

DLR Group x University of WA

Belonging as a framework for justice: Photovoice techniques for abolitionist design perspectives in K-12 learning environments



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land acknowledgement

This research and writing was conducted on the present and ancestral lands of the Duwamish, Puyallap, Suquamish, Tulalip, Muckleshoot, Nations. We gratefully honor these indigenous communities and their continued stewardship of these lands and waters on which this dialogue took place.

message from the author

This work is deeply rooted in principles of abolition justice, which walked hand-in-hand with efforts to dismantle ongoing systems of settler-colonialism that we participate in by living and working on these lands, and in *all* indigenous lands, as visitors and settlers. This work was written as we continue to bare witness to an ongoing, extreme settler-violence and genocide in the Gaza strip following October 7th, 2023. For each day that follows, may we better articulate our roles as academics, activists, and built environment professionals in radical solidarity with all oppressed people. Free Palestine.

about

This research was conducted from 2023-2024, as part of the **Applied Research Consortium (ARC)** Fellowship with the College of Built Environments at the University of Washington and DLR Group, an integrated design firm and a leading practice in the industry of K-12 design. The following research contributes to DLR Group's internal practice and should impact the firm's knowledge on conducting research and engagement around belonging and engaging K-12 community members. It is crucial to acknowledge the constraints of adopting abolitionist theory in a for-profit design practice, not limited to the expectations and values of client relationships. This body of work offers several degrees of action that designers can take to adopt a more abolition-oriented practice within the constraints of a capitalist context.



Abolition is...

“not some distant future but something we create in every moment when we say no to the traps of empire and yes to the nourishing possibilities dreamed of and practiced by our ancestors and friends.”

– Eric A. Stanley, *Captive Genders: Trans Embodiment and the Prison Industrial Complex*, p 36

positionality

My interests in the topics of belonging have ultimately been shaped by my childhood as a racialized student in a predominantly white public school district in the Seattle area, in the early 2000s. My academic experience was never isolated from the reality of how my identities, and those of my siblings and my few Black classmates, systemically challenged our ability to participate, succeed and belong in learning environments in non-abstracted ways. Racial profiling, inequitable disciplinary action, and a lack of representation in authority figures, were some of the ways that our academic experiences differed from our white peers. These realities were synchronously shaped by other intersecting identities, including gender, queerness, socio-economic backgrounds, disability, and/or religion.

In my adulthood, I observed my younger siblings navigate the similar challenges, while reflecting on my own experiences with a more complex understanding of racial justice in our country and our schools. I channeled these experiences as an advocate and supporter of “No cops in schools” campaigns across the United States and Canada and racial justice organizing in and outside of the classroom. Thus sense of belonging in schools has been deeply shaped from a history of structural oppression and a perspective of social justice.

To topics of sense of belonging and K-12 design, I bring a lens of abolition feminism, with the understanding that that we must take a intersectional and structural approach to dismantling systems of oppression that include the the school-prison nexus and the prison-industrial complex. I also draw from perspectives of data feminism to guide how designers can engage with communities in the pursuit of knowledge generation. When working with communities around data that concerns lived experience, we must arrive with the understanding that data is a form of power and strive to engage it in just ways.



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Executive Summary

What might sense of belonging disrupt within the context of the school-prison nexus?

Abstract

This research offers photovoice methods as a means for designers to adopt abolitionist perspectives in professional practice relevant to K-12 design. In existing literature, photovoice methods have been utilized to engage student sense of belonging. Separately, abolitionist theory has been adopted and applied in design contexts in order to identify opportunities for designers to engage in goals associated with racial justice and restorative justice. This work contributes a unique application of photovoice methods for abolitionist design perspectives, with the intention of centering student belonging in a K-12 design process. Doing so can fulfill goals from abolition such as disrupting the school-prison nexus – a phenomenon that highlights the symbiotic relationships between schools and prisons, and ultimately leads to disproportionate academic and belonging outcomes for racialized and otherwise marginalized students.

In order to demonstrate these relationships, concepts from abolitionist theory were applied to a design process in professional practice. This approach is intended to encourage designers to disrupt power structures and

hierarchies embedded in K-12 design processes and center design responses that are reparative. Reparative design responses thoughtfully address a plurality of belonging experiences that include marginalized students. Photovoice methods were identified as a tool with the capacity to center these principles and uncover student sense of belonging for design feedback. The methods were tested in a multi-day, student-engaged, photovoice study at a high school located in a Seattle suburb. The results successfully demonstrated how photovoice could begin transforming the design process by delivering insights into spatial experiences relevant to the school-prison nexus. Photovoice represents one element of a larger effort to adopt a more liberation-oriented architectural practice. However, it is focused on in this study for its potential to make tangible lived belonging experience investigation for K-12 designers and more broadly, engage student participants in accessible co-design processes.





Key words: *sense of belonging, abolition, K-12 learning environments, photovoice, participatory design, school-prison nexus*

Belonging as a framework for justice is an applied research exploration on how an abolitionist theory can inform a social-justice oriented design practice rooted in its engagement methods. This research project engaged high-school students through a photovoice curriculum to better understand the nuanced experience of belonging, with a critical lens towards top-down design approaches in education environments.

Objectives

- 01** Apply theory from abolitionist perspectives to the professional practice of designing K-12 learning environments
- 02** Demonstrate photovoice as a designer research and engagement tool, that can help build insight around student sense of belonging

What was accomplished?

-  **Surveyed 250+ built environment professionals** at DLR Group to better understand how sense of belonging is currently being approached in professional practice
-  **Synthesized an application of abolitionist perspectives in design** and its relevance to the design of school environments through a literature review
-  **Performed a student-engaged photovoice study on sense of belonging** to test photovoice methods as an engagement of abolitionist design perspectives
-  **Developed a photovoice engagement toolkit** to share with designers how to build insights around sense of belonging for design applications, through student-engaged activities

Methods

Photovoice methods were used as a tool for studying place-based belonging at individual and community scales.

An abolitionist lens, pushes this methodology to center community (and individual) agency.

As photovoice is integrated into the design process, designers should respond to photovoice insights in restorative ways with a complex understanding of student belonging.

photovoice

Photovoice is a visual research methodology that invites community participants to document their lived experience through photography, driven by a prompt. Then participants further reflect upon their experiences as individuals and groups through photo reflections, discussion and activities. This method invites the participants into the roles of researchers and analysts in the process of interpreting their own lived experience.

an abolitionist design framework

This work adopts perspectives from Abolitionist theory to inform how designers can adopt a more liberation-oriented practice that engages sense of belonging. From this lens, two goals are centered:

Undermining Power Structures & Hierarchies | Dismantling the hierarchical relationship between designers and communities, as to abolish the processes of power and exclusion in creating spaces of belonging.

Mending the Transgression of "Not Belonging" | Unpacking socio-spatial relations that determine who belongs and who does not. Offering design responses that respond to a plurality of belonging experiences from a reparative perspective.

"Take 8-10 pictures of places in the school where you feel like you belong and places in the school where you do not belong."

A photo-elicitation prompt is followed by a series of activities to understand pluralistic sense of belonging and explore potential design responses:



Documenting and co-analyzing place-based sense of belonging

Photovoice prompt is given to students, to complete before next gathering



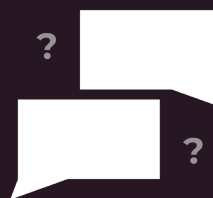
Developing a consensus around a plurality of experiences

Using a digital collaboration space (Mural) to share images and co-analyze spaces of belonging/not belonging as a group



Envisioning new learning environments as spaces of belonging

Sketching and collaging exercises where student-generated photos served as base layers for iterating future spaces of belonging



Communicating photovoice insights with designers

An exit survey for students, and a reflection to from designers to better understand what types of insights around belonging can we learn from a process like this

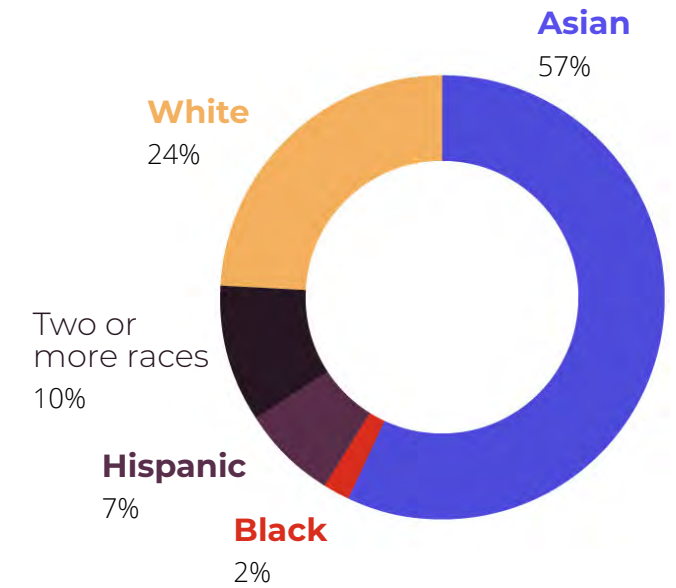
In March 2024, a student-engaged photovoice study on sense of belonging took place at a local high-school

We collaborated with an educator at a local high school to integrate a photovoice study into a Freshman English class curriculum. Of the 85+ who participated in the activities through their class, **23 students** opted into this study and are sharing the images and insights they produced through the activities with this ARC project.

Over the course of three class sessions (per class group of students) student contributors produced: **65 student generated photographs** showing spaces of belonging and not belonging around their school; **20 sketch iterations** illustrating future spaces of belonging within their school; and **22 collage illustrations** and written reflections to further explore - *what is belonging to me?*



