

THE IMPACT OF A POSITIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT IN ELEMENTARY
EDUCATION

by

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Artist's Statement

As both a teaching student and a creative endeavor pursuant, I believe that stories shape the way we understand the world, as well as the classroom. *Belong* began as a Signature Honors Project with the intention of showcasing the emotional and academic transformation a child experiences when welcomed into a positive learning environment. Based around my experiences as an education major and intern, I envisioned a story that would reflect what it feels like to be the new kid: nervous, overwhelmed, and unsure of one's place. But as the child in the story is loved, supported, and invited into community, the world around her becomes brighter, both literally and figuratively. This book uses the metaphor of color to explore belonging, and in doing so, hopes to inspire educators to reflect on the environments they create for their students.

As the project progressed, its scope naturally evolved. What began as a storytelling endeavor expanded into an exploration of the role of artificial intelligence (AI) in the creative and instructional process. By using AI tools such as DALL·E, I was able to generate original illustrations to support the narrative, transforming my story from an idea into a full visual experience. This decision, of course, considering my personal limitations as an "artist" and the suggestion of my mentor to potentially pursue AI generated illustrations. This process forced me to reflect on the practical implications of AI for educators, particularly in how it can empower teachers to bring learning materials to life in new and accessible ways. The resulting work, *Belong*, is both a storybook and a study on how creativity, pedagogy, and technology intersect.

Background and Educational Context

Creating *Belong* was inspired by real educational theory and classroom experience. At its heart, the story explores how a warm, inclusive, and safe classroom environment influences not

only academic engagement, but emotional development. The journey of the main character, a young girl beginning at a new school, parallels the psychological reality that children need to feel secure and accepted before they can flourish. This is consistent with Mary Hanrahan's (1998) research on learning environments and motivation. In her study, Hanrahan notes that "emotional support, physical comfort, and social inclusion are crucial motivators" that influence how students engage with content and peers (p. 744). These same motivators are embedded in the structure of the book: the girl's fear and isolation prevent her from participating at first, but as warmth and support increase, so too does her engagement and confidence.

Equally central to the work is the importance of visual storytelling for young readers. Janice Strasser and Holly Seplocha (2007) emphasize that picture books "allow children to connect emotionally to characters and to explore language in context" (p. 38). Taking this into consideration, the design of *Belong* relies heavily on visual symbolism. The use of grayscale in early pages visually represents the little girl's feelings of alienation and fear. As she begins to make connections, either with her teacher, her peers, or the classroom activities, color begins to be introduced gradually, representing her growth in confidence, safety, and joy. By the end of the story, the once colorless world is now vibrant, mirroring her internal transformation and signaling that she feels she belongs.

The visual arc of the story is not just a narrative device; it is an instructional tool. Young children often process emotions through pictures, and the deliberate progression from gray to color models the social-emotional development educators strive to nurture. The storyline itself contains embedded Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) principles, especially principles like empathy, community-building, and emotional expression. The book can be used as a

conversation starter for students who are adjusting to new environments or navigating friendships, making it not only a literary work but also a potential classroom resource.

The Role of AI in Creative and Instructional Practice

As was mentioned, a unique aspect of this project was the integration of generative AI in the illustration process. While I had a clear narrative in mind from the outset, I lacked the artistic tools to visually realize my story. By using ChatGPT's DALL·E image generation tool, I was able to create original illustrations “tailored” to each scene in the book. This process was both empowering and challenging. Generating consistent character designs across pages required precise prompt engineering, and at times, creative workarounds. Yet, the results were effective (to a degree) and illuminating. This generative process then introduced a deeper layer of personal reflection on AI's potential in education.

David Baidoo-Anu's (2023) article, *Education in the Era of Generative Artificial Intelligence*, argues that tools like ChatGPT and DALL·E offer “a democratization of creativity and productivity” for both educators and learners (p. 55). For teachers, particularly those working in under-resourced schools, AI can support lesson development, visual creation, and differentiated instruction. In this project, AI helped me overcome technical artistic limitations and allowed me to focus more on the story's emotional core as opposed to spending a semester commissioning an artist. The process taught me that AI can be a rather meaningful collaborator, a collaborator that supports, rather than replaces, the teacher's role.

However, my choice to use AI also required ethical and pedagogical discernment. I had to think critically about how the tool was used: Was it a shortcut, or was it expanding creative access? In this case, I found that AI enhanced rather than diluted the work. It became a teaching

point itself that highlighted how educators can use technology to enrich learning materials while remaining grounded in empathy, theory, and student experience. The project also exposed limitations: inconsistencies in image output, difficulties in maintaining visual continuity, and the need for ongoing refinement. These challenges are similar to the real-world implementation issues that educators might face when integrating new technologies.

Complications and Growth Through the Process

While the final product is something I'm proud of, the path to completion was not without its complications. Maintaining visual consistency across illustrations was one of the most demanding parts of the process. Despite careful prompt wording, DALL·E occasionally generated characters that varied in age, expression, or environment. To maintain artistic coherence, I had to iterate repeatedly, adjusting my language and learning to be incredibly specific with my commands. This highlighted to me the importance of clarity, both in storytelling and in communication with AI tools, which I suppose is a skill increasingly relevant for educators in the digital age.

Additionally, midway through the project, access to certain tools was briefly disabled, forcing me to pause illustration development and re-strategize. With the inconsistency in accessibility, delays became opportunities for creative reflection. I revisited the story structure, refined my language, and paid closer attention to pacing and emotional flow. Ironically, the complications with technology deepened my understanding of how AI should be used in education: not as a crutch, but as a flexible, evolving support system. Time management was also a challenge. Balancing the project alongside student teaching, coursework, and internship responsibilities pushed me to develop new systems for organizing creative work. For the first

time in my life, I have started consistently keeping a calendar on my phone. Challenges aside, what kept me grounded was the constant reminder of why I started the project: to show what happens when a child feels seen and supported. That mission gave the process meaning, even during difficult weeks.

Conclusion and Context for the Audience

This book can serve as a resource for educators, families, and children alike. For teachers, *Belong* is a reminder of the powerful role they play in shaping not just academic minds, but emotional lives. For students, especially those navigating new spaces, the story offers validation and hope. Then for classrooms, both presently and those of the future, the book models how traditional storytelling and emerging technologies can coexist in meaningful ways. We are living in a time of immense change in education. AI is rapidly becoming a part of our instructional landscape. But at the heart of every lesson, every innovation, is still a student who wants to feel like they matter. My hope is that this project serves as both a tribute to the educators who make that happen and a roadmap for using technology to support that work in creative, ethical, and emotionally resonant ways. While *Belong* exists as a product to conclude my time at ECU, further efforts towards publishing and presentation could see the resource value brought to the forefront of its existence.

References

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