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### 'I was involved as an equal member of the community': how pedagogical partnership can foster a sense of belonging in Black, female students

Alison Cook-Sather

*Bryn Mawr College*, [acooksat@brynmawr.edu](mailto:acooksat@brynmawr.edu)

Khadijah Seay

*University of Pennsylvania*

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**‘I Was Involved as an Equal Member of the Community’:  
How Pedagogical Partnership Can Foster a Sense of Belonging in Black, Female Students**

*Alison Cook-Sather, Bryn Mawr College  
Khadijah Seay, University of Pennsylvania*

**Abstract**

Research indicates both that a sense of belonging is fundamental to students’ engagement, persistence, and success in postsecondary education and that racism systematically works against Black students experiencing these. Research also suggests that participating in student-staff pedagogical partnership can foster a sense of belonging, contribute to the development of culturally sustaining pedagogy, and redress some of the harms experienced by minoritised postsecondary students. To learn more about these phenomena in relation to Black, female, college students in particular, we used a conceptual framework informed by research on belonging, critical race theory, and intersectionality. Our methodology is informed by a Black-Feminist and Womanist Research Paradigm, Black Girl Cartography, and counterstorying. We analysed responses to an ethics-board-approved survey completed by twelve Black, female students at three different US colleges. Writing from our perspectives as a Black, female, recent undergraduate and a White, female, faculty member, we present our conceptual framework, define pedagogical partnership, describe the pedagogical partnership programs at three US colleges, and outline our methodology. We then use our conceptual framework to analyse how the students who responded to our survey describe perceiving, feeling, and engaging differently as a result of participating in pedagogical partnership. We conclude with recommendations for practice.

*Keywords:* belonging; Black female students; intersectionality; pedagogical partnership

‘[Participating in pedagogical partnership made me] feel able to develop a sense of belonging in any institution that may deny the black girl’s perspective, whether the action is backed by unconscious motives or full-on intent.’

–Black, female student

It is well established that a sense of belonging is fundamental to students’ engagement, persistence, and success (Ahn & Davis, 2020; Asher & Weeks, 2014; Gopalan & Brady, 2019; Walton & Brady, 2017). However, in postsecondary education, racism systematically works against Black, Asian, and minority ethnic (BAME) students experiencing a sense of belonging (Ross, Tatam, Livingstone et al., 2014; Smith, 2017). While all Black students face certain challenges in predominantly White institutions (Hausmann et al., 2009; Stebleton & Aleixo, 2016; Thelamour et al., 2019), understanding the needs of Black, female students in particular is essential to supporting their success in postsecondary education (Bartman, 2015; Booker, 2016). There is limited research on Black, female students’ sense of belonging, with most studies focusing on athletics (Francique, 2018), STEM (Dortch & Patel, 2017, Johnson et al., 2019), and doctoral work (Martin, 2018). Indeed, Gassman and Bowman (2018) suggest that Black females have been left behind in the research on the experiences of Black students in higher education.

Our title and epigraph draw on the perspectives of two Black, female students. These students who, along with the other students who attended one of three colleges in the United States that provide the context of our study, suggest that participation in pedagogical partnership may constitute one approach to fostering a sense of belonging among Black, female students both during and subsequent to their participation in such partnerships. Belonging is essential in all postsecondary contexts and a focus of study around the globe, including in Australia (van Gijn-Grosvenor & Huisman, 2020), India (Sabharwal, 2020), Malaysia (Badiozaman, 2020), and The Netherlands (van Herpen et al., 2020). Recent studies in the UK, such as Eboka's (2020) analysis of belonging as related to engagement, and calls for scholarship, such as that from *Journal of Educational Innovation, Partnership and Change* focused on 'Enriching BAME staff-student partnerships in further and higher education', suggest that there is growing recognition of the importance of such research regarding the experiences of BAME students in particular.

We begin our discussion by presenting our conceptual framework, defining pedagogical partnership, describing the pedagogical partnership programs at Berea, Bryn Mawr, and Haverford Colleges, and outlining our positionalities and research methodology. We focus the majority of our discussion on presenting how the Black, female students who responded to our survey describe perceiving, feeling, and engaging differently as a result of participating in pedagogical partnership. We conclude with recommendations for practice.

### **Conceptual Framework: Belonging for Black, Female Students**

The conceptual framework within which we situate our study is informed by research findings on the importance of belonging for the success and persistence of all students in postsecondary education, the insight critical race theory offers regarding how racism works systematically to disadvantage students of colour, and arguments for how intersectionality influences Black, female students' lived experiences in particular.

