

Students' Experiences and Teachers' Perceptions of Student Belonging in One Elementary
School

by

Karen O'Shea

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Abstract

Belonging is a fundamental human need and this need is universal (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). How a student perceives their own belonging within a school and classroom can be predictive of their future engagement, motivation, achievement, and success of their interpersonal relationships. Students who feel connected are found to be less likely to engage in risky behaviours, be absent from school, or drop out of school entirely (Nichols, 2006; Anderman, 2003). Recent research on belonging has sought to examine the relationship between belonging and its outcomes on student behaviour (Anderman, 2003; Clegg, 2006; Goodenow, 1993; Ma, 2003; Osterman, 2000). There is an increasing need for belonging research to examine the development and incidence of belonging in children at school (Johnson, 2009; Osterman, 2000). This study has three research questions: a) What are students' experiences with belonging in the school? b) What are teachers' perceptions of students' belonging in the school? c) How do the students' experiences and teachers' perceptions of student belonging in the school compare? The comparison of teachers' and students' responses will provide more information as to whether the students' experiences and teachers' perceptions of student belonging are aligned or if they are disparate. This data will make it possible to begin to target specific belonging factors in school programs and teacher practices.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

When a child enters Kindergarten and graduates high school 13 years later, he or she would have spent over 12,000 hours in school. Each student spends approximately 950 hours in school per year (Education Improvement Commission, 1997). In those hours, students interact with teachers, administration, support workers, and students from different grades and classrooms. These interactions take place in the classroom, the gymnasium, the hallways, and the schoolyard. School is a significant part of any child's life, and feeling a sense of belonging to that school is often vital for student success. Research has suggested that a low sense of belonging is frequently associated with anti-social and maladaptive behaviors (Osterman, 2000).

The need to belong is defined as the "strong desire to form and maintain enduring personal attachments" (Baumeister & Leary, 1995, p. 522). Maslow argued that the need to belong or to be part of a social network operates only after more fundamental needs such as food and security are met (Maslow, 1962). Dewey promoted the idea that the quality of education "is realized in the degree to which individuals form a group" (Dewey, 1958, p. 65). Belonging to a school community includes feeling a part of a group. Belonging to communities, and especially school communities, is an area of research that is beginning to be studied in education, psychology, and sociology. Researchers of belonging have consistently argued for the benefits of feeling a sense of belonging and the potential negative effects of not feeling a sense of belonging to one's community (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Beyers, 2008; Clegg, 2006; Hagerty, Williams, & Hiroaki, 2002; Ma, 2003). Much of the research in these fields has focused on the significance of belonging and the relationship of belonging to certain behaviours, such as motivation or self-esteem (Nichols, 2006; Osterman,

2000). In particular, there is a growing body of research that focuses on how a sense of belonging affects motivation, engagement, achievement, and students' self-perceptions (Goodenow, 1993; Osterman, 2000). The literature has begun to focus on sense of belonging in particular groups, especially those individuals with learning and physical disabilities (Beyers, 2008). There is a significant gap in the research that focuses on the daily experiences of students and how belonging is developed, especially for those students who may already have a low sense of belonging to school.

There are common archetypes of students who are often associated with having a strong sense of belonging. These are students who immerse themselves in the school, both academically and socially. They attend school every day and participate in classroom discussions and activities both willingly and frequently. They have friends, are accepted by their peers, and receive support from members of the staff. There are also common archetypes of students that are associated with having a low sense of belonging. These students may be chronically late and absent from school. When they are at school they seem distracted and uninterested. These students may have friends but they often spend their time on the peripheries of classroom discussion and activities. These common archetypes assume that engaged students feel a sense of belonging, whereas disengaged students do not (Clegg, 2006). The reality may be much more complex. How students define belonging and how they develop their own sense of fit is dynamic and contextual. It is important that studies on student belonging allow students to describe how their belonging is developed at school and what challenges they may have in developing this sense of belonging. It is also important to compare students' experiences of developing belonging with teachers' perceptions of student belonging. These descriptions and comparisons will provide insight about the benefits of

belonging and how this sense of belonging is developed within a classroom. With an understanding of students' experiences, teachers and administrators can begin to develop policies and classroom practices that benefit students' connections to the classroom. For a classroom to integrate its students successfully, the teacher needs to be aware of how his or her students define themselves within the group, of how they develop a sense of belonging, and of the practices that enhance students' senses of belonging to the classroom and the school.

Purpose

The purpose of the present study was to examine student belonging in elementary school. Experiences of belonging within a school can be predictive of students' future engagement, motivation, achievement, and success of their interpersonal relationships (Johnson, 2009; Kagan, 1990; Osterman, 2000). Students who feel connected are less likely to engage in risky behaviours (such as experimenting with drugs and alcohol and engaging in violent behaviour), be absent from school, or drop out of school entirely (Anderman, 2003; Nichols, 2006). A student's sense of belonging is complex and multidimensional due to the variability of the needs of each student and the variability of communities of which students are members. It is important to examine student belonging in school, especially with students who may be more likely to have a lower sense of belonging. These students may already engage in risky behaviours, be absent from school, or drop out of school entirely. Including these students in belonging research may provide another perspective of the particular challenges that these students have when developing a sense of belonging to school.

Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to examine student belonging in one elementary school. This study examined student belonging from two perspectives: students' experiences with belonging and teachers' perceptions of student belonging. This study had three research questions.

- a) What are students' experiences with belonging in the school?
- b) What are teachers' perceptions of students' belonging in the school?
- c) How do the students' experiences and teachers' perceptions of student belonging in the school compare?

Within the first two questions, the data is organized into descriptions of belonging and experiences that develop student belonging. It is necessary to consult the teachers of the school in addition to the students because the teacher is the primary caregiver within the classroom and is responsible for fostering a supportive learning environment in the classroom and in the school. A teacher's understanding of student belonging can further contribute to the complexity of belonging research. A comparison of students' experiences and teachers' perceptions of student belonging would provide more information as to whether they are aligned or if they are disparate. This data would make it possible to begin to target specific belonging factors (such as student-student or student-teacher relationships) in school practices and programs.

This research examined the experiences of six students and four teachers from one elementary school in a mid-sized city in Ontario. The students, Alex, Allie, Clark, Ian, Charlotte, Sophie, and Lia, contributed their experiences of belonging to their school. Their stories highlighted the importance of their relationships in developing a positive sense of

belonging. The teachers, Roger, Anne, Jim, and Melissa, provided insight into how their school enhances student belonging, the challenges they faced when creating a classroom of belonging, as well as the practices that they individually employed in their classrooms. It was important to interview both teachers and students because an integral component to this thesis is the comparative element. The teachers and students both described belonging in various ways, but the emphasis consistently was on the importance of teaching practices, trusting relationships, and opportunities to become involved and contribute to school. The emphasis within these constructs did differ meaningfully both within and between students and teachers.

Outline of Thesis

The literature review in Chapter 2 discusses belonging research. This chapter outlines belonging theory, and then discusses the development and outcomes of belonging to school. Chapter 3 outlines the methods used in this study, as well as the selection and description of the location of the study and the participants involved in the study. This chapter also describes the interview techniques and questions, as well as the data analysis procedures. Chapter 4 presents the results of this study from the interviews with the students and teachers, and compares the findings between the two groups of participants. Chapter 5 discusses the findings in relation to belonging theory and also discusses the implications and limitations of this study.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The following literature review is presented into four sections. The first section outlines the theoretical framework used in this study – belonging theory. It discusses the theory’s criteria and then its specific application to students. The second section discusses the influence of belonging in students. A student’s development of a sense of belonging may be accomplished in many ways. The literature in this section discusses the importance of interpersonal relationships and school characteristics as influential in the development of belonging. Specifically, interpersonal relationships refer to teacher support, peer acceptance, friendship, and group membership. School characteristics refer to a wide variety of school-based activities and programs within the school, as well as the structure of the school and classrooms. This section also reviews the research that has been conducted on the variability of belonging needs for males and females, and children and adolescents. The third section discusses the many outcomes of belonging. This section reviews the research on the impacts of a low and high sense of belonging and in particular, how this affects achievement, motivation, engagement, self-perceptions, and mental health. This section also discusses the potential long-term effects of a low and high sense of belonging. The fourth section of this literature review discusses some of the issues in belonging research to date and the rationale for this study.

Belonging is a fundamental human need. A student’s sense of belonging has the potential to impact his or her success in school. Studies on belonging in children suggest that feeling a sense of fit can contribute to students’ social behaviours and impact the students’ academic development. According to the literature, there are three key components that influence a students’ sense of belonging. These components are: school characteristics,

teacher support, and peer acceptance and friendship. Each component may affect different students' sense of belonging in different ways. However, studies have shown that these components are integral to developing a positive sense of school belonging. Research has also shown that a sense of belonging has the potential to impact a student's development, especially in terms of motivation and engagement, achievement, self-perceptions, and mental health. Although the literature is consistent in the argument that belonging has an effect on these variables, the extent to which these variables have a relationship to belonging is contested. There are also some methodological issues in belonging research that should be considered when addressing student belonging.

Belonging Theory

The definition of belonging that is used in this study originated with Goodenow (1993). She defined belonging as a student's sense of being accepted, valued, and encouraged by others in the academic setting and of feeling that they are an important part of the life and activity of the class or school (Goodenow, 1993). In Maslow's motivational hierarchy, he argued that belongingness needs are ranked just behind the need for food and safety. Once these most basic needs are satisfied, it is crucial that an individual satisfies their belonging needs. More recent work on belonging theory has taken a critical stance on Maslow's belonging hypothesis, such as Baumeister and Leary's work in 1995.

A meta-analysis by Baumeister and Leary (1995), took a critical stance on the belonging hypothesis. They argued that if belongingness is to satisfy as a fundamental human need, it would need to fulfill certain criteria. They argued that a fundamental human motivation should operate in a wide variety of settings, have affective consequences, direct cognitive processing, lead to ill effects when thwarted, elicit goal-orientated behaviour to

satisfy it, be universal, affect a broad variety of behaviours, and have implications that go beyond immediate psychological functioning (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). They argued that the need to belong does satisfy the criteria to be a fundamental human need. They stated that this is because “human beings are fundamentally and pervasively motivated by a need to belong, that is, a strong desire to form and maintain enduring interpersonal attachments.” (Baumeister & Leary, 1995, p. 522).

Baumeister and Leary (1995) proposed that belongingness has two features. First, people need frequent personal contacts or interactions that the majority of time are free from conflict and negative affect. Second, people need to perceive that there is an interpersonal bond or relationship marked by stability, affective concern, and continuation into the foreseeable future (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). This second criterion, the perception of the bond, is essential for satisfying a sense of belonging. “To satisfy the need to belong, the person must believe that the other cares about his or her welfare” (Baumeister & Leary, 1995, p. 500).

Baumeister and Leary (1995) suggested that people seem strongly inclined to form social relationships and that they do this easily. They also suggested that people spend a great deal of time developing and maintaining these relationships and generally resist the deterioration of relationships. Literature on belonging has often discussed the link between belonging and emotion. Baumeister and Leary (1995) posited that the literature supports the notion that many of the strongest emotions, both positive and negative, are related to belongingness. For example, being rejected can lead to negative feelings such as anxiety, grief, jealousy, and loneliness. They did argue, however, that the direction of the relationship has not been established and that some of the findings may have alternate explanations. For

example, they argued that there is evidence that people prefer relationships that are marked by the other's affectionate concern but that there is no evidence that this mutuality is required to feel a sense of belonging. Baumeister and Leary (1995) suggested that while belongingness is a fundamental human need, some of the factors that characterize it, such as mutuality may be a preference rather than a need. More research needs to be done to examine the extent to which mutuality is a necessary factor in feeling a sense of belonging, rather than being a preferred factor. More research should also focus on the counterexamples to belonging theory that Baumeister and Leary (1995) suggested. They argued that the refusal to help or cooperate, nonreciprocation of love and affection, and shyness are all examples that could potentially counter belonging theory. However, while considering these counterexamples, the researchers still argued that belonging is a need, rather than just a want. Baumeister and Leary (1995) also stated that the "desire for personal attachment may well be one of the most far-reaching and integrative constructs currently available to understand human nature" (Baumeister & Leary, 1995, p. 522). Belonging is crucial for all individuals. In the literature, there is a specific focus on the development of belonging in children and, in particular, children's belonging to school.

