# BANDWIDTH RECOVERY FOR SCHOOLS

## Helping Pre-K–12 Students Regain Cognitive Resources Lost to Poverty, Trauma, Racism, and Social Marginalization

*Cia Verschelden*

*Foreword by Kofi Lomotey*

**St**y/us

Bulk Purchases

Quantity discounts are available for use in workshops and for staff development.

Call 1-800-232-0223

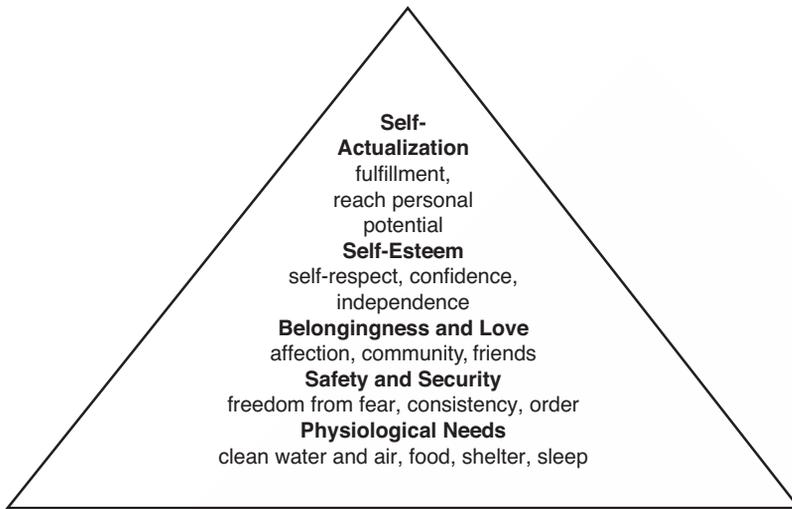First Edition, 2021

# 2

---

# BELONGING UNCERTAINTY

All humans have a need to belong. If you have ever been in a place where you were unsure if you would be accepted and affirmed, you have an idea of the importance of belonging. Without that sense, part of you is always on the alert, wondering, "Will I be safe? Will I be loved? How will I manage?" The lack of a sense of belonging can be a major bandwidth stealer. According to Kids Matter (n.d.), belonging is critical for kids in school:

> All children need to feel that school is a safe place where people will care about them, where their needs for support, respect and friendship will be met, and where they will be able to get help to work out problems. When these needs are met children develop a sense of belonging at school. Belonging is very important for children's mental health and wellbeing.
>
> Children who feel that they belong at school are happier, more relaxed and have fewer behavioural problems than other students. They are also more motivated to learn and be more successful with their school work. Research into children's mental health has found that a sense of belonging and connectedness at school helps to protect children against mental health difficulties and improves their learning. (paras. 1–2)

Way back in 1943, Abraham Maslow wrote that humans have several levels of needs, and, ideally, the most basic needs are satisfied so that the more advanced ones are possible (Figure 2.1). Related to children and adolescents in school, if they do not have the basics in their home environment—clean water and air, food, shelter, sleep—we know that their ability to succeed in school is diminished. That is why we have breakfast and lunch programs in schools for children whose nutritional needs are not met at home. The next level is freedom from fear, an environment characterized by consistency and some reasonable sense of

**Figure 2.1.**    Maslow's hierarchy of needs.



**Self-Actualization**
fulfillment,
reach personal
potential
**Self-Esteem**
self-respect, confidence,
independence
**Belongingness and Love**
affection, community, friends
**Safety and Security**
freedom from fear, consistency, order
**Physiological Needs**
clean water and air, food, shelter, sleep

*Note.* Adapted from Maslow (1943).

order. Research on the effects of poverty on children (chapter 1) indicates that these are things often missing in the day-to-day lives of poor and low-income children, thus the term *economic insecurity*. Other sources of uncertainty that cut across social class are parental physical and mental illness; drug and alcohol addictions; and family, neighborhood, and school violence, resulting in unpredictable, even chaotic, children's lives. Extended families and communities can provide stability and care for children and youth in partnership with schools, which are often places where children can be free of fear, count on things being in order, and have predictability.