An extensive body of research has established that sense of belonging is key to student success and persistence in postsecondary education (Ahn & Davis, 2020; Gopalan & Brady, 2019; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Meehan & Howells, 2019; Thomas, 2012; Tinto, 1994; Walton & Brady, 2017). Defined as feeling connected, valued, and respected (Asher & Weeks, 2014; Strayhorn, 2012), belonging makes students feel: an affinity with their institution; that they fit in and are part of the community; and accepted and recognized for their abilities (Hausmann et al., 2009; Kuh et al., 2010; Pittman & Richmond, 2008; Wilson et al., 2018a, 2018b). However, research in the US and the UK documents that underrepresented racial-ethnic minority groups, including Black students, report a lower sense of belonging (Enoka, 2020; Gopalan & Brady, 2019; NUS, 2019) and greater 'belonging uncertainty' (Cohen & Garcia, 2008; Walton & Cohen, 2007) than their White counterparts.

Gray, Hope, and Matthews (2018) offer a three-part framework for thinking about belonging in secondary schooling contexts that is relevant to postsecondary education. First, they argue that educators can create 'interpersonal opportunity structures' that actively facilitate social ties in instructional contexts (p. 98). Second, educators can create 'instructional opportunity structures' through actively upholding and reinforcing 'students' esteemed cultural meaning systems' (p. 98). Third, educators can create 'institutional opportunity structures'

through collaborating with students and taking ‘actionable steps toward eliminating structural barriers that devalue minoritized populations’ (p. 98). Drawing on Walton and Brady (2017), Gray et al. (2019) argue that such facilitating conditions

assuage students’ concerns about whether they will be able to establish social connections (e.g., “Are there people here whom I connect to?”), how much value they should place on participating in an instructional context (e.g., “Is this a setting in which I want to belong?”), and if they will be subjected to treatment that is unfavorable and different from the quality of treatment others receive (e.g., “Do people here value [people like] me?”) (p. 98)

As these arguments suggest, belonging is a relational phenomenon, but relationships unfold within systems. The primary tenet of critical race theory holds that racism is central to how systems function and intersects in complex ways with other forms of subordination (Solórzano et al., 2000). To fully understand how racism functions, Yosso and colleagues (2004) have argued, we need to ‘look to the lived experiences of students of color... as valid, appropriate, and necessary forms of data’ (p. 15). This tenet of critical race theory can guide the transformation of structural and cultural aspects of education that ‘maintain subordinate and dominant racial positions in and out of the classroom’ (Solórzano et al., 2000, p. 63). Looking to and learning from the lived experiences of students of color can help us understand both the systemic and the individual aspects of these students’ experiences. How Black, female students experience the intersection of the systemic and the individual is unique because of the particular intersection of race and gender.

In focusing on the intersection of race and gender in the term ‘intersectionality’ that she coined, Crenshaw (1991) highlighted ‘the need to account for multiple grounds of identity when considering how the social world is constructed’ (p. 1245). Black female students are at ‘the confluence of two forms of oppression’ (Zamani, 2003, p. 7)—race-based discrimination and gender-based discrimination—and are therefore infused by what Jean and Feagin (1998) called the ‘double burden’ of ‘everyday racism’. Their lived experiences are of ‘embodied intersectionality’, an experience Simmonds describes as analogous to being “‘a fresh water fish that swims in sea water. I feel the weight of the water on my body’” (1997, 227)’ (quoted in Mirza, 2018, p. 2).

All three components of this conceptual framework, separately and together, reveal the need for culturally engaging campus environments that include classrooms as spaces of belonging. They point to the need to provide ‘counter spaces’—spaces ‘where deficit notions of people of color can be challenged and where a positive collegiate racial climate can be established and maintained’ (Solórzano et al., 2000, p. 70)—which can then inform campus and classroom spaces (Cook-Sather & Agu, 2013). All three components inform our analysis of the potential of pedagogical partnership to foster a sense of belonging in Black, female students.

### **Pedagogical Partnership: Definition and Focal Programs**

In the sections below we offer a basic definition of pedagogical partnership and overviews of the two pedagogical partnership programs that provided the contexts for this study.

## Definition of Pedagogical Partnership

We define pedagogical partnership as ‘a collaborative, reciprocal process through which all participants have the opportunity to contribute equally, although not necessarily in the same ways, to curricular or pedagogical conceptualization, decision making, implementation, investigation, or analysis’ (Cook-Sather et al., 2014, pp. 6-7). Through pedagogical partnership, students and staff work together to shape their educational environment, practices, and outcomes (Bryson et al., 2016). Enacted through ‘an ethic of reciprocity’—a ‘process of balanced give-and-take not of commodities but rather of contributions: perspectives, insights, forms of participation’ (Cook-Sather & Felten, 2017, p. 181)—student-staff pedagogical partnership is premised on three underlying principles: respect, reciprocity, and shared responsibility (Cook-Sather et al., 2014).

