STRUCTURES FOR BELONGING
PROFESSIONAL LEARNING PRESENTATION: FACILITATOR'S GUIDE

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OVERVIEW OF THE *STRUCTURES FOR BELONGING* PRESENTATION

This guide accompanies this presentation deck [clicking the link will download a PowerPoint presentation].

This presentation was developed in the summer of 2021 through Student Experience Research Network's Belonging Collective. It aims to provide a high-level overview of the research on belonging-supportive learning environments; include examples of what belonging-supportive learning environments look like in practice; and connect participants with existing resources for applying insights from the research. The presentation is designed to be relevant for a range of audiences in K-12 education in the United States, including teachers, school and district leaders, teacher educators, and intermediary organization staff. However, we acknowledge that these audiences will have different entry points and objectives in this work. Section four of the presentation includes opportunities for customized meaning making.

The presentation contains about 60 minutes of presentation time and 60 minutes of activity time, followed by up to 60 minutes of additional activity time in section four, "What does this mean for my context?" The different sections of the presentation can be used as separate sessions.

We encourage facilitators of this presentation to reflect on how it fits into a larger professional learning structure that engages participants in reflecting on their own biases and developing the critical awareness necessary at all levels of a system to create belonging-supportive environments.

Facilitator pre-work

Before using this presentation, facilitators should review this guide, watch all videos included in the accompanying slide deck in their entirety, and review and adapt the deck and talking points (i.e., add,

remove, or edit slides) for their audience and context. We recommend that facilitators of this presentation familiarize themselves with the following materials in advance (estimated time needed: three hours).

- [Structures for Belonging: A Synthesis of Research on Belonging-Supportive Learning Environments](#) [Research synthesis]
- [Studying belonging in education: A conversation with Claude Steele, Mary Murphy, and Gregory Walton](#) [Video]
- [Belonging Now: What It Takes to Create the Conditions for Belonging](#) [Video]

The presentation was developed with the following principles in mind. We encourage facilitators to revisit these principles in the process of adapting and using this presentation.

1. **Making concepts personally relevant**: We offer two options of warm up activities for personal reflection *before* getting into the research.
2. **Using multiple forms of source credibility**: Research, especially quantitative research, can come across as detached from applied contexts, so the presentation seeks to humanize it by putting faces to researchers through video or by introducing them briefly in the talking points. We also include some teacher and student artifacts to build from their expertise and make content more relevant to the target audience. Facilitators who want to be able to speak to specific questions about the cited research may wish to familiarize themselves with the works cited on slides 35-38. We have provided open-access links and links to summaries of the research papers where possible.
3. **Explaining mechanisms**: We strive to explain the *why* behind research concepts and results (namely, the self-reinforcing cycles by which experiences related to belonging can affect long-term outcomes and the way in which cognitive resources are siphoned away from learning tasks when we are attending to potential belonging threats in the environment). This is important because without understanding these mechanisms, participants are left with ambiguity that leaves the door open for incorrect ideas or even for reinforcing negative stereotypes.
4. **Supporting meaning-making**: We balanced presentation time roughly equally with integration and activity time. Throughout the presentation, we encourage facilitators to refer back to any stories or comments that were shared in the opening activity or subsequent discussions to reinforce key ideas and to build belonging among participants. The speaker notes throughout the presentation offer suggested talking points, including a few discussion questions, but we recommend that facilitators add discussion questions as desired. In particular, provide opportunities for participants to connect what they have learned to what they already know or are doing. Look for opportunities to validate what participants are already doing in support of student belonging, and look for authentic opportunities for them to reinforce learning by inviting them describe how they would explain key ideas to a peer, or answer questions like the following:
   a. How have you seen this play out in your context or in your own life?
   b. What struck you most about the research and why?
   c. What are you most interested in exploring further? Why? Who would be impacted most by bringing this to your context?

PRESENTATION OUTLINE AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR CUSTOMIZATION

While the presentation has been developed to scaffold and sequence key ideas, we recognize that it will not be feasible or appropriate to use the full presentation in all contexts. This section is designed to help

facilitators customize the presentation by defining the objectives for each slide. Based on the objectives, facilitators can choose how to move through the content and customize talking points for their particular audience.