Belonging in Children

Researchers on belongingness in students agree that children who perceive they belong behave differently and have different psychological, social, and emotional processes than those who feel they do not belong. Children who feel they belong have more positive attitudes toward school, schoolwork, teachers, and their peers (Osterman, 2000). These students also perceive themselves to be more competent and autonomous, and often have higher levels of intrinsic motivation. Research is also consistent in its findings that children

who experience low levels of belonging have a higher chance of feeling rejection and alienation from members of the community (Kagan, 1990; Osterman, 2000). These feelings of rejection and alienation increase withdrawal, lower interest in school, lower achievement, and increase the likelihood the student will drop out of school (Kagan, 1990). These feelings can also induce continuous feelings of loneliness and emotional distress that can lead to violence or suicide (Anderman, 2003; Kagan, 1990; Nichols, 2007; Osterman, 2000; Wentzel & Wigfield, 1998). This research is consistent; belongingness is a fundamental need that students' must feel in order to experience positive psychological development, overall health, and well-being. There is still more work that needs to be done to describe how students shape their own sense of belonging, especially focusing on which specific variables contribute most to belonging in a school, such as teacher support, peer acceptance and friendship, or school characteristics. This present study will address this by consulting students and teachers directly for their perceptions of how belonging is formed at school. This will assist in the isolation of particular belonging enhancing factors that students find helpful when developing a sense of belonging to school. Teachers and administrators can then focus their classrooms and schools around these factors so that students can feel a stronger connection and sense of belonging to their schools.

Factors that Influence Belonging

The following section of this literature review discusses research that has been conducted on the various factors that can shape a student's sense of belonging at school. The main factors that are discussed in this literature review are school characteristics, teacher support, peer acceptance and friendship. These three factors are not the only factors within the school context that can influence a student's sense of belonging. In belonging research it

is difficult to isolate which school factors influence belonging and which factors have been influenced by belonging. These factors may also have a reciprocal relationship to each other, and then may perpetuate further feelings of belonging or alienation (Ma, 2003; Osterman, 2000). For example, support from a teacher could positively affect student achievement, which, in turn, increases teacher support. Conversely, low peer acceptance could decrease a student's achievement, which could isolate the child from peers. However, the three core factors that are central to the understanding of student belonging are school characteristics, teacher support, and peer acceptance and friendship. These factors have all been extensively researched and it has been suggested that these factors are the most influential in shaping a student's sense of belonging (Goodenow, 1993; Ma, 1996; McMahon, Wernsman, & Rose, 2009; Nichols, 2006; Osterman, 2000). This present study specifically addresses these factors and how these factors may influence students' senses of belonging to school.

School characteristics. Researchers have found that a student's weak sense of school belonging can be mostly attributed to school characteristics rather than to problems at home (Osterman, 2000; Resnick et al., 1997). Resnick et al. (1997) found that school characteristics accounted for more of the variance in students' experiences with emotional distress than the family context (socio-economic status and single-parent families), particularly at the middle-school level. This study looked at the effect that school context (school size, classroom size, school racial composition) and family context had on: emotional distress, suicidal thoughts and behaviours, violence, use of three substances (cigarettes, alcohol, marijuana), and two types of sexual behaviours (age of sexual debut and pregnancy history). The researchers interviewed 12,118 adolescents, drawing from surveys of 90,118 students from 80 high schools and middle schools. The students interviewed and

surveyed were enrolled in Grades 7-12. The study found that students' perceived school connectedness was protective against every health risk examined except history of pregnancy (Resnick et al., 1997). With each variable, family context accounted for less variance in students' experiences than did school context. Significantly, school context accounted for 17.6% of the variance with students' experiences with emotional distress (Resnick et al., 1997). This study is meaningful because it showed the influence that school contexts can have on a variety of risky behaviours in students. The study may have been strengthened if specific characteristics of families were isolated, such as single-parent, divorced, foster, or teenaged parent families. By isolating these factors, Resnick et al. (1997) may have found that certain family contexts can affect students' experiences with emotional distress. This study is significant to belonging research because it examines the relationship between family and school contexts and its effect on students' health and behaviour. Resnick et al.'s (1997) study found that the school context can be very influential in students' perceived connectedness and that this can have an impact on a students' emotional health. Building on Resnick et al.'s (1997) study, this present study seeks to examine how students report they develop a sense of belonging to school and how the school's context can enhance or challenge a students' sense of belonging.

This phenomenon of school influence is often referred to as school effect (Anderman, 2002; Kagan, 1995). This effect has been described in detail by Kagan in her study on alienation of at-risk youth. School-based factors included: class size, school size, school composition, classroom composition, urbanicity, school-grade configuration, opportunities to engage in sports and extra-curricular activities, principal-teacher-student interaction, and classroom practices, such as tracking, discipline techniques, and group-work

(Anderman, 2002; Hagborg, 1994; Osterman, 2000). The student and teacher participants in this present study referred to these school characteristics throughout the interviews, and in particular, how these characteristics influenced students' experiences with belonging.

Nichols (2008) conducted a mixed-methods study exploring students' perceptions of belongingness on the basis of past and current school contexts. Of the 45 students who were asked to complete a questionnaire and were interviewed, the majority of the students cited interpersonal relationships and school characteristics (school facilities, racial balance, and activities available) as most influential in developing a sense of belonging to school. Students commented on their relationships with teachers and peers as well as their perceptions of the school facility itself. One common theme in her work was the size of the school. However, not all students felt that having a large school promoted a low sense of belonging. Many students reported that small schools made them feel "too known" (Nichols, 2008, p. 157). Other students commented on the physical school environment, such as the sports facilities. One student commented that his low sense of belonging was due to the fact that "they don't have a soccer field, and I like soccer" (Nichols, 2008, p. 159). Nichols argued that there are many factors that belonging researchers should consider in their research, and that there are many school characteristics that could positively or negatively affect an individual child's sense of the belonging. This present study incorporates Nichols' (2008) recommendations by allowing participants to speak to their experiences without being directly asked if certain school characteristics are more influential in enhancing belonging. For example, students were asked to describe some of the activities that are offered at school that made them feel like they belong.

Teacher support. Teacher support refers to the support that students receive from teachers in different contexts of the classroom and school. Wigfield (1998) investigated the relationship between teacher support and student characteristics. This study hypothesized that the level of support from teachers would shape students' beliefs about themselves and that these self-perceptions would affect students' behaviours and, most specifically, their engagement within school. They found that teacher support had the strongest and most direct influence on students' academic behaviour and engagement. Teachers play a major role in determining whether students feel a part of the school community. However, not all students experience teacher support. Numerous studies have indicated that students may receive different levels of support based on their gender, class, appearance, and race (Finn, 1989; Kagan, 1990; Osterman, 2000; Wentzel, 1994; Wentzel & Asher, 1995). This differentiation can begin very early in the child's education and can contribute to the child's sense of belonging or alienation from the school. In addition, numerous studies suggested that teacher support could influence patterns of interaction with peers, with "peer acceptance mirroring teacher preferences" (Johnson, 2009; Osterman, 2000, p. 352).

Research on belonging has suggested that teacher support can predict peer acceptance and that this, in turn, can influence a student's experience with belonging to the school. Osterman suggested that teachers treat students differently based on a variety of factors; the most significant of these factors is achievement (Osterman, 2000). Teachers prefer students who are more academically competent and they often support lower-tracked students less. Lower-tracked refers to students who are perceived to achieve lower grades in relation to the classroom average. Higher achieving students interact more with the teacher and have more positive relationships with teachers and peers than lower-tracked students (Osterman, 2000).

Student behaviour may be, in part, a response to teacher support and acceptance. Students who are perceived negatively by teachers may display negative behaviours in response to these students' low sense of belonging (Wentzel & Asher, 1995). This behaviour, in turn, could perpetuate further student failure and low teacher acceptance and support. Teachers who place a dominant emphasis on achievement and differentiate their support may create a social environment that alienates certain students (Osterman, 2000).

The difficulty with the previous studies is determining the direction of the relationship between teacher support and belonging. Students who display poorer attitudes may do this in response to the perceived lack of teacher support. Teachers may support some students less than other students because of student academic performance. It is difficult to determine which behaviour was present first. It is suggested, however, that student attitudes and teacher support are reciprocally related, with each enhancing the other. Ladd (1990) found that as early as Kindergarten, students in the second month of school who had higher levels of achievement received higher ratings from teachers for engagement, motivation, achievement, and school readiness. This indicated that reputational biases are made very early in a child's academic development, and that this may make it more difficult for some students to integrate themselves fully within the classroom. This present study builds on these findings by addressing the perceived effect of teacher support. This was done by asking students to describe how a supportive teacher would treat them and how this treatment influenced their feelings of belonging to the classroom.

McNeely and Falci (2004) hypothesized that teacher support would lead to delayed initiation of health-risk behaviour, less escalation of involvement once the behaviour is initiated, and increased cessation of health-risk behaviours. They also predicted that the

effect of teacher support would be mediated by belonging. Using data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, 13,570 adolescents from Grades 7-12 were surveyed on measures of school connectedness, health related outcomes, and background characteristics. McNeely and Falci (2004) found that adolescents who perceived that their teachers were fair and cared about them were less likely to initiate any of the six health related behaviours than students who did not share that perception. These behaviours were: cigarette smoking, alcohol use, marijuana use, suicidality, transition to intercourse, and weapon related violence. However, this study separated teacher support from perceived sense of belonging. McNeely and Falci (2004) found that if they controlled for teacher support, a sense of belonging did not protect the initiation of any of the risky health behaviours. The researchers argued that once teacher support is removed, belonging is established through peer connectedness. When belonging is established through peer connections rather than through teacher support, it is unclear whether students will be less likely to engage in risky behaviours. It is important that future research to confirm or contradict that a strong sense of belonging that is established by peer relationships may not deter students from engaging in risky behaviours.

Peer relationships. Teacher support can influence the way in which a child perceives his or her belonging. It does this by influencing how peers accept one another. Osterman (2000) argued that there are few opportunities for peers to interact with one another in the classroom and that the frequency and quality of interactions both effect and are affected by one's sense of belonging. As with teacher support, the specific nature of this relationship has yet to be determined. For example, a student's sense of self might be impacted by their peer relationships and these relationships may also affect a student's sense of self. Studies have

shown, however, that students who are accepted by more of their peers have more positive interactions with other students (Hamm & Faircloth, 2011).

Wentzel and Caldwell (1997) found that the association between peer relationships and both academic achievement and motivation is complex. It is important to note the differences between peer acceptance and friendship. Friendship is described as a mutual relationship. Acceptance, however, is unilateral and represents a group's view of one particular student. In Wentzel and Caldwell (1997), peer relationships was defined as consisting of group membership, friendship, and peer acceptance. Each variable was measured using student nominations. Peer acceptance was also measured by using a student questionnaire that asked about each student's perception of their acceptance at school. It was found that group membership was most significantly related to academic achievement. The researchers argued that this does not indicate that friendship and peer acceptance are not related to achievement, but that their influence may be less direct than previously believed. They also stated that acceptance and friendship need to be examined further to determine more of their contributions to student achievement and motivation. For example, peer acceptance and friendship may interact with the student's ability to access resources in the classroom and with the sharing of and cooperation in school-work. Wentzel and Caldwell (1997) also commented on the difficulties of these types of studies because of the reciprocal nature of the variables. They stated that future studies need to address the reputational biases that teachers and peers may have so that there can be a more in-depth understanding of the effects that peer relationships can have on academic achievement and motivation (Wentzel & Caldwell, 1997). Building on Wentzel and Caldwell's (1997) findings, in this present study students were asked directly of their experiences with peers and whether they value these

relationships when they are developing a sense of belonging at school. In particular, students were asked to explain some of the challenges they have when working with peers to complete their work and whether being encouraged to collaborate with students enhanced their sense of belonging.

