

Critical Pedagogy and Classroom Belonging: A Framework for Meaningful Learning

Muhammad Sharif Uddin

Morgan State University, United States

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Abstract

This conceptual paper proposes a framework explaining how critical pedagogy can foster students' sense of belonging, essential for their meaningful learning. This paper argues that a sense of belonging in classrooms is a multidimensional construct that promotes physical engagement, emotional connectedness, and intellectual investment in the learning process. It further explains how, by implementing critical pedagogy, teachers can provide students with a positive experience that fosters a sense of belonging; without it, students feel alienated and unrecognized. Drawing on Freirean principles, the paper identifies five pedagogical pathways through which critical pedagogy promotes classroom belonging: dialogue, collaboration, problem-posing, shared authority, and student voice. These pathways foster respectful relationships, a sense of learning community, purpose, ownership of learning, and recognition of students' identities, experiences, and perspectives. Together, these pathways provide a conceptual framework for understanding how critical pedagogy creates classroom conditions in which students experience belonging and, consequently, engage more meaningfully in learning. The paper concludes with implications for teachers and teacher educators seeking to design classrooms that intentionally cultivate belonging as a foundation for meaningful learning.

Keywords: critical pedagogy, classroom belonging, meaningful learning, student engagement, student voice, shared authority, problem-posing education

1. Belongingness and Learning Engagement

Society established schools to educate its children (Brint, 2017). Parents send their kids to school so that they can get an education for college and careers. Students go to school to learn. The government provides funding to support education. School administration and teachers work in the school with a mission to promote students' academic success through learning outcomes. So the central purpose of schooling is to educate children for their future lives. However, not all students achieve academic success, and many cannot complete high school

education (Archambault et al., 2022). The question is why these students fall behind in achieving academic success, though every stakeholder's mission is to educate them. Lack of academic progress leads students to drop out of school (Banaag et al., 2024). These dropouts are not solutions, but a curse for students, families, and communities. Generally, dropped-out students cannot earn enough to make a living; many may get addicted to drugs and become involved in crimes (Ressa & Andrews, 2022). These students attended school and were physically present, but that was not enough for their academic success.

Physical presence in the classroom is not a guarantee for academic success if the students are not engaged in learning. Students do not get engaged in classroom activities if they do not feel a sense of belonging there (Strayhorn, 2023). If they feel isolated, unheard, overlooked, and judged for their performances or backgrounds, they do not feel a sense of belonging (Hoffman & Islam, 2026). They feel inferior and alienated. The classroom is not for their learning; it is a place of humiliation and discomfort. In that situation, they become a clock watcher who just looks at the time to get rid of the class. A sense of belonging in the classroom is a precondition for active participation and learning (du Toit-Brits, 2022; El-Zaatari & Maalouf, 2022). When they get physically engaged, emotionally connected, and intellectually invested in the learning activities, only then do they feel they belong there and are part of the learning community.

The sense of belonging emerges when students are physically engaged, emotionally connected, and intellectually invested. Physical engagement is tangible behavior in classroom activities such as staying on-task, taking notes, maintaining eye contact, doing hands-on activities, active movement, and following classroom rules. Emotional connectedness is a sense of safety in the classroom, being heard by teachers and peers, feeling comfortable asking questions and making mistakes, a positive attitude toward learning, showing enthusiasm for taking challenges, and being a part of the classroom community. Intellectual investment involves setting personal and collective learning goals, participating in knowledge co-construction activities, and engaging in productive struggle and metacognition. Thus, physical engagement, emotional connectedness, and intellectual investment create a sense of belonging in the classroom, and students become part of learning and the classroom community. By applying critical pedagogy, teachers can create such classroom conditions to foster students' sense of belonging.

2. Critical Pedagogy and Belongingness

Critical pedagogy is a teaching philosophy or educational movement that emerged from Paulo Freire's seminal work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Freire (1970) said that education must be emancipatory and transform the oppressive classroom structure that makes some students outliers and inactive. It should empower students, make them knowledge processors, promote their critical awareness, and enhance their agency. Though he never used the term critical pedagogy, later scholars, such as Henry Giroux and Michael Apple, coined it. Giroux (2020) defined critical pedagogy as a pedagogical force that makes teachers transformative intellectuals who engage each learner and connect learning with broader social and political realities. Apple (2011) said that critical pedagogy is a framework that must challenge

dominant ideologies in the classroom and promote equal participation of each student. Uddin (2019) identified critical pedagogy as a transformative classroom practice that promotes students' critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and creativity. Teachers can transform the classroom conditions to foster students' sense of belonging using critical pedagogy.

3. How Dialogical Approaches Foster Belongingness

A dialogical approach is the heart of critical pedagogy. This approach can foster students' physical engagement, emotional connectedness, and intellectual investment in the learning activities when teachers use it. Freire (1970) stated five preconditions for dialogue in classrooms: love, respect, faith, trust, and critical thinking. Teachers should have a love for all students to empower them and give them equal opportunities. During dialogue, teachers must recognize that they are not the sole holders of knowledge and that students have knowledge. Teachers should have faith and high expectations for students' potential. Trust is essential during dialogue. Teachers need to establish a trustworthy relationship with students in which students are encouraged to ask questions and take intellectual challenges. The ultimate purpose of dialogue is to foster students' critical thinking. Teachers must create opportunities during dialogue for students to reflect and take action.