Student reflections (Brunson, 2018; Colón García, 2017; Perez-Putnam, 2016) and scholarly research (Bovill et al., 2016; Cook-Sather & Felten, 2017a; Healey et al., 2014; Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017) highlight the wide range of positive outcomes associated with pedagogical partnership, including a stronger sense of belonging for students. While equity and inclusion are not always explicitly stated goals of partnership, repositioning students as partners by definition complicates the power hierarchies that characterise higher education (see Bovill et al., 2016; Cates et al., 2018), and when partnership programs are intentionally structured to focus on equity and inclusion (Cook-Sather, 2018b), student partners who identify as members of marginalised groups find their experiences and knowledge valued through partnership (Cook-Sather, 2018a; Cook-Sather & Agu, 2013; Cook-Sather, Krishna Prasad, et al., 2019; de Bie, et al., 2019).

## Pedagogical Partnership Programs at Bryn Mawr, Haverford, and Berea Colleges

The SaLT program at Bryn Mawr and Haverford Colleges and the Student-Faculty Partnership Program at Berea College are situated at liberal arts institutions that enroll approximately 1,500 students, one in the Mid-Atlantic and one in the southern of the United States. Both programs were supported originally by grants from The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, and both invite undergraduate students to take up the position of pedagogical consultant to staff who teach at these colleges. In these programs, the student partners are not enrolled in staff members’ courses; rather, staff and student pairs work in semester-long partnerships through which student partners conduct weekly observations of their staff partners’ classrooms focused on pedagogical issues the staff members identify. The student partners also expand upon and deliver their observation notes to their staff partners, and they meet weekly with their staff partners to discuss what is working well and what might be revised in relation to classroom practice, assignments, assessment, and more.

To develop and hone the skills and capacities necessary to partner with staff in the work of developing productively challenging, inclusive, and engaging classrooms and courses, Cook-Sather at Bryn Mawr and Haverford Colleges and Seay in collaboration with Leslie Ortquist-Ahrens at Berea College have provided student partners with a set of structures and supports:

- (1) an orientation that supports exploration of partnership approaches and student partners' hopes and concerns (see Cook-Sather, Bahti, et al., 2019, for [sample orientations](#));
- (2) a set of guidelines for developing partnerships with staff members (see Cook-Sather, Bahti, et al., 2019, for the [complete set of guidelines](#)); and
- (3) weekly meetings designed as semi-structured conversations to guide partnership practice (see Cook-Sather, Bahti, et al., 2019, for a [sample syllabus](#) and [weekly meeting topics](#)).

Student partners meet weekly with their staff partners to affirm inclusive and equitable approaches and explore possibilities for revision. These exchanges foster the development of 'respecting voices' (Cook-Sather, 2020). Staff develop voice through dialogue with a diversity of students' voices; generate ways of discussing and addressing inequity; and construct more productive classroom approaches. Partnership develops student voice by positioning them as pedagogical partners to staff and structuring their dialogue with their staff partners; affirming that they can carry those voices into classes in which they are enrolled; and emboldening them to participate in ongoing conversations about the experiences of underrepresented and underserved students (Cook-Sather, 2020). Depending on staff preferences, student partners might also provide their email addresses to, gather feedback from, and hold 'office hours' for enrolled students to learn about their experiences and gather insights to share with staff partners (Cook-Sather, Bahti, et al., 2019).

At Bryn Mawr and Haverford Colleges, student consultants are paid by the hour for their time, which is typically 5-7 hours per week, and at Berea College, student partners enroll in a .25 credit course (equivalent to a one-credit course elsewhere). The demanding emotional as well as intellectual work of partnership necessarily poses challenges. The main challenges of this partnership work are staff anxiety around having 'observers', feeling unproductively vulnerable, and resisting or sometimes dismissing the partnership approach. Challenges students have reported include feeling vulnerable to their faculty partners or traumatized by a partnership, frustrated with non-partnership frames and practices, hyper-responsible as a result of increased awareness and capacity, and disenchanted with non-engaged work. Other challenges include managing everyone's complex schedules and lives, differentiating teaching assistants and student partners, considering diversity of identities and roles, and acknowledging and managing the emotional labor involved in partnership. All of these challenges are addressed in [Chapter 8](#) of *Pedagogical Partnerships: A How-to Guide for Faculty, Students, and Academic Developers in Higher Education* (Cook-Sather, Bahti, and Ntem, 2019).

