



Curriculum Foundation

Introduction

Vision Statement

To nurture a generation that is empathetic, resilient, and socially responsible, capable of fostering connections, preventing violence, and building inclusive communities where everyone belongs.

Mission Statement

The "You Belong Here" curriculum fosters empathy, gratitude, accountability, and emotional agility from Kindergarten to High School. Grounded in multidisciplinary research, our approach nurtures these four pillars as the foundation for building healthy relationships and a strong sense of belonging. By integrating neuroscience-based techniques, we empower students to understand and regulate their emotions, leading to safer environments and lifelong skills that reduce harm to themselves and others.

Theory of Change

Significance Quest Theory (SQT)

Significance Quest Theory (SQT) posits that the root cause of violence stems from a universal human need for significance, encompassing feelings of worthiness and belonging. According to SQT, individuals who feel insignificant or marginalized may turn to violence as a means of gaining attention, power, or a sense of identity. This theory suggests that violence is often a misguided attempt to fulfill the deep-seated need for recognition and respect. By addressing this fundamental need, the "You Belong Here" curriculum aims to prevent violence and harmful behaviors by providing students with healthier, constructive ways to meet their needs for significance.

The curriculum focuses on fostering a strong sense of belonging and self-worth among students, which are key elements in satisfying their quest for significance. Through a variety of strategies, including community-building activities, mindfulness practices, civic reasoning, and opportunities for positive social engagement, the curriculum helps students find their place within the school community without resorting to negative or violent actions. Research shows that when students feel valued and understood, they are less likely to engage in violence as a means of achieving significance (1). By promoting a supportive environment where every student feels they matter, the curriculum addresses the root causes of violence and creates pathways for students to meet their needs in positive, non-destructive ways (2).

Supporting Sources:

¹ Kruglanski, A. W., Chen, X., Dechesne, M., Fishman, S., & Orehek, E. (2009). Fully Committed: Suicide Bombers' Motivation and the Quest for Personal Significance. *Political Psychology*, 30(3), 331-357. doi:10.1111/j.1467-9221.2009.00698.x

² Kruglanski, A. W., Gelfand, M. J., Bélanger, J. J., Sheveland, A., Hetiarachchi, M., & Gunaratna, R. (2014). The Psychology of Radicalization and Deradicalization: How Significance Quest Impacts Violent Extremism. *Political Psychology*, 35(S1), 69-93. doi:10.1111/pops.12163

Big Ideas

Gratitude Promotes Positive Identity and Meaningful Connection

Practicing gratitude encourages the development of a positive self-identity and the formation of meaningful connections with others. Research shows that gratitude acts as a "social glue," strengthening relationships and promoting prosocial behaviors like kindness and generosity, which are essential for building a supportive community (1). By helping individuals recognize and value the contributions of others, gratitude fosters a sense of belonging and reinforces positive self-perception (2). Moreover, gratitude's role in forming and maintaining relationships through mechanisms like the "find-remind-and-bind" theory highlights its importance in deepening connections and nurturing a positive identity (3). These connections are vital for creating a supportive environment where individuals can thrive and reduce the risk of engaging in harmful behaviors (4).

Supporting Sources:

¹ Emmons, R. A., & McCullough, M. E. (2003). *Counting Blessings Versus Burdens: An Experimental Investigation of Gratitude and Subjective Well-Being in Daily Life*.

² Algoe, S. B. (2012). *The Role of Gratitude in Relationships*.

³ Baumgarten-Tramer, F. (1938). 'Gratefulness' in Children and Young People.

⁴ McCullough, M. E., Emmons, R. A., & Tsang, J. (2001). *Is Gratitude a Moral Affect?*.