Additional recommendations for customization:

- You may skip slides 6, 8, 18, 21, and 24 if needed to save time.
- We are aware that several states have introduced or passed legislation banning discussions related to racism in educational contexts. If you are presenting in one of these locations, please review the presentation carefully to assess whether any content needs to be removed from the live presentation and the copy of the deck that is shared with participants. We would draw your attention to the content on slides 8, 20, and the additional resources on slide 33 in particular.
- You may customize the content by including the stories and voices of students and educators from your context. Stories of transformation from peers of the audience can also be powerful. For example, if you are speaking to administrators, you might include quotes or data to illustrate how a focus on belonging relates to goals relevant to their role (e.g., attendance, reduced disproportionality in discipline citations, etc.).

SECTION ONE: WARM UP ACTIVITY

Objective for slides 3 and 4 (or alternate activity below): Support participants in making a personal connection to the topic of belonging before diving into the research. Prompt participants toward a more complex definition of "belonging" than may be commonly held (e.g., belonging is not solely the product of interpersonal relationships; belonging has real-world impact in that it affects how we show up and behave in an environment).

- *Materials: Flip chart paper and markers*
- *Time: 20 minutes*
- *Participants: 20 or fewer*

Alternate activity: Use the below script to lead partner interviews and a full group discussion. If using this activity, you should hide slides 3 and 4 in the presentation, and remain on slide 1 for this activity.

- *Materials: None*
- *Time: 40 minutes*
- *Participants: Any; this option is recommended for groups of more than 20*

INTRO (3 MINUTES)

I want to start with an activity that gets us talking and thinking about our own experiences as a way to help ground our work together today.

I'd like to ask you to raise your hand and keep it raised if you have ever…

- Played a sport
- Engaged in the arts – music, dance, art, etc.
- Had a job

Ok, so we've all been in what researchers call "achievement or performance contexts."

Now, I want you to close your eyes. I want you to think about experiences in these kinds of performance

contexts (work, school, extracurricular activity or community group, sports, music, etc.). Keeping your eyes closed…

- Raise your hand if you ever felt like you didn't fit the mold of what someone in that place was supposed to be like
- Raise your hand if you ever felt like you weren't respected, accepted, or welcomed
- Raise your hand if you have ever felt like you were worried you might be judged negatively because of who you are
- Raise your hand if you have ever felt like you didn't belong in a space even if you had friends there
- Raise your hand if you have ever felt like you could not bring your whole self to a work, school, or other achievement context

[By this point, everyone should have their hand raised] Okay, open your eyes. So these worries about belonging are an experience all of us have had.

Alright, please close your eyes again.

If any of these experiences / feelings affected how you responded or behaved in a situation (e.g., whether you spoke up or what you said, whether you reached out for help, stuck with something), please put your hand down. [Facilitator puts their hand down too.]

[Most or all people will have their hands lowered.] Open your eyes. So not only do we all have these kinds of experiences, but it's a shared human experience, and importantly, they shape how we respond to situations, to other people, to things we're asked to do.

FACILITATOR'S PERSONAL STORY (4 MINUTES)

Sharing a story from your own experience and being vulnerable early on can help participants feel safer taking emotional risks themselves. Choose a story that highlights a few key themes from the research:

 a) The intersection of your identity with the context raising belonging questions; and how cues in the environment heightened these concerns

 b) Recursive processes playing out over time that leads you to increasingly question their belonging and disengage from productive behaviors

 c) Having some friends in this environment but still not feeling a sense of belonging

Access a sample facilitator story here.

INSTRUCTIONS & PARTNER INTERVIEW (17 MINUTES TOTAL)

Access the handout here.

In a second, I'm going to ask you to turn to your neighbor, and I'm going to ask each of you to tell the other a story about why you sat down. I want you to talk about a time when something happened that made you feel that you did not belong.

Why was this event significant to you? And how did it play out over time? It might help to think about it in the context of an indelible moment that has stuck in your memory banks—often with a longer story surrounding it.

Listen actively and focus your attention completely on what your partner is saying. There are some follow-up questions on the handout that you can use, as well, to help unpack the story with your partner. Jot down some notes afterward so you can look for patterns. You'll have 10 minutes total to do this activity, I'll let you know when we're at the midway point so you can wrap up one partner and switch to the other.

Alright, pull out those instructions and turn to your neighbor and begin.

[Give people a heads up at 5 minutes to wrap up and switch to the other person.]

