

Don't Forget

Students with invisible disabilities often feel isolated in school. But they desperately want to belong.

Roberto d'Erizans, Lee Ann Jung, and Tamatha Bibbo

Avery sits at her computer at home, going over the numbers again and again for her financial literacy course, but she can't figure out how to balance the budget. She feels confused and unsure how to move forward. Avery has always done well in her classes, but something about the 10th grade "budget competition" is not working for her. The competition part of the class is visible to everyone, which has made it worse. Now, five weeks into the competition, it's clear to the class that she's far behind, and every time she speaks up or makes a comment, the other students sigh or roll their eyes. She recalls the morning when even her teacher seemed exasperated, and she felt humiliated and isolated. I just want to quit this competition. I'm terrible at budgeting and I can't learn it, thinks Avery. But the budget competition is a required part of the class, and the class is required for graduation. She closes her computer and walks away without a sense of resolution.

Avery, like all students, desires connection. When students feel a sense of belonging, they reap a whole host of positive academic and social benefits: Greater academic motivation, success, persistence, self-sufficiency, and happiness. On the other hand, when students feel as though they do not belong, they are more likely to experience mental health and physical illnesses, debilitating stress, anxiety, and depression, and they are at greater risk of dropping out or suicide. The process of finding a social circle to "fit in" depends largely on the student's social and self-awareness, self-management, decision-making, and interpersonal skills. For students with certain disabilities, the ability to form friendships and achieve belonging is often compromised; moreover, students from

marginalized social groups who have disabilities are at particular risk. Given the impact on long-term joy and lifelong outcomes, supporting students who are at risk for isolation must be a priority for today's schools.

Invisible Disabilities

Approximately 14 percent of the student population has a disability (NCES, 2019), most of which are "invisible disabilities" (Adams et al., 2010). Although equipment or technology, like wheelchairs, make many disabilities visible, only about 10 percent of individuals with disabilities use such equipment (Sue & Sue, 2008). The overwhelming majority of disabilities are not visually apparent. Anxiety, depression, autism, learning disabilities, metabolic disorders, and autoimmune disorders are but a few of the many

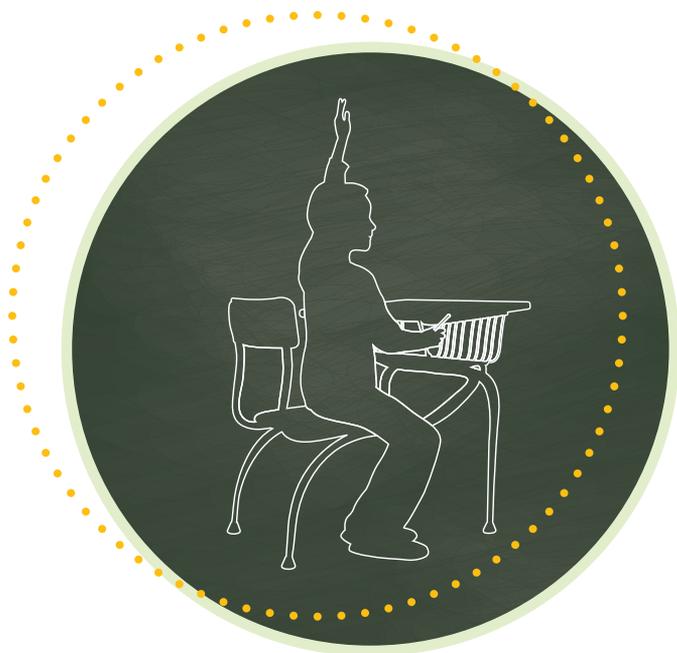
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invisible disabilities that affect our students. For every student with an invisible disability who qualifies for an Individualized Education Program (IEP), there are many more who *do not* because, although they have viable needs, they make just enough academic progress to get by.