Since the advent of the SaLT program in 2006, over 295 faculty members and 200 student consultants have participated in a total of over 400 partnerships. Many of these partnerships are with incoming staff, because all new staff are offered the opportunity to participate in such partnerships as part of a pedagogy seminar they may elect to take in exchange for a reduced teaching load in their first year (Cook-Sather, 2016). Since the advent of the Student-Faculty Partnership Program at Berea College, 47 faculty (including 2 staff members) and 51 students have participated in a total of 35 partnerships.

Neither pedagogical partnership program had as its primary goal to respond to calls in the research ‘to foster a sense of belonging among African American students’ (Hausmann et al., 2009, p. 667), for instance, or to ‘attend to the unique needs of African American women college students’ (Bartman, 2015). However, both did have the development of more inclusive and responsive classrooms as a primary goal (Cook-Sather, 2018b) to foster a greater sense of belonging. These programs aimed from their advent to support staff in soliciting ‘unheard voices’ (Harper & Quaye, 2009) and developing what Paris and Alim (2014) call ‘culturally sustaining pedagogy’ (see also Cook-Sather & Agu, 2013, and Cook-Sather & Des-Ogugua, 2019)—pedagogy that supports students ‘in sustaining the cultural and linguistic competence of their communities while simultaneously offering access to dominant cultural competence’ (Paris, 2012, p. 95).

At Bryn Mawr, Haverford, and Berea Colleges, partnership work has moved the institutions in different ways in relation to addressing diversity and racism. At Bryn Mawr and Haverford Colleges, the SaLT program was launched in 2007 with five BAME students as the first student partners, and this group of students and their faculty partners generated recommendations for creating more culturally responsive classrooms that have been used by faculty at these colleges since (Cook-Sather & Des-Ogugua, 2019). The long-term effect of this initial commitment has been to build, over time, spaces in which students, as Seay wrote in her journal, find respite as well as affirmation: ‘I remember when I did the program at Bryn Mawr College, despite whatever was going on that week in the world of Bryn Mawr, I was able to walk into the consultants meeting and breathe —sometimes for the first time that week.’

Most recently, when the colleges pivoted to remote teaching and learning in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, student partners generated a web-based [set of recommendations](#) that was shared widely. This work was sustained through weekly, student-led, cross-constituency conversations about [anti-racist pedagogies](#) in the summer of 2020, [trauma-informed, anti-racist teaching and learning in hybrid and remote contexts](#) in the fall of 2020, and [equity in assessment](#) in the spring of 2021. These efforts contribute to ‘creating conditions that can change racist narratives and practices structured into institutions such as ours’ (Ameyaa, Cook-Sather, Ramo, et al., forthcoming).

Trust and transformation take time. While the SaLT program at Bryn Mawr and Haverford Colleges is 15 years old, the partnership program at Berea College is four years old. Partnership work at Berea College complements existing places of belonging on campus, and the main impact has been on individual students, who have carried the sense of partnership with them into other contexts.

While pedagogical partnership is not a panacea, the presence and participation of students from equity-seeking groups, as one Black, female student partner put it, helps ‘disrupt the exclusive nature of higher education and helps level the playing field to allow for students to achieve more than they thought possible before their voices were included’ (quoted in Cook-Sather, 2018a, p. 925). Mentoring and networking are as important for Black, female students as they are for Black, female administrators (Marina et al., 2016). Like legitimating the intellectual work of female academics who experience ‘academia as a hostile and marginalizing space’ (Gonzales, 2018, p. 677), legitimating the voices and perspectives of female students affirms the

necessity of attending ‘to how power and privilege yields particular conditions and consequences among women’ (Gonzales, 2018, p. 677).

### **Our Positionality and Methodology**

Seay is a Black, female graduate of and former participant in a pedagogical partnership program at Bryn Mawr College. She is also a recent post-baccalaureate fellow for pedagogical partnerships at Berea College, and she is currently associate director of the civic engagement center at University of Pennsylvania. Cook-Sather is a White, female staff member and director of the pedagogical partnership program at Bryn Mawr and Haverford Colleges. We share our positionalities so readers know who did the research and who is doing the reporting—a choice consistent with our methodological approach.

Our study was guided by the premises of a Black-Feminist and Womanist (BFW) Research Paradigm (Lindsay-Dennis, 2015), of Black Girl Cartography (Butler, 2018), and of counterstorying (Ross, 2016). A BFW Research Paradigm embraces commitments of Black Feminist Thought, including using ‘concrete experience as a criterion of meaning’ and dialogue in assessing knowledge claims as well as embracing both an ethic of caring and an ethic of responsibility (Lindsay-Dennis, 2015, p. 510). Womanism intersects with Black Feminist Thought as ‘a social change methodology’ that must also ‘provide a space for self-definition’ (Lindsay-Dennis, 2015, p. 510, 514). This research paradigm is consistent with Black Girl Cartography, which Butler (2018) defines as ‘the study of how and where Black girls are physically and sociopolitically mapped in education’ (p. 29). In keeping with the premises of a BFW research paradigm, our version of counterstorying (Ross, 2016) has us engage in alternative readings of how Black, female students are often read. Our version of Black Girl Cartography strives to support the Black, female students in our study in ‘reclaiming a sense of belonging, weaving [themselves] into genealogies of resilience, and conjuring new imaginings of existing’ (Butler, 2018, p. 31).

