

ARTICLE | BUILDING AUTHENTIC CONNECTIONS FOR A MORE EQUITABLE FUTURE

WRITTEN BY: [THE TAMARACK INSTITUTE](#)

This article was written by Njoki Mbürü and Jorge Garza, with contributions from five youth leaders: Aaliyah Flett, Blue Vetsch, Clairice Tuckanow, Jelise Keating, and Jordan Higgins.

Summary

Social connections are essential to foster a sense of belonging and purpose among youth. What does belonging look like from a youth perspective? What conditions need to be in place to achieve more equitable outcomes for youth in fostering belonging? What are some trends on how youth are cultivating belonging in their communities? What lessons can we learn on cultivating a strong sense of belonging among youth? This article uncovers the answers to these questions from the perspectives of five youth leaders that have played a catalyst role in stewarding the [Communities Building Youth Futures](#) network and are central to the conversations within the [Communities Building Belonging](#) network towards advancing a pan-Canadian [Strategy for Belonging](#) that includes everyone's perspectives.

Background

In February 2024, [Communities Building Youth Futures](#) brought together outstanding leaders who are advancing more equitable outcomes for youth during its pan-Canadian gathering. This was a pivotal moment as communities reflected collectively on what the next stage of this network could look like. During these conversations, communities were invited to learn more about the learning and collaboration opportunities offered for Tamarack members. This includes the opportunity to co-create a pan-Canadian [Strategy for Belonging](#) that is rooted in local aspirations and strengths and mobilizes all sectors of society, including governments at all levels, to center belonging at the heart of community development work and conversations on the economy and the quality of life for everyone.



What does belonging look like from a youth perspective?



In this spirit of integration and collaboration, the Tamarack team invited five youth to provide their thoughts on what belonging looks like from their perspective, as well as the conditions that are needed to achieve more equitable outcomes for youth, important trends that these leaders are observing on how youth are cultivating belonging in their communities, and lessons for local organizations, governments, and institutions, to learn on cultivating a strong sense of belonging among youth and their community. This article provides a high-level overview of the takeaways that came from this conversation and includes some final thoughts on the importance of stewarding youth leadership in building [a strategy for belonging](#). It also provides a list of resources for individuals to learn more on this subject.

Source: The Tamarack Institute

Getting to know youth leaders

The development of this article could not have been possible without the contributions of five talented youth leaders who shared their perspectives on belonging. Tamarack is hosting a webinar to bring them together, discuss their reflections on this topic, and reflect on what it takes to build authentic connections for a more equitable future. Their bios are available [online](#).

Understanding belonging through a youth perspective

There is resonance among this group on the deep meaning that belonging carries. Passionate about amplifying youth voices, Blue is committed towards supporting youth-focused projects. For Blue, belonging means having a sense of purpose.

From Aaliyah's perspective, connection and passion are two driving forces to foster a stronger sense of belonging among youth. Belonging is about being comfortable in the space that we are in and the people that we are speaking with. Belonging can also feel like we are a part of something bigger when everyone is at the table.

Nature plays an important role in fostering a sense of belonging among youth. Jordan and Jelise love that their communities are surrounded by nature. Jordan loves the feeling of being in the forest where she feels like she's most at home. Belonging for Jelise means having a place where you are safe to be yourself without fear of judgment. Jordan draws inspiration on describing what belonging feels like from one of the participants in an after-school group that she organizes. "Belonging makes me feel like a cup of hot chocolate. It gives me that warm and fuzzy feeling inside", the participant said to Jordan.



A lot of organizations are able to come together and work hard, bring some successes to youth, and meet youth where they're at.

- Clairice Tuckanow

Clairice is grateful for the work of local organizations that come together with a shared vision and goal, and celebrates the efforts required to get there. *"I absolutely love having my community stand strong with me and also stand strong with the youth to make sure that their voices are heard."*

For Clairice, belonging means having the support that's needed to do social change work, while also being able to uplift voices. Belonging is also about having your voice being heard, having a place to sit at the table, and having access to support systems for success.

Identifying key conditions for belonging

Several conditions set the stage for activating a sense of belonging. Consequently, by fostering belonging, communities and community members also access more equitable outcomes. To identify the key conditions for belonging, what is important to remember is that "youth" are not homogenous. Each of us, regardless of age, have our unique tastes and preferences. As such, identifying key conditions for belonging begins with an awareness that these conditions vary with people's diverse backgrounds, identities, and geographies. What matters, as Aaliyah shares, is to lean on respect as a guiding value so that all youth feel like their perspectives matter and feel welcome to lead in defining and activating belonging on their own terms.

For Blue, identifying and activating conditions that foster belonging is one way to increase a sense of safety and security. From this place of feeling safe, Blue anticipates that youth would "feel like we're being heard in the proper ways". Considering the current precarious reality of loneliness and isolation, safety and security can be seen as keys that unlock doors to connection. Jelise aptly captures this sentiment in her reflection sharing, "When we are honest about who we are with ourselves and others, we can have difficult conversations with one another—creating those bonds of trust and care through understanding."

Woven into these reflections about safety, security, and trust is what Jordan refers to as "the hot chocolate mug" analogy. To foster belonging, Jordan notes that youth also need to feel that they are free to choose and change with time and place. "Not everyone will want the same mug", Jordan shares. Creating environments that are adjustable and attuned to the evolving preferences and needs of youth is critical in fostering belonging and is also aligned with the emphasis on value of respect, diversity, and inclusion that Aaliyah and Clairice speak to.