Goodenow (1993) found that early adolescents derive much of their motivation from their perceived supportiveness from peers. Specifically, expectancies of success and sense of belonging and support were significantly associated with motivation and achievement (Goodenow, 1993). Belonging and support accounted for over half of the variance in value for students in Grade 6. Results indicated that peer support and acceptance are significant determinants for motivation and engagement in the classroom. This study relied on student-self report surveys and achievement data from English classes. Further information is needed to examine class-specific data regarding motivation and achievement as impacted by support. Students may feel weaker or stronger senses of belonging at school in particular curriculum areas. By addressing these curricular differences, researchers could begin to target specific belonging variables that exist or are absent from certain curricular areas, such as students' opportunities to engage in activities with other students. This present study addressed this by asking students in the interviews whether they felt stronger or weaker senses of belonging in different classrooms.

Wentzel, Barry, McNamara, and Caldwell (2004) completed a 2-year longitudinal study that examined the relations of having a reciprocated friend and characteristics of a reciprocated friend to students' social and academic adjustment to school. They hypothesized that children who had reciprocated friendships are more independent, emotionally supported, prosocial, and less aggressive than those who do not have such friendships (Wentzel et al.,

2004). The researchers assessed friends' and individuals' characteristics at the end of the sixth grade and again at the end of the eighth grade. The characteristics of students and their friends were assessed by peer nominations, teacher ratings, and archival data from students' files. Two hundred and forty-two students were measured in this survey, with a balanced ratio of boys to girls. The results showed that initially, students who had a reciprocated friend displayed better social and academic adjustment at the end of their first year of middle school than did students without a friend. However, reciprocated friendships did not predict changes in prosocial behaviour over time. Wentzel et al. (2004) suggested that further research is required to explore the complex relations within young adolescences' network of social relationships. In addition, the researchers argued that there might potentially be other factors that determine students' decisions to behave positively in school. Future research should work to examine these factors, such as teacher support, as well as consider the quality of friendships between peers (Hamm & Faircloth, 2011; Wentzel et al., 2004).

Wentzel et al.'s (2004) study is significant to belonging research because it examined the intricacies of peer relationships through reciprocated friendships. Results suggested that there is a relationship between reciprocated friendships and school adjustment in the first year of middle school. This may be an important variable that may assist in the development of a student's sense of school belonging. Similar to the students' ages in Wentzel's study (2004), this present study interviewed students from Grades 4-8. The students were asked to describe the value of their friendships and whether these friendships assisted them in building connections to school. The students were also asked to draw on their past experiences of being a new student to the school and how their friendships assisted them in their integration to the new school community.

Newman, Lohman, and Newman (2007) continued this work on examining peer relationships and a sense of belonging and their relationship to adolescent behaviour problems, such as violent behaviour, disengagement from school, and experimentation with drugs and alcohol. This study also examined students' perceptions of whether peer relationships are important. The researchers wanted to examine the relationship between peer relationships and behaviour problems but also recognized that this may be dependent on each individual's perception of the importance of peer relationships. The authors hypothesized that a lack of sense of peer belonging places peers at a greater risk for problem behaviours than peer group membership. Seven hundred and thirty-three middle school and high school students were surveyed. They found that those participants who viewed peer relationships as important and felt a sense of peer belonging were less likely to exhibit internalized and externalized behavioural problems than those students who viewed peer relationships as important but did not feel a sense of belonging. Those participants who desired to be part of a group but did not experience peer relationships were more likely to exhibit both problem behaviours. Newman et al. (2007) argued that this may help to identify adolescents who may be more at-risk for problem behaviours since their desire for group belonging is not being met. This perception of the significance of belonging is important to consider because it may provide more information as to the motivation to form and maintain interpersonal relationships. Students' perceptions of the importance of friendships were a major consideration for the present study. Students were asked to describe their friendships and also to describe whether they believed many friendships were important for their school success. The emphasis that a student places on the value of friendships is important to consider in belonging research. Adults may assume that students rely on many friendships to

feel a sense of belonging, but students may actually prefer a smaller amount of reciprocal friendships rather than a large number of friendships that may or may not be reciprocated (Hamm & Faircloth, 2005).

Belonging as dynamic and contextual. Osterman's (2000) meta-analysis of belongingness research in schools outlines the significance of belonging as it affects the development of psychological processes important for student success, such as: academic attitudes and motives, social and personal attitudes, and engagement and participation. The purpose of her literature review was to examine the foundations of belonging research in education. She argued that belongingness research suggests that experiencing belonging is important at all ages and at all levels from pre-Kindergarten to high school. She argued that there are differences in the strength of the relationships of gender, age, and school composition to senses of belonging (Osterman, 2000). This suggested that the need for belonging may differ throughout the child's educational development and in different contexts.

The following two sections review some of the research that has been conducted on belonging with respect to gender and age. Each sections, gender and age, were important contextual variables to consider in this present study to provide an understanding with which to view the results. The data from this present study does not directly address the variability of belonging needs for boys versus girls, or at different ages. However, this information is still important to consider because it does signify the potential differences that may exist between students.

Gender. A strong sense of belonging contributes to a positive sense of self and others (Osterman, 2000). Feeling a sense of belonging is especially critical for boys. Wong

and Csikszentmihalyi (1991) suggested that the time spent thinking about social interaction can determine whether a student has low or high needs for affiliation. They argued that most girls in their study spent much time thinking about social interaction and that they enjoyed this time. This acceptance of this high need for affiliation was not the same for boys. They found that boys with strong needs for affiliation viewed themselves as more feminine and had an overall lower self-esteem. These boys were more likely to experience non-acceptance and have the strongest emotional reaction to non-acceptance (Wong & Csikszentmihalyi, 1991). Wentzel and Caldwell (1997) found that boys were less likely to experience a sense of belonging in school than girls. Their study looked particularly at reciprocated friendships in two groups of sixth-grade middle school students. Ryan et al. (1994) also found that boys are less likely to utilize friends for emotional and school concerns. These behaviours were found to be linked to poorer school adaptation, motivation, and peer acceptance. Goodenow (1993) argued that males develop more negative relationships with classmates than females. However, while boys may have fewer friendships than girls, friendship may be more important for males' psychosocial development (Goodenow, 2000; Moore & Boldero, 1991).

In sum, these findings indicate that males and females have varied experiences with belonging and that these experiences depend on the perceptions of friendship and acceptance. It is important to consider that these studies depended on peer nominations to establish a student's level of acceptance. For example, in Wentzel and Caldwell's study (1997), students nominated each other on levels of peer status and acceptance. Therefore, the student's status of acceptance was not determined by the student being studied but, rather, by the student's classmates. It is important to note that peer acceptance by many students does not necessarily indicate that the student feels a high sense of belonging and, conversely, a

low nomination of acceptance does not necessarily indicate a low sense of belonging. However, numerous researchers report that a child's anti-social behaviours should be interpreted as belonging needs that are not being met (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Osterman, 2000). More information is required about whether the student places emphasis on the importance of multiple friendships and acceptance or whether the student values a small number of meaningful friendships and acceptance. Most of the literature on friendship and acceptance suggests that positive peer relationships are linked in many ways to student motivation, engagement, self esteem, and performance in school (Bishop & Inderbitzen, 1995; Osterman, 2000). Several of these studies, however, provide little information that specifically examined the nature or extent of these peer relations, either in terms of friendship or acceptance (Hamm & Faircloth, 2005; Osterman, 2000).

Age. Numerous studies have suggested that feeling a strong sense of belonging leads to positive outcomes for students of all ages (Goodenow, 1993; Nichols, 2009; Osterman, 2000). Fewer studies however, have focused on elementary students who are approaching adolescence (ages 8-12 years) (McMahon et al., 2009). Osterman (2000) argued that middle-school students are particularly self-conscious and sensitive to social and academic comparisons. Therefore, it is necessary that these students experience positive and supportive relationships with both teachers and peers at school. Goodenow (1993) added to this argument by showing, in her study, that middle-school students placed emphasis on friendships and peer relations and less obvious emphasis on direct personal contact with teachers. This shift from early elementary school to middle-school can alter a students' perceived sense of belonging, acceptance, and social-emotional support. Goodenow (1993) argued that there is growing concern in middle-school because teachers may allow this

deterioration of the student-teacher relationship to occur, at a time when students need the relationship most.

Anderman (2003) provided information about belonging as it relates to age. Her study examined the change in middle-school students' sense of school belonging across three semesters from Grade 6 to Grade 7. She hypothesized that school belonging would increase as the student spends more time in the school. Students were asked to fill out Goodenow's (1993) *Psychological Sense of School Membership Scale* three times, once during each semester. Through students' self-reported data, the results indicated that students reported feelings of alienation and lower senses of school belonging most in the second and third semesters (Anderman, 2003). Student belonging decreased as students spent more time at school. This was especially true for those students who were low-achieving and who perceived their classes as performance-goal oriented. Her findings highlighted the need for school-level interventions to address students' and, in particular, low-achieving students' sense of school belonging and alienation. Anderman (2003) also suggested that young adolescents are particularly sensitive to teacher-student and student-student relationships. This research suggested that belongingness is dynamic and can change throughout a student's experience in school.

These studies that looked at the influence of school characteristics, teacher support, and peer acceptance and friendship indicate that a student's experiences with belonging are complex, dynamic, and dependent on many variables in the classroom and school. Past research is consistent in that school characteristics, peer acceptance, friendship, and teacher support are all potentially significant factors that can influence whether a child feels they belong to a school. Researchers also consistently suggest that feelings of belonging can

shape a child's engagement, motivation, achievement, and self-perception. It is important now to consider the relationship of belonging to these variables.

Outcomes of Belonging

Research on student belongingness has coincided with an increase in awareness of the drop-out phenomenon. Researchers have attempted to explain how students shape their own identity within a school and how this identity has a relationship to the probable success of some students over others. Belonging research has found that a strong sense of belonging is paramount in shaping student success and decreasing the likelihood of early school leaving. Most research on belonging seeks to report specifically on what aspects of a child's psychological and social functioning are impacted by a high or low sense of belonging (Osterman, 2000). Numerous studies have indicated, with various levels of association, that belonging impacts a student's engagement and motivation, achievement, self-perceptions, and mental health. The next sections of this literature review presents some of the research that has been conducted to examine which psychological and social factors are influenced by a low or high sense of belonging. The results of these studies indicated that a sense of belonging can impact many facets of a students' life, and therefore it is critical to understand how a child forms his or her sense of belonging. This present study does not attempt to draw conclusions of whether the interviewed students experienced improvements in their engagement and motivation, achievement, self-perceptions, and mental health. This study focuses on the development of belonging in students, not the outcomes of belonging. However, it is still necessary to provide a framework with which to view the results. The following sections highlight the importance of feeling a sense of belonging school, especially

in terms of students' positive development in engagement and motivation, achievement, self-perceptions, and mental health.

Engagement and motivation. Successful schools foster a community that emphasizes belonging and relatedness between members (Osterman, 2000). Students need to feel that their needs are satisfied by teachers and to feel supported or cared for by teachers. Dewey (1958) and Vygotsky (1978) wrote extensively on school as a social rather than an individualistic process. It is the teacher's responsibility to encourage the development of a sense of school and classroom community (Osterman, 2000). The satisfaction of these needs in children will affect their psychological development and their overall experience of health and well-being. If these needs are not satisfied, children may experience decreased motivation, impaired psycho-social development, feelings of alienation, and poor academic performance in school (Finn, 1989; Goodenow, 1993; Kagan, 1990; Osterman, 2000).

