UNIDOS US

STRONGER COMMUNITIES. STRONGER AMERICA.

Creating and Sustaining Preschool Children's Sense of Belonging in the Classroom

Introduction

In 2018, UnidosUS conducted ten focus groups with ECE teachers among our Affiliate organizations operating preschool programs. The focus groups involved 94 participants from around the U.S., working in state pre-K and federally funded ECE programs, who informed us about the strategies and practices they use to support Latinx children's learning and development.

Learning and Development: How Much Do Children's Feelings Matter?

In 2018, the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (NASEM) released *How People Learn II*, a synthesis of research on the processes and functions of human learning, which updates the initial version published in 2000.

One important change to the 2018 report is that children's *sense of belonging* is identified as a fundamental component of an effective learning environment:

"*Motivation to learn is fostered for learners of all ages when they perceive the school or learning environment is a place where they 'belong' and when the environment promotes their sense of agency and purpose*" (NASEM 2018, 25).

Schools and classrooms are social environments as much as they are places for academic learning. 'Belonging' has widely been regarded as a guiding principle for the education of adolescents, as it impacts a range of factors associated with well-being, identity, and learning (Allen and Bowles 2012). Although there are fewer studies of preschool-age children, several experiments demonstrated that children's sense of group membership was connected to increased motivation and learning (Master and Walton 2013). Clearly, if young children do *not* feel connected to their classroom, teachers, or peers, their potentials for learning and development are negatively impacted.

What Did We Learn from Our Focus Groups?

During our focus groups, UnidosUS asked participants: "*What does a good teacher do*?" We received many detailed responses, which were videotaped and analyzed.

Participants at all locations expressed a strong belief in the importance of children's social-emotional development and talked about working to build children's confidence, self-esteem and cultural identity. In particular, teachers emphasizing their role in creating and developing children's sense of belonging in their classrooms. As one teacher put it:

> *"I believe that we are the first teachers that impact children, you know, we're like planting the seed. So, whatever experience they gain with us is going ...towards them liking school or not liking school."*
>
> –Teacher, Inspire Development Centers, Sunnyside, WA

Focus group participants talked about creating and sustaining a strong sense of belonging for all children as an essential element of their responsibility as teachers. As the quote above indicates, some teachers also expressed the belief that their work has long-term implications for children's perceptions of future educational environments.

Creating a Sense of Belonging

The UnidosUS focus group participants described multiple strategies and practices to create and sustain children's sense of belonging in their classrooms, including:

1. Attending to children the moment they enter the classroom in the morning.
2. Offering children choices of activities, "studies," and materials.
3. Displaying and referring to child and family photos in the classroom.
4. Engaging in daily conversations with children that connect to their personal interests and experiences.
5. Fostering children's sense of classroom "ownership" through specific language modeling.
6. Establishing classroom routines that are predictable and supportive but not inflexible.
7. Integrating activities and materials that reflect the cultures and backgrounds of the children in the classroom.

Focus group participants described their implementation of these strategies as follows:

1. Attending to children the moment they enter the classroom in the morning.

> *"I have to be ready to go— to greet the children as soon as they arrive, to respond to whatever emotions or home experiences they are bringing in with them…. it's essential to connect with them from the very beginning [of the day] otherwise, the other children pick up on the lack of connections and that affects the whole day."*
>
> –Teacher, Para Los Niños, Los Angeles, CA

At every focus group, participants stated that they are intentional about actively greeting and interacting with children *as soon as* they arrive in the classroom each morning. Teachers identified this as a vital and necessary aspect of their work. The practice helps orient the children into the classroom environment; responds to the diverse emotional states that children bring to the classroom; and sets the stage for positive interactions during the entire day.

Participants reported that children come to recognize and to expect this type of interaction; therefore, it is essential to begin the day on a positive note. Teachers also noted that failure to implement this strategy often resulted in negative consequences (e.g., children demonstrated higher levels of depression or aggression and/or often did not engage in meaningful interactions during the day).

