



CUE Assistant Director Joanna Ross with Kiya, a student who participated in Ross's research project

How Five African American Students Navigated the Tough Transition from 9th Grade to High School

The [UNC Center for Urban Education](#) Assistant Director Joanna Ross presented a doctoral research poster at the American Association for Teaching & Curriculum conference in Louisville, Kentucky, this month, and we wanted to share her valuable insight with our readers. Her research question: **How does the sense of belonging develop among 9th grade African American students over a semester?**

Ross set out to determine the extent to which race and place affected five African American students' sense of belonging as they transitioned from middle school to a large, Denver-area high school with a predominantly White student body.

Ross set out to determine the extent to which race, place, and academia affected students' sense of belonging at school.

Her working definition for “a sense of belonging” was “feelings of acceptance and relatedness or connection to others.” She gathered data by conducting interviews with the students and observing them at school events such as the homecoming dance.

Findings

The students—four female and one male—identified two common components of belonging: 1) feeling safe enough to advocate for their own needs and 2) feeling safe enough to self-express. As the semester progressed, the students felt more comfortable and accepted and their sense of belonging grew. Support from friends helped them to develop a stronger relationship with school leaders and teachers.

Students said that to have a sense of belonging they needed to feel safe enough to advocate for their own needs and to self-express.

Another reason the students’ sense of belonging grew was that there was sufficient diversity among their peers and the faculty and staff at the school in terms of race and background. They also pointed to the existence of the Black Student Alliance, a school-sponsored group, and other cultural groups on campus as a factor.

Overall, they thought the high school provided more opportunities to explore race relations than their prior school. They did suggest that instructors allow more time for groups of students of different races to have structured conversations about race in safe spaces.

Suggestions for Educators

Here are some takeaways for teachers and administrators:

1. Take time getting to know your students so that they feel safe in the classroom. Highlight each student’s uniqueness and the strengths and cultural wisdom they bring to the classroom.
2. Sponsor safe spaces for students to have structured conversations about race in places other than in the classroom during class time (e.g., club meetings, lunch time).
3. Hire diverse faculty and staff who can relate to the student body.
4. Ensure all groups are represented in the curricula to give them visibility and acknowledge their importance.

Ross stressed that this type of research is important because it highlights African American students’ voices, but it is only the first step. “Be brave enough to host conversations about race, gender, society, and other difficult topics,” said Ross. “We have to push for standards, textbooks, and curricula that reflect students’ demographics.”

Implications for Future Research

Audience members encouraged Ross to expand the study and identify spaces where students feel like they belong (or don’t). They also suggested that she look into specific elements that foster a sense of belonging, such as classmates’ support, sporting events, other school events, and interactions with peers or teachers.

The Center is fortunate to have Joanna Ross work with us as a staff and faculty member. We are grateful to benefit from her expertise.

Thinking about Becoming a Teacher?

We are enrolling new students for the spring 2024 semester. Call Dr. Rosanne Fulton, Director, UNC Center for Urban Education, at 303-637-4334 or [email](#) for more information. Watch our [short video](#) to learn more about the CUE teacher-preparation program.