23 students (14-15 y/o) across three classes participated



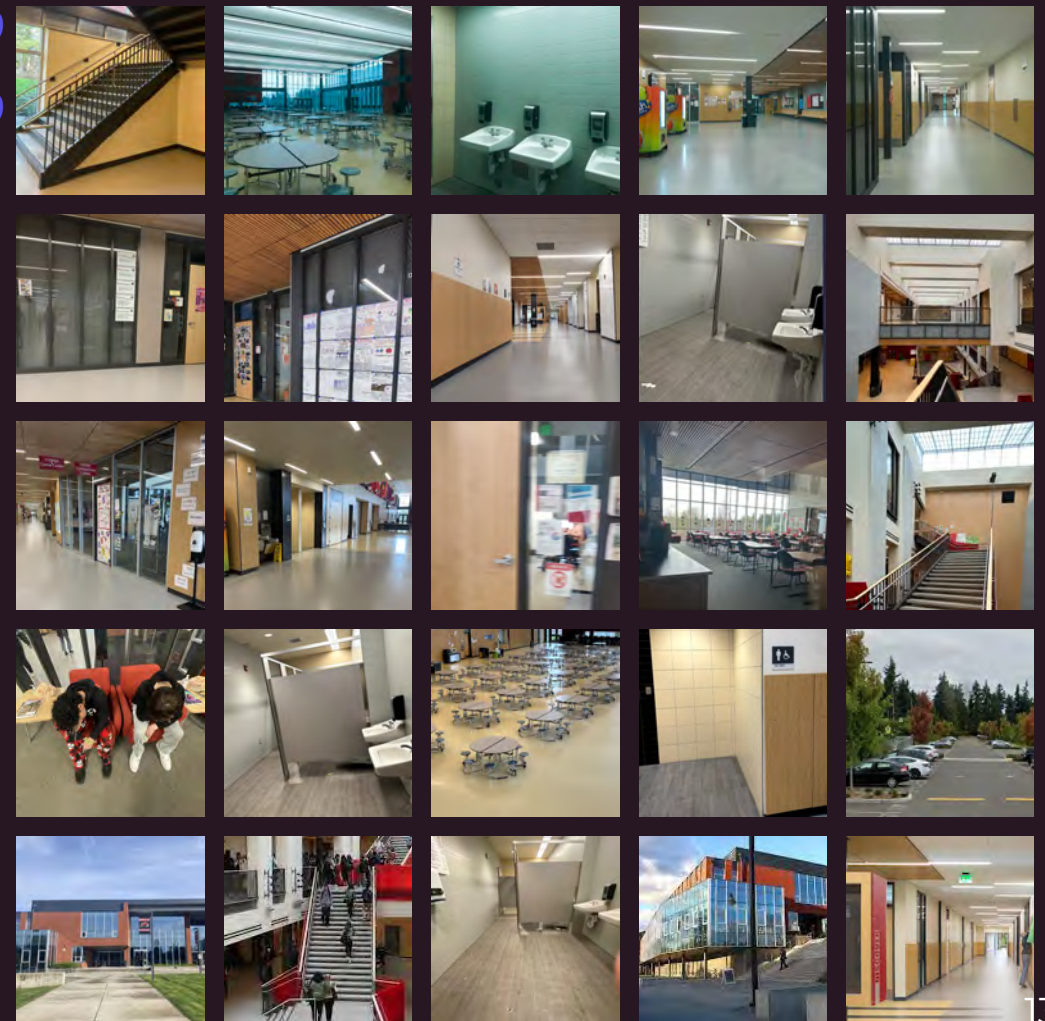
*School-wide racial-demographics 2022-23

Places of belonging



Some images omitted to protect identity of the school and students.

Places of not belonging



“...[I was trying to capture] 90’s grunge, skateboard, industrial, city brutalism, vibe. I’d like to preserve... uhhh...the classrooms because they’re actually really nice.”

Q: What was 90's grunge, skate, industrial, city brutalism, vibe?
 Q1: I'd like to preserve them because they're actually really nice.
 Q2: Probably the way they're too open covers—
 Q3: Art, mural for fresher air
 Q4: more art



This student identifies the importance of a unique aesthetic identity in contributing to their sense of belonging at school, particularly one that is more informal.



we should be taking in school, it'd be a failure. For in school, always this don't have a should be or adventure out school, long new tips, a should be, eris, and f are one none, people shall Deep up to the task

“...There should be heros, and if there are none, people should step up to the task”

This student calls for some emergent leadership in their school community.



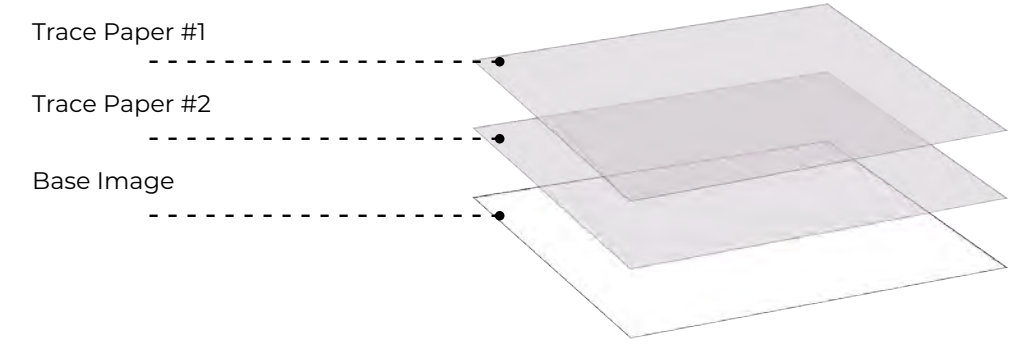
“TV on; Better food options; more comfortable seating; more decorative floor; couches”

A cafeteria could be improved if it felt more like a living room, with a working TV and comfortable lounge seating.



“Mural that student do/did; grip during the snow/ice; Maybe flowers here to make it seem more alive”

This student specifically describes a mural created by students - and a need for student autonomy in placemaking at their school



Multiple layers of trace allowed students to iterate ideas collaboratively over a selection of student-generated images that served as the base layers.

Findings

Through qualitative coding and a close reading of student-generated photos, sketches, collages and reflections, insights on place-based sense of belonging emerge.

safety

Safety was strongly associated with privacy and the use of smaller, intimate spaces. Safety also was mentioned in relation to an absence of the noise and chaos associated with passing periods and mobility concerns throughout student's daily routines. On the positive side, students associated safety with positive student/teacher relationships, friendships and hobbies.

privacy

Students expressed a critical need for privacy and generally a positive association with places they could spend time alone in. Spatial "openness" was frequently mentioned as a negative contributor to belonging.

relationships

Relationships between staff and students were mentioned as an essential component of belonging - where spaces associated with favorite teachers or staff members were considered to generate positive sense of belonging. Classes that were considered "stressful" garnered negative sense of belonging for their associative learning spaces.

autonomy

Autonomy was associated with spaces where students had unique social freedoms such as chatting in the hallway, as well as spaces and opportunities where they were invited to participate in placemaking. There seemed to be a lack of programmed student-autonomous spaces in the school, where bathrooms were frequently mentioned as contentious social and autonomous spaces.

representation & familiarity

In this context, representation was associated with the desire for visible representation and inclusion of marginalized groups including Indigenous and LGBTQ+ representation. Familiarity was expressed through an overwhelming desire to create an environment that resembled a home (i.e. demonstrated interest in indoor plants, soft lighting, comfortable seating, food and drink option, and small, private spaces).

These insights are not specifically meant to generate definitive, overarching conclusions about the nature of student belonging, or sense the study site, but instead demonstrate the level of student feedback that can be achieved through these methods.

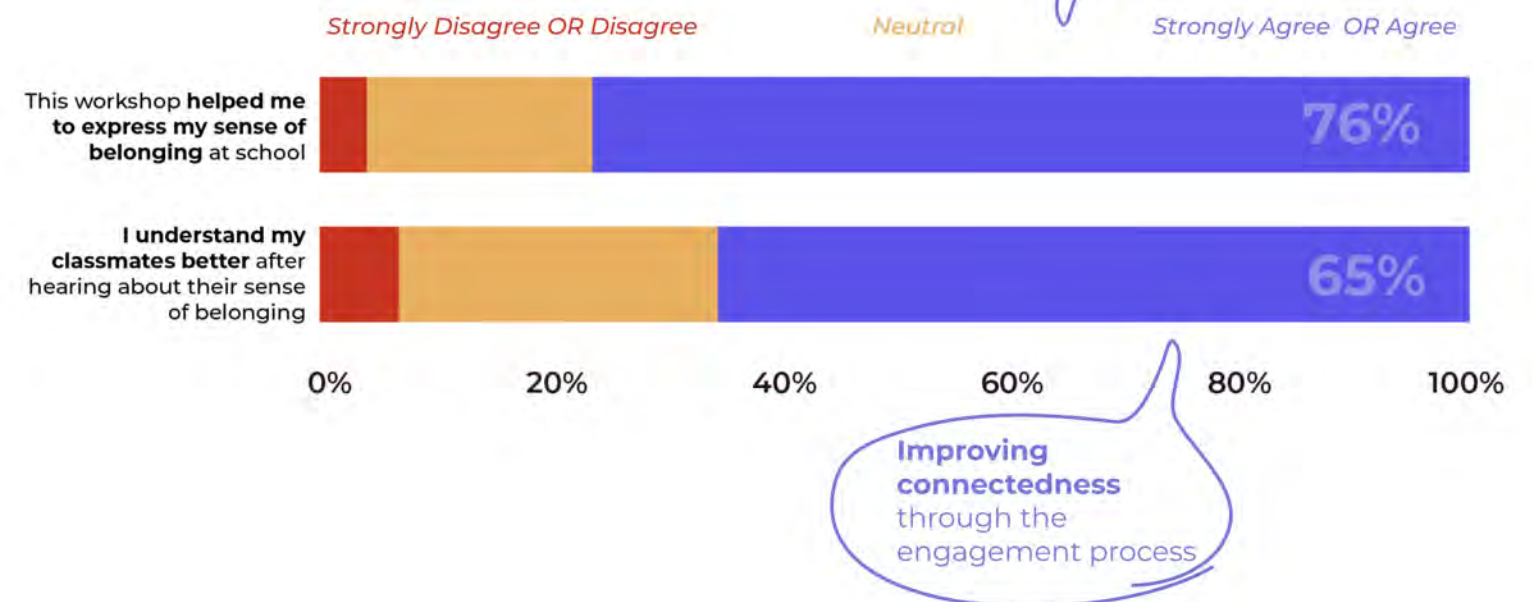
78% images displaying outdoor spaces represented positive sense of belonging

14/19 students believe indoor plants and greenspaces will improve their sense of belonging

19% images displaying lack of belonging mentioned crowdedness

22% images displaying positive sense of belonging included food or places to eat.

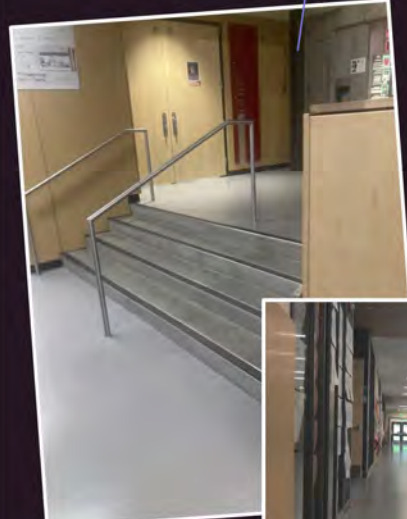
A successful approach for generating student feedback for designers, and fostering belonging through the process



*72 survey respondents. Exit survey for 2024 Photovoice Sense of Belonging study.

RELATIONSHIPS

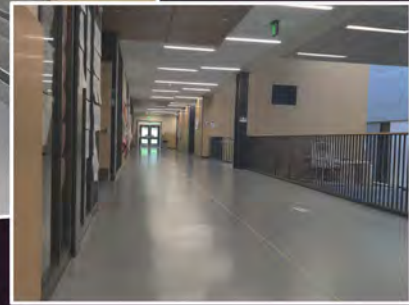
"This place feels **very quiet and secluded** and **gives a sense of security**"



"The band room **feels safe.**"



"...**There should be heroes**, and if there are none, **people should step up to the task**"



HOW DO WE EXPERIENCE BELONGING IN SCHOOL?