Maslow would suggest that only when children are free of fear can they even be open to affection and love, connecting with other kids in friend relationships, and feeling like they are part of a mutually supportive community. It seems to me that it is only when a child feels safe and loved can they be their full self, bringing their heart and mind to the task of learning. A child has to have some reasonable degree of self-confidence and independence before they can think for themself, accept and analyze new information, and learn.

Given the importance of belonging for children and adolescents, we need to carefully examine our school environments and the ways these environments support or hinder a sense of belonging for all students, specifically for certain vulnerable groups of students. There are groups of students who, because of messages from within our schools and from the larger society,

might be more likely to feel insecure about belonging. I will briefly discuss four of these groups to illustrate the concept of the belonging challenge: out-of-school suspension students; students living in immigrant families; students with physical or intellectual disabilities, developmental disorders, and/or mental health challenges; and students who fall outside a strict gender binary.

## Out-of-School Suspension

The suspension or expulsion of a student can send the message that "kids like you don't belong here." This message is communicated to not only those who are excluded but also their classmates. It is made clear to everyone "that belonging to the classroom community is conditional, not absolute, contingent upon their willingness and ability to be a certain kind of person" (Shalaby, 2017, p. 162).

In the United States, non-White students are much more likely than their White classmates to experience punishment, suspension, and expulsion in schools. I think this speaks volumes about the relative value placed on students of color and the marginalizing effect of "zero tolerance" policies that require schools to inflict harsh punishments, often suspension or expulsion, for certain behaviors. In the service of creating safe school climates, the concept of zero tolerance has resulted in the increased use of consequences that disproportionately remove some groups of children from opportunities to learn (Skiba & Rausch, 2006). This starts early; "black children are 3.6 times more likely to be suspended from preschool than white children," according to the U.S. Department of Education (Gilliam et al., 2016). A 2015 study of California schools (Loveless, 2017) found that for every 1,000 Black students, 178 received out-of-school suspension, compared to just 52 Hispanic students, 44 White students, 12 Asian students, and 54 students overall. A U.S. Department of Education (2016) study of students receiving special education services in over 17,000 school districts showed that from 2011 to 2014, the percentage of students who received out-of-school suspension (10 days or less) varied widely by race/ethnicity: 5% of Black students versus 0.3% Hispanic, 0.2% Native American/Alaska Natives, 0.09% White, and 0.02% Asian students. Skiba et al. (2014) conducted a meta-analysis of data on out-of-school suspensions and expulsions and concluded that race is a significant predictive factor. However, the effect of race disappeared when they took into account school characteristics, such as percentage of Black student enrollment (consistent with data that relate the percentage of non-White school enrollment with other quality measures) and principals' attitudes toward discipline.

They concluded that, to address the disproportionate punishment of Black students, it would be more productive to focus on school variables rather than on the students and their family characteristics.

I relate these statistics about out-of-school suspension to make the case that exclusion—in this case real, physical separation, naturally communicates to students that they do not belong. Landers (2018) asserted that "exclusion damages our students' futures" (p. 22). In addition to being taken away from the opportunity to learn, the social isolation of out-of-school suspension must exacerbate feelings of marginalization and belonging uncertainty in children and adolescents. I further suggest that even for the majority of Black children who are not suspended, the effects of vicarious racism may negatively affect the bandwidth of Black students in general. They empathize with their Black classmates who are suspended and realize that, within this school climate, they may be next, decreasing their "freedom from fear," which is so important to their sense of belonging.