A BFW research paradigm, Black Girl Cartography, and counterstorying recognize Black female students as ‘holders and creators of knowledge’ (Delgado Bernal, 2002, p. 106) and their lived experiences ‘as valid, appropriate, and necessary forms of data’ (Yosso et al., 2004, p. 15). Because previous research findings had indicated that working in pedagogical partnership increases students’ sense of belonging and has the potential to combat epistemic, affective, and ontological harms caused by postsecondary education’s enactment and maintenance of various forms of oppression (Cook-Sather, 2018b; Cook-Sather, 2018a; Cook-Sather & Agu, 2013; Cook-Sather, Krishna Prasad, et al., 2019; de Bie et al., 2019, 2021 in press), our goal with this study was to learn from Black, female student partners about whether and how these findings were true for them.

We sought approval from our colleges’ ethics boards for a survey comprised of the following two open-ended research questions:

- (1) In what ways, if any, did participation in the student-[staff] pedagogical partnership program on your campus contribute to your sense of belonging?
- (2) What other effects/impacts did participation in the pedagogical partnership program have?



With ethics board approval, we sent the survey to all students who had participated in pedagogical partnership at Bryn Mawr and Haverford Colleges that houses the SaLT program and Berea College that houses the Student-Faculty Partnership Program and invited students who identify as Black and female to complete the survey. We received twelve responses.

Guided by the ethic of care and respect that is at the heart of a BFW research paradigm, Black Girl Cartography, counterstorying, and pedagogical partnership work, we read and reread students responses to the survey, focusing on how students themselves described the potential of pedagogical partnership to foster a sense of belonging. This focus on students' own ways of describing their experiences of belonging builds on both a growing body of research that sees students as experts on their own experiences and recent research focused on how Black college students experience and articulate their sense of belonging to the racial group (Hunter et al., 2019). We do not aim or claim to generalise here; rather, our goal is to offer glimpses into the particular experiences of these twelve, Black, female students. To preserve confidentiality, we designate student respondents with an 'S' and a number (e.g., S11).

### **Findings: Perceiving, Feeling, and Acting Differently**

Across the student responses, we identified three themes regarding what participating in partnership can achieve for Black, female students: (1) perceiving differently; (2) feeling differently; and (3) engaging differently. Although we address these one at a time, they are not linear-sequential experiences, but rather mutually informing.

#### **Perceiving Differently**

Perception is at the heart of belonging—whether students perceive connections and respect between themselves and others (Asher & Weeks, 2014; Strayhorn, 2012) in the spaces of postsecondary education and whether they perceive themselves to be part of the community and accepted and recognized for their abilities (Gray et al., 2018; Hausmann et al., 2009; Kuh et al., 2010; NUS, 2019; Pittman & Richmond, 2008; Wilson et al., 2018a, 2018b). Those perceptions depend on the interrelated phenomena of how students think they are perceived and how they perceive themselves. One theme we saw in survey responses is that, as a result of participating in pedagogical partnership, these Black, female students experience themselves being perceived differently and they perceive themselves differently.

Students described the conditions of their college contexts that worked against their sense of belonging—what one student described as 'a predominately white institution where space was not created for people of color' (S5). Within these spaces students described experiences that reinforced their sense of not being accepted or recognised for their abilities: 'I have had white-male professors that I felt did not appreciate my perspective in the learning environment' (S8). This student points to the ubiquity of this perception: 'All too often, when the black girl speaks or tries to offer an intellectual analysis of issues at hand, her perspective is denied or deemed unworthy' (S8). This acute awareness of how Black, female students are often perceived in spaces, including classrooms, that are not created for them is an awareness Seay shares.

Student responses suggest that participation in pedagogical partnership both sharpens these perceptions and provides an alternative experience of being perceived. One student wrote: ‘I think my partnerships pushed me to think about the ways my Blackness and womanness are perceived by authority figures within the academy’ (S4). Students wrote about how pedagogical partnership creates space for students to be perceived differently: as knowers and agents. One student described being perceived as ‘someone other students and my [staff partner] could trust’ and as a ‘big resource to other students’ (S1).

