Creating Belonging Through Nurture

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Submission: January 01, 2023; **Published:** March 21, 2023

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Introduction

Many studies have shown that there is a correlation between risk factors and the educational attainment level of minority people and through these studies emphasis has been placed on strategies that target or combat those risk factors. The creation and execution of certain strategies have revealed through various studies to increase positive factors; strategies such as mentorship, resource allocation, and implementing different forms of diversity throughout the campus etc. Most of these strategies that have been put into place are based off research that utilizes strategies that worked well in the past. But how in depth can a study go?

The problem that comes to mind is that these strategies are "blanket" or surface strategies that seem to work well for those students in the majority i.e., white people while ignoring the unique experiences that people of color have, including cultural connectedness and oppression. This often causes students of color to lack a sense of belonging in the institution they attend and ultimately, they end up dropping out or leaving to find a more suitable form of education, such as community colleges or common trade schools in their community. Belonging is to have an affinity or penchant to something or someone. The questions to be answered would then be, how can we locate and combat the root causes of this lack of belonging? How do we combat lack of retention and educational attainment among black students in the university setting? How do we create belonging that isn't natural? How do we maintain and allow those strategies to become a part of the institutions culture?

Nature Vs. Nurture

The debate over nature vs nurture started back in the 18th century when Francis Galton presumed that nature has a more powerful impact on outcome than nurture [1]. In contrast, I believe that the nature of a person is only a small portion of what a person chooses to become when adequate nurturing is applied.

There are genetic disorders that can prevent a person from doing certain things but as far as the choices they make regarding how they pursue career and life is something that I believe is nurtured in the individual by the people and experiences that they come into contact with. Let's look closer at nature and view it from a different lens.

I define a person's nature as their basic inherent features or characteristics that are acquired intentionally or unintentionally through their adolescent years. These characteristics can be seen in behavior, preference, and even language. On a larger scale, a groups nature can also be seen in commonality found in those members of that group. I pair this theory with the theory of intersectionality. This theory explained by Lisa Bowleg, is a theoretical framework that states that social categories such as ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, racism, sexism, oppression etc., intersect at the micro and macro levels of an individual's experience which reflects multiple interlocking systems [2]. For example, a person can have an intersection where they are female, black, and struggle as far as socioeconomic status.

The intersection is who this person is. Please keep in mind that a person's intersection can never be erased, only added onto. For instance, a person who grew up in poverty and is now financially stable will always be a person who experienced poverty. Poverty experience is always going to be a part of their intersection. However, having the experience of being financially free is also.

Individuals can share similar intersections. For example, two mothers having both given birth through cesarean. These women have intersections that are similar: they are both women, they both gave birth, they both had a cesarean performed on them. Therefore, they naturally can relate to each other which creates a sense of belonging. Again, belonging is to have an affinity for a

certain place or situation. We can look at a larger example of this natural relatedness or belonging in African Americans and their experience with oppression. Many African American people can relate to each other on these grounds based on shared experience. This shared experience, among groups of people and individuals, creates a natural sense of belonging when they are around those of the same group because there is commonality among them.

Nurture is something that requires action. This can be done through the individual who is attempting to change a behavior within themselves or within a person. Usually this is done through a person or on a larger scale, an institution, seeking to cause a shift in an individuals designated path trajectory. This can be a relationship path, education path, or a career path. Also, this nurturing can come from a guardian, parent, teacher, mentor, or even a boss. Nurturing has two main components. The first is the transference of cultural norms and content knowledge and the second component to nurturing is social emotional support. Cultural norms are the expectations of behavior based on a shared belief system within the group. Content knowledge is facts, theories, principles, ideas, and vocabulary in focus. Social emotional support requires the nurturer to help the person manage their emotions, set, and achieve goals, make responsible decisions, etc. For the nurturing to be successful in guiding the individual or group on the chosen path, both components must be present.

Natural Belonging vs. Nurtured Belonging

When individuals or groups encounter each other, and their intersections have similar identities that are crossing, a connection whether intentional or not, whether addressed or not, naturally occurs. For example, two women, both black, both experienced poverty or oppression, and both heterosexual. Their identities within themselves have created similar intersections, making it easier to understand each other when willing. This creates a natural belonging. The connection is made between two people, a person to a group, or a group to another group.

Nurtured belonging is different from natural belonging because action must be taken for it to come into fruition. When there are very few similarities in intersections, belonging within a group must be nurtured. Regardless of the situation, if an individual or a group of people are put in an unfamiliar or a new situation that is challenging without an incentive or intrinsic motivation to stay, they usually will leave. This is the case with Predominantly White Institutions, PWI and African American, AA, students. PWIs focus on the majority student which is predominantly white individuals. White students usually come from low context cultures. This theory comes from a theorist by the name of Hall.

Hall [3] distinguished between high-context and low-context cultures. In his writing he explained that African Americans were considered high context cultures and White Americans were a part of low context cultures. He theorized that the way a person learn's is dependent upon the way they perceive context. Hall also brought up questions regarding the assimilation of high context people into low context settings. PWI's would be considered a Low context setting as it caters to the majority student, white students. The intersections of the people who direct and instruct in the institution are similar to the majority students they serve so naturally this leaves AA students and other students of different ethnicities to figure out how to assimilate or get left behind and assimilation is hard when you don't understand the context. Westbrook explains Halls theory further in his article when he states that "According to Hall, high-context communication occurs when nonverbal cues are expressed between people or through places and events. The closer one is to a given culture, the more communication she or he can detect from the context" [4]. If not addressed, AA students leave for other schools or worse, drop out of college. Using theoretical models of student retention in higher education, Aljohani O [5] explained the important role that institutions have on the decision of African American students to successfully navigate their way through college. He went further to explain that "a student having academic difficulties might persist if successfully integrated into the college environment" [5]. Therefore, belonging must be intentionally nurtured within the institution and for this to be accomplished successfully, institutions or individuals must plan.

Suggested Strategies

First, the main goal must be stated. For example, the goal stated would be to increase retention and graduation rates for AA students. Next, the institution must complete research to determine what the population in focus needs. After the data has been received and analyzed, strategies can then be put in place that focuses on the main goal being achieved. For example, if a PWI has low AA enrollment they would put strategies in place that increase enrollment building structural diversity. These strategies would include free, or reduced college tuition, personalized advisors, and counselors, high schools' prep courses that allow students to take college courses during their junior and senior year (dual credit), free, or reduced-price housing and food accommodations, and many more.

Once the students are in the institution, strategies to keep them there must be put in place such as allowing space for student organizations that focus on that population, putting forth intentional programmatic efforts that create ethnic studies and multicultural learning courses, hiring faculty of color, etc. All of which build curricular diversity. It is here that students would then feel a sense of belonging which is not a natural occurrence but nurtured by the strategies that have been put in place. Nurtured belonging. In this case, the student did not have to change to adjust to the school, but the school adjusted to the student and became student-centered.

Global Journal of Intellectual & Developmental Disabilities

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