

Who is Your *Nathalia?*

By Steve Sider



In one of my first years as a secondary school administrator, I met “Nathalia.” Nathalia had significant attention and behavioural challenges, her mother had recently died, and she was living with her uncle since her father did not have custody. Over the next two years, Nathalia was in my office on many occasions. Life had not been easy for Nathalia and her behaviour was an expression of some of those difficulties.

But during this time, Nathalia also started developing really solid relationships with her peers and a number of teachers. She became involved with a sports team. She was invited to participate as a mentor in a mentoring program for incoming students. By the time Nathalia completed Grade 12, she had the required credits to graduate. Some time after graduation, Nathalia returned to meet with me and talk about her post-secondary work experience. We also discussed what had helped turn things around for her. She didn’t hesitate when she said, “Feeling like I belonged.”

Nathalia taught me a lot about the idea of intersectionality, that is recognizing the multiple layers that make up our identity. Intersectionality also acknowledges the privileges and barriers, which contribute to that identity (Crenshaw, 1989). Intersectionality is a recognition that students such as Nathalia do not just have academic needs, they also have emotional, spiritual and physical needs. Understanding intersectionality is to work toward understanding the whole person. It means that when we work to create the conditions of belonging in our schools, we become aware of the complexities of what this means and what might prevent or support students in feeling a sense of belonging in school.

I have led multiple national research studies that have examined the ways in which principals support students with special education needs. In 2018, we completed a major study, which involved 285 principals from British Columbia, Alberta, Ontario, Quebec, New Brunswick, and Newfoundland and Labrador. The study identified six key themes in how principals support students with special education

needs: the importance of relationships, modelling desired behaviour, challenges of communication, principal isolation, limited preparation that principals experienced particularly in light of intensive student supports, and the identification of critical incidents which had influenced principals’ views on inclusive education. In this article (Sider et al., in press), I examine three aspects of our study with consideration for how principals can foster a sense of belonging for students with special education needs from an intersectional perspective: Safety, support and serving.

It starts with safety


Cultivating an environment of belonging starts with safety. Students, who represent the rainbow of diverse identities, need to feel safe in our schools. We heard this from many of the principals in our study. One commented, “All children need to feel safe and included at school.” Another stated, “Every student has that the right to be here, to feel safe and access the curriculum in a way that makes them part of the community.” These statements are reflective of the comments of many others.

For Nathalia, who entered our school after a negative year at another high school and with her family situation, the sense of safety did not automatically lead to a sense of belonging. However, it was a condition for the support that she would receive.

360-degree support

Many of the participants in our study commented on the realities that many students face outside of the time they are in their school. One principal commented,

You learn that there are a whole lot of kids carrying a whole lot of baggage. And for some of these kids to continue coming to school is a miracle. You learn a lot about resilience because some of the kids, who have every reason to never come to school, are there every single day. And sometimes you also realize that your actions have a big part to play in that.



Through the work of principals, teachers, support workers and staff, schools can provide the variety of supports that students with special education needs require. But these supports need to be differentiated not just to the learning needs of the student but with a 360-degree perspective of who they are.

An intersectional approach helps principals develop a holistic perspective of students. It helps them understand that the supports, which can be provided in school are only part of what a child with a special education need might require. One principal stated,

I can keep kids safe for six hours, but after six hours they are going home or out in the community. Even if a program works academically or behaviourally in my school for six hours, it falls apart the moment they walk out of the school.

Principals can address these challenges by providing suggestions for community supports and engaging family members in discussions about how to provide effective, ongoing support for the student.

In Nathalia's case, 360-degree support involved teachers and support staff in our school. But it also involved ongoing communication with Nathalia's caregivers in an effort to ensure that they – and Nathalia – were supported to the greatest degree possible outside of the school. Ken Leithwood's research reminds us that engaging with families may be the most untapped aspect of how principals can influence enhanced student learning (Leithwood, Patten, & Jantzi, 2010).

Serving

In our study, we were struck by the number of principals who clearly articulated an attitude of service toward students with special education needs. Serving students with special education needs helps us be aware of the complexities of all students. When we genuinely desire to meet the needs of students we enter into a multi-textured space where we increase our knowledge of the special needs of the student as well as their strengths. We encounter the whole child.

As Jean Vanier states in *Becoming Human*,
Every child, every person needs to know that they are a source of joy; every child, every person, needs to be celebrated. Only when all


of our weaknesses are accepted as part of our humanity can our negative, broken self-images be transformed.

Acts of service also remind us of the importance of inclusion. As one principal said,

There has to be a common understanding that every student has the right to be here, to feel safe and access the curriculum in a way that makes them part of the community whether they live in a trailer or a \$3 million home, whether they have an IEP are not, whether they speak English or don't speak English.

This comment reflects an intersectional understanding that there are many aspects that make up our identities. When we serve our students – and the staff in our schools – we are supporting the full inclusion of all members of the school community.

Sometimes developing a sense of belonging does not occur despite our best efforts. A principal in our study reinforced the importance of asking critical questions at times such as this, "If we have members of the community who are not feeling included, in a place that is supposed to be inclusive, what are we doing wrong? Where did that break down?" These types of questions acknowledge that there are certain privileges that we may have experienced that others may not have. Asking critical questions, and working to address the barriers which may exist in our schools, provides a model for our students that inclusion is not always easy and we may not always get it right, but that we are working diligently to do better going forward.

Fostering a safe school space, with appropriate supports provided with an attitude of service are key aspects of supporting a sense of belonging that all students, but particularly those with special education needs, require. An intersectional approach recognizes the complexities of our identities and can help principals to better support and serve those who are often the most at risk for being marginalized. Nathalia was the student who helped me develop this perspective. Who has been that student for you? 

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