Goodenow (1993) was one of the first to research student membership and its effect on students' expectancy beliefs (Nichols, 2006). She created the *Psychological Sense of School Membership Scale* (PSSM) to measure student belonging. Using this scale, Goodenow (1993) found a significant relationship between junior/intermediate students' beliefs about their level of membership and their expectancies for success. Wentzel (1994) identified similar relations between belonging, motivation, and engagement. She found that students who had greater feelings of belonging were more likely to adopt pro-social goals and behaviours in the classroom. In her study, belongingness was defined by students as perceived support from peers and teachers in the school. This study found that when students perceived that they were supported, they were more likely to have good behaviour, pay attention in class, and have enhanced school citizenship (Wentzel & Wigfield, 1998).

Student belonging research has consistently shown that a sense of belonging is linked to motivational variables associated with positive academic and social outcomes (Nichols, 2006; Osterman, 2000; Wentzel & Wigfield, 1998). Belonging, motivation, and engagement have been widely studied, especially in terms of whether motivation and engagement declined as students progress through school. Goodenow found that students' perceived belonging affected levels of motivation and engagement in the earlier grades (elementary school) but that the relation among belonging, motivation, and engagement declined beginning in Grade 6 (Goodenow, 1993).

Achievement. Belonging research has also sought to examine the link between belonging and achievement. Anderman's (2003) study found that school achievement and academic motivation were positively correlated with students' level of school belonging. In particular, she found that students who perceived their classes as task goal oriented had higher levels of belonging than students who perceived their classes as performance goal oriented. Anderman (2003) also found that students reported a greater sense of belonging when they found their tasks interesting, important, and useful. She found that this was the case for all students, regardless of prior achievement. Anderman (2003) suggested that teachers should place less emphasis on persuading students that they can succeed and more emphasis on "ensuring that actual success is a realistic possibility for all students" (p. 18). According to Anderman (2003) student achievement is enhanced when students feel a strong sense of belonging to school.

A study completed by Liu and Lu in 2011, indicated that belonging did not predict changes in students' academic achievement over the high school transition period. This study surveyed 567 students on their sense of school belonging and their academic achievement.

The descriptive results suggested that students with higher academic achievement trajectories over the high school transition period did not experience higher levels of belonging (Liu & Lu, 2011). These findings challenge the links between belonging and achievement. These findings suggested that belonging might be more influential in affecting students' social and emotional behaviour than academic achievement.

Self-perception. Osterman (2000) argued that a greater sense of school belonging is associated with greater academic self-efficacy. Self-efficacy is defined as a belief in one's capabilities to exercise control over his or her level of functioning and environmental demands (Harter, 1999). Self-efficacy concerns students' beliefs about whether they have control over their performance in specific subjects. It has been argued that a high sense of school belonging can positively influence a student's self-efficacy. Reciprocally, a high self-efficacy can influence a student's perception that they belong within the classroom (McMahon et al., 2009).

Using survey data from 6,883 Grade 6 students and 6,868 Grade 8 students, Ma (2003) found that student belonging differed mostly within schools rather than among schools. Ma (2003) also reported that a student's self-esteem was the most important predictor of a sense of belonging across Grades 6, 7, and 8. Consistent with other studies, Ma (2003) found that a student's sense of belonging is formed more by school-level factors and individual factors and less by family factors (Anderman, 2002; Osterman, 2000; Wentzel, 1998). These findings indicated that how a student feels about themselves may be transferable to how he or she feels they belong in school, and that teachers can influence students' experiences with belonging. Ma argued that the relationship between self-esteem and sense of belonging may be circular, with each enhancing the other (Ma, 2003).

Mental health. Early research on belonging suggested that there is an inverse relationship between anxiety and belonging. For example, Anat's research in 1967 looked closely at how feeling a lowered sense of relatedness or belonging to a group can influence an individual's anxiety and stress. Since then, the relationship between sense of belonging and mental health has received little attention. Hagerty, Lynch-Sauer, Bouwsema, and Collier (1992) argued that sense of belonging is a concept that has not been widely researched in nursing, psychiatry, or counselling practice (Hagerty et al., 1992). The researchers suggested that belonging is the missing link in understanding mental health and mental illness. They defined belonging in terms of being valued and having a perception of fit (Hagerty et al., 1992). They argued that an individual's perception of value and fit is related to his or her psychological functioning. The consequences of not perceiving one's value and fit can be represented by depression, loneliness, anxiety, history of psychiatric treatment, and suicidality. Hagerty, Williams, Coyne, and Early (1996) found that a sense of belonging was closely related to both social and psychological functioning, especially for women. The researchers suggested that this is consistent with other theories of women's development, in that women generally define themselves in terms of their interpersonal relationships (Hagerty et al., 1996).

In a study by Sargent, Williams, Hagerty, Lynch-Sauer, and Hoyle (2002), it was found that a sense of belonging significantly buffered those with a family history of alcohol abuse against developing depressive symptoms. However, the study did not find any connection between the buffering effects of a sense of belonging to depressive symptoms with those participants who had a personal history of abuse, family history of mental illness, and personal history of drug abuse. The researchers suggested that more research needs to be

done to identify the buffering effects of a sense of belonging to more family background characteristics that may have a relationship to depressive symptoms. In addition, more studies need to address the long-term mental health implications of a low sense of belonging. This data would encourage administrators, teachers, and school counsellors to address belonging factors in their schools and the potential impact on students' mental health.

Long-term effects. Some studies in belonging have attempted to find relationships of a sense of belonging in childhood to adult outcomes. Finn's work (1989) on at-risk subcultures described the long-term affects of alienation from school and the community. Research has consistently found that at-risk behaviour in childhood can eventually lead to school dropout in the absence of successful intervention programs (Finn, 1989; Kagan, 1990). Finn (1989) created two models for understanding dropping out as a developmental process that begins in early grades. His two models, the frustration-self-esteem model and the participation-identification model have been widely used by other researchers to further define dropping out as a developmental process (Jimerson, 2006; Kagan, 1990). These models are particularly valuable for understanding the importance of belonging, especially for at-risk students. The frustration-self-esteem model identifies school failure as the root cause for problem behaviour. Finn (1989) argued that poor school performance leads to an impaired self-view and this impairment may take its form in the child's oppositional behaviours. This process continues as the child becomes embarrassed and frustrated by continual school failure. This continual failure may result in increasingly disruptive behaviour as the child ages. As a result of this lowered self-view, the child may seek an avenue through which esteem is restored. Finn argued that "This may be accomplished through success at alternate activities that are less socially sanctioned or by winning the

approval of peers” (Finn, 1989, p. 121). This problem behaviour is exacerbated until the child withdraws from the school environment.

Finn’s (1989) next model, the participation-identification model, examined the need for students to feel a sense of belonging in order to engage fully in the schooling process. He argued that students must feel this sense of belonging and value the schooling process in order to prevent feelings of alienation. Finn (1989) also argued that within this participation-identification model, is the importance of bonding. When bonds are weakened the individual is free to engage in delinquent behaviours, such as absenteeism, truancy, violence, and drug-use (Finn, 1989). Finn’s (1989) work on alienation depicted the potential relationship between a weakened sense of belonging and future problem behaviours. Elements of Finn’s (1989) participation-identification and frustration-self esteem models were evident in this present study’s interviews with the teachers. The teachers spoke to the consequences of students not integrating themselves within the school environment. They argued that students who do not feel a strong sense of belonging to school would attempt to fulfill this need by seeking membership in outside groups, such as cliques or gangs.

There are some methodological flaws that must be considered when examining literature on the relationship between sense of belonging and long-term effects. These are discussed in detail in the next section. It is important to note that most studies on the long-term effects of belonging are retrospective in design and rely on self-reporting measures. However, it is also important that we do not discount the long-term implications of a low-sense of belonging. This research speaks to the importance of developing a strong sense of belonging in early childhood and to continue to develop inclusive and supportive classrooms so that a strong sense of belonging can be sustained throughout the child’s education.

Methodological Considerations for Belonging Research

Belonging is studied in many fields of research: education, sociology, psychology, psychiatry, health, and counselling. There is a breadth of knowledge about belonging, and specifically the outcomes that a sense of belonging can have on an individual's behaviour. Recently, researchers on belonging have suggested that there are methodological issues that should be taken into consideration when citing the research. First, research on belonging is primarily conducted through a single-time data collection. There is a scarcity of research that has used a longitudinal approach. Most research that looks at the "predictive" nature of belonging relies on retrospective analysis. For example, in Hagerty et al. (2002), the researchers asked participants to complete a questionnaire that was based on childhood memories of experiences. The participants filled out a questionnaire based on their current perceived sense of belonging, while also answering retrospective questions that addressed their parental bonding, childhood adversity, and adolescence deviance. The mean age of the 362 students was 26.2 years. Using this design, the authors argued that certain experiences during childhood are associated with a sense of belonging as an adult. (Hagerty et al., 2002).

Hagerty et al.'s study (2002), while successful in isolating potential childhood antecedents to adult sense of belonging, has limitations. The retrospective design does not allow for any cause and effect relationships. A second methodological consideration of belonging research is that many of the studies rely on self-reported data of adult's memories. In Hagerty et. al.'s study (2002) the design was based on self-report data, and much of this data relied on an adult's memory of childhood experiences. Adult's perceptions of their childhood could be impacted by their existing contexts and there is often some difficulty remembering specific feelings many years later (Clegg, 2006). There is a continued need to

study belonging using a longitudinal approach that uses multiple data collection periods throughout the time period of the study. This is so that researchers can begin to isolate variables that have a significant impact on belonging as well as the variables that belonging can influence in the short and long term. This present study does not use a longitudinal approach, but it does address students' perceptions of their school experiences and how they are affecting them in the present. In this study, belonging was viewed from the students' perspective, rather than an adults' recollection of what belonging meant to them in the past.

There is also a difficulty within belonging research in identifying the direction of the relationship between belonging factors (such as peer relationships or teacher support), a sense of belonging, and the potential outcomes of belonging (such as motivation or achievement). Goodenow (1993) argued that the direction of the relationship between a sense of belonging and motivation could also be true in the reverse. She argued that the relationships among the variables in belonging research are often more reciprocal than the models suggest (Goodenow, 1993). Osterman (2000) suggested that to begin to account for this, more studies need to focus on the development and incidence of belonging, especially with children. This may become more possible when using a qualitative research approach. Nichols (2008) argued that most research in belonging literature relies on quantitative methods. She stated that what is lacking in this research is the student's perspective, and in particular, the student's perspectives of day-to-day experiences. Many researchers have defined the predictive outcomes of belonging based on a definition that has been developed from the adult's perspective. It is essential that future studies consider students' day-to-day experiences to assist in creating an operational definition of what it feels like to belong and what it feels like to be rejected at school. Examining students' day-to-day experiences and

their perceptions of belonging was one of the main objectives of this present study. This present study also sought to examine the development and incidence of belonging from the students' and teachers' perspectives.

It is also important to consider within belonging research the mediating factors that could alter the relationship between belonging and outcome variables. For example, McMahon et al.'s study (2009) examined classroom climate (satisfaction, cohesion, friction, task difficulty, and competition) and school belonging in relation to self-efficacy and student achievement. The results revealed that school belonging was the most important influence on students' self-efficacy and, in turn, students' achievement. However, in this study, academic self-efficacy could have mediated the relationship between school belonging and academic achievement. That is, students who have a high sense of self-efficacy could have higher levels of academic achievement, regardless of their sense of belonging. The mediating variable could be self-efficacy. Clegg (2006) also found in his phenomenological study that certain factors, such as teacher support, could mediate against the feelings of a low sense of belonging. He also found that a high sense of self could also mediate against a low sense of belonging. Hagerty et al. (2002) also argued that more research needs to consider other mediating factors that could impact a child's sense of belonging. For example, the child's changing contexts, access to other support systems outside the school, and the temperament of the individual (Hagerty et al., 2002). More recently, Hamm and Faircloth (2011) have looked at friendship as a buffer against peer group membership. They found that friendships helped the participants cope with not belonging to a clique. It is important that researchers consider the mediating factors that could have influenced their data. Defining belonging is more complex than assuming that teacher support and many peer relationships indicate a

high sense of belonging. In this present study, students and teachers were asked what influenced school belonging. It is difficult to isolate whether these experiences (such as participating on a school's sports team) are a result of feeling a sense of belonging, or whether these experiences influenced belonging. To account for this, the students and teachers were asked to think of belonging in terms of being developed, rather than how their sense of belonging has impacted their experiences at school.

