (if different from where you are now). What is its racial makeup? Social class makeup? Where do you want to work in the next 10 years? What is its racial makeup? Social class makeup?

**6. General:**

- What's the most important image, encounter, whatever, you've had regarding race? Have you felt threatened? Have you ever felt in the minority? Have you felt privileged?

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**SOURCE:** Courtesy of Glenn Singleton and Courageous Conversation™.



## CASE IN POINT

Mike Alberts is a new colleague at a high school in a densely populated neighborhood in a large metropolitan area. He has more than 20 years of experience teaching advanced mathematical courses and self-identifies as white, middle-class, and “north of 50.” He had previously taught in another nearby district in an affluent suburb. He was hired with strong letters of recommendation, advanced credentials, successful rounds of interviews, and a demonstration lesson. He noted in his interview that an area of weakness for him is that he hasn’t had any experience in teaching in what he called “an urban school.”

The mathematics instructional coach and the department chair will be working with Mr. Alberts to help him transition to the new school, as they are invested in making sure all members of the school community experience a strong sense of belonging. They were part of the hiring committee and recognized his talent as a math teacher, but also saw that he had some difficulty connecting with students. He is anxious, of course, to learn about his students. But when asked about his own cultural experiences, he dismisses them and says, “I don’t have a culture. I’m white.”

What advice do you have for the instructional coach and the department chair to support this teacher during his first year? Identify three experiences per quarter that would assist Mr. Albert.

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1ST QUARTER EXPERIENCES	2ND QUARTER EXPERIENCES	3RD QUARTER EXPERIENCES	4TH QUARTER EXPERIENCES

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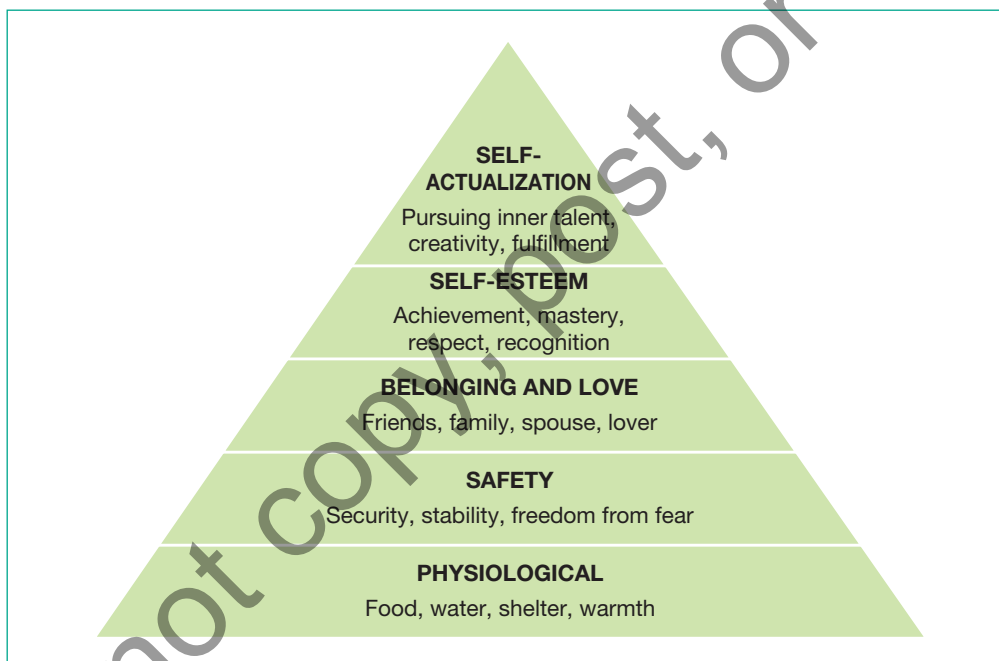
## IDENTITIES AND BELONGING CONTINUE WITH STUDENTS

Knowledge of the *identities* of students allows educators to create classrooms and schools that foster a sense of *belonging*. In order to discuss both, we will begin this section of the module with a further examination of belonging before moving into a powerful framework for defining a comprehensive approach to both.

### INVEST IN YOUR STUDENTS' SENSE OF BELONGING

The research on belonging is extensive as it relates to a person's ability to achieve their aspirations. Maslow (1954) articulated this in his hierarchy of needs, noting that each level represents a need that must be met before advancing to the next level. Belonging is relevant to classrooms and schools as a prerequisite condition to self-esteem and achievement. In other words, when a young person's sense of belonging is compromised, their ability to achieve is endangered (see Figure 2.4).