## Students Living in Immigrant Families

Immigrant children may experience persistent fear in their lives. Especially in the current political climate in the United States, security has become very tenuous for immigrant children, whether or not they themselves are undocumented. The number of affected children is significant. There were 44 million immigrants (not U.S.-born) living in the United States in 2016, which was 13.5% of the total population (Zong et al., 2018). In the same year, 26% of children (nearly 18 million) in the United States lived in families that included at least one parent who was an immigrant. Most of those children (88%) were themselves born in the United States; among children ages 0 years old to 5 years old, 93.5% were born in the United States (Migration Policy Institute, n.d.). In 2013, India and China surpassed Mexico in numbers of immigrants entering the United States (Chrishti & Hipsman, 2015); however, those from Mexico are still the largest group of immigrants in the United States at 26%, compared to 6% from India; 5% from China; 4% from the Phillipines; 3% each from El Salvador, Vietnam, and Cuba; and 2% to 2.5% each from South Korea and Guatemala (Zong et al., 2018).

Menjívar and Cervantes (2016) describe some of the negative "spillover" effects on children when immigration policy goes beyond the person who is targeted for enforcement. A significant spillover effect is related to work, as parents are likely to be in low-wage jobs that have little long-term security and in which labor violations cannot be challenged for fear of discovery of illegal status, making these workers vulnerable to exploitation and dangerous work conditions. Low-wage jobs come with persistent financial insecurity,

and stresses about paying bills and rent can result in families living in sub-standard housing, experiencing frequent moves, and living in overcrowded conditions. Children of undocumented workers have lower educational attainment than other children, and young children in these families are less likely to be in early learning environments. In families in which a member is undocumented, the adults avoid contact with government agencies for fear of detection, so children do not have access to some of the social and health services that might be helpful to them. All of this can have very negative effects on children.

> The possibility of losing a parent to deportation, having to hide a family member's legal status, and living in fear of authority and in social marginal-ity has consequences on children's mental wellbeing including high rates of anxiety, depression, fear, attention problems and rule-breaking behaviors (Delva et al., 2013). (Menjívar & Cervantes, 2016, para. 8)

As I discussed in chapter 1 with reference to children who live with the stress of poverty or persistent economic insecurity, it is clear that given the conditions listed here, the bandwidth of immigrant children is severely depleted, leaving them less able to learn and to succeed in school. In *Forgotten Citizens*, Zayas (2015) reported on his studies of U.S.-born children of undocumented immigrants. He asserted that stress "affects the child's education performance, their developmental trajectories, how they achieve things. It affects the entire neurobiology of a child" (quoted in Edwards, 2018, p. 38).

## Students With Physical or Intellectual Disabilities, Developmental Disorders, and/or Mental Health Challenges

Feeling a sense of belonging is a struggle for many of us, including normally developing children and youth. For those who have intellectual, developmental, and physical disabilities, the need to fit in and be part of the group may be especially challenging, adding even more uncertainty to an already stressful school experience.

Three of my four children received special education services for various things from learning disabilities to gifted enhancements, so I know the system from the parent side. I remember lots of documents and meetings and receiving many copies of "Parents' Rights." However, I was a college professor mom in a college town with an excellent public school system, so I suspect my experience does not reflect that of many parents and students in the United States who are in less well-resourced situations. I focused my research on trying to understand what it is like for children and youth who

have disabilities related to their sense of belonging in school, which is so critical for all students, academically and socially.

In the 2017–2018 school year, 7 million students ages 3 years to 21 years (14% of all students) in U.S. public schools received special education services. The distribution by type was 34% specific learning disability, 19% speech or language impairment, 14% other health impairment, 10% autism, 7% developmental delay, 6% intellectual disability, 5% emotional disturbance, 2% multiple disabilities, 1% hearing impairment, and 1% orthopedic impairment (McFarland et al., 2019). Among students ages 6 to 21 years, 63% spent 80% or more of the school day in regular general education classrooms (up from 47% in 2000) (McFarland et al., 2019). This inclusion model conforms to the "least restrictive environment" directive in the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA). IDEA is the most recent version of the 1975 law that guaranteed a free appropriate public education for every child with a disability (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.) and is generally accepted as best for students (Kimbrough & Mellen, 2012; Robinson & Truscott, 2014). Inclusion presents bandwidth challenges and opportunities for everyone in the school community.