Empathy Enhances Positive Conflict Resolution and Social Harmony

Practicing empathy helps individuals understand and connect with others' feelings and perspectives, fostering a more harmonious social environment. Research shows that empathy facilitates positive conflict resolution by enabling individuals to approach disagreements with understanding and compassion, which strengthens relationships and promotes prosocial behavior. By enhancing the ability to see situations from others' viewpoints, empathy reduces hostility and aggression, contributing to social harmony and reducing the likelihood of violence (1). Additionally, empathy plays a crucial role in sustaining peace in both personal and broader social contexts by building trust and understanding, which are essential for resolving conflicts and preventing violence (2). Ultimately, empathy not only improves interpersonal relationships but also serves as a powerful tool for creating safer, more connected communities (3).

Supporting Sources:

¹ Waldman, M. (2016). *Empathy in Conflict Resolution: If, How, and When*. Center for Empathy in International Affairs.

² Péloquin, K., & Lafontaine, M. (2010). *Measuring empathy in couples: Validity and reliability of the Interpersonal Reactivity Index for couples*. *Journal of Personality Assessment*, 92, 146–157.

³ Christensen, A., Atkins, D. C., Berns, S., Wheeler, J., Baucom, D. H., & Simpson, L. E. (2004). *Traditional versus integrative behavioral couple therapy for significantly and chronically distressed married couples*. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 72(2), 176–191.

Civic and Moral Reasoning Cultivate Personal Accountability

An understanding of my civic role makes me more committed to the common good

Engaging in civic and moral reasoning encourages individuals to develop a strong sense of personal accountability and responsibility. Research indicates that when students are taught to critically evaluate ethical dilemmas and social issues, they become more attuned to the consequences of their actions and the impact on their communities (1). By fostering an understanding of civic duties, individuals are more likely to make decisions that are guided by a commitment to the common good. This heightened sense of accountability not only strengthens personal character but also promotes social cohesion by encouraging responsible behavior and active participation in community life (2). Furthermore, integrating civic and moral reasoning into education helps prevent antisocial behaviors, as students learn to navigate complex social situations with a focus on justice, fairness, and the well-being of others (3).

Supporting Sources:

¹ Berkowitz, M. W., & Bier, M. C. (2005). *What Works in Character Education: A Research-Driven Guide for Educators*. Character Education Partnership.

² Hallman, S. K. (2016). *Development and Assessment of Student Social/Civic Responsibility and Ethical Reasoning*. Center for Research on Learning and Teaching, University of Michigan.

³ McAvoy, P., & Hess, D. E. (2013). *Civic Reasoning and Discourse: Teaching Students to Engage in Civil Dialogue*. In W. C. Parker (Ed.), *Teaching Democracy: What Schools Need to Do* (pp. 65-78). University of Chicago Press.

Emotional regulation skills build resilience, reduce the likelihood of violent behaviors.

By teaching students how to manage stress, frustration, and other intense emotions, SEL fosters a supportive environment where students can navigate conflicts without resorting to aggression. Emotional regulation is particularly critical in helping students avoid impulsive, aggressive reactions, making it a key component in violence prevention strategies (1). Studies indicate that schools implementing SEL programs see a significant reduction in incidents of violence, as students become better equipped to handle challenges constructively (2).

Supporting Sources:

¹ Goleman, D. (1995). *Emotional intelligence: Why it can matter more than IQ*. Bantam Books.

² Greenberg, M. T., Weissberg, R. P., O'Brien, M. U., Zins, J. E., Fredericks, L., Resnik, H., & Elias, M. J. (2003). *Enhancing school-based prevention and youth development through coordinated social, emotional, and academic learning*. *American Psychologist*, 58(6-7), 466.

Educational Philosophy

Guiding Principles

Student-Centered Learning:

This approach focuses on the individuality of students and classrooms rather than solely on the content delivered by the teacher. It emphasizes pulling from the knowledge and experiences that students bring, fostering a learning environment where students are actively involved in their educational journey.

Instructional Strategies

Throughout K-12 Curriculum

Lecture and Effective Questioning:

Combined as foundational strategies, lectures introduce and summarize new content, while effective questioning prompts deeper thinking, gauges understanding, and guides students toward critical learning goals.