The dialogue between the teacher and students and among students promotes physical engagement (Sağlam & Kanadlı, 2022), emotional connectedness (Yang et al., 2024), and intellectual investment (Rapanta & Felton, 2022). During dialogue, students maintain eye contact, stay on task, ask questions, prepare responses quickly, analyze interlocutors' responses to formulate follow-up questions, and reflect on their own responses for answering follow-up questions. These activities require students' close attention to dialogue. Students feel valued and heard (emotional connectedness) when they see their teachers love their participation and encourage them to continue. They get engaged physically and invest intellectually. When students find that their teachers and peers show respect and do not laugh at them for incorrect responses or limited knowledge of concepts, it fosters emotional safety. Teachers' faith in students' potential is a foundation for a trustworthy relationship, as it encourages students to invest their time and intellectual energy (Johnston et al., 2024). During the critical thinking phase of dialogue, students take a deeper dive into the concepts that foster physical engagement, emotional connectedness, and intellectual investment. So, teachers' implementation of a dialogical approach lays the foundations for students' positive experiences that foster their sense of belonging.

4. How Collaborative Learning Fosters Belongingness

Collaborative learning is an essential part of Freirean approach of critical pedagogy. Freire (1970) stated that learning is a social and collaborative act, and he emphasized knowledge co-constructions in which teachers and students work as mutual partners. Horizontal relationships are a precondition for this approach. Students work in pairs or groups to solve problems, explore concepts, or complete tasks. Each student can exercise their voice without fear and without violating others' rights. There are no outliers and no one is superior or inferior in collaboration. Everyone plays their respective roles and takes individual

responsibility for collective efforts. Students respect each other's existing knowledge and culture. When the group works together, they analyze resources, share and critique ideas, provide rationale, pose questions, listen carefully, and develop strategies to reach the goal. It not only builds their academic knowledge, but also promotes civic behavior, critical consciousness, and collective responsibility (Gockel et al., 2022; Zhou & Colomer, 2024).

This collaborative approach engages students physically, emotionally, and intellectually in activities. They actively work in groups to attain common goals. Their respectful and friendly interactions in groups provide emotional support to all students (Martin, 2025). They get connected with each other. It breaks down hierarchy in the classroom (Buchs et al., 2023). Students find themselves as equal partner in knowledge co-construction. It fosters trust among the teachers and students (Yang et al., 2024). This collaborative approach also generates a healthy competition among students. They feel encouraged to take accountability and invest their intellect in the collective effort. So, teachers' intentional instructional design provides students a positive learning experience that makes them feel they belong to that classroom. These positive experiences encourage them to engage physically, connect emotionally, and invest intellectually in the learning activities.

5. How Problem-Posing Strategy Fosters Belongingness

Problem-posing strategy is a core operational approach in critical pedagogy. Freire (1970) said that the problem-posing approach transforms students to shift from passive observers to active change-makers. As he said, "the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation" (p.83). The author emphasizes that education should empower students to change history, not just survive it. Through the problem-posing approach, teachers can engage students to think about static reality versus reality in progress. For students, this approach is a highly intellectual investment compared to physical engagement and emotional connectedness (Yurttaş-Kumlu & Taştepe, 2023). In this process, teachers ask why and how questions. Then students inquire about the origin of the problem and analyze why the solution is essential. Different students interpret the problem differently based on their backgrounds and look for multiple ways of solving it (Aguirre et al., 2024). Teachers are open to accepting students' justifications in multiple ways.

The problem-posing approach can foster a sense of belonging among students when they see themselves as capable thinkers and active change agents (Quarmby & Luguetti, 2022). Teachers need to design problem-posing approaches that reflect society and in which students can see themselves. It requires students to analyze an authentic problem using critical thinking and demonstrate creativity through possible solutions. Analyzing an authentic problem guides students to connect their classroom learning to a real social problem. When students see this connection, it emotionally resonates with them, and they try to find possible solutions for change (Quarmby & Luguetti, 2022). This experience fosters their sense of belonging. Their sense of belonging encourages students to invest their intellectual capabilities for a transformative solution. They realize the importance of their investment because the problems are socially meaningful, and they consider that a solution is essential. They discover that they are change agents and capable thinkers (Mathers et al., 2024). So,

through the problem-posing approaches, teachers can connect real-world problems that resonate with students to foster their sense of belonging and engage them in learning.

6. How Shared Authority Fosters Belongingness

Shared authority refers to the shared ownership in classrooms. In traditional classrooms, teachers are the sole authority for making all decisions (Freire, 1970; Oruc, 2024). Students merely follow teachers' directions without questioning. Power dynamics play a role here as students are just followers. Let's discuss a simple, straightforward question: Do students have ownership of their learning? If the answer is "no," students do not feel a sense of belonging (Tripp & Waight, 2024). If teachers present themselves as the owners of classrooms, students may feel they do not belong there. Shared authority distributes ownership among teachers and students (Cox & Masuku, 2024). It makes teachers co-learners and students co-educators. Teachers and students develop co-ownership. They all share responsibilities in designing curriculum, choosing learning materials, establishing classroom norms, designing assessments, and maintaining a positive learning environment.