2. **Offering children choices of activities, "studies," and materials.**

> *"The teacher can have a little bit of choice by saying 'okay, we're going to do sand, or we're going to do instruments [music]. And then the children vote on which study they're doing. So, we're giving them voices, and we're teaching them how it is what you want to learn [that] is important. And it's funny because each of them has a different personality, so each of them gives a different choice of what they want to do. One enjoys science a lot, so they do that. One says, 'oh, I want to do insects.'"*
>
> –Teacher, Casa Azafrán, Nashville, TN

Teachers create and sustain a sense of belonging by offering children many choices throughout the day. For example, children may be asked to choose the activity they want to engage in as they enter the classroom in the morning. For some children this may involve movement and active play; for others, a chance to sit with a favorite book or to converse quietly with a teacher.

Teachers also offer children choices about what types of activities they can do during free play, such as going to the art area or playing with blocks. A child who chooses the art area may be offered the options of finger painting or painting at an easel; or choices regarding the types of colors or paintbrushes they can use.

"Studies" is a curriculum term that refers to a sustained approach to investigating and learning about material in depth. For example, a classroom may pursue a "study" of bugs, weather, or plants over a period of weeks or even months. Teachers spoke of offering children choices (voting) about the types of studies the class will pursue over a period of weeks or months as well as choices over specific topics or ideas to investigate and learn more about.

3. Displaying and referring to child and family photos in the classroom.

> *"We provide photos of the children throughout the classroom and photos of their families so that really makes them take ownership of the classroom."*
>
> –Teacher, Inspire Development Centers, Sunnyside, WA

> *"We've had children that actually will carry a picture of their parent with them throughout the day, that they can look at their parent and have it with them."*
>
> –Teacher, El Concilio, Stockton, CA

Participants spoke of posting photos in children's cubbies as well as in other areas of the classroom. Participants also spoke about referring to the photos during curriculum implementation and/or during conversations with children. Photos served as sources of conversations about children's interests, feelings, and experiences. Teachers encouraged children to discuss the photos of their own families and to make observations about the photos of other children. Teachers reported that they were able to extend their conversations with children by referring to information in the photos.

4. Engaging in daily conversations with children that connect to their personal interests and experiences.

> *"And he was always talking about hippos, like to get this and hippos like to eat that, and they live here, they live there, he wants me to talk about hippos but when I realized I didn't have any book about hippos…. I know my kids love the story of the Three Little Pigs. So, I made [up] the Three Little Hippos. Okay? So, it was a book. I take the book, but I was talking about hippos and he was so happy because I took the time to talk about something that he likes."*
>
> –Teacher, Guadalupe Centers, Kansas City, MO

Teachers spoke of initiating and sustaining conversations with children throughout the day and of the impacts that conversations can have upon children's sense of belonging in the classroom.

Teachers invited children to talk about their experiences at home during the morning greeting and about their interests during book reading. Teachers also talked while children were playing, sometimes by bringing out their 'inner child' and getting down on the child's level, talking to them about what they were doing. Teachers also mentioned the importance of responding to conversations initiated by children. They spoke of prioritizing their responses to child-initiated conversations and of building closer relationships with children through conversations.

Teachers also mentioned that they discover and explore children's individual interests and experiences during conversations. Teachers are able to observe children's development of language and thinking skills during conversations, especially after children have been enrolled for several months and conversations build on prior interactions and experiences.

5. Fostering children's sense of classroom ownership through specific language modeling.

> [This is how I talk to my children] *"These are the toys for **our** classroom. We have the responsibility to keep **our** toys in their place.* [And as a result] *When they take ownership of their classroom, it just flows nicer, they take ownership, they know this belongs to **us**. This is not the teacher's; this is not the program's. This is **my** classroom; this is **my** place...."*
>
> –Teacher, Inspire Development Centers, Sunnyside, WA

Teachers worked to create and sustain children's sense of belonging through intentional language modeling. Several teachers described the approach as not talking about "the classroom" or "the materials" but instead speaking about "our classroom" and "our materials" to the children. Teachers spoke about how their language use influenced children's learning and behavior and how children "absorbed" these messages over time and incorporated the learning into their own language.

