BELONGING

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To the master community builder, Coach Pittman

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BELONGING

How Social Connection Can Heal, Empower, and Educate Kids

DUSTIN BINDREIFF

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Dustin Bindreiff has worked at every level of education, from beginning his career as a teacher's aide to now providing technical assistance and training to school districts. Working with underserved students for more than 20 years gave Dustin firsthand experience meeting the need for behavioral and mental health supports in schools. As an avid researcher, Dustin pairs his practical experience with knowledge of equity, mental health, neuroscience, and building systems of supports to empower teachers with practical tools to build community.

His experience in providing behavior support has led him to be a sought-after trainer, presenting at multiple regional and national conferences. He has presented on topics such as Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, Growth Mindset, Implicit Bias, and more. He is a dedicated researcher and author publishing multiple articles each year on topics such as mental health, equity, and the neuroscience. Combining a passion for data with an in-depth knowledge of equity and achievement factors, he has helped numerous schools identify predictive data measures that drive student success. As a teacher and professor, he is known and respected for his ability to connect and engage with hard-to-reach students who have experienced extensive traumas and repeated school failure. Relying on his experience as a paraeducator, teacher and behavior analyst, a central focus of Dustin's research has been empowering teachers with interventions that teachers can consistently implement. His blend of experience and research allows him to bridge gaps between theory and action. As a result of these contributions, in 2021 he was recognized as an inspiring educator.

For more on Dustin and his work, visit drdustyb.com and thebookonbelonging.com.

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INTRODUCTION

If you are like many, you may have noticed some concerning trends with kids in recent years. Perhaps you, too, have been trying to understand the angst and sadness that now seems so common. Each year it seems harder to find the innocence, joy, and curiosity that have traditionally been natural parts of childhood. Instead, for many, childhood today seems to be filled with loneliness, anxiety, and sadness.

In 2019, the Center for Disease Control (CDC) found that over 13% of children had received mental health treatment in the past year. In total, 1 in 10 kids received therapy, and 1 in 12 received prescription medication to address their mental health. As most therapists know, many more needed mental health services, but didn't access it. Additionally, the number of students near clinical levels of need for mental health support has been rising steadily. For example, the traits of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD): impulsiveness, disorganization, poor time management, problems focusing, restlessness, poor planning, and low frustration tolerance have become common in elementary classrooms. By high school the same could largely be said for the traits of anxiety and depression with teens, and this was before COVID-19. Early indicators point to a significant worsening of mental health as a result of COVID-19, online learning, and social unrest. As childhood mental illness and the challenges it brings have become common, families, schools, and communities are struggling to adapt and keep pace.

In over 20 years of working in education, I have seen firsthand how commonplace students struggling to function has become. As an educator and behavior analyst, I have increasingly seen the innocence and energy of childhood deteriorate, replaced by large numbers of young people needing stimulants, antipsychotics, and therapy to get through the day. When and how did childhood become such a difficult time and what does that say about children's future prospects for happiness?

My experience in education began as an idealistic and naïve young adult, with no background or training in education, I wanted to work with the toughest kids I could find, the ones no one else could work with. So I did, that is, in 2000 I began my career as a teacher's aide at a regional school for students identified as having a severe emotional disturbance. Many of these high schoolers had

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criminal records and histories of violence. They could be very intimidating and the tough exterior that comes from years' worth of rejection and school failure. In hopes of changing the energy of high schoolers with little optimism for their future, I would play basketball with several of them throughout the day. For the first few months they would barely engage. However, over time we began having some fun, competitive games. The once guarded kids were exercising, competing, talking, and interacting. These basketball games took their minds off their traumas and anger, gave them exercise and some positive social connections. As a result, it began to change the energy in the classroom. Slowly but surely, they would open up a bit more in class, the staff could interact with them without fear of violence, and they even laughed on occasion. These experiences were my first insight into building relationships and how doing so can even bring out a different side of students most had given up on long ago.