Another difficulty with belonging research are the complexities that contribute to the development of a student's sense of belonging. Some researchers of belonging would agree that peer relationships are integral to developing a positive sense of belonging (Goodenow, 1993; Nichols, 2006; Osterman, 2000). However, there is little research that focuses on the quality of friendships and the intricacies of group membership. For example, Hamm and Faircloth (2011) argued the importance of recognizing the intricacies of group membership. They focused their study of "group membership" to two variables—multiple-group memberships and network stability. The purpose of the study was to examine the dynamic features of peer relationships and their role in adolescents' sense of belonging. They found that multiple group memberships actually promoted a sense of belonging in African American students but having stability within a network did not affect African American or White students (Hamm & Faircloth, 2011). In another study by Hamm and Faircloth (2005), they differentiated friendship as more than just the number of friends that a student had. Rather, they looked closely at the quality of the friendship in terms of loyalty and support, sharing of resources, intimacy, enhancement of worth, and companionship. They found that while all of these friendship factors did play a role in establishing a student's sense of belonging, the setting of the friendship also affected sense of belonging (Hamm & Faircloth,

2005). Hamm and Faircloth (2011) also suggested that future studies expand their perceptions of the benefits of friendship and group membership. More research needs to consider the negative aspects of having certain friends and belonging to certain groups, such as competition, rivalry, and dominance (Hamm & Faircloth, 2005). Both group membership and friendship are difficult to define and describe because there are many intricacies within these relationships that can contribute to the development of a sense of belonging, such as the child's perception of the importance of friendship and the child's need for reciprocated friendships. This present study accounted for this by not assuming that children need to be accepted by everyone in their class to feel a sense of belonging, and by not assuming that students place a greater emphasis on the quantity of friends than the quality. Students were asked directly what they valued in their friendships and whether their friendships impacted their sense of belonging at school.

The present study has addressed some of these considerations and has attempted to include the recommendations made by belonging researchers. This current study's data considers the day-to-day experiences of students. The focus is to describe the development of students' sense of belonging to school. There is also a comparative element to this study. Teachers were asked their perceptions of student belonging. This allows the perceptions and experiences of belonging to be compared and contrasted. This provides information about the alignment of teachers' and students' descriptions of belonging to school. Nichols (2008) argued that this is the first step in creating effective programs and practices that encourage student belonging.

The next chapter describes the method used for this study. This chapter reiterates the study's questions and discusses the process of site selection and participant selection. There

is also a description of the site, participants, and the interviews, as well as the process that was used for data analysis.

Chapter 3: Method

This chapter describes the qualitative research design that was used for this study. A description of the site selection and participant selection processes, and then a brief description of the school and the participants are provided. Next, the interviewing process is discussed followed by an illustration of the procedures used to code and categorize the data. There is also a discussion of the data analysis techniques that were employed.

Research Design

The purpose of this study was to gain an understanding of how students experience belonging in their classrooms and schools and how teachers perceive student belonging in elementary school. This study was undertaken using qualitative methodology. Qualitative research was the most appropriate approach for this study because of the methodology's specific characteristics. Stake wrote that qualitative research is interpretive, experiential, situational, and personalistic (Stake, 2010). Qualitative research does not seek to determine a consensus of views. Rather, it is encouraged that the researcher becomes comfortable with the multiple realities that are described by the participants. According to Stake, qualitative research is in "tune with the view that reality is a human construction." (Stake, 2010, p. 15). In the present study, this "reality" was associated with contextual issues in the classroom and school where the students were enrolled. The main context of this study was a public elementary school. Each one of the participants, both students and teachers, approached belonging through their own experiential lens. One of the interview questions of this study was to ask participants to describe belonging and its importance to school. Students' descriptions of belonging were likely to be specific to each participant's "reality" and the context from which each participant drew their experiences. As Stake argued, qualitative

research seeks to describe the depth of experiences as impacted by participants' individual contexts, and thus, qualitative research often works "against generalizations" (Stake, 2010).

Study's Questions

This study sought to examine school belonging from the perspectives of students and teachers. The following are the study's particular research questions.

- a) What are students' experiences with belonging in the school?
- b) What are teachers' perceptions of students' belonging in the school?
- c) How do the students' experiences and teachers' perceptions of belonging in the school compare?

The students and teachers were asked to describe student belonging in terms of (a) their description of belonging and its importance to school, (b) experiences that develop belonging at the school, and (c) challenges that they may have when developing a sense of belonging at the school. These descriptions of belonging and experiences of belonging were elicited through the interview questions used in this study. Sample interview questions are found in Appendix A.

Site Selection

This research was conducted at Joseph Arthur Elementary School (pseudonym) in a mid-sized city in Ontario, Canada. The elementary school has an enrolment of approximately 300 students from Kindergarten to Grade 8. This school was chosen because I have experience volunteering in this school. Finally, this school serves a community with a low socio-economic status. Previous research has shown that students from a low-socio-economic status may have increased likelihood of engaging in at-risk behaviours (Kagan, 1990). These students may already have negative experiences with not belonging to school

and may have a perspective that can contribute to the complexities of belonging research. This population was considered for this study because it is important to address these students when studying belonging because some of these students may have difficulty engaging successfully in school (Finn, 1989). However, socio-economic-status may not indicate that a student is withdrawn, physically or emotionally, from the academic or relational aspects of school. Feeling a sense of belonging can be achieved in a variety of ways and is possible even for theoretically defined “at-risk” students (Finn, 1989; Kagan, 1990). The following paragraph discusses the participant selection process. Following that, a description of the site and participants is provided.

Participant Selection

Ethical clearance was received from the Queen’s General Research Ethics Board in September 2011 (Appendix G) and then I sought approval from the school board that the participating school is registered under. Upon receiving permission from the school’s principal (Appendix B & C) consent was sought from junior/intermediate students and junior/intermediate teachers (Appendix D & E). These grades were selected because they are consistent with the participants included in Osterman’s meta-analysis (2000) and Goodenow’s study (1993). These two researchers argued that studying middle-school students is valuable in belonging research because it is within this age range that students are particularly susceptible to teacher support, peer acceptance, and friendship (Goodenow, 1993; Osterman, 2000).

To receive consent from the teachers, emails were sent to the junior/intermediate teachers from the school. Only junior and intermediate teachers were approached for this study so that there was an alignment with the grades of the students being recruited. Consent

was received from four teachers. Melissa teaches Grades 3/4, Jim teaches Grades 6/7, Roger teaches Grades 7/8 part-time and prep-time part-time, and Anne also teaches Grade 7/8 part-time and student-support part-time. Following teacher consent, interviews were organized according to each teacher's availability. Teachers were informed that the interviews could occur either at the school during school hours (prep time or lunch) or after school, either within the school building or at another location. Teachers were also provided with the student letters of information (Appendix G) and consent forms (Appendix F) to distribute to students enrolled within their classes. Teachers were asked to collect the consent forms and notify the researcher when forms were returned.

After three weeks, seven consent forms were returned by students. Two students were in Grade 4, three students were in Grade 6, one student was in Grade 7, and one student was in Grade 8. Four females and three males comprised the student sample. In selecting student participants, emphasis was placed upon obtaining a balance of genders because boys and girls may define their senses of belonging differently (Goodenow, 2000; Moore & Boldero, 1991; Wentzel & Caldwell, 1997; Wong & Csikszentmihalyi, 1991). Since only seven consent forms were returned, all consenting students were interviewed. Interview times and locations with students were established after consulting with students' classroom teachers. These interviews were conducted at the school during school hours in a location that allowed for the privacy and safety of both the researcher and the student participant.

Description of Site and Participants

School. The elementary school selected for this study had a student population of approximately 300 students from Kindergarten to Grade 8. Most of the classes are split-grades, serving two sequential grades within the same classroom. The school is administered

by a principal and a vice-principal and has a library, gymnasium, student-support classroom, and school-to-community classroom for students with special education needs. This school is located in a mid-sized city in Ontario and is situated in a community with a low-socio-economic status. According to the Ontario Ministry of Education School Profile, 41% of students from this school lived in lower-income housing, whereas the provincial average is 16.5%. Also, 10% of these students' parents had a university education as compared to 36.9% for all of Ontario. In addition, 17.8% of these students received special education services, while the provincial average is 13% (Ontario Ministry of Education School Profile). The statistics show that many of the students live in lower-income housing and receive special education services. It may also be inferred that these students may be from households where higher education is not encouraged. These statistics provide some background to the possible challenges that these students have when establishing a sense of belonging to school. These challenges could be due to a number of other reasons, but research suggests that these students may have a higher likelihood of feeling disengaged from school and may be more likely to participate in activities that are not condoned by the school, such as alcohol and drug abuse, violence, and gang-membership (Kagan, 1990). For this study, these statistics provide a contextual framework with which to view the results. Many of the students from this school may be dealing with challenges at home and in their community that may affect their integration within the school.

Teachers. The teachers who consented to participate in this study were all experienced teachers who had spent the majority of their career at this school. The Grade 3/4 teacher, Melissa, had been a practicing teacher for 6 years and had been at Joseph Arthur Elementary for 4 of those years. Melissa was involved in a variety of activities at the school

and devoted a significant amount of her time to working one-on-one with students, teacher candidates, and support workers. Jim was a Grade 6/7 teacher and had been teaching for 8 years, 5 of which were at Joseph Arthur Elementary. He was a coach of many sports teams and organized many clubs that met during and after school. Anne was a part-time Grade 7/8 teacher who also worked part-time as a student-support teacher. This position allowed Anne the opportunity to work with many students from all grades. Anne had been working at Joseph Arthur Elementary for 17 years and had been a practicing teacher for 19 years. Staff from the school looked to her for guidance and she provided support and stability to the students. Roger also taught Grade 7/8 part-time and then covered prep-time for the rest of the day. At the time of data collection, Roger worked with students from Kindergarten to Grade 8 but most of his experience was in the intermediate grades. Roger had been a practicing teacher for 20 years and had spent half that time at Joseph Arthur Elementary School. Roger was involved in many of the sports teams at the school and he emphasizes athletics and healthy-living in his teaching practices. Table 1 outlines the previous information.

Table 1

Teachers' Experiences at Joseph Arthur Elementary School (JAES)

Teacher Participant	Grade Currently Teaching	Years of Experience	Years of Experience at JAES
Melissa	3/4	6	4
Jim	6/7	8	5
Anne	7/8 and student support teacher	19	17
Roger	7/8 and prep-teacher	20	10

From this data, it is apparent that these four teachers have spent the majority of their careers teaching at Joseph Arthur Elementary School. This information was important to

consider because there is research that suggests that the student-teacher relationship that is marked by stability and consistency can contribute to students' senses of belonging to school (Nichols, 2006; Wentzel, 1998). The results from this study also suggest this, and this contributes to the argument that when teachers feel a sense of belonging to school, this may enhance students' connections to the school as well.

Students. The students who consented to participate in this study were from the junior/intermediate grades. One of the Grade 4 students, Allie, had been at Joseph Arthur Elementary for two years. Charlotte, another Grade 4 student, had been at this school since she started in Kindergarten. Ian, a Grade 6 student, had been at this school for four years. The second Grade 6 student, Clark had been at Joseph Arthur Elementary for three years. Lia was the third student from Grade 6 and she, like her younger sister Charlotte, had been at Joseph Arthur Elementary since Kindergarten. Alex, a Grade 7 student, had been the most transient participant, with this school being the fourth school he had attended in 8 years. He was in his second year at Joseph Arthur Elementary. Sophie was a Grade 8 student who spent her time in the school-to-community classroom as well as in her Grade 7/8-homeroom class. She had been at this school since she was in Kindergarten. Table 2 depicts this information.