When disabilities are invisible, it is harder for others to remember or be aware of the person's disability. Worse, those affected may be accused of clamoring for attention or special treatment

(Gingold, 2015). This perception of “choice”—that the individual is choosing to behave in a particular way rather than being affected by an invisible disability—can lead young people to stop trying to belong or to withdraw altogether. In a survey conducted at Roberto's and Tamatha's middle schools, students reported that it is easier to pretend to be uninterested in relationships or meaningful connections than to be rejected from a group.



The teachers and peers of students who desperately want to belong but are afraid to try might believe that these students are not trying hard enough or that they are nonchalant in their desire to belong or work hard. This misperception further reduces the likelihood that they will find belonging. For students who are marginalized because of race, sex, sexual orientation, religion, or the like, having an invisible disability can compound the isolation they are already at risk of experiencing.

Despite the known risks of isolation, little attention has been paid to how students with invisible disabilities develop a sense of belonging in our schools, and what actions we, as educators, can take to improve their outcomes. One impediment is that these disabilities are commonly associated with a negative stigma or received with trepidation. As middle school administrators, Tamatha and Roberto are part of their schools' student support teams. They have found that even among teaching staff, there is a need to advocate more for students with invisible disabilities.

While her name and some details have been changed, Avery is based on a real student from a school where Lee Ann worked. And from our experience as educators, Avery's story of struggle is not at all uncommon. Most of her classes had a corresponding textbook and

online resources, but this financial literacy class was almost completely oral. Each class period, the instruction was large-group didactic followed by class discussion and group practice. The online resources provided were YouTube videos. Because Avery has an auditory processing disorder, the verbal instruction was challenging. She felt unable to master the material, unsure of what she needed, reluctant to ask for help, and subsequently alienated from her peers.

Because her disability is invisible, and Avery didn't have the skills to advocate for her needs, her teachers sometimes forgot to make connections to the necessary accommodations. Simply bringing text resources to the course would have made all the difference for Avery, and probably for other students as well.

A Framework to Promote Belonging

Schools need a systematic approach to support belonging so that fewer students like Avery feel isolated and defeated. In their research, Vaccaro, Daly-Cano, and Newman (2015) studied factors that contribute to a sense of belonging for students with disabilities. They offer us three themes we can use as a framework for building a systematic approach: self-advocacy, mastery of the student role, and building relationships.

Self-Advocacy

Developing a sense of belonging is intertwined with a student's ability to self-advocate inside and outside the classroom (Vaccaro et al., 2015). Effective self-advocates have a keen awareness of their own abilities and needs. It's no surprise that self-advocacy is already difficult for many students, but certain invisible disabilities can *paralyze* a student from identifying and expressing their own needs. Self-advocacy is not simply a behavior; it is a set of skills that all students need. Secondary teachers highly value self-advocacy skills, but most do not have the training to effectively *teach* these skills. For many students, we may need to offer explicit instruction in self-advocacy, and there are effective models for this curriculum

(Meglemre, 2010). But there is also much we can do within the everyday routine to build a foundation for these skills.

Self-Advocacy Strategies

■ Support students with invisible disabilities so they can share the details of the accommodations and modifications they need with their teachers, as opposed to just relying on the special educator to advocate directly for them. The goal is for the student to be fully equipped, empowered, and to embrace the responsibility. Offer only as much support as necessary for the advocacy to happen and the supports to be implemented.

■ Model and discuss ways you, as an educator, use self-advocacy skills to meet your needs and reach your goals.

■ Find ways to highlight your students' strengths and increase their self-esteem.

■ Periodically, have all students formally reflect on their strengths, needs, preferences, and what helps them be successful. Provide feedback on these reflections and use them to plan and differentiate instruction. This work can be especially helpful as students navigate the IEP process.

■ Offer students many choices throughout the day, beginning at an early age.

■ Create safe spaces where small groups of students can connect with teachers, advisors, or mentors; participate in discussions; role-play scenarios; and be empowered to give and receive feedback on learning.

An example of the power of self-advocacy can be found in the story of Omar, a student in Tamatha's school who has attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. Teachers describe Omar as "fidgety," "forgetful," "all over the place," and "lacking self-control." Some even call him "problematic," "difficult," and "lazy." Omar, however, is a spirited and joyful adolescent who enjoys hands-on projects and anything sports-related. He has loving, supportive parents who struggle with how to best support his learning differences.