As time went by, I became a teacher and one of the first behavior specialists working in schools. These experiences further expanded my knowledge and skills, improving my ability to support those students with challenging behavior, trauma, and mental illness. As one of two behavior analysts in a district of 60,000 students, I would spend each day driving from one side of town to the other, responding to calls of students running off campus, biting staff, fighting peers, throwing chairs at principals, and much more. There were not many dull days. After 2 years of putting out these behavior fires, it was clear students having severe behavior resulting from underlying mental illness, traumas, or other factors were a much bigger issue than we have recognized. Early on, the behaviors I helped students work through seemed extreme and resulting from a unique need of a particular child. However, as the years went by and the calls for behavior support continued to come even more frequently, it became clear that this wasn't just a few kids anymore, but that something deeper was happening. Something that was troubling and affecting large numbers of young people to varying degrees.

Fortunately, I had an exceptional mentor therapist, from the south side of Chicago, who could calm the most traumatized child. I would watch her enter the room during the release stage of an angry outburst. The point when a child is throwing chairs, screaming, attacking people, and tearing things off the wall—with a strong calm presence, she would deliver clear instructions, helping the angry child regain control of themself. Her focused energy allowed her to connect, set boundaries, and soothe their pains. In minutes she would be able to deescalate the situation, easily connecting with a child that no one else could communicate with. Watching her combination of warmth and limit-setting made me question what she was able to communicate to traumatized children in the

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middle of a crisis, when the best efforts of everyone else only seemed to make things worse. And how was she doing it? As I continued to observe her, I began to see personal connection is often more helpful than advanced theoretical training and complex intervention plans.

By 2010, the demand for behavior support was growing. More and more schools needed help with more and more kids. No longer was it one or two kids in a school district displaying alarming and dangerous behavior, it was becoming routine. As one leading researcher explained to me at the time, it was clear we could no longer assume kids are coming to school eager and ready to learn, believing that the teacher is always right, or that "Because I said so" is a reason to do something. Researchers were also noticing a dramatic rise in the number of young people requiring medication for mental illness. By 2012, the number of preschool children receiving antipsychotic medications had increased as much as 500%, a trend that has shown little signs of being curbed. The systems of support schools did help build capacity, but the demand for social emotional supports has continued to climb faster than support providers can effectively respond. At this point, I had experience working with large urban schools, small rural schools, and elite boutique schools. Regardless of the location or demographics of the school, the most pressing need were the same: To provide behavior support to students struggling with trauma, anxiety, depression, and ADHD. The dangerous and depressed kids I had played basketball with in the early 2000s were becoming commonplace.

Over this time, I also continued to notice the power that warm and authentic teachers, therapists, and coaches had on their students. As the social emotional needs of students have grown, I increasingly came to appreciate what it takes for a skilled teacher to transform a room full of rambunctious, anxious, or shy kids into a well-functioning team. Additionally, the behavior and achievement in classrooms where kids felt a sense of belonging as compared to classrooms lacking this warmth stood out. Even in the same school, neighboring classrooms often had completely different energies, behaviors, and outcomes. There wasn't one way all the teachers did it. Different teachers had different personalities, some were reserved and quiet, others outgoing. Some relied on research, others on wisdom and experience. But they all had learned how to share their personalities with their class. They used their interests, talents, and energy to build communities where students felt safe, valued, and respected.

One teacher relied on daily morning circles to build community. Each morning the class would stand forming a circle, and students would quickly go around sharing how they were doing or anything interesting they wanted to share with

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the class. Many of her students were in foster care or had experienced trauma, so establishing a culture of warmth and safety was imperative to allowing them to calm and release the pain energy in their body. The daily circles allowed students to examine and learn to share the emotions they were feeling, without judgment. Another teacher at a therapeutic school assigned her class of high schoolers mentorship duties with a neighboring elementary class. A few times each week, her students would visit the neighboring elementary class to read and interact with the elementary students. Even though they were in high school, many of her students couldn't read beyond a third-grade level. Yet the opportunity to read to kids gave these teens, who had mostly known rejection and failure, a purpose and a child who looked up to them. For many of her students, this was the only reason they were still in school.

While many teachers had systems and direct practices to create community, the little things such as tone of voice, body language, or a willingness to check in with challenging kids often made the biggest difference. By understanding the power of nonverbal communication these teachers, often unconsciously, used these small acts to build a foundation for relationships and community. After visiting so many classrooms, you can almost feel the different energies in those that have built a community and those that are just a room full of individuals. By investing in community, these teachers were able to spend more time on instruction and less time on classroom management.