Cooperative Learning and Flexible Grouping:

Integrated to foster student collaboration and engagement. Lessons utilize various group configurations—whole class, pairs, or small groups (e.g., groups of four)—to facilitate discussions, problem-solving, and reflection. This method promotes knowledge sharing, diverse perspectives, and adaptability to different learning needs.

Modeling:

Essential for helping students develop and practice new skills, particularly safety-related behaviors. Teachers demonstrate concepts such as assertive communication, enabling students to observe and replicate these skills. This approach includes:

- **Task and Performance Modeling:** Teachers demonstrate specific tasks or skills, showing the steps involved.

- **Practical Application:** Students practice and apply the demonstrated skills in real-life scenarios.

K-5 Curriculum

Hands-On Learning with Analogy Themes:

Combines practical, experiential activities with analogy themes to make abstract concepts of connection, belonging, and safety more tangible and relatable to younger learners.

Middle - High School Curriculum

Classroom as a Mini-Community

The classroom acts as a real-life scenario where students can apply the skills they are learning—such as conflict resolution, communication, and critical thinking. It provides a space for students to practice navigating different opinions and even controversial viewpoints. Teachers should remain neutral, acting as guides by encouraging open dialogue and making sure all voices are heard. This allows students to develop and test the skills they’ve learned, creating a classroom environment where belonging, respect, and non-violent problem-solving are actively practiced. Students take ownership of their learning by reflecting on their experiences and participating in group activities. Direct instruction is limited in lessons, with the focus on students leading the majority of the lesson through reflections, discussions and projects.

Reflective Practices:

Journaling has been shown to significantly improve mental well-being, emotional regulation, and problem-solving skills, as demonstrated by the research of James W. Pennebaker, a pioneer in expressive writing. Neuroscience shows that journaling activates the prefrontal cortex, which governs critical thinking and emotional regulation, while simultaneously reducing activity in the amygdala, which controls emotional responses. This process helps students manage stress and gain clarity in their thoughts. Pennebaker’s work highlights how journaling helps individuals process complex emotions, fostering self-awareness and resilience, making it a powerful tool for personal growth and emotional healing.

Sources:

1. Pennebaker, J. W., & Chung, C. K. (2007). *Expressive Writing: Connections to Physical and Mental Health*. Oxford University Press.
2. Lieberman, M. D., et al. (2007). *Putting Feelings Into Words: Affect Labeling Disrupts Amygdala Activity in Response to Affective Stimuli*. Psychological Science.

The Role of Creativity:

Creativity plays a key role in developing relationship skills by encouraging students to think flexibly and generate innovative solutions. The curriculum's approach is rooted in the concept of Critical Creativity, which, as explained in the book *Intention: Critical Creativity in the Classroom*, focuses on using creativity as a tool to develop critical thinking. According to research from the APA, engaging in creative tasks helps activate areas of the brain involved in executive function and cognitive flexibility, which are essential for navigating relationship challenges.

Sources:

1. American Psychological Association (APA). *Creativity and Problem Solving*.
2. Runco, M. A. (2014). *Creativity: Theories and Themes: Research, Development, and Practice*. Academic Press.
3. Burvall, A., & Ryder, D. (2017). *Intention: Critical Creativity in the Classroom*. EdTechTeam Press.

Project-Based Learning (PBL):

A core instructional strategy in older grades, PBL involves hands-on projects where students investigate, research, and create solutions to open-ended questions. Projects encourage connections with the broader school community on topics such as mental health, connection, and violence prevention.

High School Curriculum

Inquiry-Based Learning:

Emphasized to promote deeper exploration through open-ended questions and student-led investigations. This method encourages students to ask questions, conduct research, and construct their own understanding of complex topics.

Current Events:

Integrated to help students relate their learning to real-world issues, making the curriculum adaptable and responsive to current experiences.