**FIGURE 2.4 MASLOW'S HIERARCHY OF NEEDS**



Our actions as educators communicate a sense of belonging (or not) to our students. Keyes (2019) conducted imaginative research with tenth-grade students. Although her intention was to uncover teacher actions that convey belonging, she did not share this with students. Instead, she asked them to identify and describe their favorite and least favorite ninth-grade class. Her findings were that two teacher actions built belonging:

1. Fostering relationships with and between students
2. Employing teaching practices that encouraged participation in the work for the class

These actions were expressed in a variety of ways that seem familiar:

FAVORITE CLASS		LEAST FAVORITE CLASS	
BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS	CONSTRUCTING A LEARNING ENVIRONMENT	BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS	CONSTRUCTING A LEARNING ENVIRONMENT
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The teacher shows all the students that they are respected and valued.</li> <li>The teacher listens and incorporates students' ideas.</li> <li>The teacher understands their developmental needs and incorporates them into the class.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The teacher establishes clear, orderly, and consistent expectations and routines.</li> <li>The teacher makes sure everyone understands and doesn't go forward until they do.</li> <li>The teacher gives honest feedback.</li> <li>The teacher offers opportunities to work with peers using clear directions.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Students don't feel that the teacher likes them.</li> <li>The teacher has difficulty relating to students.</li> <li>The teacher provides inconsistent support with little follow-through.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The teacher has favorite students.</li> <li>The teacher frequently changes seats to punish students.</li> <li>There is no class discussion or peer work.</li> <li>The teacher lacked passion or interest in the course content.</li> </ul>

Notice that these adolescents did not say that they needed the teacher to be their friend. What they did say is that in some classes they felt a stronger sense of belonging, while in other classes they did not. Further, they tied belonging to their teachers' actions. In other words, a sense of belonging is situational and is sensitive to the emotional environment. In the modules that follow, we will return to belonging through further discussion on curricular design to support belonging.



### NOTE TO SELF

Caring educators cultivate a sense of belonging among their students. These practices are not left to chance and begin with the physical features of the classroom. Conduct an environmental scan of your classroom. Examine the following chart and note actions you take or help others take to create a sense of belonging. After you have finished, examine your reflection. What do you want to strengthen?

CHARACTERISTIC	HOW THIS IS EVIDENCED IN MY CLASSROOM
Students have a designated personal place for themselves and their possessions.	
Materials are accessible to students.	
Classroom agreements are posted, positively stated, and implemented.	
Student work is displayed.	
The classroom is clean and orderly.	
There is space for students to move around the classroom.	

## INVEST IN IDENTITY-SAFE CLASSROOMS

Students and teachers bring with them a multitude of identities each day. A team of researchers, led by the late Dorothy Steele, have forwarded a framework they call *identity-safe* schools. Now led by Becki Cohn-Vargas, the research team leads work in making schools places where all students belong and learn. One hallmark of identity-safe classrooms is curriculum that reflects and promotes students' experiences using an assets-based approach. In addition, these classrooms reduce the level of stereotype threat that damages the learning of students. Their four-part framework, which aligns strongly with social-emotional learning, includes the following:

1. **Child-centered teaching**, promoting autonomy, cooperation, and student voice
  - *Listening for student voices* to ensure that each student can contribute to and shape classroom life

- *Teaching for understanding* so students will learn new knowledge and incorporate it into what they know
  - *Focus on cooperation* rather than competition; each student learns from and helps others
  - *Classroom autonomy* to promote responsibility and belonging in each student
2. **Cultivating diversity as a resource**, providing a challenging curriculum and high expectations for all students in the context of the regular and authentic use of diverse materials, ideas, and teaching activities
    - *Using diversity as a resource for teaching* to include all students' curiosity and knowledge in the classroom
    - *High expectations and academic rigor* to support all students in high-level learning
    - *Challenging curriculum* to motivate each student by providing meaningful, purposeful learning
  3. **Classroom relationships**, based on trusting, positive interactions with the teacher and among the students
    - *Teacher warmth and availability to support learning* to build a trusting, encouraging relationship with each student
    - *Positive student relationships* to build interpersonal understanding and caring among students
  4. **Caring classroom environments**, where social skills are taught and practiced to help students care for one another in an emotional and physically safe classroom
    - *Teacher skill* to establish an orderly, purposeful classroom that facilitates student learning
    - *Emotional and physical comfort* so each student feels safe and attached to school and to other students
    - *Attention to prosocial development* to teach students how to live with one another, solve problems, and show respect and caring for others (Identify Safe Classrooms, n.d.)