The 20-year trend of increasing need for social emotional supports in school due to mental illness spiked even further with COVID and remote learning. By October of 2021 students had returned to school from COVID restrictions, and teachers were getting a sense of the impact on students. At this point, it was clear it will be a long road to just get young people back to the precarious state they were in prior to COVID. Additionally, the shift to distance learning compounded inequities in education. For many families and students, it simply wasn't effective. Many students checked out and others experienced learning loss. Some students with disabilities simply did not receive needed supports for a year or more. The trust between parents and schools had declined. Students missed proms, graduations, and other invaluable experiences. Young students struggled to learn to read and make friends through Zoom. The lost learning and stunted social development due to COVID have left a mark on youth and the field of education that will be felt for many years.

As the spring of 2022 began, teachers were frustrated and wearing out. In the early elementary grades, schools were beginning to grasp the amount of learning lost from trying to teach 5- to 8-year-olds online. While also responding to

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increased problem behavior that resulted from missed social experiences, attempting to accelerate learning with students who have missed out on critical developmental experiences was proving to be overwhelming for many teachers. By the spring of 2022 reports that more than half of educators were looking to leave the profession began to emerge.

As we work to redesign and rebuild schools, it will be a mistake to continue to fail to appreciate the severity of the pervasive angst, sadness, and anxiety that is troubling young people. The wounds, traumas, and mental illness that are commonplace will not be fixed easily or quickly. It is important we don't overlook a fundamental area of need, the need to belong. Schools that are willing to invest in establishing connections and willing to make the investment into building communities will better serve students in the long run.

When we are able to meet a child's belonging needs, we can begin to heal emotional wounds, provide hope to those who have known mostly despair, and show kids a different future. Kids want someone to believe in them and they will work hard to meet the high expectations of the person who does. School hallways are filled with kids struggling to understand where they fit and wanting to be a part of something, to belong. Understanding how these needs shape student thinking, behavior, and motivation gives teachers an edge in efforts to help students reach their potential, create more equitable learning environments, and connect with students. These are some of the reasons belonging is often the key ingredient that convinces kids to keep going when things get difficult. Ultimately, support or a lack of support from a community is often the fulcrum that shapes what path children go down.

Belonging is a basic need, much like food and shelter. When we feel a sense of belonging, our body and mind are comforted, similar to how we feel after a good meal. However, much like hunger pains, when this need is not met, our mind and body often begin working against our better selves, trying to find ways to get this need met or ease the pains created from the deficit. The purpose of this book is to make the case for community, for belonging. Its fundamental role in our life, development and well-being can easily be overlooked. As a result, we may be looking for solutions within individuals rather than in our communities. Without appreciating the impact of not having the basic need to belong met we risk putting band aids on deep emotional wounds. While belonging is certainly not the only factor contributing to the youth mental health crisis, experience has taught me it is a great starting place when helping children in need.

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This book pairs experiences in education with research on our basic need to belong in the hopes of telling the story of how this need dramatically shapes our development, school experiences and how we see the world. The first four chapters detail the role a sense of belonging plays in our development and explores why so many students show signs of unmet belonging needs. These chapters are heavy on research. However, the state of our youth requires we take an honest look at what is happening and how it is impacting them. For this reason, Chapter 1 details recent research documenting the fundamental role of belonging in every aspect of our life. Then, Chapter 2 examines how a long-term decline in community is impacting children, families, and schools. Chapter 3 examines the dangers of intergroup conflicts; how our need to belong brings out the best and worst in people. In Chapter 4, I share important research outlining how feelings of rejection and alienation impact the psychological experiences of marginalized and underserved students.

After this detailed examination of the fundamental role belonging plays in our lives, Chapter 5 examines the power of psychological safety in shifting student's mindsets. Chapter 6 examines the warm demanding teaching style as the signature traits of transformative educators. Then, Chapter 7 details the connection between learning, growth mindsets, and belonging. In Chapter 8, I share strategies and trainings pathways that have been shown to develop community-building skills. Finally, Chapter 9 introduces data measures that would empower us to build data-driven schools that meet belonging needs and improve achievement.

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