Omar's IEP describes that he has weak executive functioning skills, an impaired sense

of time, and low tolerance for frustration.

Omar's learning support teacher has recently begun to include reflective protocols to help Omar identify successful learning strategies that work for him, and together, they practice how to advocate for those strategies with his teachers. Omar's special education teacher also works with his mainstream teachers to ensure they are ready for and receptive to Omar's self-advocacy. As a result, his teachers are providing him with more choice, greater kinesthetic learning opportunities, and opportunities for hands-on and interdisciplinary projects. Omar's self-advocacy has contributed not only to increased learning and engagement, but also to greater self-esteem.

Students with disabilities need to feel like they can master the "role of a student" in order to experience a sense of belonging.

Mastery of the Student Role

Vaccaro, Daly-Cano, and Newman (2015) also found that students with disabilities need to feel like they can master the "role of a student" in order to experience a greater sense of belonging. Mastery is directly connected to one's confidence and competence as a student and a contributor to a school community. Educators often think of the role of a student as limited to academic demands, including meeting academic expectations or completing assigned tasks. However, the role of a student is as much about identity as it is about tasks. In other words, mastery is feeling legitimized as a student. When students feel that their peers and teachers support them and believe in their abilities, students' self-sufficiency increases. This can lead to greater positive social and academic outcomes, especially for those who feel even more segregated because of a disability (Vaccaro et al., 2015).

Mastery/Self-Efficacy Strategies

■ When planning academic goals for students, determine a student's current

proficiency in core academic skills and how it compares with grade-level expectations. To secure mastery, academic goals must be based on student data and realistic expectations of achievement.

- Consider the type of motivation that is relevant, given the student's learning goals. How students understand their own motivation plays a significant role in how they apply learning strategies.

- Use study-skill checklists as tools to assess and help students build academic-enabling skills needed for classroom success.

- Highlight and model successful study-skill strategies and contextualize these techniques within subject areas.

- Use visuals to exemplify classroom expectations. For example, instead of reminding

Even minimal signs of social connection can have positive effects on student motivation and achievement.

students to have their materials ready, project a picture of students ready for instruction as they are entering the class.

- Encourage a spirit of inclusion in extracurricular school events. Find “low-risk” ways for students to participate—opportunities where the chance of successfully developing positive relationships is high and the competition is low.

- Develop mentoring programs across grade levels to create student agency, leadership, and foster peer-to-peer connections. Older students can model successful self-efficacy strategies.

Naomi, a student in Roberto's school, has both depression and dysgraphia. She disguises her challenges by remaining quiet and well-behaved. Academically, her teaching team has focused on rewriting her internal narratives of “I always get this wrong,” “I can't do this,” or “I'm not smart” by highlighting positive achievements and using growth mindset language such as, “I can't do this yet.” These quick

wins have begun to allow Naomi to see herself as someone who can showcase mastery as a student. She has also been asked to participate in team events and artistic extracurricular activities in which she shines.

Supportive Relationships

When students feel that an adult cares deeply about them and has their best interests in mind, they are better able to mitigate the stress associated with daily school life (Crouch, Keys, & McMahon, 2014). A sense of belonging increases participation and engagement, positive dispositions, and improved behavioral outcomes, and generally sets better conditions for academic success. Research indicates that even minimal signs of social connection can have positive effects on student motivation and achievement, despite a visible or invisible disability (Hamm & Faircloth, 2005). For students with invisible disabilities, connecting socially with others is key to developing a sense of belonging.

For students with autism or social-pragmatic needs, it is especially difficult to make deep personal connections with peers or classmates. *How to Dance in Ohio*, a documentary that follows a small group of students with autism as they navigate the complexities of their high school prom, highlights the universal human need to grow, connect, and belong as felt by individuals who struggle routinely for social survival. These students, like others with invisible disabilities, experience barriers that make this desire difficult to achieve. Programs, like those detailed in the documentary, highlight that the success of such students depends largely on a system of support, as well as strong home-school partnerships.

