

Take Action

The 'Take Action' option provides a Community Service Learning (CSL) framework for students and teachers to become active citizens and enhance their sense of belonging to Quebec society. Schools interested in this option were eligible to apply for up to 2K in project funding.

1 BECOMING AUTHORS: WRITING FOR CHANGE

When teachers Sarah Macaskill and Ashley Rowley from [Beurling Academy \(LBPSB\)](#) learned about the [Take Action](#) option from Community Development Agent, Simone Viger, they knew immediately that it was a perfect fit for their vision. The teachers wanted their grade 7 and 8 students to "write something meaningful, and show them that their words have [the] power to create change."

To help inspire students, they invited author Danielle Murrel Cox to share her story - a children's book, *My Hair* - which promotes the celebration of Black hair and natural hairstyles. Danielle described her writing process to the students and inspired them to tell their own stories to build community and create a space where everyone can belong.

Broad and Deep Discussions about Belonging

Sarah and Ashley set the stage with their students by sharing the LEARN resources about belonging as part of their Ethics and Religious Culture class, facilitating a wonderful opportunity to connect two disciplines - ethics and language arts. The discussions among Sarah's 20 grade eight students indicated that their strongest sense of belonging was felt at home and at school. Many of her students wanted to talk about individuals with learning disabilities and their frequent struggles with feeling a sense of belonging to Quebec society. Interestingly, the majority

of students in Sarah's class are identified with a learning difficulty themselves and have an accompanying Individual Education Plan (IEP). The project facilitated open conversations about "adaptation, making sure everyone has what they need" as well as "the lessons that other people need to learn in order for them to be accepted."

Ashley approached things slightly differently with her participating students: 22 in grade seven and 20 in grade eight. Using the initial discussions as a foundation, she prompted her students to think deeply about the challenges they face as teenagers. At first the students were a little scared and skeptical, but with more probing, they started to talk about their struggles with identity. Many expressed their longing for someone to truly understand them. Topics included the challenges that come with ethnic differences, physical and learning disabilities, abuse and sexual orientation.

Writing, Editing, Illustrating, Binding, Recording

Sarah explained that the project is "a great way to start the year because we were able to touch the majority of the curriculum." The young authors at Beurling have had an authentic writing experience over a three month period, using all three ELA competencies through a process of constant feedback, small group discussions, peer editing and collaboration.

Adding illustrations to the book allowed students to demonstrate their artistic strengths, which has been very validating for many. Furthermore, CDA Simone Viger, who supported the teachers throughout the project, arranged for book-maker, Kate Battle, to give a book-binding demonstration - an important stage of the book-making process. The students are also doing a voice recording of their stories. Sarah shared, "we're planning to share those recordings with students in other schools; and despite



"Supportive interactions between people in a neighbourhood is one of the strongest factors found to increase community belonging...the more we get involved in the community, the more we feel like we belong."

Community Foundations of Canada, Vital Signs (2015, 2016)

the pandemic, we're still hoping to get into some classrooms and have students read their stories and interact with the classes, and maybe even have some discussions about why they wrote them."

Student Voice and Choice Drives Engagement

At first, Sarah and Ashley wanted to narrow down the number of thematic choices for students and structure their time more rigidly. But they have now realized that by giving students more choice and latitude, and including them in the planning process and even in determining deadlines, the students were more engaged and accountable. It has been so interesting to "watch the students who struggle to write things...here they are finishing full stories, becoming authors; being able to step back and let them take ownership has been very effective."

Moving forward

Sarah and Ashley are very appreciative of the opportunity to participate in the 'I Belong' project with their students. The resources, support and funding provided by LEARN helped them to launch and sustain their vision and they are thrilled with the results and the ongoing learning about belonging. They look forward to having even more resources in the future, with suggestions for development including a bank of visual prompts, videos and examples, in order to elicit deeper thinking about belonging.

2 LAST WAVE RADIO STATION: A BEACON TO BRING US TOGETHER

Teacher Alex Bon-Miller at [Laval Senior Academy \(SWLSB\)](#) was immediately enthusiastic about the 'Take Action' option as it aligned with his goal to help cultivate a deeper sense of belonging to the school community, particularly during the pandemic. "What we've experienced in our school culture is an enormous amount of atomization, people being separated from one another, unable to come together, physically. How do you get students to come together and to speak, exchange and share when you're so restricted in terms of your physical movement ... I wanted

to cultivate a sense of belonging to the school so that we actually have some kind of beacon that brings us together."

In this case, the beacon is a school Radio Station called "Last Wave"- it is something that the community can tune into, participate in by sending in responses through audio files and personal recordings, creating a dialogue of exchanges and interchanges. It is a "platform for amplifying voices - student voice and educator voice." Furthermore, the project is originating from the Work Oriented Training Program (WOTP), giving students who often don't have the opportunity to take on a school-wide initiative, the unique and powerful experience of modelling leadership for the rest of the community.

Community mentoring relationship is a gift

The building of a sound studio is not a small undertaking, particularly as a student project within a school setting. However, as soon as he heard about the project, one WOTP student was keen to take it on as his stage. Fortunately, community sound expert, Max Husbands, agreed to join the project, sharing not only his depth of knowledge and experience, but providing key mentorship and guidance to the student. Max's level of commitment to the project has been very inspiring and demonstrates how a school can create a deepened sense of belonging for students by reaching out to the wider community for support - "it takes a village."

CDA advocacy buoys the team

Alex is the first to express that this project would not be possible without the tireless accompaniment of Community Development Agent, Katrina Driver. Her advocacy buoys the team: she helped to pitch the project to school administrators and parents, coordinate budgetary matters and facilitate trusting relationships in the community. As a school of 1500 students, "it would be impossible to do alone, without the help of someone taking a high altitude perspective, connecting the dots within the institution and with community resources."