"I feel like I belong here due to the **sweet staff**"

"**I don't feel like I belong** to this place because of the class I don't really like, **due to the teacher** as well as the crowd of people who block the ways..."

"The places **without people that I actually admire like good teachers**, friends, or classmates makes the place really **awkward** & creates a sense of **anxiety** & being **uncomfortable** at school"



"**I don't belong in school**"

SAFETY

"I always feel like i belong in the theatre, because i have **many friends who make me feel safe and important.**"

"...[the theatre] **feels second home** to me"

"**Make it 'homey'.** Too bland and dull to me"



FAMILIARITY



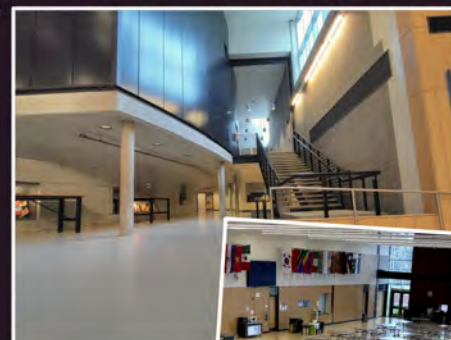
"... **nobody can see me / bother me.** I just go here to spend time by myself..."

"...I belong here due to the **time I can get for myself** before starting the day at school, and makes me feel better from previous day experiences."

PRIVACY



"...I usually eat here **when i want to be alone** and it's **comforting**"



"...[the school] it's **wayyy too open**"

"They are in the hallway **where kids get to talk and see friends**"

"[murals] **driven by the students**"

"Artistic freedom to encourage students"

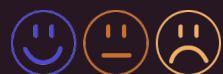
AUTONOMY



"A huge tree people could sit under for shade **while doing everything they want to do**"



"Bathroom's literally the **go to place** for me **when I wanna go somewhere**"



A **toolkit** was created to guide designers on engaging K-12 students around topics of sense of belonging & design using photovoice

The toolkit (see Appendix) offers an overview of activities, processes and best practices for engaging high-school aged students around their lived experience and sense of belonging for relevant applications in K-12 architectural design. The strategies explored are intended to build agency for community stakeholders through long-term engagement throughout the design process.

what

A sequence of “photovoice” and art-based **engagement strategies** with a focus on **lived experience investigation**

who

These strategies were developed with **high-school aged students** in mind, but can be relevant to other age groups and stakeholders in the K-12 school community

when

The strategies are most effective in **early planning, pre-design** stages with emphasis on **continued collaboration** throughout the design process

where

K-12 design project communities

why

These strategies were developed with the goals of **dismantling hierarchical processes** between designers and communities by inviting community members in to accessible processes of deep engagement that lead to **sense of belonging, design, and advocacy outcomes**.



Excerpt pages from the toolkit. *Belonging as a framework for justice: Tools for engaging K-12 students around topics of sense of belonging & design.*

*Belonging as
a Framework
for Justice*
an essay

Introduction

Sense of belonging is a topic that professionals in the design community are increasingly more interested in. Much of the research on spatial belonging derives from the social sciences, particularly in the disciplines of geography, environmental psychology and sociology. While there are many nuances to understanding belonging, it can generally be defined as, “a subjective feeling that one is an integral part of their surrounding systems, including family, friends, school, work environments, communities, cultural groups, and physical places,” (Hagerty et al., 1992 in Allen et al., 2021, p. 88).

Accessing belonging is an important component for integration and success into society. However, it is complicated for particular individuals and groups. Scholars recognize how sense of belonging interacts with social justice (Schein, 2009) and a “politics of belonging” (Walls, 2023; Yuval-Davis, 2006) – which describes the construction and maintenance of boundaries that includes some people and excludes others (Yuval-Davis, 2006, p. 204). Within society broadly, lack of access to belonging disproportionately affects groups that have been historically marginalized in mainstream cultures. This places an emphasis on sense of belonging for Black and Indigenous people who have faced systemic exclusion through dispossession and state-sanctioned violence (Allen et al., 2021, p 89).

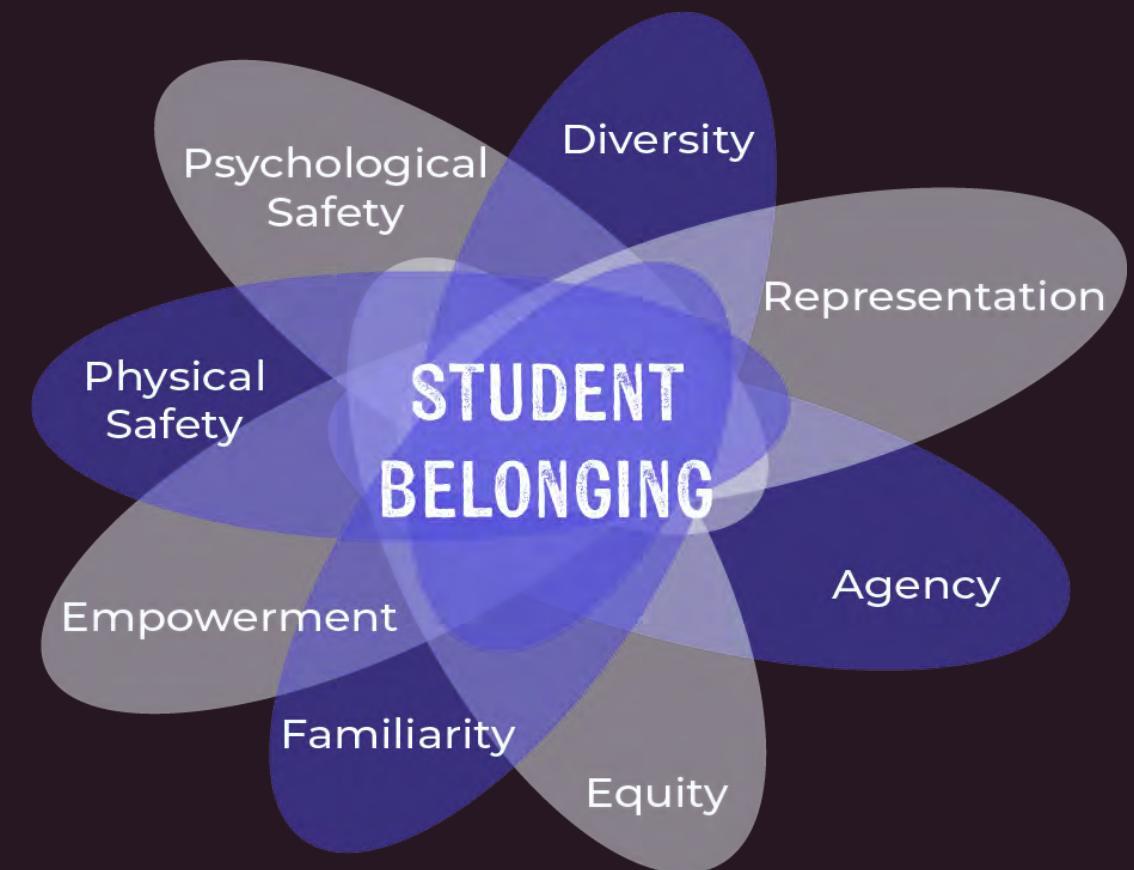
In public educational settings, belonging is further complicated by the expectation of egalitarianism and the reality of how a politics of belonging shapes student experience (Walls, 2023). For students these barriers include a spectrum of inflexible to highly flexible ways of belonging (p.4). Formal governance practices including attendance zones and standardized test scores are inflexible conditions that determine student belonging or membership in a school community. Cultural norms or behavioral policies, like dress codes and disciplinary practices are moderately flexible conditions. Finally, practices and expectations that shape student agency such as behavioral participation and attendance are highly flexible ways students experience or gain access to belonging. The politics of belonging ensures that a student who is marginalized, or disadvantaged by even the most highly flexible of conditions, may struggle to access belonging. Thus, belonging is a social justice issue, where one's ability to access it is not always equal to that of their peer's.

Belonging as a framework for justice is an applied research exploration aimed at addressing some of these inequities through the design process. This research project has explored how an adoption of abolitionist perspectives can inform a liberation- oriented K-12 design practice, rooted in participatory engagement. The study portion that succeeded this exploration, engaged high-school students through a photovoice curriculum to better understand the nuanced experience of belonging, with a critical lens towards top-down design approaches in education environments.

What follows is a review of concepts that ground the theoretical framework of this work. They include an application of abolition to K-12 design; the impact of the school-prison nexus on student sense of belonging; and lastly, photovoice methods as a way for designers to adopt abolitionist perspectives in professional practice. On the topic of abolition and the design of K-12 learning environments, this document is not intended to puport anything "new". Instead, I engage thinking stewarded by generations of oppressed people across the world and their liberatory efforts to divert from the tyranny of white supremacy and state-sanctioned violence.

In the following, I articulate the need for abolitionist design perspectives and the crucial role of "sense of belonging" in its adoption in K-12 spaces. Abolitionist perspectives are explored as a lens for both understanding what student belonging entails, and how belonging can be approached through K-12 design. First, I begin with an overview of abolitionist theory and its relevance in K-12 spaces by way

of the school-prison nexus. As I move to the need for abolitionist perspectives in design and its application, I center two goals that emerge from abolition: undermining power structures & hierarchies, and mending the transgression of "not belonging", through a restorative justice response. Lastly, I offer photovoice methods as an opportunity for designers to engage with these theories by introducing a deep investigation of lived experience with opportunities to engage participants in accessible co-design processes.



Dimensions of student belonging. Leila Jackson. 2024

Abolition, Carceral Cultures & K-12 Environments

Abolition is a call for the end of forced labor and carceral punishment, and for radical transformations towards a world free from prisons and policing (Davis, 2003). Abolition is intimately tied to anti-racism especially in the context of the United States, where the presence of carceral punishment and forced labor has historically laid the infrastructure for racialized violence in the pursuit of capitalist, colonialist agendas (Davis 2003; Loury, 2008).

This research specifically draws from abolition feminism, which has been largely shaped by the perspectives of scholars and activists including Angela Davis (2003; 2022), Ruth Wilson Gilmore (2022), Erica Meiners (2011; 2022), and Mariame Kaba (2021). Abolition feminism offers approaches to dismantling carceral practices at the intersections of racism and gendered violence oppressions (Davis et al., 2022). In place of prisons and policing, abolition feminists center a politics of compassion and care through a practice of restorative justice (Kaba, 2021). While abolition generally centers efforts to challenge what scholars refer to as the “carceral state,” or punitive practices and infrastructures like prisons and policing, abolitionist theorists have more broadly called for the dismantling of all conditions that create the need for such measures (Kaba, 2021; Gilmore, 2017).