Okay, now turn over the handout for part 2. For part 2 of this conversation, I want you to think about a time in an achievement context – perhaps as a student or a professional or another achievement context – when you really felt you belonged. What happened? Why did you feel like you really belonged? Turn to your neighbor and spend a couple of minutes talking to them about that experience and then switch so they can tell you their story of belonging. You'll have 5 more minutes for this part of the conversation, so switch after a couple of minutes and I'll give you another heads up. [alert to switch after 2.5 minutes]

Now I want you to spend 1 minute, jot down some patterns and observations on the handout from the stories you and your partner shared and the story I shared. As part of these notes, make some comments about what you think affects whether someone feels as though they belong.

GROUP DISCUSSION (15 MINUTES)

IF TIME: Before we dive in and get into themes, I want to ask to see if anyone else would be willing to share a story about why they were seated (~5 minutes).

Can anyone share some observations that stuck out or patterns that you noticed listening to my story or your partner and thinking about your own stories of both non-belonging and belonging?

Question probes, if needed:

- What did you notice about the contexts in which these experiences arose? When did these experiences happen?
- What role did you notice the person's identities played in these situations?
- What did you notice about what happened after the pivotal moment? How did it affect people's behavioral responses? Did this then shape how the other actors in the situation respond to them?
- What did you notice about the long-term effect on the person--whether and how they remained in that achievement context?
- What was critical to people feeling like they belonged in those moments of belonging?

Closing: What you all pulled out of your stories aligned with some of the key themes from the research that you'll hear about shortly.

SECTION TWO: WHAT IS BELONGING?

Objective for slide 6: Draw on neuroscientific research to demonstrate that learning is inherently contextual (i.e., shaped by the environment) and social and emotional. This combats misconceptions that belonging is something that is "nice to have" in education, and foreshadows how belonging influences academic outcomes.

Objective for slide 7: Offer a working definition of belonging, describe the process of making meaning of cues in the environment, and introduce the role of identity and social group memberships.

Objective for slide 8: Introduce examples of what it can look like to affirm students' identities in school and provide student, teacher, and researcher perspectives on why it is important.

Additional notes:

- Dr. Camille Farrington mentions "white supremacist ideas and structures" in this video. If facilitating the presentation in a setting where this language (in the context of a brief video clip, without a full definition provided) is either legally restricted or will cause participants to shut down or retaliate, you may consider ending the video clip early.
- Dr. Farrington also uses the term "inclusion" in this video in a way that may be confusing compared to how it is used in other places in the presentation. If helpful, you may note that she uses it similarly to how "fitting in" is used in the warm up exercise.

Objective for slides 9 and 10: Describe self-reinforcing cycles (also known as recursive cycles) as one mechanism by which experiences related to belonging influence student outcomes. This concept can help participants understand why belonging concerns can have seemingly outsize impact, help them "walk in students' shoes," and continue to internalize the idea of interaction between person and environment.

Objective for slide 11: Give an example to illustrate self-reinforcing cycles. Show that meaning making is shaped by context -- put more specifically in the context of this example, schools systematically undermine Black students' belonging, making them more likely to interpret an ambiguous cue negatively.

Objective for slide 12: Describe the consequences of belonging concerns for cognition as a second mechanism by which experiences related to belonging influence student outcomes. This concept reinforces the connection between belonging and academic outcomes. Provide an example of a cue in the environment (i.e., in this case, gender representation at a STEM conference) influencing cognition.

Objective for slide 13: Show the magnitude and range of outcomes associated with belonging. Set up the transition to belonging-supportive environments in the next section by pointing out the pattern we see in which advantaged students' belonging is systematically supported by educational environments.

Objective for slide 14: Provide time and space to process the information from section two. Additionally, build participants' empathy for students by asking them to stretch outside of their comfort zone in an achievement context with their peers.

SECTION THREE: WHAT DO WE KNOW FROM RESEARCH ABOUT CREATING BELONGING-SUPPORTIVE ENVIRONMENTS?

Objective for slide 16: Make clear that our unit of change related to belonging is the learning environment, not students themselves. Provide a definition of belonging-supportive learning environments and a roadmap for the rest of the presentation (i.e., the implementation cycle).

Objective for slide 17: Illustrate that some practices, policies, and norms that are sometimes "taken for granted" within the culture of schooling undermine students' belonging. Show that two students can experience the same cue in the environment differently. Introduce (or refresh participants' understanding of) independent and interdependent cultural norms and how they show up in educational settings.

Additional note:

- If you'd like to facilitate a follow-up session to go deeper with your group on independent vs. interdependent norms, you could have participants complete the [Stanford SPARQ self-construal scale](#), and then have a brainstorming session / discussion about what these self-construals might mean in the classroom.

