Importance of Belonging for Youth Hope and Wellbeing

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Through this program, I met new people who are now my closest friends and they care deeply about me... If I hadn’t met them, I would have never met some of my other friends. If I didn’t, I think I would still be lost and not as open as I am right now...They give me hope.

– After School Matters Teen

Belonging, Hope, and Youth Development

Belonging is a fundamental human need that is especially important during adolescence – feelings of belonging play a crucial role in youth developing strong connections with their peers and communities, figuring out who they are, and finding their place in the world. Educational environments are critical sites for young people to experience opportunities to belong (SoLD Alliance, 2020). Belonging in school is not only predictive of greater academic achievement, but also more positive socio-emotional outcomes, such as greater happiness, life satisfaction, adjustment, self-esteem, and positive self-identity (Allen et al., 2018; Healey & Stroman, 2021). Importantly, belonging in school has also been linked to a greater sense of hope (Dixon, 2020; Sulimani-Aidan & Melkman, 2022). Hope, or one’s perceived ability to imagine a better future coupled with one’s perceived capacity to achieve future goals, is one of the most powerful predictors of flourishing across a variety of contexts and can serve as a transformative force in the face of adversity and stress (Bryce et al., 2019; Ciarrochi et al., 2015; Lopez et al., 2010). These findings suggest that belonging and hope are vital resources in the lives of young people.

Understanding the types of spaces in which young people can socialize, heal, grow, belong, and prepare for their futures is particularly important when we consider that the COVID-19 pandemic has been a period of significant challenges and disrupted connections for many young people. The pandemic triggered an experience of mass trauma that exacerbated existing systemic inequities, including poverty and violence (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2021; Ann and Robert H. Lurie Children’s Hospital of Chicago, 2021; Lopez, Hart, & Katz, 2021). In December 2021, the US Surgeon General issued an advisory on the National Youth Mental Health Crisis further exposed by the pandemic. Creating affirming and empowering environments is especially important for youth from marginalized groups that are often expected to engage, learn, and thrive in exclusionary or oppressive environments (Healey & Stroman, 2020; SoLD Alliance, 2020).
While much of the research around belonging and hope has focused on school environments, some of the most powerful belonging practices and ecosystems exist in youth development spaces. Belonging is often core to the mission and design of youth development programming—environments that prioritize and intentionally support mentorship, caring relationships, collaboration, youth choice, and leadership opportunities (Parchia, 2021; Vossoughi, 2017). Youth development spaces hold the potential to positively and significantly impact well-being and hopefulness among youth. To this end, we examined how a large youth development organization in Chicago—After School Matters—has worked to foster belonging, and how it is related to youth well-being and hopefulness.

**Fostering Ecosystems of Belonging in a Youth Development Organization**

After School Matters (ASM) is a nonprofit organization in Chicago that provides afterschool and summer opportunities to public high school teens to explore their passions and develop their talents in the arts, communications and leadership, sports, and STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics), while gaining critical skills for work, college, and beyond. ASM programs are project based and led by instructors who are industry experts, with a goal of providing pathways to progress in skills development and self-actualization. In addition to content area exploration and skill development, creating warm and welcoming spaces where teens can lead, collaborate, and build strong, healthy relationships with peers and instructors is also an essential component of ASM’s program model.

ASM works to achieve this by building strong ecosystems of belonging – processes, practices, and systems that help cultivate a sense of acceptance and connection in our instructor and teen communities (Allen, Vella-Brodrick, & Waters, 2016; National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2019). Key components include:

1. **Individual coaching from program staff** throughout the year to provide thought partnership and resources that help instructors create environments where teens can belong and thrive.
2. **Specialized supports for new instructors** including training in youth development best practices, curriculum planning tools and support, and an introduction to a community of peers to learn in solidarity with throughout their first cycle of programming.
3. **Comprehensive professional development workshops** that operate from a model of parallel practice – the belief that adult learning spaces should mirror the warmth, connection, and sense of community that we strive for in teen spaces. Instructors can attend 6 or more hours of professional development each program cycle with topics including trauma and healing, anti-oppressive practices, and fostering connections and collaboration. Instructors also attend regular communities of practice in which they support one another, build on community knowledge, and collectively refine their practice.
4. **Continuous quality improvement processes** including teen and instructor surveys as well as external observations of programs that allow us to assess programmatically and organizationally where we are, develop data-informed plans for supports and improvement, and continually adapt our belonging ecosystem.

By emphasizing community care in our professional development offerings and amplifying instructor and youth input, After School Matters aims to continually strengthen and nurture the ecosystems of belonging in our teaching and learning communities.
Evaluating the Link Between Belonging, Well-Being, & Hope

In partnership with the American Institutes for Research, After School Matters examined teen experiences during the pandemic, as well as the benefits of ASM programs in remote and in-person environments (Young et al., 2022). As part of this larger study, over 4,000 teens were surveyed during ASM’s Summer 2021 program session to examine how connections with instructors and peers may impact teens. In particular, validated scales were used to assess the relationships between:

- Instructor supportiveness (e.g., trustworthy, respectful, valued input, open to feedback)
- Sense of belonging in an out-of-school time program
- Current well-being
- Hopefulness for the future

Analyses revealed that teens’ sense of belonging in their ASM program was significantly, positively correlated with the support they received from their instructor(s) ($p < .001$). In other words, teens who reported feeling more supported by their instructors were more likely to feel like they belonged in their out-of-school time program. Crucially, teens who felt a greater sense of belonging or instructor support were also more likely to report more positive well-being and a greater sense of hopefulness about their future ($ps < .001$). The vast majority of teens also shared that participating in their program helped them lessen and manage their stress (84% of teens) and made them more hopeful for their future (78% of teens).

Qualitative feedback from teens reinforced this striking connection between belonging and hope. In open-ended survey feedback, many teens shared that they were more hopeful about their future after participating in their program specifically because of the personal connections they developed and mentorship they received.

One teen said:

"Being in a group of people that shared my interests and seeing that there are plenty of people... like this that are accepting, good people that are in life. I am hopeful to meet more people like them and find a similar space for myself in the future."
Another stated:

“What made me hopeful is my instructors having a very comforting talk about everything that’s happening in the world right now. They didn’t try to push anything aside or try to hide anything, they were just real, but also gave reassurance. I didn’t know what career path to look forward to, and now I have an idea of what I’m going to go to college for. [I now know] what I want to do with my life and [how to] be happy while doing it. That came right from a talk with the instructors. I’m just very happy and appreciative of the fact that I got to come across and have those people in my life.”

Overall, these findings expand on existing work in school environments by highlighting the importance of relationships with instructors and peers in youth development spaces, and the potential influence these connections may have on elevating hopefulness and well-being among teens. While the study was correlational in design and causality cannot be determined, this is an exciting and important area for further inquiry in youth development.

Implications for the Youth Development Community

These findings give us the opportunity to look at hope and well-being as something that can be cultivated, nurtured, and strengthened in a youth development setting and invite us to consider the powerful impact that high-quality environments can have on youth outcomes and outlooks. If youth system builders can foster ecosystems of belonging, this may have powerful implications not only for deepening a young person’s sense of hope and well-being, but also their ability to envision and pursue a more positive future for themselves and their communities. Considering this turbulent moment in time coming out of a global pandemic that heightened pre-existing ‘pandemics’ of structural racism and inequity, creating spaces where young people feel a sense of belonging and hopefulness about their future is perhaps more important now than ever.
References