Table 2

Students' Experiences at Joseph Arthur Elementary School (JAES)

Student Participant	Grade	Years at JAES
Allie	4	2
Charlotte	4	5
Ian	6	4
Clark	6	3
Lia	6	7
Alex	7	2
Sophie	8	9

It was important for the researcher to be aware of the time-span spent at this school so that the interview questions could reflect some of the individual experiences that these students may have had when they were new to the classroom, school, and community. This school has a high transient population with students moving from school to school because of negative behaviour, poor achievement, and instability in the home. Most of the students who were interviewed had experience moving from school to school and can speak to their experiences that are unique to this school and that reflect the qualities of this school.

Data Collection

Interviews with teachers. The interviews with the teachers were conducted in a one-on-one setting at a site of the participant's choosing. The shortest interview was 15 minutes and the longest was 40 minutes. The questions that were asked were created by the researcher before the interview took place. These questions were adapted from Goodenow's

Psychological Sense of School Membership Scale (1993). The interview questions reflected the belonging factors that were discussed in the literature review: school characteristics, teacher support, and peer acceptance and friendship. The interview was semi-structured so some probing and additional interview questions were asked while the interview was taking place.

Before the interviews began, the researcher gave a brief introduction to the study, its purpose, and the expectations of the participant. The participant was reminded that the information discussed was confidential and that he/she could remove all or part of the data without reason or consequence. The participant was also reminded that the interview was being audio-recorded and would be transcribed verbatim. The interviewer began the interview by asking the participant questions about his/her experiences, that is, years of service, as a practicing teacher and as a teacher at Joseph Arthur Elementary. After the introductory questions were answered, the participant was asked to describe what feeling a sense of belonging means to them. This question provided the foundation for the rest of interview because it encouraged teachers to think about their students' experiences of belonging, as related to their individual descriptions of belonging that was given at the start of the interview. Teachers were then asked to discuss the importance of belonging to school and the classroom. The questions for the remainder of the interview asked teachers to describe a classroom where students had a high sense of belonging and a classroom where students had a low sense of belonging. They were also asked to describe what they perceived to be factors of the school and classroom that enhance student belonging. Teachers were then asked to describe the challenges that they believe students have when developing a sense of belonging to the school and classroom. Throughout the interview, the teachers were asked to

place themselves in the “student’s shoes” so that they could perceive the challenges and benefits of belonging for a junior/intermediate student.

Interviews with students. The interviews with the students were conducted within the school during a time that was convenient for both the teacher and the student. The interviews took place in a one-on-one setting in the school’s library. The shortest interview was 11 minutes and the longest interview was 27 minutes. The participant was reminded of the confidentiality of the interview and that he/she could withdraw all or part of the data without reason or consequence. The participant was also reminded that the interview was being audio-recorded and would be transcribed verbatim. The student participant was also reminded that if he/she wanted to talk about the interview or felt upset about something that came up in the interview, the student’s homeroom teacher was available to talk with them. The student was also asked during the interview if he or she had any questions about this interview or wanted any clarification. The student interviews began similarly to the teacher interviews. The student participant was asked what grade he or she was in and how long he or she had been at the school.

The interview questions addressed the following constructs: school characteristics, teacher support, peer acceptance and friendship. The interview was semi-structured and, therefore, some interview questions or probing questions emerged as the interview took place. The students were asked to describe belonging in terms of how it feels and whether they believe it is important to belong to school. Students were then asked to think about times when they felt they belonged to school and times when they felt they did not belong to school. Students were asked particularly about friendships, peer acceptance, and teacher support. Students were also asked to describe belonging and what enhances it and what

challenges it. There was a story-telling and hypothetical element to the questions throughout the interview. The final questions asked students to think about what “they would do if they were in charge,” and “if you could give advice to a new teacher...” All of the questions were adapted from Goodenow’s *Psychological Sense of School Membership Scale* (1993).

Considerations for interviewing students. There were considerations that the researcher made when interviewing the students for this study. According to Docherty and Sandelowski (1999), children are the best sources of information about themselves. It is important for researchers to interview and observe children to begin to understand how they perceive the world and the people in their lives. There is evidence that children are able to express and give graphic descriptions of their experiences, even events that involve complex and challenging experiences (Docherty & Sandelowski, 1999). Children are also able to express their opinions and judgments of their immediate environments. From the ages of three to six, children begin to recount and explain their experiences. This ability coincides with the child’s development of self-concept and self-evaluative reflection (Docherty & Sandelowski, 1999; Kortessluoma, Hentinen, & Nikkonen 2003).

There are some concerns with interviewing children that were considered for this study. Many researchers argue that children have a lot of memories that are “jumbled up,” and there are questions of validity that researchers must acknowledge (Docherty & Sandelowski, 1999; Kortessluoma et al., 2003). However, numerous studies have argued that to increase trustworthiness, there are strategies that interviewers can adopt (Dockett & Perry, 2007). These strategies were used in this study to assist the researcher to obtain more accurate and consistent data from child participants. The following are the strategies that

were used in this study to respond to some of the validity concerns that exist when interviewing students.

First, children often have difficulty knowing what interviewers want from them, and sometimes interviewers take for granted that their participants can see the obvious (Docherty & Sandelowski, 1999). During the interviews for this study, the researcher briefed each student on what was going to take place during the interview and what the students were expected to do. Another strategy that is often cited is to begin the interview with more free-recall questions. These questions will often bring up more general experiences from the child. This allows the child to become more comfortable with the interview. This strategy was used in this study. The students were asked more general questions and then were asked more specific questions as the interview went on. Finally, to account for inconsistencies in the discussion, the researcher can repeat the child's answer back to the child so that the child has the opportunity to correct or contribute to the answer (Kortesluoma et al., 2003). This was also a strategy that was used in this study as it assisted the researcher and the participant in clarification.

Data Analysis

Transcribing the data. The interviews were transcribed verbatim by the researcher using Microsoft Word. Words such as “like”, “um”, “ah” were not included in the transcription. The transcriptions were edited and then printed for multiple readings by the researcher.

Open-coding. The open-coding process began by reading and re-reading the transcriptions. This allowed the researcher to gain a conceptual understanding of the transcriptions and to begin reflecting on the data. Open codes were either constructed by the

researcher or used in-vivo – terms used by the participant. The codes that were used were descriptive or analytical. For example, a descriptive code was “school activities” when students referred to office duty, kindergarten helper, or sports teams. An example of an analytic code was “autonomy.” The researcher applied this code to statements made by the students that discussed “being able to make our own decisions” or “being able to play whatever we want.” Analytical codes encourage interpretive analysis, which can deepen the understanding of the code (Patton, 2002).

The students’ transcriptions were analyzed first. The researcher open-coded the data by phrase, paragraph, or participant response. Each of the codes was written in the margins of the transcription. Once the open-coding was completed, the researcher inputted all of the codes and the code’s identifier (quote or text from interview) into Microsoft Excel. This allowed the researcher to identify which codes corresponded to each interview and to identify where in a transcript a code was located. For example “family backgrounds” would have the identifier “They all came from strong family backgrounds too so they had that sense of self-worth when they came to the school” (Roger, 83-85). This identifier could also be used under the “self-worth” code. Some of the codes were used more than once. For example, “trust” was a re-occurring code. In this case, the researcher kept track of the frequency of the code, and provided one example of an identifier of that code. Throughout the open coding process, the researcher also wrote memos noting the unique emphasis of each participant, reoccurring patterns, and reflective questions to consider further into the analysis process. Once this open-coding process was completed for the student interviews, the same process was completed for the interviews with the teachers.

Axial Coding. Axial coding began with reassembling the data to draw attention to codes that can be linked due to similarities, such as “sports teams,” and “office duty.” These codes were grouped together under “school activities.” To begin the axial coding process, the researcher wrote down all of the codes that were used for each participant. The emphasis of each code throughout all of the interviews was recorded. For example, various school activities were cited by all of the students during the interviews. Other codes, such as “classroom activities,” “involvement at school,” and “contribution” was all coded under the axial code “student activities.” This axial code became a category for the interviews with the students.

At the conclusion of the axial coding, the researcher organized the categories into groups to create themes. The themes were divided up into a) students’ and teachers’ descriptions of belonging and b) how student belonging is developed in the classroom and school. The themes for students’ and teachers’ descriptions of belonging were: focus, fitting in, students’ sense of self, and the dark side of belonging. The themes that represent students’ and teachers’ descriptions of how belonging is developed are: holistic teaching, trusting relationships, and opportunities for student engagement. The results section that follows presents these themes in further detail. The major similarities and differences between the teachers’ and students’ responses are also found in the results chapter.

Trustworthiness. There were many considerations that were made throughout the data collection and analysis process to promote the trustworthiness of this study. The first considerations occurred during the interviewing process. Both the student and teacher participants were asked to clarify their responses if there was confusion. Some of the

interview questions also allowed for overlap so that the participants would have the opportunity to add to or modify their original responses.

During the data analysis process, the researcher kept a memo journal, where comments could be made on the transcripts. The comments included questions to consider, points of interest, and next steps. This reflexive process encouraged the researcher to be transparent with the data and to provide links between the data. This assisted the open-coding and axial-coding process. The open-coding process consisted of two phases. The researcher defined the first phase as “initial coding.” This involved reading and re-reading the transcripts and memo taking. The researcher compiled codes on different coloured sticky notes that represented the different participants. The researcher then grouped the sticky notes together under like themes. Once this was completed, the researcher began the open-coding process using a more systematic approach where codes were defined and then marked in terms of emphasis by the participants. The researcher also noted any patterns that were found within and between the interviews.

Once the axial-coding was complete, the researcher compared the results of the axial-codes to the sticky notes that were grouped in the initial-coding phase. The themes were similar and the codes were grouped under similar themes that were found during the axial-coding process. This exercise was used to increase the trustworthiness of the results. By coding the data initially and then again during the open-coding process, which used a more systematic approach, the results were found to be similar. This suggested that the themes and categories that were found are effective in depicting the results of the study. The next chapter presents the results from this study and then compares the students’ and teachers’ responses.

Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this study was to describe student belonging from the perspectives of students and teachers. This chapter presents the results of this study. The results are separated into four units: students' descriptions of belonging, how belonging is experienced and developed, teachers' descriptions of student belonging, and how belonging is experienced and developed for students at school. One theme that was found for students' descriptions of belonging was focus. The themes that were found for students' experiences of how belonging is developed were holistic teaching, trusting relationships and opportunities for student engagement. The three themes that represent teachers' descriptions of student belonging are fitting in, students' sense of self, and the dark side of belonging. The two themes that were found for teachers' perceptions of how student belonging is developed were trusting relationships and opportunities for student engagement. The results that were found for the students will be presented first, followed by the results found for the teachers.

Students' Descriptions of Belonging

Students described belonging as being vital for their success at school. They argued that it was important to feel a sense of belonging so that they could have friends, behave positively, and do well in school. The next section presents a theme that emerged from the student interviews. This theme represents the students' descriptions of belonging, that is, their understanding of the importance of belonging and how belonging makes them feel.

Focus. A theme that emerged from the interviews with students was the concept of focus. Students described belonging, as being able to focus on what they felt was important to them. These students felt that you would not feel a sense of belonging if you had many distractions, such as feeling bullied or not accepted by peers. Alex, Allie, and Charlotte,

described focus in terms of staying on task and completing their work at school. “If you feel comfortable, I would imagine that your mind is at ease and that you have more focus to do the work” (Alex 57-58). Allie commented that “I think it is important for me to feel like I like school and for me not to feel left out because that way I am not always feeling like I am somewhere else in class and I can actually get to know people and learn” (Allie, 38-40). Charlotte responded similarly by saying “It [belonging] feels great because I can sit down and do work and not worry about people picking on me” (Charlotte, 25-26).