Relationship-Building Strategies

- Ensure your learning spaces are psychologically safe for students. Build a culture of respect and inclusion.

- Lead discussion in small groups to build empathy and awareness of individual differences and needs. Teach what empathy is and why it matters—and find ways to model it.

- Connect with parents to learn more about specific students' interests. Appealing to interests and passions can better connect students with adults.

- Greet students individually each day as they enter your classroom, to demonstrate your care.

- Call on students equitably. Increase wait-time when questioning students (use “no hands up” wait time). This allows students time to process and participate, and thus, demonstrate their understanding.

- Use cooperative and collaborative learning strategies where students work together to achieve tasks.

- Create opportunities for students to imagine others' perspectives. This can include reading and discussing relevant books and asking students to role-play “what they would do” in certain situations. Note stereotypes, fears, or other potential barriers to acting on empathy.

- Reflect with students on who is within and outside their circle. Collectively discuss ways to widen circles to foster inclusion.

- Establish clear norms and systems of accountability for behavior and language. When hurtful language arises, such as “that’s gay,” ensure it becomes a learning moment. Utilize restorative justice practices when conflicts arise.

- In grade-level meetings, several times per year, discuss the connections each student has with adults in the building. If any student does not have a strong connection to an adult, plan for developing one.

Maria, a 7th grade student in Roberto’s school, easily slips under most adults’ radars. She is introverted, completes assigned work, and achieves grade-level expectations. During lunch, she often spends time reading in the library, which is one of her favorite activities. In student review meetings, her name is never offered for discussion. Her parents have never contacted the school, and she does not share personal stories with others. But her advisor has noticed that when she is in the cafeteria, she sits alone.

Over the course of the year, this advisor made it a priority to ensure Maria feels noticed and worked to build a trusting relationship.



One day, he asked her to remain after advisory and spoke with her about what he has observed in the cafeteria. Due to the trust he had built, she revealed that she had been diagnosed with an eating disorder and is undergoing treatment. Consequently, her advisor was able to alert other support personnel, connect with Maria’s family, and ensure she had a safe space and a supportive relationship to turn to at school. He made it a point to check in with Maria each day.

All In

Belonging is integral to academics and essential to the health, happiness, and success of all our students. The positive outcomes of belonging are not only immediate, but they also ignite a ripple effect throughout a student’s life. Schools need a multifaceted approach that prioritizes those with invisible disabilities—one that takes into account what happens both in and out of the classroom. When we design our environment to support the belonging of our most marginalized students, we have designed an environment that supports the belonging of *all*. ■

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Not Finding Their Voice

Students feeling they have a voice is a key indicator of emotional safety. Surveys show there’s not enough of either in schools.

Russell Quaglia and Michelle Brait

What would happen if *all* students felt valued and had a powerful voice in school? Might it create a safer environment? Our research at the Quaglia Institute for School Voice and Aspirations (QISVA), suggests that it would. When students have a “voice” in school, they feel more known, valued, and cared about and have a stronger sense of self-worth.

Encouraging student voice within a school is key to creating a sense of emotional safety—and leads to greater academic motivation. Fostering student voice means more than encouraging learners to speak up or share their opinions. It’s about creating a school culture that encourages students to be individuals, express and challenge themselves, and contribute to the school community.

Since 2001, QISVA has administered a survey of both students and teachers in the United States and abroad to gauge their views. QISVA is currently preparing a

report that compiles data from surveys we administered between 2009 and 2018, representing the views of 452,329 students in grades 6–12.¹ These results reflect less-than-ideal realities about how valued and listened to students in this age group feel.

Do Students Feel Known and Valued?

In schools that make room for student voice, students feel valued for who they are. And when teachers listen to students and are willing to learn from them, students feel respected. And yet, according to QISVA surveys:

- Only 67 percent of students reported that school is a welcoming, friendly place, and only 45 percent felt like a valued member of their school community.
- 56 percent of students reported that teachers make an effort to get to know them.
- 50 percent of students agreed with the statement, “Teachers care if I am absent from school.”

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