You'll find these themes throughout this playbook. However, for this module, we are going to build on listening, as evidenced in the first principle of child-centered teaching, as an important way teachers communicate their respect to young people. Now we invite you to further consider your listening experiences using a tool developed by the identity-safe classrooms research team (Cohn-Vargas et al., 2020).





## NOTE TO SELF

How do you put listening to student voices into practice? Use this tool to reflect on your experiences. Then collect data from your own classroom to deepen your reflective thinking.

Reflect on your personal experience with speaking in a group, both when you were a student and in the present.

Do you feel free to speak up in groups?

What allows you to feel safe to speak up in one place but not another?

Consider your students who come from backgrounds different from yours.

How might their experience be like yours, and how might it be different?

Are any of your students' voices silenced, perhaps not by you, but by past experiences of being marginalized?

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Observe the speaking patterns in your classroom. Make a simple tally of who is speaking in the group. Mark the initials of each child who speaks. We suggest you do this more than one time.

Analyze your data by asking yourself the following questions:

How many students in the class spoke out loud in the discussion?

Who spoke more than once?

Who did not speak at all?

What were the social identities of those who spoke and those who did not?

How can you extend opportunities to ensure everyone gets a chance to speak?

What kinds of encouragement can you give right in the moment as students speak?

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**SOURCE:** Steele and Cohn-Vargas (2013).

## PROMOTE THE PROSOCIAL SKILLS NEEDED IN CARING CLASSROOMS

The social and emotional lives of students evolve throughout their educational careers. However, there are several overarching skills that deeply influence their relationships with teachers and peers. The Illinois State Board of Education was one of the first in the country to craft specific standards for SEL. They cast SEL as an issue of school wellness and identify five broad social skills needed for student success:

- Recognize and manage emotions
- Demonstrate caring and concern for others
- Establish positive relationships
- Make responsible decisions
- Handle challenging situations constructively

Many social-emotional curricula and programs have extensive materials and a scope and sequence of skills needed by students to promote positive peer relationships and a sense of belonging in the classroom and school. As well, they are attuned to the developmental needs of students. For instance, young children benefit from learning *prosocial skills* about sharing, while older students are developing the skills to resolve problems, come to a consensus, and make decisions. However, these efforts to teach students SEL are undermined when they are used as one-off lessons with little follow-through.

Feelings of belonging in the classroom are intertwined with the relative care peers demonstrate to one another. Kindness and compassion among students are crucial and are nurtured through daily investment. Teaching students to care for and about others is not going to be accomplished with isolated lessons on kindness. Rather, it needs to be infused into the dialogue and academics of the classroom and the school.

**Teaching students to care for and about others is not going to be accomplished with isolated lessons on kindness.**

Kindness is a character strength and therefore is a malleable trait that can be fostered. The school and classroom climate play an important role in doing so. A recent study of nearly two thousand 13- to 17-year-olds found that there was a strong relationship between their perceptions of their own sense of belonging at school and their evaluation of school kindness, which is the level to which “students and others’ needs are considered, and prosocial acts and positive relationships are encouraged” (Lee & Huang, 2021, p. 98). A culture of kindness exhibited through prosocial behaviors across the school contributes to a sense of belonging. As an example, some schools have specific student-driven actions for welcoming and connecting new students, such as peer-led orientations. Students who feel belonging in school are themselves kinder and have more positive relationships with peers and teachers (Patrick et al., 2007).

Prosocial behaviors are outward acts that are intentional acts that benefit others. Helping, sharing, volunteering, and comforting are all prosocial behaviors that are further associated with relatedness, which, you'll recall from Module 1, is not feeling alone (Eisenberg et al., 2015). And it turns out that prosocial behaviors are contagious. When these acts of kindness are witnessed by others, the observer, in turn, is more likely to behave in a prosocial manner (Dimant, 2019). Just as importantly, antisocial skills are even more contagious (Dimant, 2019). Classrooms and schools with a higher degree of antisocial behaviors are likely to spark similar actions among other students.

**Students who feel belonging in school are themselves kinder and have more positive relationships with peers and teachers.**

Schoolwide prosocial efforts include activities that encourage volunteerism and service learning. Classroom efforts, especially those that are infused into the academic flow, reinforce for young people that we pull together to jointly solve problems. One of our favorite examples comes from a practice developed by a colleague, which she called Random Acts of Chemistry Kindness. She encouraged her students by assigning them to complete at least one act every quarter and to explain the chemistry involved. Some examples included a student who baked cookies for her classmates and explained what happened to the sugar when heated, and another who washed the desktops while discussing the role of detergents and surfactants.