“ Abolition is about abolishing the conditions under which prison became the solution to problems, rather than abolishing the buildings we call prisons”

– Ruth Wilson Gilmore (2020)

Abolitionist theorists recognize how the culture of incarceration and policing permeates our everyday lives, creating a “carceral culture”. Carceral cultures are everyday practices that normalize punishment and isolation as a response to complex social problems. This phenomenon operates any time we, “try to address the problem by removing the person from our community, marking them out as fundamentally different from the rest of ‘us’ and by distancing ourselves from them,” (Lamble, 2021). There are opportunities for countering carceral cultures, and thus practicing abolition in the infrastructures we interact with daily, including education (Shange, 2019) , healthcare (Wahbi & Beletsky, 2022)), community safety (Chua et al., 2023), and our everyday social interactions with others (Lamble, 2021).

The school-prison nexus

One locale of this discourse is K-12 learning environments - the study site for this research. While K-12 learning environments are not traditionally understood as justice infrastructure¹, the relevance of these spaces to abolitionist thought becomes evident through phenomena such as the school-prison nexus, or the more well-known “school-to-prison pipeline”. These phenomena describe how schools, through active and passive mechanisms, oftentimes uphold the harmful outcomes of the carceral justice system (Annamma et al., 2023; Krueger, 2010; Shange, 2019). The “school-to-prison pipeline” is defined by the way American education systems disproportionately steer Black and brown youth towards the criminal justice system (Kim et al., 2010, p.2). Suspension and expulsion disciplinary practices, on-campus arrests, and lower graduation rates are all conditions within the school-to-prison pipeline that disproportionately impact Black students and have long-term adverse impacts on their lives and ultimately,

¹ “Justice Infrastructure” is defined here by the Justice Civic work sector at research collaborator and architecture firm, DLR Group. Justice Civic architectural work includes spaces such as youth and adult secure treatment facilities and public safety facilities.

their sense of belonging (Krueger, 2010). These conditions reflect the reality of mass incarceration in the United States, where incarceration rates are amongst the highest internationally, and jails and prisons are disproportionately filled with Black and Latinx individuals (Loury, 2008, p. 6).

For the purpose of this research, we'll center the concept of "school-prison nexus". The term derives from the "school-to-prison pipeline", with the nuanced understanding that more than serving as a pathway towards incarceration, schools become carceral spaces themselves due to the presence of constant surveillance, monitoring & policing, and generally the control of individual bodies (Krueger, 2010). The nexus often operates in more covert, or passive ways (dress codes, behavioral expectations in common spaces, etc.). Related to the school-prison nexus are the normative practices in schools that determine expectations like where individuals can and can't move, what they can wear, and ultimately who they can "be".

An important component of how the school-prison nexus manifests is by the reproduction of power within educational settings. Stovall (2018) describes how 'school' (not to be conflated with 'education'), "rewards students for order and compliance, which should also be considered part and parcel of the larger projects of settler colonialism and white supremacy/racism," (p. 51). With this understanding, Stovall positions school as a form of state-sanctioned violence (p.53). Structural power is embedded into school environments, and catalyzed through authority figures, behavioral expectations and particular design decisions.

What does it have to do with designers?

The nexus highlights the potential impact designers can have by calling attention to the spatial conditions and experiences that contribute to carceral cultures in education. Krueger (2010) argues that space is, "invaluable to interrogate the physical manifestations of educational policies and practices that increasingly push poor and non-white students into the criminal justice system," (p. 387). These are spaces that are highly securitized and policed. The insights that emerge from studies on how youth experience securitized school space demonstrate that the nexus directly impacts a young person's adult life as, "safety protocols and codes that strengthen and legitimize structures of social inequalities [are internalized]," (p.404). Spatial conditions, particularly those that limit agency and privacy for students not only contribute to the nexus, but are critical to student belonging. Designers are tasked with understanding belonging from the perspective of these nuanced experiences of agency and safety. This includes navigating the sometimes

conflicting perceptions of what makes students feel safe vs. what might make them feel controlled – both of which have an impact on their belonging.

The school-prison nexus highlights the need for abolitionist perspectives in education (Meiners 2011; Meiners & Winn, 2010; Stovall 2018), which emphasizes a need for abolitionist perspectives in the design of learning environments as well. Scholar and anti-violence worker, Beth Richie identifies:

"The work for prison abolition is at once a policy issue, a community accountability issue, a family issue, and an issue that must be understood to be deeply personal. It is about health, neighborhood, the environment, U.S. position in global markets, youth empowerment, spirituality, the upcoming election, interpersonal relationships, identity politics, and many more things."
(Richie in Meiners, 2011, p. 551).

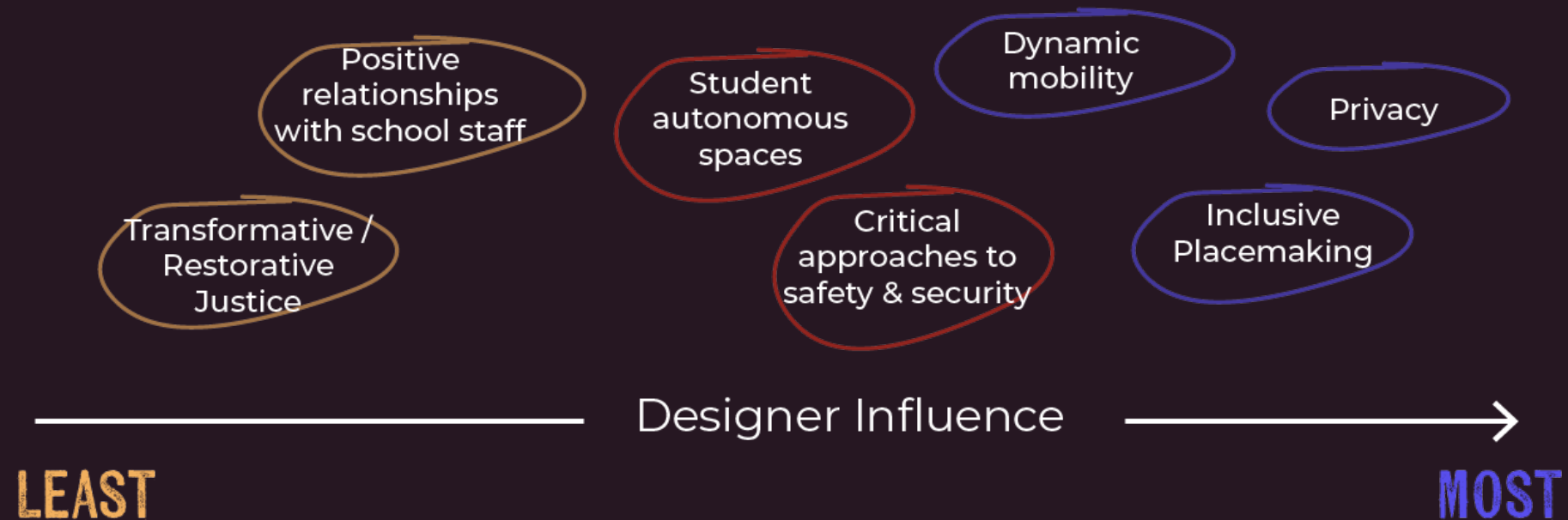
To this notion, I would add that the work for prison abolition is a *design* issue. One that considers the designer's role in the creation of *all* carceral spaces, and one that engages sense of belonging as an abolitionist goal and as a design outcome.

SCHOOL-PRISON NEXUS



VS.

AN ABOLITIONIST APPROACH



A designer's role in the school-prison nexus and an alternative abolitionist approach to K-12 design. Leila Jackson. 2024.

The transgression of “not belonging”

So far we have introduced abolitionist concepts to K-12 learning environments, including defining the school-prison nexus and identifying its relevance to designers. Next, we will further explore the impact of the school-prison nexus on student sense of belonging.

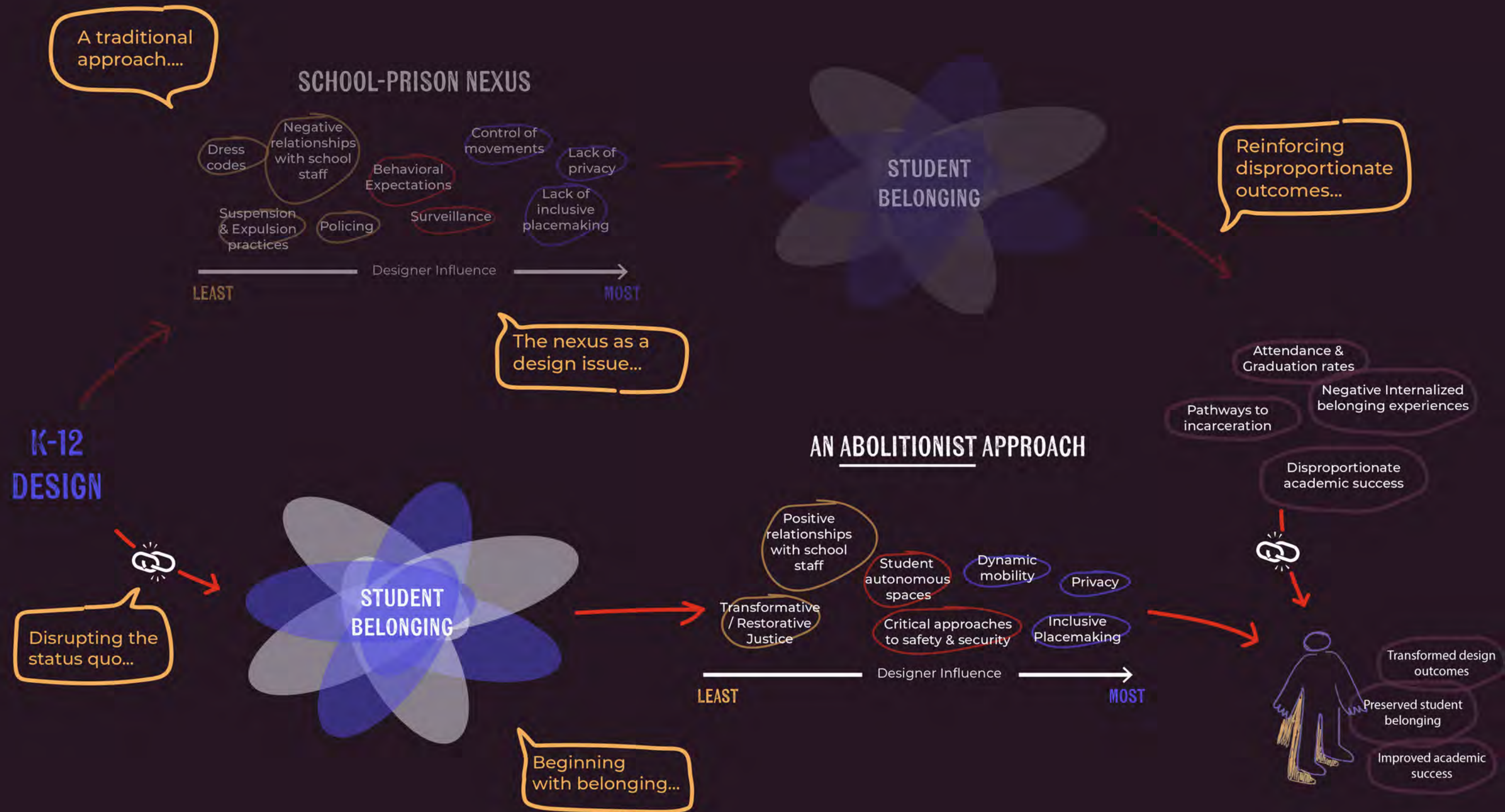
A key understanding for designers is the inherent connection between how everyday carceral logics begin to impact belonging. Where belonging is tied to feelings of inclusion, acceptance and psychological safety, (Allen et al., 2021, p. 92, p. 88), a carceral culture normalizes patterns of exclusion and isolation (Lamble, 2021). The environment of control that the school-prison nexus creates has a profound impact on sense of belonging because of the limitations that are created to fostering student agency and generally, a sense of self. As aforementioned, these environments are assembled by authority figures, behavioral expectations and the physical school environment- all of which interact with student belonging.

