A House Divided Cannot Stand:

Exploring Belonging as a Determinant of Student Success

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*“Let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds,**not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another.”*

*~Hebrews 10:24-25*

 Walking down the halls of Medicine Hat High School, I was struck with a sense of insecurity and isolation. The students spewed forth from their classes in a flurry of indifference towards the likes of others in their path, save for small pockets of students who had carved out for themselves bastions of solidarity in alcoves and benches. In the classroom, students fought for acceptance in cliques of likeminded individuals; some found success, while others were left alone or resented by their group members. In bathrooms, graffiti vomited on the walls expressed such base views as, “to [*sic*] many fa\*\*\*ts in this school #pride #fa\*\*\*t #kill ur self”. However, around the school, lighthouses of community offered acceptance and respite from the gauntlet of alienation. In nearly every case, teachers, who saw the need to create a space for them, facilitated these meeting places. Without these, students invariably turned to their source of consistent simulated belonging: their phones.

 My research indicated that ‘Hat High’ was not an exception in this regard. In 2000 Osterman reviewed a number of publications on the issue and found that “for the most part students and researchers describe schools as alienating institutions” (p. 360). Yet there is considerable reason to care about changing this. To begin, “students who experience acceptance are more highly motivated and engaged in learning and more committed to school” (Osterman, 2000, p. 359). Additionally, Tian (2015) found a link between school belonging and subjective well being. Students are also healthier in an environment that promotes participation and empowerment, according to research by Samdel (2011). Furthermore, in a study by Hart et al., their analyses indicated, “high school extracurricular participation was associated with higher rates of volunteering and voting in presidential elections in early adulthood (2007, p. 213). Not only does school community involvement lead to high civic engagement, the researchers found that classroom education on the subject was ineffective, stating: “the relation of high school coursework in the social sciences to civic knowledge was surprisingly weak (Hart et al, 2007, p. 213). Finally, Demanet and Mieke found results showing “students’ individual feelings of bonding with peers, teachers and school associate with school misconduct, rather than the overall school cohesion. Results further showed that, while higher perceived teacher support and school belonging related to less school misconduct, higher peer attachment was associated with higher rates of school misconduct” (2012, p. 499). In other words, school wide community building and undirected peer relationships are not as beneficial as focused group cohesion for student success.

 With this in mind, I set about investigating small, teacher-facilitated groups wherein relationships could be fostered. Some were formal, such as the student council in which two teachers worked with students to create a pep rally during my time there, while others were informal – such as the office of my teacher mentor, in which drama students met every day. The subject matter of the group played a part for the students, as they were able to find a sense of belonging through likeminded identification with their subculture or interests. For instance, an ESL group met after school each day to work with local students for peer support in learning and integration into the community, yet the club also served to provide the students with a sense of belonging that was often missing for these students. As well, the work these clubs did served to arm the whole community with knowledge and support for minority groups such as immigrants and LGBT youth. Research on the matter reveals this phenomenon, such as Van Der Wildt’s study, which “found a significant positive effect of tolerant practices towards multilingualism on sense of belonging” (2015). Likewise, the work by the student council not only increased the member’s knowledge of governance, but also fostered community spirit in the school as a whole.

 Yet even in cases where students seemed to run the clubs, such as the comic book and chess club, they existed only when teachers facilitated the usage of the space and equipment. When renovations reduced space, these clubs dissolved. I found that most of the clubs were headed by a teacher with an interest in the subject who kept it going – be it the welding club run by the shop teacher, anime club run by the cosmetology teacher, GSA run by the counselor, or the art and comic book club run by the art teacher. Research seems to indicate that the teachers themselves play a role in feelings of school belongingness, as “students’ school belonging was lower when students perceived their relationships with teachers and other adults at their school as negative, and higher when teacher–student relationships were perceived as positive” (Crouch, 2014, p. 26). Thus it seems it is not enough to simply provide space for student relationships and activities, but teachers play an active role in student’s feelings of belonging at school. Where better to build such relationships than in one of these groups?

 Motivated by this thought, I ventured to visit each of these clubs in turn during my lunch hour or after school to interact with the students. The students proved very welcoming, engaging in conversation and including me in their activities. For instance, one day the students invited me to join them for a round of wonton mayhem in a virtual battle to the death; I am happy to report I narrowly escaped being the first to die. During these times I was able to learn more about the students and their lives, partly due to the informal nature of the meetings, and partly because the students were able to convey a passion of theirs to me. Moreover, I also watched to see how the various teachers facilitated these groups. Sometimes they offered advice, other times just a space to meet. Sometimes they demanded work, at other times encouraged rest. In each case, the well being of the students was the priority and, whenever possible, the teachers encouraged their groups to work collaboratively. Inspired by this, I decided to incorporate a project I was already doing with one of my classes in which individuals trade up from a paperclip to more valuable items into my T.A. period. Partaking in the assignment myself, I found that asking for trades was a good excuse to get to know the students. Now we have created a trading circle each day, and I am able to ask them about their lives and make a small connection with them.

 In my future practice as a teacher, I hope to create a student club that aligns with the interests of both myself and the students, such as a drama, chess, parkour, medieval, or film club. Additionally, I plan to create meeting spaces for students in my classes to build relationships with each other, and myself. Furthermore, I will advocate to the school administration for the support of such groups. While some may see such endeavors as a waste of time, space, and money, buying anti-bullying posters will never be as effective as students making them, nor will ESL focused classroom instruction have the impact that engaging with other ESL students will. Research indicates “during years in which high school students had a strong connection to their school, they were more likely to feel that school was enjoyable and useful… school belonging may help high school students continue to enjoy school and appreciate its usefulness, even when they are struggling academically. Given that these academic values are associated with increased educational persistence and graduation rates the current study suggests that school belonging may be a promising intervention to reduce school dropout” (Neel & Fuligni, 2013, p. 689). Thus, while these groups may not increase student GPA, they may be the only reason some students come to school at all.

 Almost everyone can agree on the value of education. Without it, our society would turn to darkness in a generation. Yet what we teach remains contentious – are we as teachers preparing citizens and self-directed learners, or arming them with content knowledge? Some may say memorization is vital and the foundation for all future learning. Others will argue that who you grow to be is more important than what you learn to know. The truth is likely somewhere in the middle. However, our school classrooms are largely places where knowledge is taught at the neglect of character. For this, social groups and student clubs offer a solution. In the words of Stendhal, “One can acquire everything in solitude except character” (1958). Not only this, but a social club may provide a reason the come to school at all, and be the only place of support and acceptance in a student’s life. For teachers who believe education is just about content knowledge, the realization that the desks in their classes are empty may be enough to cause them to support a student group. Ultimately though, the mental and physical well being of the students is more important than any teacher’s agenda. Perhaps during a time of life so wrought with turmoil, granting an adolescent the freedom to spend his lunch hour engaging in unfettered virtual carnage on his peers may be the greatest gift of all.

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