In my reading about students with disabilities and differently developing students, I found several overarching messages from and about these students and their parents.

- *For many students, the actual "dis-ability" is primarily a result of social and cultural factors in the school and in society.* (See the definition of *disability* from the New Zealand Ministry of Social Development in chapter 18, this volume.)
- *Belonging is not a "special need"* (Turner, 2019, para. 1). All humans need a sense of belonging in order to survive and thrive. Students with disabilities are no different than other students in this way. "Everyone is diminished by a narrow focus on inclusion, which leaves some members of the school community feeling like they don't belong" (Robinson & Truscott, 2014, para. 2).
- *Not belonging is often more disabling than the disability itself* (Daley et al., 2018; Foley et al., 2012). Exclusion or outright rejection deplete bandwidth for students with disabilities, adding to the depletion that results from the social and learning challenges related to their disabling condition.
- *Belonging and having even one friend can act as protective factors against bullying and discrimination for students with disabilities* (Daley et al., 2018; Robinson & Truscott, 2014).

- *Inclusion is not just about sharing space.* There is a large gulf between accepting the presence of "special" students and valuing them as part of the school community (Robinson & Truscott, 2014). "Inclusion is built on the premise that all students should be valued for their unique abilities and included as essential members of a school community. Inclusion is not a place; it is a way of thinking" (Causton-Theoharis & Theoharis, 2008, p. 25).
- *Authentic inclusion is a school system issue, not an individual student issue* (Robinson & Truscott, 2014). We need to be student-ready schools rather than putting the onus entirely on students and their families to be school-ready (White, 2019).
- *This is a whole-school issue in which everyone needs to be "all-in."* A commitment to inclusion is best done full on; if not, exclusion is a too-easy default (Causton-Theoharis & Theoharis, 2008). The transition to full inclusion takes individual and organizational bandwidth and requires a resource commitment to professional development, collaboration, leader support, and open and authentic communication with students and parents.

## Students Who Fall Outside a Strict Gender Binary

Last, before we leave the conversation about belonging, I want to address this crucial need for children and adolescents who are transgender or *gender-expansive*, a term that is defined by the Human Rights Campaign as "an adjective used to describe people that identify or express themselves in ways that broaden the culturally defined behavior or expression associated with one gender" (Welcoming Schools, n.d., p. 2). Partially because there are many new terms to describe gender identity and gender-expansiveness, it can sometimes seem like the issues are unendingly complex. As teachers, education professionals, and leaders, we may feel that we should spend more time researching and trying to understand the issues before we make significant changes in our schools and the way we treat students. Chaz Bono, in an interview in the *New York Times*, simplified things regarding transgender people: "There's a gender in your brain and a gender in your body. For 99 percent of people, those things are in alignment. For transgender people, they're mismatched. That's all it is. It's not complicated, it's not a neurosis. It's a mix-up" (quoted in Wilson, 2011, para. 19). My sense is that we have to act now to transform our schools into gender-safe places for everyone. We may make some mistakes because we do not fully understand some of the more nuanced issues about the life experiences of our students. But if we are genuine in our intentions and honest in our actions

and communications, I feel confident that the environments we create will be better for all students and the adults in their lives.

Although gender identity is not a new issue, there are conversations happening, especially in elementary schools, which have not occurred in the past. There is a developing awareness that some children feel like they do not fit in the gender role they were assigned at birth and some young children and adolescents just want to *be*, without having to fit into someone else's idea of "girl" or "boy." Parents are realizing that they need to pay attention to the statements of even their very young children about their gender identity. For most of us, this is new territory, so we need to be patient with each other and try to do the best we can to nurture and value all students. Students themselves may be very hesitant to talk about their feelings or to "come out" to teachers and classmates for fear of rejection, or even abuse or violence from classmates or others. They may want to keep a low profile and hope no one notices, leaving them in a situation of survival and unable to thrive (Orr & Baum, n.d.).