As a result of these different ways of being perceived through pedagogical partnerships, Black, female student partners perceive themselves differently—as ‘valued and recognized for the work they contribute’ (S5). Students perceive themselves as not only belonging but also impactful—what one student described as ‘the belonging of a voice’ and the recognition that “‘wow, the professors are looking for my input in guiding their next plan’” (S6).

### **Feeling Differently**

Building on the different ways of perceiving that partnership facilitates, students also described feeling differently: feeling that they matter, that they are validated, and that they can overcome fear and lack of confidence to experience themselves as legitimate members of the community. The partnerships themselves foster that sense of belonging through valuing the ‘perspective or “expertise” of a student’ (S3), and they extend that feeling. As one student asserted: ‘Through this partnership, I have learned how to feel a sense of belonging in my other classrooms’ (S8). Using the language of mattering, this student explained: ‘Participating in the partnerships program makes me feel as though my perspective on education and learning matters’ (S8).

A second way in which students described feeling differently is that they feel validated—by the facilitators of partnership programs and the staff members with whom student partners work. One student suggested that the SaLT program ‘promoted my sense of belonging because I had a space where I could contemplate my experiences as a student’ and have those experiences ‘validated’ (S11), and another explained how Seay and her co-facilitator ‘asked questions and gave activities that prompted safe sharing of personal passions and ideas’ (S12). These affirmations are ‘reinforced’, as this same student explained, ‘by my [staff] partner, too’ (S12).

Finally, students described feeling differently as they overcame fear and lack of confidence to feel like they had more of a stake in the community—that they could be stakeholders. As one student put it, because partnership ‘flips the paradigm’ through which ‘[staff] are viewed as the experts who are imparting knowledge to students ready to receive it’, it affords students ‘another way...to become a stakeholder in the community’ (S5). In the words of the student we quoted in our title: ‘As a Participant, I felt like I was involved as an equal member of the community, specifically when it comes to academics’ (S3). This last qualifier is important because, as Seay points out, it’s one thing to find your people in social spaces; it’s another to feel a sense of belonging in academic spaces.

## Engaging Differently

Student partners' use of the word 'feel', captured in the examples above, is linked to ways of engaging—to the ways students can 'be'. This is our third theme—engaging differently—which manifested in students seeing themselves as resources, helping others, experiencing new forms of agency, and accepting new kinds of responsibility.

Because student partners become 'a big resource' (S1) to both their staff partners and students enrolled in those staff members' courses, their ability to 'contribute to making something better' (S2) gives them 'a strong sense of belonging' (S2). When students feel like their experience and perspective matter and can make a difference, they can turn negative perceptions into positive actions. As another explained, the way partnership prompted her to think about how her 'Blackness and womanness are perceived by authority figures within the academy' allowed her to '[use] that insight to advise my [staff partners]' (S4).

A second thread that informs this theme 'comes from knowing that you can both give to and receive from a community' (S5). This kind of reciprocity supports working through 'strategies to compromise with students' (S1), and it can 'breathe life into my purpose, starting with culturally responsive teaching' (S2). Such work brings a sense of purpose and capacity as well as of connection—a commitment to 'think through affirmations, inclusion, constructive criticism etc. and more!' (S6)—as part of the reciprocity of pedagogical partnership.

A third thread is experiencing new forms of agency. As one student explained, partnership 'helped me overcome my fear of professors therefore allowing me to be more proactive and willing to engage in conversation with [staff]' (S7). Another student wrote: 'In engaging in partnership with a [staff] member, I began to feel like I had more agency in my own school' and '[I felt] more comfortable in navigating academic spaces as a whole' (S10). Summing up this feeling, this student asserted: 'I felt more confident in my experiences as a student, and felt empowered to be an active participant in my own learning. This partnership really changed how I think about my academic institution, and how I interact with it' (S10).

A final thread that informs this theme is students developing an identity that transcends partnership itself—and 'identity as a leader and change agent' (S2). This student explained that 'leaning into this identity was empowering during a time when I was experiencing feelings of disempowerment and lack of belonging' (S2). While it is important to note that one student respondent felt belonging within partnership but did not experience a 'sense of belonging on a campus-wide scale' (S9), for the other respondents this sense of belonging, identity, and agency carried beyond partnerships themselves, into life even beyond college. This is the sense, captured by the student quoted in our epigraph, 'of belonging in any institution that may deny the black girl's perspective whether the action is backed by unconscious motives or full-on intent' (S8).