Classroom processes can encourage or thwart prosocial behaviors. One seminal study is by Vivian Gussin Paley, a kindergarten teacher and researcher at the University of Chicago Lab Schools, who co-created a classroom norm with her students during a particularly rancorous year when she saw some of her students excluding others. "You can't say you can't play" became a rule as she and her students figured out together how peers would be included in activities. She wrote about her experiences in a book of the same title, noting, "We call it *play*. But it forms the primary culture in the classroom" (Paley, 1993, p. 29).

Classroom promises about how others are treated and spoken to, how students work together, and how care and concern are demonstrated can set a tone for expectations. Fourth-grade teacher Sarah Ortega co-constructs classroom promises with her students each year. One of the promises developed with her students for the 2021–2022 school year? "When you see someone who is sad, take their gray clouds away." And at the high school where the three of us work, we have three overarching rules:

- Take care of yourself.
- Take care of each other.
- Take care of this place.

Regardless of the grade span, intentional communication of prosocial values about sharing, helping, demonstrating concern for others, and working together should be a signature feature of classrooms and schools.



## NOTE TO SELF

Examine the classroom and schoolwide practices at your site as they relate to prosocial skills. How are they encouraged? What new ideas do you have for enhancing them? Work with your colleagues to complete the following grid.

PROSOCIAL SKILL	YOUR CLASSROOM EFFORTS	YOUR SCHOOL EFFORTS	ADDITIONAL IDEAS TO STRENGTHEN
Helping			
Sharing			
Donating and volunteering			
Comforting			



## CASE IN POINT

The faculty and administrators at Pine Tree Middle School have an experience that relatively few educators get to participate in: they will be opening the first new school in their district in more than 15 years. A core administrative staff was hired a few months earlier and most of the teaching faculty slots have been filled. As a part of the development of their school vision, the team had hosted numerous focus groups with community members, families of future students, as well as business and nonprofit leaders in their city. The emerging consensus was that a core mission of the school would be to foster belonging and the identities of its students.

Now the administrative team is preparing for a series of professional learning events with the teaching staff to move from vision to practice. An essential element of these efforts will center on students. Take what you have learned so far from these first two modules to advise the planners about considerations to keep in mind for building momentum.

CHARACTERISTICS	WHAT MIGHT THIS LOOK LIKE IN CLASSROOMS AT PINE TREE MIDDLE SCHOOL?
Building belonging through relationships	
Building belonging through learning environments	
Building identity through child-centered teaching practices	
Building student voice	

## IDENTITIES AND BELONGING ARE NURTURED BY SCHOOLS

Much like individuals have identities, so do schools. These social organizations have histories that shape the identity of the school and the district or region they are part of. Sometimes, students are proud of their school. Other times, they are not. In some schools, students identify by the mascot, as in “We are Cardinals. Once a Cardinal, always a Cardinal.” Other times, students say, “I go to a ghetto school” or “It’s really not safe here. You gotta watch your back at this school.”

### SCHOOL IDENTITY AND REPUTATIONAL CAPITAL

Interestingly, the reputation of the school has an impact on students’ overall learning. When students attend schools that they and their families believe are better, they actually perform better. As Willms (2013) noted, the different results of the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) can be explained in part by the culture and climate of the school, as well as by the academic press and reputation of the school. The academic press and reputational capital become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

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So what is *reputational capital*? The business world defines it as the perception of the trust that customers and users have in your products, websites and services, and your brand. It comes down to one word: Trust. Do people trust your business? We will discuss relational trust (between people within the school) in an upcoming module, but trust in terms of reputational capital is about the reputation that the school has within the community. Building reputational capital requires being honest, delivering on the promises you make, and taking responsibility when you are wrong. Notice that there is a lot of individual responsibility required. Students, their families, and the community judge the school based on a sum of all the interactions they have with people associated with the school. In other words, what you say at the supermarket about the school can have an impact on the way people think about the school.

Of course, a single action can damage or destroy the reputation of a school. When a school or district is in the news for some awful thing that happened, some members of the community overgeneralize and assume that the entire school is a terrible place. That’s when a public relations firm may be necessary to help tell other stories about the school. Remember, when schools have lower reputational capital, some of the students who should be attending the school exercise choice and transfer to different schools.

This brings us to another business term: *branding*. It’s when we promote a product or company, usually using advertising and design. As *Entrepreneur* (n.d.) magazine noted, “Simply put, your brand is your promise to your customer. It tells them what they can expect from your products and services, and it differentiates your offering from that of your competitors.”