6. Establishing classroom routines that are predictable and supportive but not inflexible.

> *"It's just bringing in those routines and just making them feel secure because you really can't move onto the next thing or teach them how to stay seated or to figure out who they are if they don't feel secure in that school setting."*
>
> –Teacher, Casa Azafrán, Nashville, TN

In every focus group, teachers stressed the importance of establishing predictable routines in their classrooms. Many teachers identified this as an essential skill acquired during their first years of teaching. Teachers widely agreed that implementing predictable routines— while being flexible to children's needs and interests— was necessary for children to feel safe and secure in the classroom, and this became the foundation for an effective learning environment.

At the same time, teachers emphasized the importance of flexibility. They did not describe "routines" as keeping to a rigid schedule, but rather as an intentional and transparent framework for operating the classroom in which children's individual needs and special circumstances were considered.

For children, predictable routines foster a sense of belonging, as children quickly come to understand how the day unfolds and how they can pursue their interests in the classroom. For teachers, classroom routines provide structure for interacting with children and for implementing a variety of learning experiences. When children know the classroom's routines, they can more easily focus on learning new words and ideas.

7. **Integrating activities and materials that reflect the cultures and backgrounds of the children in the classroom.**

> *"...they bring all that* [culture, home language(s), beliefs, and traditions] *to the classroom and we have to be aware of it."*
>
> –Teacher, Guadalupe Centers, Kansas City, MO

Honoring and respecting the children's family culture, home language, beliefs, and traditions was an important theme across all focus groups. Programs and teachers prioritize having classroom materials— toys, music, pictures, and books— that were inclusive of people from different races and ethnicities.

This outlook is strongly supported by the research. NASEM's How People Learn II states: "culture shapes every learning environment and the experience of each learner within that environment: learners who find the classroom environment unfamiliar, confusing, unwelcoming or unsupportive will be at a disadvantage" (p. 157). Creating a safe, welcoming, inclusive and representative environment promotes equity and optimal learning and development for all children in the classroom.

Best Practices

First, UnidosUS found that many teachers at our Affiliates prioritize creating and sustaining children's sense of belonging in their classrooms. They use strategies at the beginning of each day, from the beginning of the program year and throughout the program year, to connect with each child.

Second, teachers combine strategies to obtain maximum impact. For example, during an ongoing conversation with a child, a teacher may refer to a picture of the child's family to bring additional information or ideas into the conversation. Or, teachers may offer children choices of activities in the afternoon based on their conversations with children as they enter the classroom in the morning. Teachers evaluate children's responses and behaviors to their strategies and practices and adapt and refine strategy implementation over time.

Finally, many teachers bring a long-term perspective to their work. They see that creating and sustaining children's sense of belonging in the preschool classroom has consequential implications for children's performance and success in future educational settings.

For more information, contact Dr. Robert Stechuk, Director of ECE Programs, at rstechuk@unidosus.org.

About Us

UnidosUS, previously known as NCLR (National Council of La Raza), is the nation's largest Hispanic civil rights and advocacy organization. Through its unique combination of expert research, advocacy, programs, and an Affiliate Network of nearly 300 community-based organizations across the United States and Puerto Rico, UnidosUS simultaneously challenges the social, economic, and political barriers that affect Latinos at the national and local levels.

For more than 50 years, UnidosUS has united communities and different groups seeking common ground through collaboration, and that share a desire to make our country stronger.

Latinos will soon represent nearly 30% of all students enrolled in U.S. schools. Our success as a nation is tied to their success, and UnidosUS's education work is dedicated to ensuring all children have access to quality education.Our education programs, policy, and advocacy ensure that all kids have the opportunity to become empowered adults. We work with practitioners, policymakers, and advocates to develop and promote best practices that help students succeed from early childhood programs through college and beyond.

For more information on UnidosUS, visit unidosus.org or follow us on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter.

References

Allen, Kelly A. and Terence Bowles. 2012. "Belonging as a Guiding Principle in the Education of Adolescents." *Australian Journal of Educational & Developmental Psychology, 12,* 108-119.

Master, Allison and Gregory M. Walton. 2013. "Minimal Groups Increase Young Children's Motivation and Learning on Group-Relevant Tasks." *Child Development, 84,* 737-751.

National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. 2018. *How People Learn II: Learners, Contexts, and Cultures*. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press. https://doi.org/10.17226/24783.

National Research Council. 2000. *How People Learn: Brain, Mind, Experience, and School: Expanded Edition*. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press. https://doi.org/10.17226/9853.