## Discussion

This study confirms findings from previous studies of how pedagogical partnership can benefit all students and especially students traditionally underrepresented in and underserved by higher education (de Bie et al., 2019). In addition, it offers particular insight into what constitutes

a sense of belonging for Black, female students and how such belonging can be fostered through pedagogical partnership. Participating in pedagogical partnership affords Black, female students the opportunity to step back and perceive how they are perceived as racialised, gendered bodies in college classrooms and, crucially, to challenge and complicate those perceptions, both in and through their partnerships with staff. Through partnership, students gain clarity regarding the ways that ‘Blackness and womanness are perceived by authority figures within the academy’ (S4) and how ‘all too often’ the black, female, intellectual analysis or perspective ‘is denied or deemed unworthy’ (S8). Contrasting these experiences, in partnership students find recognition and respect as ‘someone other students and my [staff partner] could trust’ (S1) and who can contribute to ‘staff’s pedagogy’ (S5) and offer legitimate input to guide ‘their next plan’ (S6). Such recognition and respect alter students’ perceptions of themselves. In these ways, partnership provides ‘interpersonal opportunity structures (actively facilitating social ties in instructional contexts)’ that assuage students’ concerns about whether they will be able to establish social connections by demonstrating that there people to whom they can connect (Gray et al., 2018, p. 98).

This recognition and respect extends to students enrolled in the courses for which students serve as consultants. A Black, female student articulated in previous research that it was powerful ‘for other students of color or underrepresented groups to have seen me in this new and “high level” role with respect to the professor in that their perspective was welcomed, would be treated well and was valued as a driving force to change classroom dynamics’ (quoted in Cook-Sather & Agu, 2013, p. 277). And a Black female staff partner (who worked with both a male and a female, Black student partner) reflected on how, when students enrolled in her courses (who are primarily students of color) saw that ‘students of color can be authorities in the classroom’ as they were in the role of student consultant, it was ‘incredibly transforming and powerful for the students who were actually participating in the class’ (quoted in Cook-Sather & Agu, 2013, p. 279). In these ways, partnerships offer ‘instructional opportunity structures’ that assuage students’ concerns about how much value they should place on participating in an instructional context; they answer in the affirmative the question “Is this a setting in which I want to belong?” (Gray et al., 2018, p. 98).

Participating in pedagogical partnership prompted in the Black, female students in our study new feelings as well as perceptions. The students in our study felt heard when they spoke; they felt valued and validated by both program facilitators and staff partners for what they had to say; and they felt able to overcome fear and lack of confidence and experience themselves as legitimate members of the community. These feelings reflect definitions of belonging, and they also link to confidence and empowerment that lead to having a sense of agency, all of which inform our third theme: engaging differently. As a Black, female, student partner in a previous study explained, working with faculty ‘made me feel like who I am is more than enough—that my identity, my thoughts, my ideas are significant and valuable’ and can ‘drive important transformation in classrooms and in the student-teacher relationship’ (student quoted in Cook-Sather & Agu, 2013, pp. 277-278). Partnerships provide ‘institutional opportunity structures’ by answering in the affirmative the question: “‘Do people here value [people like] me?’” (Gray et al., 2018, p. 98). Pedagogical partnership programs provide an institutional structure through which students and staff can take ‘actionable steps toward eliminating structural barriers that devalue minoritized populations’ (Gray et al, 2018, p. 98).

Each of our findings is supported by the components of our conceptual framework. Speaking to ‘the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the group (e.g., campus community) or others on campus (e.g., [staff], peers)’ (Strayhorn, 2012, p. 3), student responses highlight how partnership informed their perceptions, their feelings, and their actions in ways that contributed to their sense of belonging. Racism may go undetected because it is part of the formation of institutional relationships and decisions. Pedagogical partnership responds to critical race theory’s assertion that racism is structural by creating a new institutional role of educational developer that the Black, female students in our study and other students take on. In this role students mobilise their own cultural identities to contribute to the transformation of universities into more egalitarian learning communities (Cook-Sather, Krishna Prasad, et al., 2019). They thereby contribute to the transformation of structural and cultural aspects of education that ‘maintain subordinate and dominant racial positions in and out of the classroom’ (Solórzano et al., 2000, p. 63). And finally, the ‘embodied intersectionality’ (Mirza, 2018; Simmonds, 1997) Black, female students experience can be resituated in their individual roles as student consultants and is part of a ‘strength in numbers’ phenomenon whereby these students’ ‘viewpoints about what we wanted to receive from our education deserved to be taken seriously and was useful not only to us, but to the professors and other students’ (student quoted in Cook-Sather & Agu, 2013, p. 278).

