



Editorial Introduction

Reflecting on Our Shared Educational Futures: A Global Need to Belong for Transformative Learning

Erica Reed
Arizona State University

Celina German
Arizona State University

Patricia Geraghty
Arizona State University

Kelly Brown
Arizona State University

Jami Carmichael
Arizona State University

Abstract: In this editorial introduction to the *Fall 2025* issue of *Current Issues in Education*, we explore belonging as the relational and systemic foundation of educational transformation. Building on prior discussions of equity and redesign through care, this issue highlights how belonging and agency operate across micro, meso, and macro levels—from teacher identity and classroom collaboration to institutional leadership and policy design. Across the seven articles published in this issue, authors demonstrate that transformation is sustained not by compliance or reform cycles, but by relationships that cultivate trust, capacity, and shared purpose. Together, these works illustrate how belonging can be institutionalized as both a human need and a policy imperative, shaping educational futures that are inclusive, adaptive, and rooted in connection.

Keywords: Belonging, Equity, Transformative learning, Teacher identity, Inclusive systems

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Editorial Introduction
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In the Spring 2025 issue of *Current Issues in Education (CIE)*, readers were invited to move from reaction to reflection, to redesign education through care rather than crisis (see Carmichael et al., 2025). As we publish this Fall 2025 issue, we build on this conversation through the lens of belonging (Strayhorn, 2018) to inquire into what it takes to be a catalyst for transformation globally.

Reading the seven manuscripts published in this issue of *CIE*, we observed a common theme: authentic transformation is not imposed from top-down governmental policy approaches; instead, it grows from relationships that make people feel seen, valued, and inspired. Each article illustrates the educational possibilities that can develop when relationship-centered educational practices are prioritized. The manuscripts featured here collectively highlight the relational core of educational practice. Whether examining teacher well-being, curriculum adoption, instructional design, or professional belonging, each study reflects the human need to feel connected, capable, and trusted within our complex systems of teaching and learning. Together, these articles remind us that agency and belonging are not peripheral to academic flourishing (Vanderweele & Case, 2025); they are foundational to better policy and practice.

In this editorial introduction, we invite readers to imagine an ecosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) of belonging and transformation. We observed these phenomena unfolding across three levels: the micro, meso, and macro—each complementary to the overall success of the system. At the micro level, belonging takes root in identity and nourishes motivation. At the meso level, transformation begins to unfold as educators and learners co-create their shared experiences. At the macro level, capacity, leadership, and policy either enable or erode that collective sense of purpose.

We offer this framing as a way to read the articles in this issue as a cohesive whole. Each level illustrates how belonging and transformation emerge, sustain, and sometimes struggle within various educational contexts. Together, these articles remind us that transformation rarely happens in isolation; rather, it emerges through the relationships, practices, and systems that connect educational stakeholders. In a time when educational spaces are increasingly shaped by division and politicization (Pollock et al., 2022; Woo et al., 2024), these authors help us imagine what is still possible in education—an interconnected ecosystem where connection, co-creation, and shared purpose shape the conditions that allow both educators and learners to thrive (Love, 2019).

Engaging with the Micro: Human Experience & Professional Belonging

The first two manuscripts in our issue remind us that belonging can be cultivated through systemic changes. First, in "**Finding Their Place: Exploring the Sense of Belonging Among Alternatively Certified Early-Career Educators**," Wilcoxon, Langfeld, and O'Shea show that retention relies on a sense of belonging. Grounded in an ecological framework, this multicase qualitative study explores how alternatively certified teachers experience value, connection, influence, and authenticity during their early years. Participants described how mentorship, collegial trust, and recognition fostered belonging, while bureaucratic barriers and limited decision-making voice weakened it. The study affirms that belonging is both emotion-based and structural, shaping early teacher identity and determining whether new educators stay committed to the profession. Transformation is made possible when mentorship and inclusion are built into systems, rather than left to individual effort.

In the second manuscript, "**Comparing Special Education and General Education Teachers' Stress, Job Demands, and Resources During COVID-19**," Leo, Mola Ávila, Wilcox, Khan, Schiller, and Zhang, reframe resilience through the Job Demands–Resources framework, revealing that belonging and professional connection are central to endurance and growth within the teaching profession. While reported stress levels were high across the teacher participants in this study, special education teachers faced distinct challenges related to individualized instruction, IEP compliance, and the emotional toll of remote support during COVID-19. Yet many of these educators sustained their sense of purpose through collaboration, administrative support, and collegial trust. The authors' findings offer a hopeful view of transformation amid crisis, showing that resilience is not a matter of individual grit but of collective belonging that sustains well-being and commitment even under strain.

These articles demonstrate that at the micro level, belonging serves as a powerful foundation for teacher retention and growth. When mentoring, ongoing feedback, and collaborative problem-solving are prioritized within educational organizations, people feel valued, which in turn strengthens performance and sustains success.

Exploring the Meso: Academic Design as Shared Authority

The following two articles illustrate how belonging becomes a form of agency in motion at the school site level. In their article, "**A Systematic Review of Reviews on Problem-Based Learning and Its Effectiveness**," Amoah-Danquah and Carbonneau position the classroom as a space of inquiry, empowerment, and shared transformation. Synthesizing 22 studies on problem-based learning, the authors confirm that when teachers facilitate inquiry and students co-construct knowledge, critical thinking, communication, and authentic problem solving deepen. Their findings highlight that student agency depends on teacher agency; facilitation thrives when educators have the autonomy to design, guide, and adapt learning to their specific context. This study calls for shifting from compliance-based implementation to principle-aligned practice, where belonging and trust between teachers and learners drive meaningful and sustainable change.