The concept of feeling comfortable in school was closely aligned with students being able to focus on what they felt was most important. The students spoke about how feeling comfortable at school would allow them to complete their work and have positive relationships with their peers and teachers. Alex in particular spoke about how important it was to feel comfortable at school so that he could focus. “You’re not going to get much done if you are worrying that you are doing something wrong” (Alex, 42-43). To Alex, feeling a sense of belonging was knowing what to do, where to go, and who to talk to, so that most of their energy could be focused on completing their work.

Clark spoke of belonging in terms of how it focused him to stay on task and stay out of trouble. He said that when he feels he belongs to school he is able to stay focused on his friends and his schoolwork. He also said that feeling a sense of belonging made him feel less bored. He stated, “if you don’t belong to the school you’ll probably get in trouble a lot because you just have nothing to do” (Clark, 36-37). Similarly to Alex, Charlotte, and Allie, Clark spoke of belonging in terms of being able to focus on what really matters to him. The next section describes the students’ experiences with belonging, especially in terms of how their sense of belonging is developed and enhanced at school.

Students' Experiences with Belonging

The following sections are referred to as belonging themes. These themes emerged from the interview data with the students, and they represent the experiences of students when developing a sense of belonging to their classroom and school. The themes were holistic teaching, trusting relationships, opportunities for student engagement. Students described how these themes assisted them in developing and enhancing their sense of belonging.

Holistic teaching. “Holistic Teaching” was the most commonly cited category by students throughout the interviews. Holistic teaching referred to teachers who are connected to their students’ lives, academically, socially, and emotionally. These teachers support their students, have a positive attitude towards students, and they allow students to get to know them on a personal level. Mutual relationships are formed between the students and the teachers that are caring, compassionate, and assistive towards the child’s development. The following sections outline the specific attributes of “holistic teaching” as described by the students.

Teacher support. A major emphasis within the student interviews was the concept of support from teachers, both in the students’ academic and social lives. There was more of an emphasis on teachers supporting students socially than academically, although all participants discussed both. Many of the students believed that if the teachers supported them socially, the students would feel more comfortable in the class and would therefore be more able to focus on their schoolwork. The next two sections discuss teacher support both academically and socially and how this, according to the students interviewed, has an impact on students’ sense of belonging to school.

Academic support. When students were asked what made them feel comfortable at school when completing assignments, they emphasized that they wanted to be asked if they had any questions or concerns before the teacher gave them an assignment. Lia explained that, “if the kids have a test that day the teacher talks to you about what you are doing and not just hands you the test and say this is what we are doing” (Lia, 192-194). Lia felt that academic support from the teacher requires the teacher to be transparent and willing to speak to the students about the test before it is given. Lia argued that when she felt included and listened to, she felt a stronger sense of belonging and comfort in her classroom. “I like it when my teachers ask me how I am doing, if I want anything to be different. I feel better” (Lia, 194-195).

Academic support from the teacher also requires the teacher to be willing to listen and willing to help. Both Clark and Ian spoke to this. They argued that they felt the most supported by teachers when the teachers listened to them and were willing to assist them if they had any problems. When Clark was asked why he thought his current teacher was so supportive, he replied “Well, our teacher is always willing to help us. If you need any help, just ask” (Clark, 223). Clark argued that having a teacher who was willing to help allowed him to feel comfortable in the classroom.

Ian felt that teachers needed to listen to their students and be sensitive if they do not understand something. Ian said that he was often uncomfortable with concepts in language, but his teacher was non-judgmental and willing to help. Ian said this was really important so that he could keep up to his peers. Ian also felt supported when his teacher explained to him why he got a wrong answer and what Ian could do to correct his answer. “I want a teacher

who actually listens. Say you are sitting there and you get the wrong answer. He'll tell you why you got the wrong answer but not get mad" (Ian, 243-245).

Many of the students also felt that supportive teachers would help them achieve better grades and learn more at school. "I'm not very good at language but he helps me get better. By putting commas here and there. I'm not really good with punctuation" (Ian, 245-246). Students believed that supportive teachers are willing to listen, willing to help, and willing to take the time to teach students so that the students could learn and keep up to their peers. "I want my teacher to teach me new things and get better so that I am as smart as my friends" (Sophie, 214-215). When asked how she would feel if teachers did not support her, Sophie replied "That would make me feel bad because I'm not learning anything...it would make me feel sad" (Sophie, 213-214). Allie also spoke about how it felt when the teachers were willing to support her academically. She said that she felt supported when the teachers are "teaching you a lot of things and letting you have some fun" (Allie, 201-202).

Academic teacher support was emphasized by Ian, Clark, Sophie, Allie, and Lia, and the consensus was that teachers should be non-judgmental, willing to listen, willing to help, and willing to spend the time with students to support their learning needs. This feeling of support enhanced these students' sense of belonging to their classrooms.

Social support. When speaking about support from teachers, the students consistently referred to teachers supporting students' social needs. The students argued that in order for them to feel comfortable and feel a sense of belonging to their classrooms, teachers would have to involve themselves in the students' development and maintenance of friendships. As Alex stated, the teacher's responsibility is to "probably look out for you and make sure that everyone is treating you nice. Keep an eye on you" (Alex, 248-249). The students believed

that teachers should give students opportunities to meet friends and develop friendships, introduce you to the class when you are new, and deal with issues that arise between classmates.

One of the students argued that teachers should provide students the opportunities to make new friends, and that teachers should assist in this process. Sophie replied that teachers could:

Maybe like help you by getting more friends if you don't have any friends...they can try to help you get friends. I know a teacher I had helped me get friends when I didn't have any friends. I was really quiet and then he came and helped me...I got more friends. (Sophie, 180-184)

Sophie is a really shy and cautious girl, and she seemed very appreciative when speaking about this teacher that assisted her in making friends. When Sophie was asked if she could make a recommendation to a new teacher who is trying to make a welcoming classroom, she recommended that the teacher could “maybe try and say it's okay, it's okay to be shy but if you try to get out there you may not be shy no more” (Sophie, 276-277). Teacher support, to Sophie, was about getting involved in her social life by encouraging her to make new friends, and by providing her the opportunities to make friends.

Teacher support in the students' social lives also involved an aspect of trust. Students believed that in order for teachers to be supportive of the students' social relationships, the teachers would need to be willing to solve some of the students' problems. Charlotte argued that when she has a problem with some of her friends, she can trust that her teacher will deal with the issue. “Then I go and get the teacher and the teacher goes to talk to them and then they become friends again” (Charlotte, 103-104). This concept of trusting teacher support

was echoed by Lia who argued that “if you get into an argument that day and the teacher doesn’t deal with it, I don’t think that would be very welcoming” (Lia, 210-211). These two students believed that teachers should become involved in the students’ social relationships, especially if there was an issue between friends.

Sophie and Clark also discussed how important it is for teachers to introduce new students to the classroom. Clark spoke about his experience as a new student and how teachers can make students feel a sense of belonging. He argued that teachers should “ask you, is there anything I can do to help you?” When asked about his own personal experience being new to the school three years ago he replied “my teacher made me feel welcome, she introduced me to everyone in the class and made me feel normal. I just felt normal” (Clark, 243-244). Sophie believed that if teachers did not take the initiative to involve a new student in the classroom, the student might begin to withdraw from the classroom and school community. She stated:

If it’s your first day and they just add you to the group and don’t introduce you to people then you’ll feel scared and not want to talk to people and that. If they are rude to you you’ll not want to go to the school anymore because you’ll think that all teachers are rude. (Sophie, 203-206)

Here, Sophie has also argued that bad experiences with one teacher can affect future relationships and trust with other teachers. This is discussed in further detail under the category of “trusting relationships.”

Support for all. Support for all refers to teachers providing equal academic and social support for students and was related to differentiated instruction and equal support. The students interviewed felt that in order to feel like you belong, the teacher needed to provide

each student with the same support and attention. Clark spoke about this directly when he argued that:

Yeah, same attention as everyone else. If I were a teacher I would make everyone feel equal. Not one person is better than you or you are better than them. If you think that way someone will feel worse than someone else. I'd want everyone to feel equal, not like they are better than someone else. (Clark, 264-267)

Clark believed that when teachers treat students differently, the teacher creates a competitive and negative atmosphere in the classroom.

Ian and Charlotte spoke of consistent teacher support in the classroom, but emphasized equity, rather than equality. Charlotte believed that if a student were behind, it would be fair for the teacher to provide that student with more support. "If it's your first week or something and you are the new student...they'll teach you what the other kids have learned already and you'll catch up" (Charlotte, 171-172). Ian and Charlotte both spoke to the value of teachers differentiating their instruction, based on the students' individual needs. Ian argued that teachers should "start out easier and then gradually work harder for the kids that like to work harder. That would make all the kids feel accepted" (Ian, 275-276).

Whereas Clark felt that each student should be treated equally and with the same amount of attention, Ian and Charlotte believed that students who need extra help should be given that extra support so that they could fit in with their peers.

Positive student-teacher relationships. Another attribute of holistic teaching is developing positive teacher-student relationships. Students argued that student-teacher relationships need to be based on trust and respect. Teachers also need to be willing to share

their interests with students and allow their students to get to know them on a personal level. When describing a teacher who made her feel a sense of belonging, Lia stated that teachers “Make you laugh. They help you with everything. They help you learn to read better. They help you get better at subjects” (Lia, 199-200). Alex referred to the principal of the school as a “friend,” and Alex reported students should be friendly to the staff if the staff are friendly to the students. This concept of reciprocal relationships was also mentioned by Lia as a way to build strong student-teacher relationships. Lia argued that teachers should share just as much about themselves as students do of themselves. When asked what she would suggest to a new teacher who was trying to build an inclusive classroom, she stated that she would suggest that teachers should “tell them some stuff about yourself. Tell them how fun you are and some of your interests and favourite subjects” (Lia, 242-244). According to Lia and Alex, a positive student-teacher relationship is effective in enhancing a students’ sense of belonging to the classroom and school.

A component to building a positive student-teacher relationship was the expectation from students that teachers will have a positive attitude when it comes to teaching and interacting with students. Sophie argued that teachers are not welcoming when “they are yelling at you and when they make you feel like you did something wrong when you didn’t...that makes people upset” (Sophie, 202-203). Clark also argued that teachers are “nice and they don’t yell. They are always nice the first time” (Clark, 228). Allie believed that teachers should be hired only if they like students and that if she was a principal she would make sure that there were “no mean words” (Allie, 248). Ian believed that teachers should be committed to their students and be willing to get to know the students on a personal level. He stated “some of them [teachers] just want to get it over and done with. Me

and my friends want someone with humour and someone who is funny” (Ian, 232-235). These students described how important it was for a teacher to have a positive attitude towards teaching and towards students. These students desire teachers who show their personality, are committed to building positive relationships with students, and who refrain from yelling and from punishing without listening.

Trusting relationships. Trusting relationships referred to student-student and student-teacher relationships that are based on trust and respect. This theme became evident throughout the interviews, and particularly when students were asked how their friends and teachers enhance their sense of belonging to school. This theme is further divided into trusting relationships with peers and with teachers.

Peers. Students argued that in order to feel a strong sense of belonging, they would need to trust and be trusted by their friends. This trust involved telling the truth, keeping secrets, and social support. Clark argued, “You can trust them. They won’t lie. They won’t talk behind your back” (Clark, 138-39) when he was asked what made a good friend. Sophie believed that a friend who enhanced her sense of belonging would “always be with you no matter what happens. They stand by you and they are always nice” (Sophie, 108-109). Ian believed that trust required a level of reciprocal trust between friends. “They tell me and I tell them stuff that they wouldn’t tell other people” (Ian, 149-150). Charlotte stated that “when you are feeling sad and when something happens at your house, you can tell them and they will make you feel better” (Charlotte, 123-124). These students believed that trusting and being trusted by their friends would enhance their sense of belonging to their classroom and the school.