Positive and negative relationships between students and school staff (educators and administrative personnel) and school safety staff (“school resource officers” or police personnel in schools) impact student belonging in diverse ways, as agency, safety and familiarity are affected (Riley, 2022; Walls, 2023; Krueger 2010 p. 401). Broadly, authority figures set expectations for behavioral participation in learning environments that can create barriers to student belonging (Walls, 2023,

p.4). Lamble (2021) describes the instance of a student being excluded from a classroom by a teacher for ‘misbehaving’ as a reflection of a carceral culture - a response of isolation, that negatively informs belonging. Tangentially, interpersonal relationships with educators and administrative figures in school settings has been known to shape student belonging. In a student-engaged study of sense of membership at school (Walls, 2023), students’ interpersonal relationships with teachers emerged as a main theme impacting their membership.

The physical manifestation of the school-prison nexus also impacts sense of belonging, where limitations to agency and privacy are reflected in the built design. The architectural design of hallways, passages and other transitory spaces, informs how students are meant to move through the school in an ‘orderly’ manner. The experience of surveillance and lack of privacy is made tangible with an adoption of safety design standards, such as Crime Prevention Through Design (CPTED), that emphasize surveillance, territoriality and defensible space. These design features condition racialized (Black and brown) students, who are the most policed on school campuses (Krueger, 2010, p. 385), with the notion that they are not trusted; that they do not have agency; and thus that they do not belong. As the lack of privacy and agency in traditional K-12 design becomes normalized, the transgression of “not belonging” emerges.

While the reality of the school-prison nexus reflects a lack of belonging through agency and autonomy, scholars in education tell us that fostering belonging can be achieved through valuing accountability and self-advocacy for students in education settings (Steinitz Holyoke, 2022, p. 242). This operates in the extended responsibility of the educator to teach children how to grow in a community and engage as part of a collective (p. 215). Steinitz Holyoke (2022) speaks to a restorative justice approach to belonging, a strategy that is deeply engaged in the history of abolition (Kaba 2021).



Abolition & Design

We have complicated the role of school environments in contributing to the school-prison nexus and ultimately shaping student belonging. Now, we will explore how designers can contribute to this discourse through an integration of abolitionist design perspectives and a focus on belonging.

Within the context of architectural design, practitioners are implicated in calls for dismantling institutions that reproduce systemic racism, because their disciplines directly support and/or unwittingly reinforce these hierarchies, dispossessions and exclusions. Limited academic scholarship exists on the explicit relationship between abolition and design. Such has included design applications to traditional abolitionist texts including W.E.B. Du Bois's "Abolition Democracy" (DeSesto, 2023); links between design and policing practices (Fathallah & Lewis, 2021); and restorative justice design (Toews et al., 2022; Buren, 2017).

Additionally, community-generated expertise from designers engaging with racial justice and abolition emerged organically following the 2020 response to the lynching of George Floyd, and contribute to the body of knowledge associated with abolitionist perspectives in design. These include but are not limited to the Design Justice Demands written by Design as Protest (DAP collective), the Field Notes on Design Activism series by *Places Journal*, and other projects that demonstrate how built environment design professionals play a substantial role in upholding harmful

systems of policing and carceral punishment (Fathallah & Lewis, 2021). To this body of knowledge, this research distinctly contributes the role of sense of belonging and participatory design methods towards its application, as an abolitionist designer's just response. For the purpose of centering abolitionist goals, I draw from two principles of abolitionist theory: an interrogation of power and hierarchy and a practice of restoration that disrupts the school-prison nexus.

An interrogation of power and hierarchy

First, abolitionists acknowledge the inherent need to undermine power structures & hierarchies. Abolitionist geographer, Ruth Wilson Gilmore (2017) states that liberation is achieved through the abolishment of "hierarchy, dispossession, and exclusion that congeal in and as group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death". She acknowledges the way that regimes oriented around these injustices lead to extreme disproportionate outcomes for particular groups. Liberation must include a dismantling of these hierarchies.

To professional practice, hierarchy is defined by several stakeholder relationships constrained by socio-political, capitalist contexts. They include: the relationship between designers and the communities for which they are designing; the power dynamics between clients and stakeholders (education institutions to students/educators); tax payers to public institutions, and potentially others. For this context we will focus primarily on the relationships between the designers and the communities for which they are designing, but with an acknowledgment of how these adjacent hierarchies influence the design of educational settings.

In order to operate within the limitations of a capitalist industry, the design profession often ascribes to an subconscious validation of expertise hierarchy - where architects are expected to have a master ability to understand and design for the human experience. To varying degrees, design firms interact with communities through engagement and co-design processes, which may challenge this designer bias and expertise. However these engagements are not habitual to every design firm or team's process. Often times, these engagements are supplemental premiums determined by client and stakeholder expectations and resources.

When these expectations are lacking, the role of designers becomes problematized and harmful power structures emerge between designers and the communities for which they are designing. In turn, designers contribute to a carceral culture

by ultimately “determin[ing] what social metrics to surveil, analyze, and change,” (Fathallah & Lewis, 2021) through a design project. Though this may lead to the creation of spaces, such as what manifests within the school-prison nexus, designers are “neither accountable for nor impacted by their actions’ outcomes on the targeted communities”.

Restructuring power elements within the design process and recentering communities is essential to abolishing the processes of power and exclusions that determine spaces of belonging. This goal can be achieved throughout the design process. As designers arrive in community spaces, this begins with a self-interrogation where designers must commit to elevating the design voice of communities and abolishing the notion that designers are the experts entering communities. Next, designers must facilitate a democratization of the design process by recentering communities as agents of change within their own lives, rather than simply future users of a designed space. Throughout an abolitionist design process, the design profession should emerge transformed, as designers dismantle the hierarchies they would typically yield and reinforce. These transformations for designers and communities cannot occur through any one-time engagement with communities, but through a long-term commitment to a transformed design process that thoughtfully integrates the design voice of marginalized community members.

A practice of restoration

At its core, abolition centers restoration of individuals to participate fully in society. A design process that centers abolitionist goals, should do just that.

Earlier, we introduced the transgression of “not belonging” that occurs within the context of the school-prison nexus. This transgression is associated with spatial experiences of not-belonging in an environment with nuanced tensions of safety, control and agency. Through an abolitionist perspective, architects have the opportunity to mend this transgression through design and the design process.

Engaging communities in meaningful exploration of their lived experiences and desired outcomes around belonging is how designers can respond to this transgression. Delsesto (2023) applies W.E.B. Du Bois’s “abolition democracy” to a design context. He explains that creating new worlds through design requires,

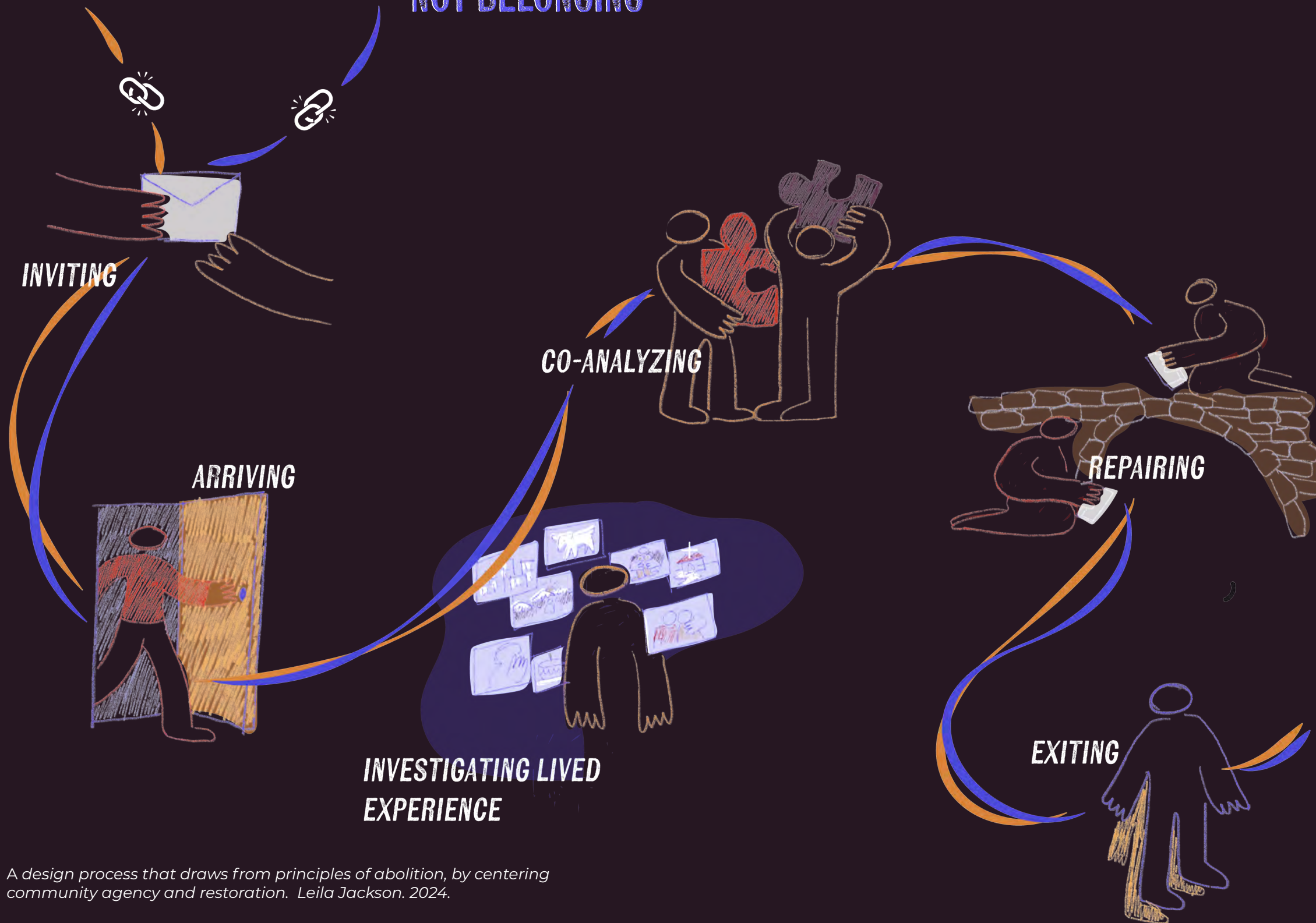
“new ways of producing knowledge about social realities that people face and the possibilities they imagine; that is participatory and collaborative approaches to understanding and transforming existing conditions that help to enable people’s strengths and creative powers, not simply respond to deficits,” (p. 261). This notion alludes to the need for centering design methods that are empowering, and accessible for community participation and collaboration.