Critical pedagogy challenges the power dynamics and dismantles the status quo. It provides students equal ownership in classrooms alongside teachers. When students realize they have a sense of ownership in the classroom, they feel they belong here (Cox & Masuku, 2024). This sense of belonging promotes learning activities. When they own their learning, they speak in class, collaborate with teachers and peers, feel secure asking questions, and show enthusiasm to participate (Khatter et al., 2024). But the shared ownership does not come out of nowhere. First, teachers should give up their sole authority attitude. Then, teachers need to give students ownership through various shared activities, such as collecting learning materials, designing classrooms, and establishing rules and norms. These activities require physical engagement, emotional connectedness, and intellectual investment. So, through sharing classroom ownership with students, teachers can foster students' sense of belonging, a precondition for engagement in learning.

7. How Student Voice Promotes Belongingness

Student voice is sharply different from dialogue. During dialogue, students' participation matters, but here what students say matters. This is about recognition of students' voices. The question is: do students' experiences and perspectives matter in the classroom regardless of their identity? Freire (1970) said traditional classrooms reinforce oppressive societal structures and power dynamics. He argued for liberating classrooms by dismantling power dynamics so that dominant narratives do not oppress the perspectives of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. When students find that their teachers and peers do not value their opinions or experiences, they might feel undervalued in the classroom (Peters et al., 2024). If teachers frequently ask questions or invite the participation of students who are gifted and talented or who are from the dominant culture, it validates the dominant culture and reinforces power dynamics (Holquist et al., 2023). Even if a student wants to share an idea or is willing to participate but teachers and peers ignore them, it is a form of unrecognition and humiliation (Honneth, 1995). These students find that they are intentionally overlooked and are not recognized as a part of the learning process. This

experience of being unrecognized might lead them to consider that they do not belong in classrooms.

To foster students' sense of belonging, teachers should have strategies to incorporate each student's culture, perspectives, and experiences into the learning process. Instead of always including the dominant culture in the classroom discussion and learning materials, teachers need to include all cultures. When students see their cultural representations in classroom discussions or learning materials, it gives them a sense of recognition (Peters et al., 2024). Teachers must invite multiple perspectives, allowing students to share their lived experiences, and then teachers can connect them to the learning materials. They should validate diverse cultural knowledge, providing examples from different cultures. Teachers need to encourage students to challenge dominant narratives and assumptions so that students from other cultures realize that their voices matter in classrooms. It is teachers' responsibility to ensure that students don't have to leave parts of their lives outside of classrooms. When students find that their cultures are represented in learning materials and classroom discussions, and that their voices matter in challenging the dominant narratives, they feel recognized (Flores & Ahn, 2024). This experience gives them a sense of belonging, and then they engage physically, connect emotionally, and invest intellectually in the learning process.

8. Conclusion

The purpose of this conceptual paper was to explain how teachers can apply critical pedagogy in classrooms to foster students' sense of belonging, a precondition for meaningful learning. Without a sense of belonging, students feel alienated, isolated, unrecognized, and excluded from the learning process. This paper conceptualizes sense of belongingness as multidimensional, engaging students physically, connecting emotionally, and investing intellectually in the learning process. This paper argues that teachers should wear students' shoes and consider these five questions: Am I heard? Do I belong with my peers? Can my idea make a difference? Do I have ownership in my learning? Do my experiences matter? A classroom characterized by critical pedagogy is one in which every student can answer five essential questions positively. This paper explained five principles of critical pedagogy to implement in classrooms.

Table 1. Pathways to Belongingness

Principle	Students Ask	Pathway to Belonging
Dialogue	Am I heard?	Relationships
Collaboration	Do I belong with my peers?	Community
Problem-Posing	Can my idea make a difference	Purpose
Shared Authority	Do I have ownership?	Agency
Student Voice	Do my experience matters?	Recognition

This paper argues that students' foster a sense of belonging when they experience that (1) they have trustworthy and respectful relationships with their teachers and peers, (2) consider

themselves as a part of learning and the classroom community, (3) understand the purpose of their learning and knowledge creation, (4) have agency to realize the ownership of their learning, and (5) realize that their experiences and cultures are a part of learning process. Teachers can foster those five pathways to belonging by implementing (1) a dialogical approach to build relationships, (2) collaborative learning to develop the classroom and learning community, (3) problem-posing strategies to give students purpose, (4) developing agency through shared authority, and (5) applying student voice to give students recognition. When students have those positive experiences, they will have a sense of belonging, and this will guide them to engage physically, connect emotionally, and invest intellectually in the meaningful learning process.

This framework provides classroom teachers with a lens to design instructional practices that intentionally foster belonging. Future empirical research should explore how these five pathways develop and influence students' physical engagement, emotional connectedness, and intellectual investment. Future research may also examine how these five pathways are effective in different academic settings.

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