In "**The Micropolitics of Literacy Curricula Adoption: An Exploratory Actor Network Theory Analysis of Curricula Adoption**," Barrett-Tatum, Scales, Vaughn, Stevens, Kline, Van Wig, Yoder, and Wellman examine how curriculum decisions move through layers of policy, procurement, and accountability. Using Actor Network Theory, the authors trace the relationships among mandates, administrative structures, and teacher voice. Their analysis shows that while classroom educators carry the weight of implementation, they often have limited

influence over what they teach. Yet teachers reclaim agency through collaboration and contextual adaptation, transforming top-down directives into meaningful practice. The authors advocate for including educators more authentically in curriculum decision-making, affirming that belonging and professional agency are essential to equitable and sustainable reform.

These two articles illustrate that at the meso level, belonging and transformation begin with agency. When teachers are trusted to design, adapt, and lead, classrooms become communities of inquiry, and policy becomes partnership rather than prescription.

Visiting the Macro: Systemic Belonging and Transformative Leadership

The remaining four manuscripts included in this issue widen our lens from classrooms to institutions and nations, illustrating how belonging can be codified into the architecture of transformation. First, in **“Leave, Move, or Stay? An Examination of Retention Factors Among Novice Dual-Certified Teachers of Color,”** Kea, Young, Wilder, Sirgany, and Trent examine why novice Teachers of Color (TOC) in the United States leave, move, or remain in the profession, and how belonging within school systems shapes those decisions. Guided by Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological systems theory, the authors surveyed dual-certified teachers who graduated from a Historically Black College and University to explore how preparation, mentorship, administrative support, and diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) commitments influence retention of TOC. The findings show that TOC stay where they feel supported, connected, and respected, and leave when those conditions are absent. These elements reflect a macro-level focus on systemic belonging, as they highlight the need for educational institutions to create equitable, supportive, and culturally responsive environments. This study underscores the importance of transformative leadership that addresses systemic inequities, advances inclusive policies, and ensures that TOC not only enter the profession but are supported so that they can thrive, stay, and lead.

Second, in **“Leveraging on Stakeholder Involvement to Create a Student Success Culture Through Institutional Capacity Assessment at a University in South Africa,”** Ndebele and Mbodila demonstrate how collective reflection can drive transformation. Using the Institutional Capacity Assessment Tool (ICAT), faculty, staff, and administrators assessed their university’s strengths and gaps in supporting student success. The process fostered dialogue across roles, creating a shared understanding of what student success means and how it can be achieved. Rather than serving as a compliance measure, the ICAT became a catalyst for belonging and collaboration, aligning diverse perspectives around a common purpose. This study illustrates that transformation begins when institutions turn assessment into community connections and capacity into a culture of belonging.

Third, in **“Urban-Rural STEM Education’s Influence on Creativity in Public and Private Middle Schools of Pakistan,”** Kamlash and Das explore how equitable access to STEM education in Pakistan can transform student potential into participation. Surveying 164 middle school students across diverse programs, the authors found that while current curricula often underdevelop creativity and critical thinking, structured STEM experiences foster stronger analytical and innovative skills. Results also revealed an equity gap, with students in urban and private schools reporting higher engagement and perceived benefits than those in rural and public settings. The findings point to a central insight: transformation in education depends on belonging and equitable opportunity, where all learners are equipped to engage fully in creative, inquiry-based learning.

These three articles show that at the macro level, belonging and transformation emerge as systemic work. Institutions evolve when leadership, policy, and capacity building move beyond compliance to cultivate trust, equity, inclusion, and community.

From Reflection to Regeneration

If the last editorial introduction asked how we design educational spaces for equity amid disruption, here, we ask readers to contemplate how transformation adapts and endures. Together, we imagine that one approach might be in how belonging is systematically institutionalized; mentorship is integrated into educational structures; and collaboration is prioritized as critical to effective academic design. How can we use capacity tools to align communities around shared purpose rather than to expose gaps? How can we track retention, engagement, and belonging, and utilize those results to inspire collective accountability and transformation? These seven selected articles offer insights into these questions and inspire us to re-imagine how transformation can give educational stakeholders greater leverage in authentically representing their envisioned educational futures.

Transformation is not a destination but a current that flows through classrooms, campuses, and communities, inching the needle toward justice and equity issue by issue, transgressing the limits of each reform cycle. Throughout each article in our Fall 2025 issue, a consistent truth emerges: teacher and student agency are deeply intertwined with belonging in educational systems. When educators feel valued and trusted, they can create the conditions for students to take ownership of their learning and thrive. When learners are invited to co-construct knowledge, they gain the confidence and curiosity that sustain lifelong growth. These manuscripts remind us that systems thrive when policy is informed by practitioners' experience, leadership nurtures authentic relationships, and pedagogy is designed for partnership. When belonging becomes an authentic practice, hope and equity inform policymaking, and transformation becomes a possibility.

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Author Notes

Erica Reed
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0007-8077-8830>
Arizona State University
esreed2@asu.edu

Celina German
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0005-7309-7522>
Arizona State University
cgerman5@asu.edu

Patricia Geraghty
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0007-9358-7769>
Arizona State University
patricia.geraghty@asu.edu

Kelly Brown

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0000-1795-4247>

Arizona State University

Kelly.Brown1@asu.edu

Jami Carmichael

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0000-7723-0646>

Arizona State University

jlcarmic@asu.edu

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