Designers must be intentional and critical about who to invite into this process, considering voices for whom socio-political conditions complicate the context of belonging and uphold this transgression. Designers must also create the conditions for a deep investigation of lived experience that extends beyond a surface level engagement process to center authenticity and accountability. Lastly, designers can center “reparative” design solutions. Reparative solutions asks designers to not only disrupt a typical process but to also work differently in order to change design outcomes as to not reproduce the same results of the school-prison nexus. Designers must grapple with questions that may contradict the status quo, for example: *How do student insights around privacy and autonomy contradict or intersect with design standards and frameworks for relational safety?* The use of CPTED is just one example that warrants future exploration on the topic.

Thus, an adoption of abolitionist principles in design, is actualized through a process of inclusion, critical positionality on behalf of the designer, deep investigation, co-analysis of design insights, and an investigation of reparative solutions. What emerges is a transformed design process and industry. The practice that is being proposed here is distinct from an equitable design approach, because rather than centering equity in internal practice (AIA, 2022) , an adoption of abolitionist principles centers capacity building, agency and empowerment throughout the design process.

UNDERMINING POWER STRUCTURES AND HIERARCHIES

MENDING THE TRANSGRESSION OF "NOT BELONGING"



A design process that draws from principles of abolition, by centering community agency and restoration. Leila Jackson. 2024.

Inviting

Inviting voices for whom socio-political conditions complicate the context of belonging

Arriving

Unpacking designer bias and committing to elevating community members as experts and designers themselves

Investigating Lived Experience

A deep investigation of the lived experience of communities.

Co-Analyzing

Democratizing the design research process and recentering participants in a non-extractive ways

Repairing

Center "reparative" spatial and experiential solutions. This looks like, challenging standard practices to center nuanced experiences of safety, agency and belonging that are driven by investigated lived experience

Exiting

Designers emerge transformed, through self interrogation and a dismantling of the hierarchies designers yield and reinforce. Communities emerge as agents of change

Photovoice methods for abolitionist perspectives

With an understanding of abolitionist perspectives in K-12 design, and the experience of the school-prison nexus and its impact on belonging, this work seeks to offer photovoice methods as a tool for designers to engage student belonging with a critical, abolitionist lens.

An abolitionist design process requires designers to engage in a deepened community engagement process. Precedents for a more thorough and just engagement process exist through community-engaged design, but are not explored in this paper. The framework proposed in this paper makes its distinction through the adjacent goals of (1) fostering “reparative solutions” that challenge standard practices and consider nuanced experiences of safety, and (2) cultivating agency, or empowering community members as agents of change.

Participatory Action Research (PAR) methods can achieve these goals. PAR is a research methodology that centers research subjects, or in the case of designers (design communities), as tasked with the documentation, interpretation or analysis of their lived experience. These actions aid communities to take a leading role in actionable outcomes that can better articulate the role of the designer. Cahill (2007) characterizes PAR by commitments to democratize the research process; place an emphasis upon knowledge from below; center the lived experience as the starting point for investigation; and push for genuine accountability (p. 268). Social designer, researcher and activist Sarah Fathallah (2021) advocates for participatory methods for designers specifically. They claim that in a design context, these methods help to shift power dynamics in ways that break down traditional knowledge roles and build capacity for participants.

PAR is particularly effective with children and youth (Shamrova & Cummings, 2017) because it is known to deliver belonging outcomes. An effective belonging study will challenge existing age-based power imbalances (p. 406), create a ground for developing and strengthening a sense of connectedness and belonging to a community (p. 403), and help youth participants become agents of change within their own community (p.405).

On Photovoice

PAR can be practiced through a variety of methods including surveys, focus groups and more creative approaches like photovoice and drama techniques (Shamrova & Cummings, 2017, p.401). For the purpose of this research, I will focus on photovoice methods.

Photovoice is a visual research methodology that invites community participants to document their lived experience through photography, driven by a prompt. Then participants further reflect upon their experiences as individuals and groups through photo reflections, discussion and activities. This method invites the participants into the roles of researchers and analysts in the process of interpreting their own lived experience. Participant-generated images can be useful in understanding community values and facilitating reflection on daily experiences. Paired with group discussions, photovoice helps to develop co-constructed meanings and shared community experiences.

Photovoice has been particularly effective for belonging studies around youth and school behaviors (Walls 2023; Stack and Wang 2018), and has led to several student-engaged photovoice studies on belonging (Walls, 2023; Stack & Wang 2018; Locke et al., 2023, Duran 2019). It is also useful for designers, because it reflects a spatial understanding of belonging that can help identify design opportunities. Ultimately, photovoice is uniquely capable for studying belonging, engaging youth and serving the process of designers.

It is important to note, that a pure application of photovoice does not define an abolitionist approach. However, designers can use photovoice as a starting point for lived experience investigation, coupled with a more complete adoption of an abolitionist design process.

Conclusion

In the previous pages I have explored how principles derived from abolition can guide designers in efforts towards a liberatory design praxis. I began with an exploration of space (K-12 learning environments and the school-prison nexus) and concluded with an exploration of methodology (photovoice for abolitionist design perspectives). Belonging is a framework for justice, when we when we take the opportunity to center the lived experiences of marginalized people in actionable ways.

The journey throughout this project has been an effort to spatialize my values within the built environment, and perhaps selfishly, uncover my own sense of belonging within a profession that I often feel at odds with and isolated from. At many points in this process I've asked myself whether these ideas are truly meant for designers, and more importantly, if I am doing justice to abolitionist theory by suggesting its application in this industry. However, my hope is that this work inspires reflections of what it means to be a designer for myself and for anyone else reading this.

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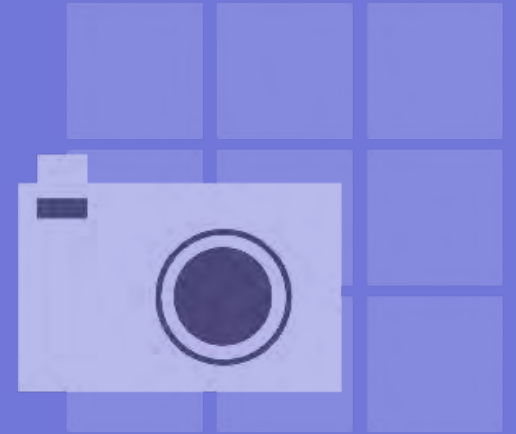
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Appendix

PHOTOVOICE ENGAGEMENT TOOLKIT



Tools for engaging K-12 communities around
topics of sense of belonging & design

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Firm Advisor I B Sanborn, DLR Group
Faculty Advisor I Christopher Campbell, UW

The team



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Applied Research Consortium Firm Advisor +
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About

This toolkit was created in Spring 2024, by Research Fellow, and Graduate student of Landscape Architecture, Leila Jackson. The tools explored in this document were developed for Leila's Applied Research Consortium project titled, "Belonging as a framework for justice: Photovoice techniques for abolitionist design perspectives in K-12 learning environments." The research project explored student-engagement methods for understanding sense of belonging from a lens of abolition justice.

The following document offers an overview of activities, processes and best practices for replicating similar student engagement processes for relevant applications in K-12 architectural design.



Leila Jackson

Leila is a graduating **Masters of Landscape Architecture student** (class of 24') and DLR Group's **2023-2024 University of Washington Research Fellow**.

With a B.A. in Human Geography and a professional history engaged in social justice, their design work and academic interests have been deeply concerned with the spatialization of injustice within the built environment. In their work they hope to center projects which foster sense of place, particularly for marginalized communities, center justice and explore landscape as a storytelling medium of cultural, historical and ecological narratives.

To this work they bring a lens of abolition feminism, and data feminism to explore community engagement praxis for designers.

Firm Advisor | B Sanborn, DLR Group
Faculty Advisor | Christopher Campbell, UW

Contents

01

Introduction

A brief description of photovoice methods and an overview of engagement activities

02

Process

A complete overview - preparing for engagement, hosting photovoice workshops and coding the data

03

Best Practices

Recommendations for optimizing impact of stakeholder engagement

Toolkit Cheat Sheet

What activities are covered?

- Crafting a photovoice exercise to generate sense of belonging feedback
- Co-analyzing community-generated photos through:
 - Design iteration or sketching
 - Collage
 - Qualitative coding

How much time should you budget for per project?

- **25 hours:**
 - **3.5 hrs** of stakeholder engagement **in 3 parts**
 - **5-7 hrs** of prep (including gathering materials)
 - **15 hrs** of data analysis

Best practices for photovoice engagement

- Collaborate with an educator
- For a focus group, the minimum number of participants for an effective engagement is 5 people
- Prioritize long-term engagement opportunities
- Reflect on designer positionality
- Get fresh perspectives on data insights
- When analyzing the data don't over index on any one thing

Part A

1. **Introducing** dimensions of **sense of belonging**
2. Releasing **photovoice prompt**



PAUSE

Give students time to capture photos

Part B

1. **Uploading and captioning** participant generated images in Mural
2. **Reacting to images** from other participants



PAUSE

Designer prepares (1) a high level analysis and (2) Prepare activities using generated photos

Part C

1. Sharing **high level analysis** of themes from the last session
2. **Design iteration** activity
3. **Collaging** activity

**What is this
toolkit** all about?

Introduction

About

Photovoice Engagement Toolkit:

Tools for engaging K-12 communities around topics of sense of belonging & design

Purpose statement

The following offers an overview of activities, processes and best practices for engaging high-school aged students around their lived experience and sense of belonging for relevant applications in K-12 architectural design. These strategies are intended to build agency for community stakeholders through long-term engagement throughout the design process and lead to social justice outcomes.

What

A sequence of “photovoice” and art-based **engagement strategies** with a focus on **lived experience investigation**

Who

These strategies were developed with **high-school aged students** in mind, but can be relevant to other age groups and stakeholders in the K-12 school community

When

Most effective in **early planning, pre design** stages with emphasis on **continued collaboration** throughout the design process

Where

K-12 design project communities

Why

These strategies were developed with the goals of **dismantling hierarchical processes** between designers and communities by inviting community members in to **accessible** processes of **deep engagement** that lead to **sense of belonging, design, and advocacy outcomes.**

What is photovoice?

Photovoice is a visual research methodology that invites community participants to document their lived experience through photography, driven by a prompt. Then participants further reflect upon their experiences as individuals and groups through photo reflections, discussion and activities. This method invites the participants into the roles of researchers and analysts in the process of interpreting their own lived experience.

Photovoice can be particularly relevant in understanding place-based sense of belonging.