Beyond diversity and inclusion, Clairice also highlights the necessity to ensure that youth leadership is encouraged and that youth are also fairly recognized for their hard work. It is one thing to have youth at the table, and it is another to ensure that the conditions are right for youth to feel that their presence and leadership is valued and that their ideas are acted upon.

From these reflections, what becomes clear is that there is no fixed ingredient list that creates the conditions for belonging. Each environment is informed by the identities of youth present. It is our responsibility as (emerging) leaders to welcome diverse voices to the table, listen well, adjust, and adapt based on evolving needs, and to always center respect.

Naming trends and patterns on how youth are cultivating belonging

Youth are looking to develop a sense of belonging in their circles and environments that they are part of. However, different social and systemic factors may nudge youth toward seeking to “fit in” rather than inspiring a sense of belonging. A common sentiment that is emerging is that youth want to take up leadership and cultivate genuine belonging for themselves and one another, undeterred by the varying degrees of peer and societal pressures to “fit in”.

For Blue, a core component of success for youth leaders in fostering belonging is having adult role models who would be willing to support youth in their initiatives and offering mentorship along the journey. As Clairice beautifully notes, “Youth have a powerful voice. If you put them in those positions and have those allies along with them, they’re able to move mountains”.

The value of allyship in the journey towards belonging—for individuals and communities—cannot be understated, and especially as we societally navigate a series of polycrisis and widespread uncertainty. With such an emergent context, it makes sense to seek out relationships in community to navigate complexity. This search for connectedness amidst crisis also gives rise to new possibilities of action and advocacy, through which, as Jelise notes, youth are able to “feel like they are a part of something bigger”.

In some cases, there are opportunities for youth to join movements and networks that already exist. In other cases, youth create this infrastructure from the ground-up with minimal templates. In such instances where there are no previous examples to model from, Aaliyah highlights the critical value of learning in public. By learning-as-you-do and inviting fellow youth to participate in this learning journey, she sees an opportunity for youth to practice collaborative leadership. Such a process of learning and growing “in public” also serves as a foundation for others to develop their own skill sets and knowledge through exposure.

From this overview of an array of trends and patterns on how youth are cultivating belonging, it becomes clear that creating a future where everyone belongs starts with valuing the leadership and voices of youth today. As Jordan shares, youth want to belong, but without access to meaningful youth-focused opportunities to co-create a sense of belonging, some youth take up behaviours and habits because “their friends do it” and they want to “fit in”. Going forward, to foster belonging with more intentionality, it is crucial that youth-led initiatives are celebrated; and equally, that youth have access to dedicated support from local organizations, institutions, and the wider public.

Final thoughts: Sharing lessons for governments, organizations, and institutions on cultivating belonging among youth



When we start with curiosity instead of judgment, we shift the (power) dynamics from adults above and youth below to being equals.

- *Jelise Keating*

Cultivating belonging carries benefits for individual and community-level well-being. In our varying contexts as individuals and communities, a common factor is that governments, local organizations, and institutions each have a role to play as facilitators, amplifiers, and connectors. When it comes to fostering belonging among youth, the role of these 'entities' begins with assuming a position of curiosity and humility. These values, which signify a willingness to learn, are also one way to address power imbalances that are often present when working with such large-scale partners.

This call to rebalance the scales amplifies a crucial perspective that was shared earlier in

this piece about the role of trust, safety, and security in fostering belonging. In order to nurture relationships within these conditions, as Jordan shares, the first step is to "stop assuming that we know what the youth want". By moving back to create space for youth to come forward as leaders in their own right, governments, local organizations, and institutions are role-modeling what trust-based partnership can look like. Blue builds on this by offering the reminder that reaching our goals for equity and accessibility requires that "we meet people where they are at", understanding that youth have diverse capacities and gifts to bring.

The journey ahead towards a future where everyone belongs will come with its own challenges and opportunities. While the future is uncertain, what is true and certain now is that we have one another as co-creators and collaborators. For youth, the future is a place that holds much potential and promise—but so is today. Acknowledging the gifts of the present time as well as the gifts of our current relationships is helpful. From there, as Aaliyah, Blue, Clairice, Jelise, and Jordan share, it is crucial that we continuously find ways to learn from one another, to inspire leadership in each other, to build partnerships that shift power, and to hold on to the vision of transformative futures that are equitable, inclusive, and trust centred.

The path ahead might have detours, but as the youth remind us, we have an opportunity now to set our compass towards values of curiosity and humility which will ensure that we lean on one another as we navigate complexities. As the African proverb goes, "If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together".

Dive deeper

Below are resources to learn more about youth and belonging and participate in activities to foster a stronger sense of belonging:

- [Explore](#) the benefits of becoming a Tamarack member.

- [Learn more about this webinar](#) titled *Building Authentic Connections for a More Equitable Future* with our youth champions that contributed to this article.
- [Consult CBYF's report](#) titled *CBYF Members' Retreat: Co-creating Solutions for the Future*, which outlines the critical role of belonging in shaping more equitable futures for youth.
- [Sign the pledge](#) for a Strategy for Belonging that brings everyone's voices into conversations on belonging, the economy, and the quality of life for all.
- [Explore this guide](#) on meaningfully engaging youth.
- [Review this publication](#) on understanding youth through empathy mapping.
- [Take a look at this blog post](#) that features five lessons learned on building a leadership table.

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