Reread that definition and replace the word “customer” with “students and families,” and “products and services” with “educational experience.” That’s school branding. In their book on school branding, Sinanis and Sanfelippo (2015) noted, “We want to ensure that OUR voices are the ones telling OUR story—we cannot let anyone else tell our story for us” (p. 7). They continue,

The idea of branding schools isn't about marketing kids or making false promises . . . it's about promoting the amazing things happening for those who don't have the opportunity to experience them on a daily basis. (p. 9)

What does this have to do with social-emotional learning, you may be asking? Well, the reputational capital of the school becomes part of the identity of the educators and students who work and learn in the organization. If you are interested in branding your school, take a look at Tracy Tigchelaar's (n.d.) "How to Create a Successful School Branding Strategy" blog post.

Given the ubiquity of social media, consider the messages that are sent by, and about, the school across various platforms. Some school staff members avoid social media because they recognize that it can encourage opinions and criticism. Others worry that their personal accounts will be targeted. However, there will be mentions about your school whether or not you choose to tell your story. Josh Meah & Company offers the following recommendations for using social media to create the reputational capital of the school:

- Complete your social media profiles using interesting photos and compelling copy. Include an attractive logo and cover image, contact info, and website address.
- Post regular and timely updates. Find out when most of your followers are online and post regularly at those times.
- Include captivating, high-quality images with posts to make them 650 percent more engaging than text-only updates.
- Add video to updates. Videos are the most popular type of content on Facebook and attract three times more shares than text-only posts.
- Use the 80/20 rule. Create 20 percent of the content you share and source 80 percent of it from other websites and blogs. Similarly, only 20 percent of your updates should be about the school, and 80 percent of them should pertain to subjects that parents and students are likely to find interesting. (Josh Meah & Company, 2019)



## CASE IN POINT

The staff at Harbor Point Elementary School asked many members of the community, including parents of current students, the following questions:

- What three words would you use to describe our school?
- What feelings come to mind when you think about our school?



- What do you like best about our school?
- Would you recommend our school to your friends?

The data were startling but not surprising. The staff knew that the school did not enjoy a favorable reputation. Nearly 200 students who live in the neighborhood choose to attend different schools. The common terms used to describe the school were *depressing, nice teachers, no rigor, bad neighborhood, and prison*. The feelings included *fear, not welcome, and sad*. As one parent said, “My kid just isn’t happy, and I worry that she’s starting to hate school.” Another said, “The teachers are nice, but I don’t think that the students are learning very much.” Over 60 percent of those surveyed said that they would not recommend the school but that the teachers were really nice to the students.

Obviously, the reputational capital of the school was not strong. However, the school had made progress over the past three years with increasing academic achievement. The quality of the instruction was strong with teachers supporting one another in implementation. And teacher morale was high. Together, they developed three goals:

1. Breakthrough academic results for students, combining rigor with support
2. Happy students and parents who loved their school
3. An improved sense of identity for teachers, students, and the school

Take each of these three goals and identify action steps the school could take to change the reputational capital of their school.





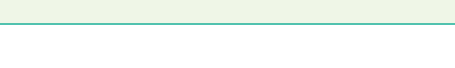





GOALS FOR HARBOR POINT ELEMENTARY	YOUR RECOMMENDATIONS
<b>Goal 1:</b> Breakthrough academic results for students, combining rigor with support	
<b>Goal 2:</b> Happy students and parents who loved their school	
<b>Goal 3:</b> An improved sense of identity for teachers, students, and the school	

## SELF-ASSESSMENT

Emotionally and psychologically healthy young people are immersed in school environments that allow for them to learn about themselves and others. Use the self-assessment to determine the ways you contribute to this effort.


### Menu of Practices on Identities and Belonging


Use the traffic light scale to reflect on your current practices as they relate to identities and belonging at the levels of self, students, and school. What areas do you want to strengthen?


INDIVIDUAL OPPORTUNITIES	
I have self-knowledge of my own cultural autobiography and its influence on me.	
I am exploring racial identity as a way to know more about myself.	
STUDENT-LEVEL OPPORTUNITIES	
I am able to use positive teacher relationships to build a sense of belonging for my students.	
I am able to construct a learning environment to build a sense of belonging with my students.	
I am able to incorporate elements of identity-safe classrooms as a way to build the social-emotional learning of my students.	
I regularly collect and analyze student participation data to improve identities and belonging for my students.	
I am intentional in fostering the prosocial skills of my students as it relates to helping, sharing, volunteering, and comforting.	
SCHOOL-LEVEL APPROACHES	
I am seeking to learn about the reputational capital at my school or district.	
I am knowledgeable about branding at my school or district.	
I have examined my school's or district's website with identities and belonging in mind.	

## REFLECTION QUESTIONS

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 What do I need to do to change my reds to yellows?

 Who can support me to turn my yellows into greens?

 How am I using my greens to positively contribute to the good of the whole?

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