“This place feels **very quiet and secluded** and **gives a sense of security**”

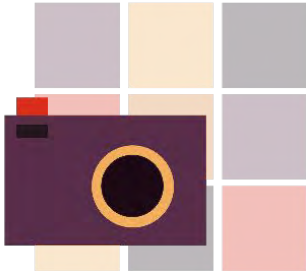


“Bathroom’s literally the **go to place** for me **when I wanna go somewhere**”

Examples of participant-generated photos and reflections from a 2024 study with High School, Freshman students.

Photovoice sequence

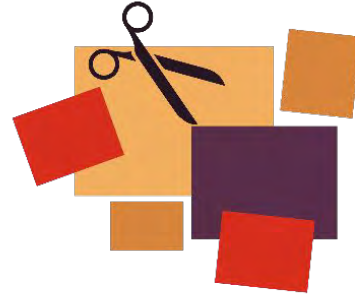
In this toolkit, the photo-elicitation prompt is followed by a series of activities to understand pluralistic sense of belonging and explore potential design responses.



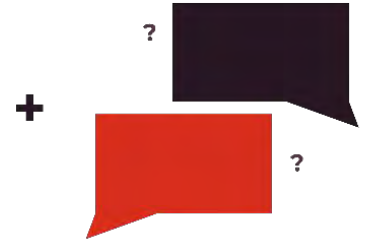
Documenting and co-analyzing
place-based sense of belonging



Developing a consensus around a plurality of experiences



Envisioning new learning environments as spaces of belonging



Communicating photovoice insights with designers



Part A



“Take 8-10 pictures of **places in the school where you feel like you belong** and **places in the school where you do not belong.**”

Photovoice prompt is given to students, to complete before next gathering.

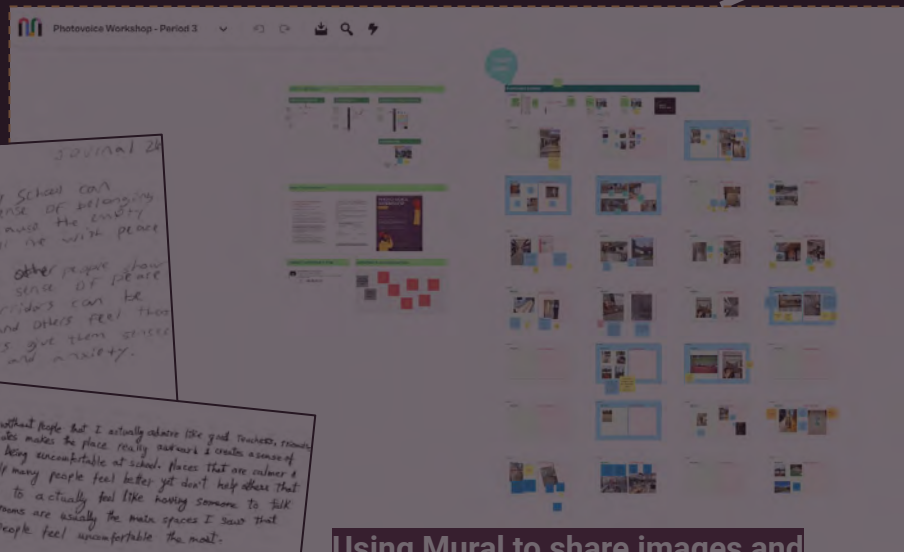
Part B

Journal 21

- Spaces in my school can generate a sense of belonging for me because the empty corridors fill me with peace
- Images from other people show me how the sense of peace I feel in corridors can be different, and others feel stress the corridors give them stress of dread and anxiety.

Journal 22

The places without people that I actually relate like gym, restrooms, room 101 makes the place really awkward & creates a sense of being uncomfortable at school. Places that are colorful & many people feel better yet don't help others that tend to actually feel like having someone to talk to. Restrooms are usually the main spaces I saw that made people feel uncomfortable the most.



Using Mural to share images and co-analyze spaces of belonging/not belonging as a group



Part A

“Take 8-10 pictures of **places in the school where you feel like you belong** and **places in the school where you do not belong.**”

Photovoice prompt is given to students, to complete before next gathering.

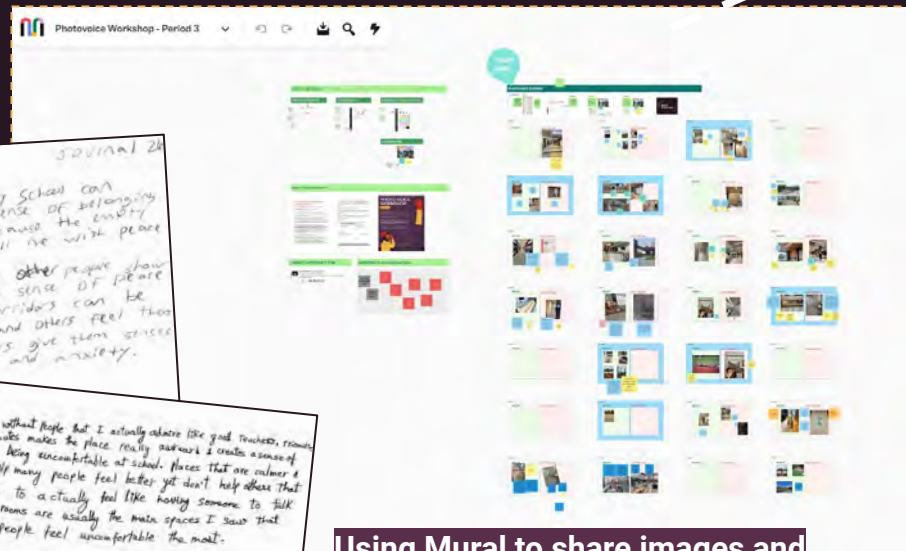
Part B

Journal 24

- Spaces in my school can generate a sense of belonging for me because the empty corridors fill me with peace.
- Images from other people show me how the sense of peace I feel in corridors can be different, and others feel that the corridors give them stress of dread and anxiety.

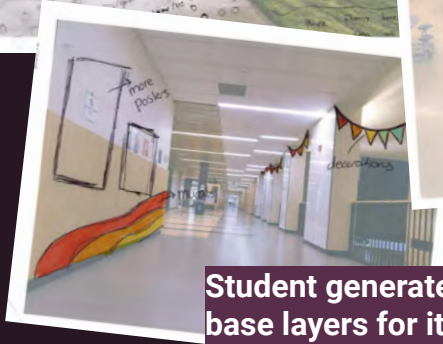
Journal 25

The places without people that I actually value like gym, restrooms, rooms... makes the place really awkward & creates a sense of being uncomfortable at school. Places that are colorful & many people feel better yet don't help others that tend to actually feel like having someone to talk to. Restrooms are usually the main spaces I saw that made people feel uncomfortable the most.



Using Mural to share images and co-analyze spaces of belonging/not belonging as a group

Part C



Student generated photos served as base layers for iterating future spaces of belonging



Collaging and reflections to articulate sense of belonging in a more abstract form



Intended Outcomes

Designer

- Generate student feedback** for design application
- *What contributes/detracts from sense of belonging in a specific community*

Student

Improve connectedness / sense of belonging through the engagement process

Generate advocacy outcomes

Students emerge as agents of change through a long term engagement process

Empowered through design;

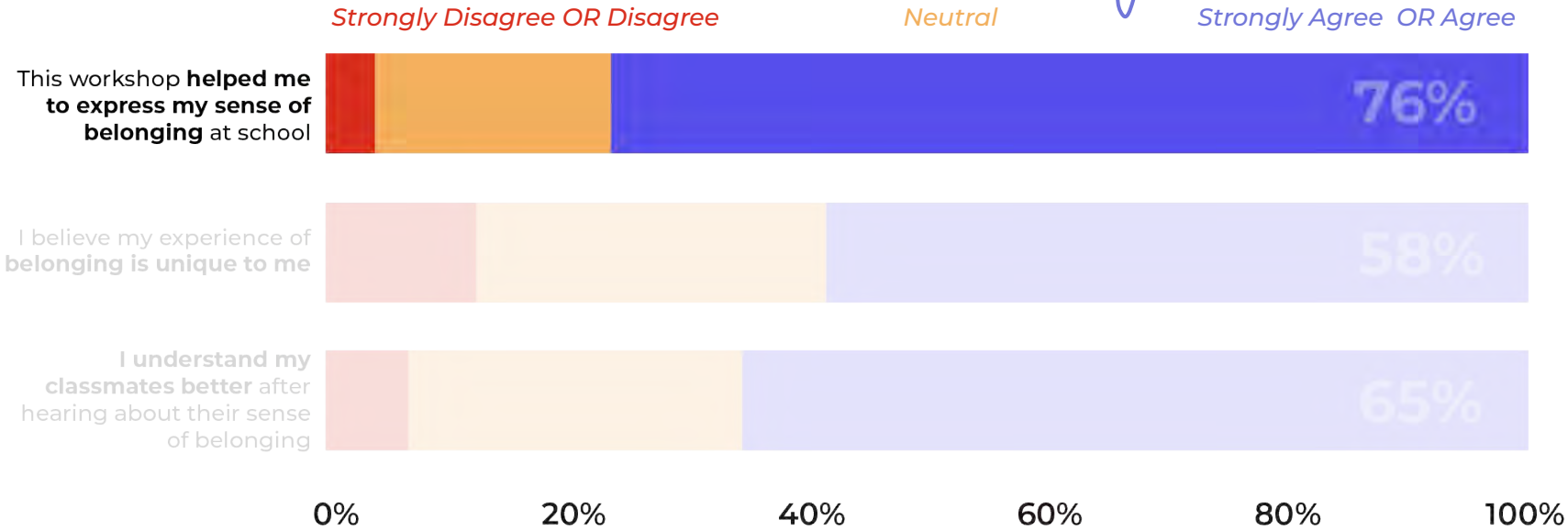
students see how their lived experience insights have direct value to the design of built spaces they inhabit

Educator / Administrator

Data & insight into sense of belonging within the school community that can help advocate for structural or policy change

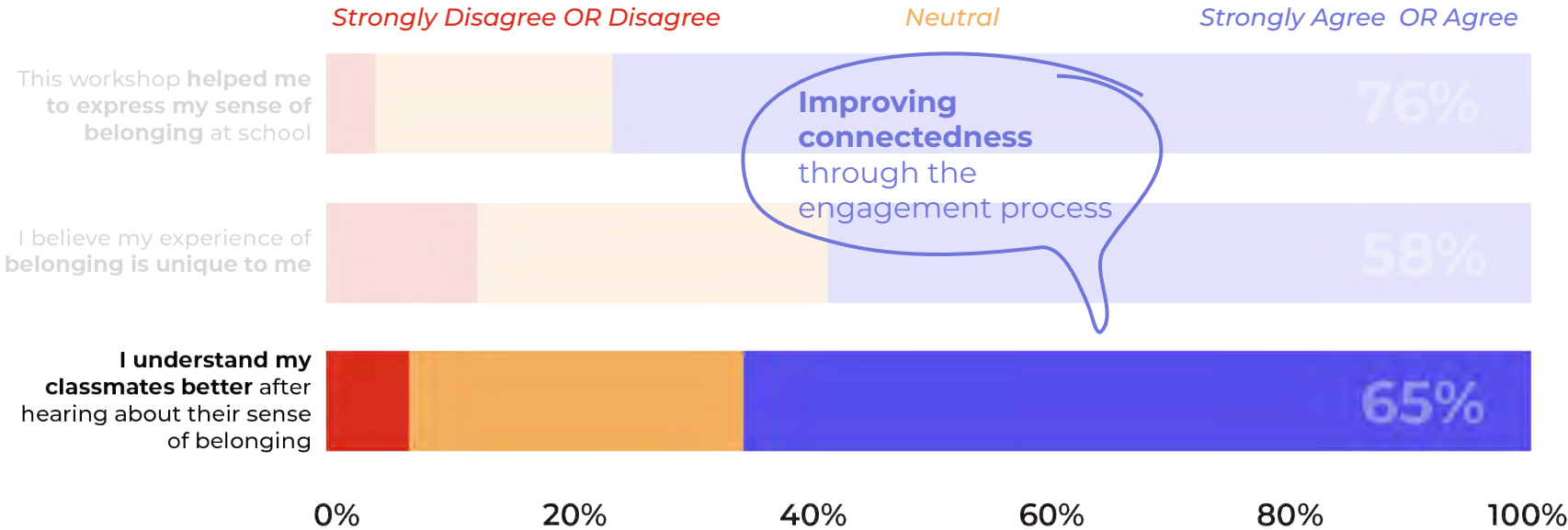
Student Workshop Experience

Successful approach for generating student feedback



*72 survey respondents. Exit survey for 2024 Photovoice Sense of Belonging study.

