

Chapter 1

Is There Recess on Mars? Developing a Sense of Belonging in Online Learning

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ABSTRACT

The pandemic of 2019 created a multitude of challenges for teachers and students alike. The urgency with which education was forced to transition to a fully online delivery paradigm necessitated a triage and curate process to decide where efforts were to be placed. Teachers, forced to move quickly, leveraged existing research in designing their courses and activities. However, little research exists concerning how to meaningfully create online learning environments for K-12 students. This chapter explores the importance of recess, where children have free-play, self-constructed interactions essential for developing a sense of belonging. Through exploring the sense of belonging construct in the context of how it is formed, its importance for developing social skills, and the connection between a sense of belonging and successful online learning, the authors present critical gaps in research and suggest directions for research.

INTRODUCTION

Ernie loved school. Ok, maybe not all of third grade, but he really enjoyed being with his friends as they played during recess. When one of them did well in kick-ball or four-square, the others yelled and cheered. They were not just there for him in the good times, either. He remembered when his mom was really sick and how his circle of friends helped him stay hopeful for her recovery. Having a tight-knit group of friends even helped him doing school stuff. History is not his best subject but working with his friends on the big project really helped him learn about the pyramids as well as to better understand

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how to make sense of history in general. He felt safe in his community to show that he did not know something and to ask for help.

The time spent at school consumes a significant portion of most students' days and provides the primary avenue for interaction with peers. Through developing an awareness of how they fit in with others and of how their actions impact the relationships they have with their peer group, children develop a *sense of belonging* (Hagerty et al., 1992; Lambert et al., 2013; St-Amand et al., 2017). This sense of belonging is what gave Ernie comfort and support as he navigated the oft-times challenging world of third grade.

In March 2020, the need for developing knowledge and understanding for teaching and learning in an online context increased exponentially when the Center for Disease Control (CDC) announced that the world-wide COVID-19 infection rate indicated the existence of a pandemic. As a response to this announcement and the CDC recommendations, education transitioned from a face-to-face environment to one where distance learning was the sole delivery method. In one broad stroke, it was as if all the students in the world were magically teleported to Mars, where everyone lived in their own isolating bubble, cut off from the world they knew. For Ernie, it was like he was transported to Mars with all his friends, but it was impossible for them to be together at all, much less to hang out during recess like they were used to doing. Even though they saw each other every day during the Zoom based classes, he never felt so alone. Not being able to see his teacher, be in the familiar classroom surroundings, or even eat the terrible cafeteria food at lunch just added to his sense of isolation. All the video classes did was to remind him of how much he missed recess and being with his friends. That sense of belonging Ernie felt when he was with his friends was gone and Ernie felt like he was out in space, alone in a strange and potentially hostile environment.

For elementary students in particular, the shift to online classes was a trying experience. Being deprived of the ability to physically interact with their peer groups took away one of the primary avenues through which they learned how to be social beings. As immature learners, children do not have the emotional resources needed to be self-regulated enough to navigate online learning alone. Their success (or more often failure) depends on the amount of support they can get from both the teacher and their peer group. Part of this support comes from the aforementioned sense of belonging and originates in peer group interactions. Other support comes from the teacher, who, through directed actions, has a substantial impact on academic success. As well-meaning and proactive a teacher may be, the fact that student-teacher interactions are constructed and framed by the teacher mean that these interactions are ineffective and possibly counter-productive in helping children develop peer-based social skills. This ineffectiveness results in a schism, where students might be able to learn how to academically engage through instructor actions, but they will be challenged to develop the kinds of social skills that come from child constructed and directed activities.

This chapter unpacks several concepts and constructs to more deeply explore what a sense of belonging means to children and how this belonging is integrated into and frames their online school experiences. The authors begin by borrowing from health science literature in describing a sense of belonging. Following this background development, the authors again return to health science literature to explore the social lives of children, how and where they interact, and how they develop social skills. Included in this discussion is the impact of family on a child's sense of belonging. After this, the transition to a sense of belonging in an academic context (sense of belonging at school) is described, including a differentiation of a sense of belonging from social presence. Finally, the authors suggest best practices for helping students develop a sense of belonging in an online environment.

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