Objective for slide 18: Provide an example of shifting curriculum and instruction to affirm cultural values related to interdependence that many students hold.

Objective for slide 19: Introduce stereotypes and deficit-based narratives as another potentially "taken for granted" aspect of the culture of schooling, and communicate how detrimental they can be.

Objective for slide 20: Provide two examples of shifting educational structures to combat stereotypes (i.e., removing Native American school mascots) and deficit-based narratives (i.e., foregrounding marginalized communities' perspectives through an ethnic studies course).

Objective for slide 21: Provide participants (as individuals and as a group) with the term "critical awareness" as a label for the type of knowledge that is important to prompting the belonging-supportive shifts highlighted in the presentation so far. Highlight educators' agency and leadership in creating belonging-supportive environments.

Objective for slide 22: Get a sense for how the content is landing with participants, and give them an opportunity to map the information onto the implementation cycle introduced on slide 16. Set up the transition from considering educational practices, policies, and norms broadly in slides 16-21 to considering processes, tools, and frameworks they could use in their own context in the remainder of the presentation.

Objective for slide 23: Show an example of a classroom in which students' agency and contributions to the institution are valued. At the same time, explain that the capacity to gather and respond to student input is an important part of creating belonging-supportive environments.

Objective for slide 24: Provide another example of gathering student input that connects belonging-supportive environments with academic outcomes.

Objective for slide 25: Make clear that we can change learning environments in ways that matter for student outcomes. Model the vulnerability and responsiveness needed for creating belonging-supportive environments through a teacher's reflections.

Objective for slide 26: Give participants a framework for identifying practices, policies, and norms related to belonging in their environment. Emphasize that belonging is a structural issue, not purely an interpersonal issue.

Objective for slide 27: Give participants a framework for shifting practices, policies, and norms related to belonging in their environment. Emphasize the importance of going beyond symbolic or surface-level efforts to create spaces of belonging.

Objective for slide 28: Provide time and space to process the information from section three. Additionally, build participants' empathy for students by asking them to stretch outside of their comfort zone in an achievement context with their peers.

SECTION FOUR: WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR MY CONTEXT?

This section creates space to lead participants through a meaning making activity to process the information presented. We recommend that all participants have a strong foundation in the research before implementing ideas in practice.

Option 1
1. Take about 30 minutes for everyone to individually familiarize themselves with one case study.
    a. **Case study**: Watch episodes 2, 3, and 5 of the Kingmakers of Oakland Docu-Series and read about the program's impact
    b. **Case study**: Explore EL Education's character education framework, Crew videos, and student-engaged assessment videos
2. In breakout groups, communities of practice, or individually, consider:
    a. How do the program elements connect to research on belonging-supportive environments?
    b. What inspiration can we take from the program for our context?
    c. What are the near-term and long-term steps needed to act on that inspiration?
3. If applicable, facilitate a gallery walk and/or full-group discussion to share insights from all breakout groups.

Slide 32 provides a visual reference that can be used with activity option 1.

Option 2
Rather than case studies, you may want to organize breakout groups around pre-selected topics, or allow participants to choose their own topics to research further based on the rose, bud, thorn activity. Slides 33 and 34 include resources that can be used for learning and reflection, or to generate ideas to try out in practice.

Option 3
Use the frameworks from the presentation to guide reflection.

Depending on what resonates most for your audience and context, you may set up one of the frameworks from the presentation (i.e., a) the three characteristics of belonging-supportive environments [slide 16]; b) interpersonal, instructional, and institutional opportunities to belong [slide 26]; or c) challenging exclusion and promoting inclusion [slide 27]) on worksheets or on a wall or whiteboard where participants can add post-its, and ask them to brainstorm practices, policies, and norms in their context that they believe do or do not support student belonging, citing examples and evidence where possible.

You could also combine frameworks, for example by asking participants to fill out a table with the three characteristics of belonging-supportive environments listed on the x-axis and the interpersonal, instructional, and institutional labels listed on the y-axis. Participants could use different colored post-its or markers to indicate which practices, policies, and norms they consider to be supporting or undermining student belonging.

We recommend participants start by reading the source documents for these frameworks, *Structures for Belonging: A Synthesis of Research on Belonging-Supportive Environments*, and/or *Black and Belonging at School: A Case for Interpersonal, Instructional, and Institutional Opportunity Structures*.