Student Workshop Experience



*72 survey respondents. Exit survey for 2024 Photovoice Sense of Belonging study.

How can **photovoice** change the impact of stakeholder engagement at DLR Group?

“ The Photovoice tool offers a meaningful and fun opportunity for communities to engage in the design process. Providing design teams with the user groups' **unfiltered perception** of their school, will have a tremendous impact on how we design their future spaces. This unfiltered lens has the potential to **help districts reconcile the needs of their students, staff, and facilities management stakeholders into a more holistic vision** that could transform the future of school design and planning.”

Kelly Mabry,
K-12 Architect & Senior Associate, DLR Group

“ Designer expertise in visual storytelling and graphics can create a power imbalance with stakeholders of any age; people may hesitate to express themselves in sketches because they “aren't good at drawing.” Floorplans are notoriously difficult for some people outside the AEIP industry to relate to. **Photovoice gives younger stakeholders a powerful tool for immediate visual communication with designers, leveling the playing field** without requiring them to become accomplished artists or sketch in a way that is familiar to architects.

B Sanborn
Design Research Leader, DLR Group

Now, let's learn **how to
organize our own
photovoice** engagement
workshops

Process

Getting started



This toolkit will walk you through the process for setting up your own workshop from beginning to end.

Building Relationships

1. **Designer Positionality**
2. **Communicating engagement plan with stakeholders**
3. **Curating a worthwhile experience for community members**
4. **Planning ahead for longer-term engagement opportunities**

Preparing Materials



Materials Checklist

Pre-Workshop

- Permission Forms

Part A (Day 1)

- Introducing Belonging concepts (activity)
- Developing a photovoice prompt

Part B (Day 2)

- Mural Board (activity)

Part C (Day 3)

- Design Iteration (activity)
- Collaging (activity)

Hosting the Workshop

Part A

1. **Introducing** dimensions of **sense of belonging**
2. Releasing **photovoice prompt**



PAUSE

Give students time to capture photos

Part B

1. **Uploading and captioning** participant generated images in Mural
2. **Reacting to images** from other participants



PAUSE

Designer prepares (1) a high level analysis and (2) Prepare activities using generated photos

Part C

1. Sharing **high level analysis** of themes from the last session
2. **Design iteration** activity
3. **Collaging** activity

BEFORE

DURING

AFTER

Working with the data

1. **Qualitative Coding**
2. **Close Reading**
3. **Communicating Insights**
4. **Closing Reflections (Designer Homework)**

How can we **optimize the impact of stakeholder engagement** tools like **photovoice**?

Best Practices

Best Practices for Photovoice Engagements

Collaborate with an educator

or an organization that has existing relationships with students at an individual level. Consider hosting engagements as part of a class curriculum. This can help foster trust with participants, tailor exercises to specific groups, and reach a more diverse range of participants.

Prioritize long-term engagement opportunities

Where stakeholders (students, school staff etc.) can have leadership roles (coming up with prompts, connecting with students, co-analyzing the data), organizing post-photovoice community building activities.

Reflect on the designer role critically throughout

Practice your designer homework and reflect critically on your positionality as the designer and the impact of the engagement.

Get a fresh perspective on your data insights

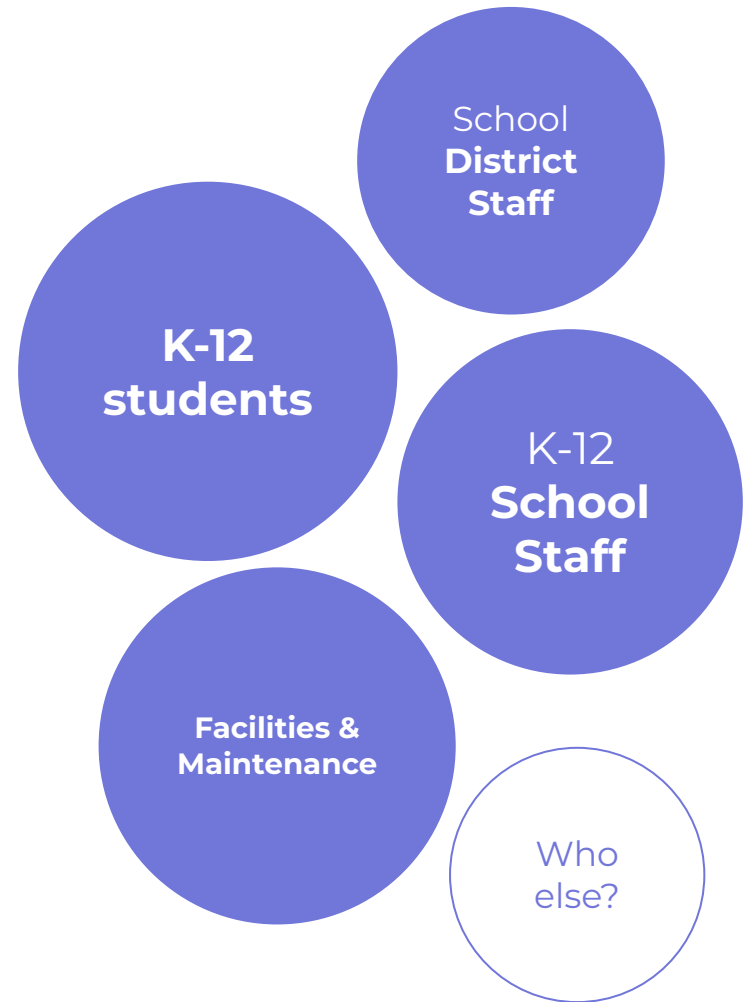
Take a step back from your analysis and get perspectives from your colleagues, from engagement stakeholders themselves on your analysis.

Are you synthesizing a complete and accurate consensus?

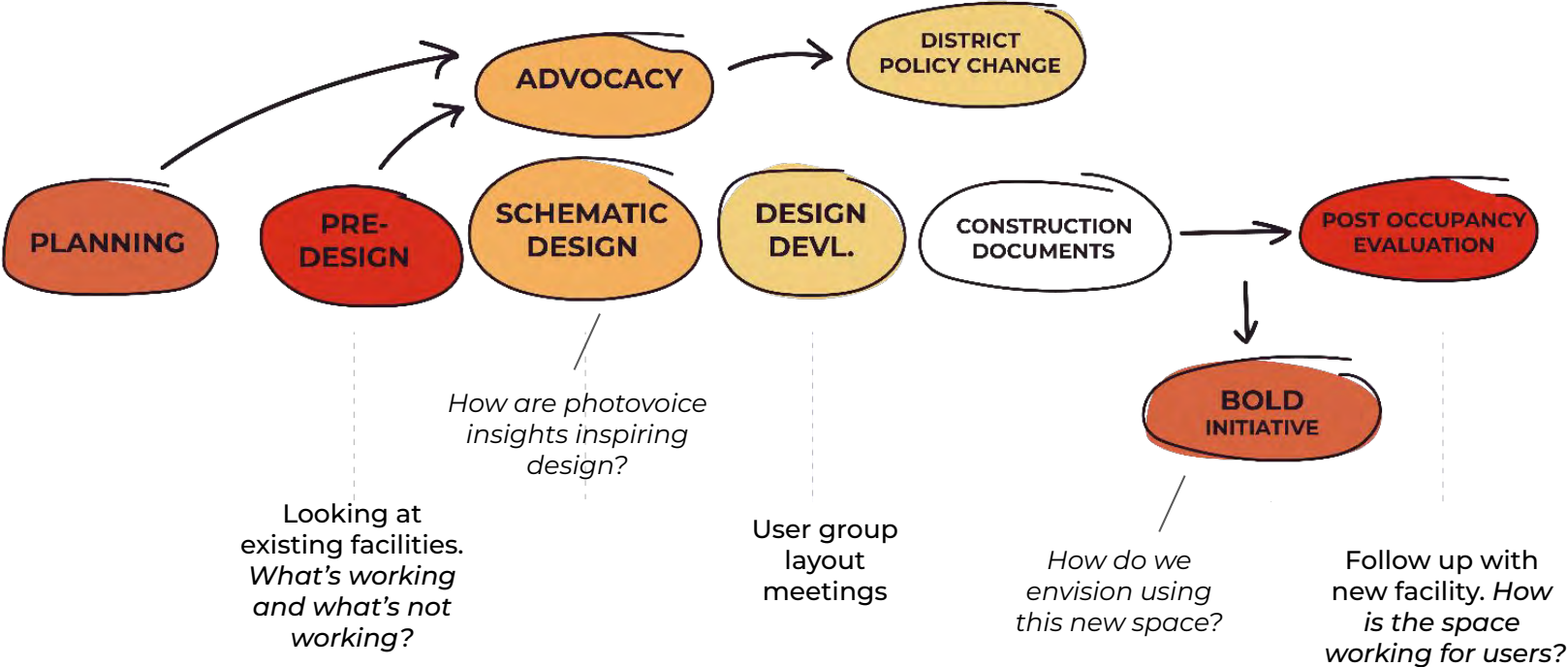
Working with a variety of stakeholder groups

This toolkit was created for engaging high-school aged students in mind, however these techniques could be used to engage other audiences.

Consider using different photovoice prompts and adapting activities for different stakeholder groups.



Engaging throughout the design process



Thanks!

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For more information on the project that inspired this toolkit, see Leila's project report titled, "Belonging as a framework for justice: Photovoice techniques for abolitionist design perspectives in K-12 Learning Environments"