### **Limitations, Implications, and Recommendations**

While the vast majority of students in this and other studies affirm the potential of pedagogical partnership to foster a sense of belonging, there are complexities and limits to this experience. There are significant emotional demands that accompany partnership work (Cook-Sather, Bahti, et al., 2019), especially when marginalised students experience resistance from their staff partners (Ntem & Cook-Sather, 2018). Black, female students who work with White, male staff describe particular challenges, and one of our survey respondents named both the challenges and the benefits of this work: ‘While it was taxing’, this student wrote, to have to explain the difference between the experience of living in her Black, female body and her staff partner’s experience of living in his White, male one, ‘I have learned more about my capacity to learn and teach on an inter-personal level, something I am deeply appreciative of now’ (S4).

Another limitation of this work is that, while it might promote a sense of belonging within partnership, that sense does not always extend beyond partnership. One student response in our survey included this reflection:

I feel that participating in the partnership made me feel more connected to other student consultants, and to [staff]. I felt a strong sense of community and trust with other consultants because of the kind of work we were involved in (work that requires you to be very open and honest), and I felt connected to more [staff] because I had renewed appreciation for their effort and creativity. However, I don’t think it made me feel an increased sense of belonging on a campus wide scale. (S9)

Other students might have had a similar experience but did not say so. An implication of this work, therefore, is that those who facilitate and participate in pedagogical partnership programs need to guard against assuming that the sense of belonging transfers beyond the programs.

Berea, Bryn Mawr, and Haverford Colleges are different contexts with different kinds and extents of spaces and structures designed to foster student belonging. None of them, however, had affirming Black identities as part of its founding commitment, and indeed all of them have complex histories in relation to admitting and supporting Black students. Thus, as Seay notes in relation to her experience as a student at Bryn Mawr College, the Black part of her identity was not affirmed, and the intersection of Black and female for her and other students who live that intersectionality can get lost. We recommend, therefore, that postsecondary institutions create structures such as pedagogical partnership programs that support staff in soliciting ‘unheard voices’ (Quaye & Harper, 2009), developing ‘culturally sustaining pedagogy’ (Paris & Alim, 2014), and place Black, female and other marginalised students in positions to draw on their identities, knowledge, and experiences to transform those institutions (Ameyaa et al., forthcoming; Cook-Sather, 2018a; Cook-Sather & Agu, 2013; Cook-Sather, Krishna Prasad, 2019; de Bie, et al., 2019). In doing so, though, it is important to recognise that even efforts to redress through pedagogical partnership the harm postsecondary education can cause racialised and other marginalised students, such work can unintentionally reproduce such harms (de Bie et al., 2021 in press).

### Conclusion

Partnership respects Black, female students’ intellects; affirms their experiences and expertise; and makes them feel they belong in conversations about teaching and learning and, for many students, in the wider institutions that support those. They can make Black, female students, like the one quoted in our title, feel ‘involved as an equal member of the community’. But they do not do so automatically, and the thoughtful facilitation of partnerships and the thoughtful engagement of staff as well as student partners are necessary for partnerships to achieve these results. Exploring and drawing on scholarship on belonging, critical race theory, and intersectionality can help raise awareness and guide practice.

Such work takes on new urgency at the intersection of the global COVID-19 pandemic and the newly revealed extent of ongoing anti-Black racism. Affirming Black, female students as ‘holders and creators of knowledge’ (Delgado Bernal, 2002, p. 106) contributes to the work of developing what Museus, Yi, and Saelua (2018) call culturally engaging campus environments, which predict a stronger sense of belonging for both White students and students of color. Colleges and universities are spaces within which such work is especially urgent and necessary (Addy et al., 2020; Cook-Sather, et al., 2020).

In keeping with the tenets of Lindsay-Dennis’ (2015) Black-Feminist and Womanist Research Paradigm, Butler’s (2018) Black Girl cartography, and Ross’ (2016) counterstorying, we conclude with the words of one of the students who participated in our study, portions of which we have quoted earlier in this discussion. Recognising that ‘conceptions of Blackness are tied to reclaiming a sense of belonging, weaving one’s self into genealogies of resilience, and conjuring new imaginings of existing’ (Butler, 2018, p. 31), we re-assert the importance of ‘hearing girls, believing girls, understanding Black Girl matters, and articulating why Black girls matter’ (p. 40):

Being at a predominately white institution where space was not created for people of color, there is liberation in receiving the admiration of ideas and being affirmed for all the hard work you put into an institution, making it more cognizant of all the complexities and culture that enters the classroom space alone. It is no longer about content but also about the people and who they are in the space as well. Therefore, when thinking about how students are ‘beings’ that add to the complexity, uniqueness, and richness in a space...one of the best ways of enriching the classroom culture is through the invitation and agency for black women to feel included, valued and recognized for the work they contribute as well as the change they are making, which essentially improves ... staff’s pedagogy.

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