According to Martin and Ruble (2010), children between the ages of 18 months and 24 months understand the concept of gender, are able to label people by gender, and use gendered words in speech. By 18 months, most children have a sense of themselves, and begin to look around and observe what that means and how they should behave (Baldwin & Moses, 1996). They quickly figure out what are girl toys and boy toys and what are girl things to do and what are boy things to do. At the same time, gender seems to be a fluid concept; for instance, children believe they can change their gender by wearing different clothes or participating in a different activity. By the time they are 6 or 7 years old, they know that gender is something that stays the same for life (Bem, 1989). And although most children settle into the gender that matches their physical sex characteristics, some children seem to know early on that there was a "mix-up."

Young children are often very insistent and consistent in their ideas about their gender. I once heard a girl, at about age 4 years, watching a male friend sew on a button say, "Men can't sew." A father of a 4-year-old told me that his biologically male child, at an early age, told his mom, "I'm like you, not like Daddy." As it has become clear that their child is a girl, these parents worked with her kindergarten teacher and school to make sure both the classroom and the playground were environments where she could be her true self.

If a family refuses to acknowledge their child's gender identity, that child may experience serious psychological damages and problems developing healthy interpersonal relationships. The child can become withdrawn at home and at school and have an inability to concentrate and learn in school.

"The longer a transgender youth is not affirmed, the more significant and long-lasting the negative consequences can become, including loss of interest in school, heightened risk for alcohol and drug use, poor mental health and suicide" (Orr & Baum, n.d., p. 8).

In the National Transgender Discrimination Survey (Grant et al., 2011), data was gathered from 6,450 transgender and gender-nonconforming people. Of those who had expressed their transgender or nonconforming identity in their K–12 school years, most reported experiencing one or more negative incidents at school, including harassment (78%) and physical assault (35%), and 15% said they had left school because of the mistreatment. Attempted suicide was reported by 41% of respondents, compared to a rate of 1.6% for the general population. For those who reported that they had been harassed or bullied in school, the rate of attempted suicide was 51%. According to the survey report,

> Respondents who have been harassed and abused by teachers in K–12 settings showed dramatically worse health and other outcomes than those who did not experience such abuse. Peer harassment and abuse also had highly damaging effects. (p. 3)

Transgender adults are becoming more "out" in media and culture, and we are seeing that children are realizing and claiming their transgender status when they are quite young. Parents and teachers and extended families are having to learn how to support these young people who are trying to make sense out of life and figuring out how to live as their authentic selves. We are finding out that the attitudes of "He's just going through a phase" and "She's just confused" have been devastating to children and young people, and that we need to figure out how to love and support them.

Transgender and gender-expansive children need special kinds of supports that require the establishment of classroom environments in which all children feel accepted and safe being fully who they are. According to Orr and Baum (n.d.) and their colleagues in *Schools in Transition: A Guide for Supporting Transgender Students in K–12 Schools*:

> The expression of transgender identity, or any other form of gender-expansive behavior, is a healthy, appropriate and typical aspect of human development. A gender-expansive student should never be asked, encouraged or required to affirm a gender identity or to express their gender in a manner that is not consistent with their self-identification or expression. Any such attempts or requests are unethical and will likely cause significant emotional harm. It is irrelevant whether a person's objection to a student's identity or expression is based on sincerely held religious beliefs or the

belief that the student lacks capacity or ability to assert their gender identity or expression (e.g., due to age, developmental disability or intellectual disability). (p. 3)

The authors also point out that there are often trust issues based on the past experiences of students and families with educational institutions. Care needs to be taken to establish—or reestablish—confidence in the teacher and the school related to both their intentions and their actions that demonstrate their trustworthiness and competence to create an environment in which these young students can thrive. Teachers and schools can create learning environments that are not only critical to gender-expansive students but also positive, enriching places for everyone, including classmates, parents, teachers, and the greater school community.