Teachers. Trusting teachers involves the expectation from students that teachers will deal with issues when they arise. Lia argued that she found it very frustrating when teachers and principals say they are going to deal with an issue, but they do not, or they wait too long to deal with the issue. She said “if you get into an argument that day and the teacher doesn’t deal with it, I don’t think that would be very welcoming” (Lia, 210-211). Sophie also argued that having a bad experience with one teacher can make her feel like she cannot trust the other teachers in the school. Trust, to these two students, was when the teacher does not trivialize the students’ problems and respects the students enough to listen to the issue and respond to the issue in a timely manner.

Opportunities for Student Engagement. The final theme that surfaced was “opportunities for student engagement.” This referred to students’ engagement in a breadth of activities at the school. This term also refers to the opportunities that teachers provided for students that allowed them to become involved in and contribute at school. At Joseph Arthur Elementary, students have the opportunity to participate in extra-curricular activities that are led by the staff. The student participants believed that it was these opportunities that encouraged them to feel a sense of value, contribution, and belonging. In addition to becoming involved in school activities, these students felt that being consulted on the creation and management of school activities made them feel a high sense of contribution. This theme is divided into two sections, “contribution and student voice” and “involvement in school activities.”

Contribution and student voice. Becoming involved in school activities allowed students to feel a sense of value and contribution. It was through participating in these activities, that students could sense their role within a group. For example, Ian discussed his

experiences being involved in a school play. When asked when he felt the strongest sense of belonging at school he stated “In Grade 5 when we were doing a Christmas play and I was the narrator. I felt like I totally belonged because without me there would only be 2 narrators and it wouldn’t work” (Ian, 116-118). Ian sensed his role and his value through contributing to a school activity. Allie also spoke of how “amazing it feels to teach kindergartens how to draw.” She described the value she felt when she and her friend created a group that assisted younger members of her school.

Charlotte, Ian, and Allie also spoke about contribution through using their “student voice.” “Student voice” referred to when students were consulted by teachers and were asked to make suggestions to teachers about what students most desired at school. Ian thought that if he were principal he would:

Take one kid after another to the office and ask them what they like. Once I find something that they all really have in common, all the kids, I’d try to make a spirit day that involved something like that. So if they all like pajamas or video games, you could make a video game themed day where everyone dresses up as their favourite video game character. That would be fun. Everyone would feel accepted. (Ian, 262-266)

Charlotte also believed that teachers should take suggestions from students. She stated that if she were principal, she would “put a list of things and then whoever wants to write something down, like an idea, I would look at them and choose and then I could try to do them” (Charlotte, 217-220). These students felt that teachers should allow students to make suggestions so that students can feel as if they were contributing. Feeling like you were

valued and that you were contributing made these students feel a sense of purpose and a sense of belonging to their school.

Involvement in school activities. Another important component to students' feeling a sense of belonging at school was for teachers to provide students with opportunities to become involved in school activities. Each of the student participants spoke of how important it was to feel involved at school. These formal activities (such as a club or sports team) and informal activities (such as games played at recess) allowed students to feel that they were an integral part of their school. Clark stated, "They have a big gym here. There is always something to do around here" (Clark, 63). Ian discussed the many options that his school had to offer, "I like what we do here at this school, the different crafts that we do. And I like the things that we do for celebrations" (Ian, 59-60). Charlotte spoke to how much she loved coming to school when there was a particular activity happening at the school that day. She was a member of a community-based activity that came to the school every Thursday. When Charlotte was asked why she liked coming to school on Thursdays so much, she responded that she really enjoyed participating in the activities with her sisters and her friends. Lia also spoke of becoming involved in activities because it allowed her to spend time with her friends.

Me and my friends practically do every sport the school has together. We find a game that everyone wants to play. We find out what we want to do. If someone wants to do office duty, we all do it. (Lia, 112-114)

During the interviews, these students were very excited to explain the different activities that took place at their school and their involvement within these activities. The students spoke of

how these activities made them want to come to school and how it enhanced their sense of belonging at school.

The results from the student interviews indicated that students describe belonging in terms of being able to focus on what really matters to them. They argued that when they had a strong sense of belonging to a place, such as their school, they were able to keep focused on other important activities, such as their schoolwork. The students felt that their belonging is developed at school through holistic teaching, trusting relationships, and opportunities for student engagement. The following section presents the results that were found from the teacher interviews.

Teachers' Descriptions of Student Belonging

The teachers described student belonging as fitting in and having a positive sense of self. They also described some of the consequences of having too strong of a sense of belonging or having a sense of belonging to an outside group with conflicting values to school. This is referred to as the dark side of belonging. The following are themes that emerged from the data that describe the teachers' understandings of belonging.

Fitting in. One theme that emerged from the teachers' interviews was "fitting in." Each of the teachers described belonging in many different terms, but the underlying theme within each description was the concept of fitting in. Jim pointed to the fact that belonging for his students meant not being made fun of or picked on. "Overall, I think that their sense of belonging is not being made fun of. Avoiding being picking on. Fitting in, in any way that they can, by showing positive or negative behaviors" (Jim, 36-39). This quote alluded to a popular discussion topic referred to as the dark side of belonging. This will be discussed in greater detail in a following section. Roger echoed Jim's statement by saying that belonging

is when you “Fit in to any situation. People respect you. That you’re not an outcast” (Roger, 27-28). For Roger and Jim, “fitting in” meant that you were accepted and incorporated into the majority group.

For Melissa and Anne, “fitting in” was more of a broad feeling felt by the individual, rather than an acceptance made by others. Anne described belonging as “that there is some place where you are meant to be, where you should be” (Anne, 25). Melissa stated that belonging was about:

Fitting in. Feeling comfortable in your community, feeling part of your community like you contribute and that it takes a team and you are a part of that team, so any one piece that is missing, it wouldn’t be the same. (Melissa, 32-34)

Both Anne and Melissa felt that belonging was a right, in that all people deserve to feel a sense of belonging somewhere. Roger and Jim spoke of belonging as feeling like others accept you. There is a distinction between these two perceptions – the female teachers’ perceptions of belonging are that it is intrinsic and determined by the individual. The male teachers, Roger and Jim, perceived belonging as a feeling of being accepted by outside members. Both of these conceptions of belonging correspond to Baumeister and Leary’s descriptions of belonging. To Baumeister and Leary, belonging is feeling as if you are accepted but also that you have a place within the group (Baumeister & Leary, 1995).

Students’ sense of self. “Students’ sense of self” was another theme that emerged throughout the coding process and was particularly evident throughout the interview with Roger. He described student belonging in terms of being dependent on students’ sense of self, both inside and outside the school. He felt that when students feel like they belong, it is often because they have a positive sense of self. “I think it goes back to self-esteem. My

personal impression is that if you have a low self-esteem, you don't have that peer group, and you're not accepted in the classroom" (Roger, 38-39). Roger did acknowledge the particular challenges that his students are faced with. "I think these kids are coming to school with a backpack full of baggage. They don't have any self-worth at home and then they come to school and try to fit in" (Roger, 131-133). Roger believed that when students do not develop connections or a sense of belonging to school, it is often because they have very little experience with these emotions. Roger also described the negative effects of having a low sense of self and its impact on developing a connection to school.

It always seems that those students that have a higher self-confidence seem to do better in anything – not necessarily academically wise, but they do seem to fit in better and they don't seem to get down on themselves. Or vice-versa, the ones that don't seem to have that high self-worth or self-esteem tend to shy away from things, they don't open up and they don't tell you what's going on. At our school, they don't really show up to school, or they sleep in and they're late. (Roger, 218-223)

This quote speaks to Roger's perspective of the importance of students' self-esteem for engaging within a school. He also spoke to the particular challenges that his students have when developing a connection to school. He viewed sense of self as being an important variable for developing a sense of belonging, and that a student's sense of self also needs to be positive outside of school for it to make a positive impact on student belonging to school. He argued that many of his students do not have opportunities at home to develop a positive sense of self and that this transfers to negative self-confidence at school. This speaks to the

influence that a student's home life can have on a student's ability to integrate within a classroom and school.

Taking risks. Within student self-esteem is the notion of "taking risks." Both Anne and Jim spoke to the importance of self-worth in taking risks and learning from mistakes. Jim stated that "I think that sense of belonging is clear in their confidence and risk taking behaviour when answering questions or doing tasks" (Jim, 145-146). Anne also described the dynamics of a class she had when she felt most of her students felt a strong connection or sense of belonging. "They would mess up but they knew it was okay that they messed up. They would challenge themselves" (Anne, 123-124). Jim also argued that students with a low sense of self need a constant reassurance from the teacher that they are on the right path. "They are always looking for reassurance, always looking to make sure that they are doing it right" (Jim, 144-146). To Jim and Anne, a student's sense of belonging can be seen in their willingness to take risks and challenge themselves. Without this positive sense of self "they kind of hide themselves and stay out of it and don't participate" (Jim, 144).

The dark side of belonging. This is a term that was defined by the researcher during the data analysis process. This term refers to the consequences of feeling too strong of a sense of belonging, or feeling a sense of belonging to a group that is not conducive for a child's pro-social development. The teachers in this study spoke of the dark side of belonging using two examples. Jim spoke of how feeling too strong of a sense of belonging can lead to students feeling territorial or distrusting of other teachers who come into the school, such as support workers or substitute teachers. He argued that his students feel a sense of belonging:

To a fault sometimes because when new people come into the classroom, they are quick to defend their turf. They feel it is theirs, they put up a wall to new people; they feel as though that person needs to earn trust from all of them as a group. (Jim, 49-53)

Sometimes, according to Jim, this defensive behaviour can lead these students to disrespect visiting members to the school.

Anne, Jim, and Melissa argued that some of their students strive to feel a sense of belonging and that they are willing to display negative behaviors in order to fit in.

They will try to act out to be accepted. They will do what they think is cool to not get picked on. A lot of kids talk to me in private and say that they did what they did to not get picked on. (Anne, 41-43)

Anne also described the potential consequences of feeling a sense of belonging to the wrong group.

If their sense of belonging happens to an outside group like a group of friends that doesn't have anything to do with the school, then it affects behaviour by increasing negative behaviour, decreasing the amount that they do at school, that kind of thing. (Anne, 45-47)

Belonging to the wrong group or the willingness to belong at all costs are described as the "dark side of belonging." This concept was discussed by all teacher participants, and was described as a significant issue at this school.

The teachers described student belonging in terms of fitting in and having a positive sense of self. They also described some of the negative consequences of feeling too strong of a sense of belonging or feeling it in a group that promotes negative behaviours. The

following sections present the results from the teacher interviews that discuss the teachers' perceptions of how student belonging is developed at school.

Teachers' Perceptions of Student Belonging

The following are the themes that describe teachers' perceptions of how student belonging is developing and enhanced at school. These themes are trusting relationships and opportunities for student engagement.

Trusting relationships. Trusting relationships, according to the teachers, need to be fostered both between the student and the teacher and the student and his or her peers. According to Anne, trust is a major challenge at this school. "I think the big thing is the road block of that student being able to trust that this is where they want to belong" (Anne, 184-185). Anne, Jim, Roger, and Melissa, spoke of students developing trust through two means: feeling a sense of safety and consistency.

Safety. Anne argued that one way the teachers establish trust at this school is through providing students with a safe place to learn and participate.

I think there is a safety spot in it for our kids. Being that they are so at risk for a number of different reasons, that safety is a bigger concern and a bigger part of what makes them belong to something. (Anne, 31-34)

Jim described that he wants his students to "feel safe to learn and participate, and that they don't feel criticized or ridiculed for any ideas they have" (Jim 23-25). Both Anne and Jim argued that a safe classroom atmosphere is first developed by the teacher. As was stated previously, one way that teachers do this is by showing students that bad behaviour will not be attributed to who they are as a person. Jim and Melissa described the difference between punishing the behaviour of a student, rather than punishing the student. Anne stated that once

this sense of safety is established, students would begin to feel secure enough to take risks and ask for help.

Consistency. “Consistency” was another method through which trust was enhanced in the classroom. The teachers spoke of consistency in terms of teachers being consistent in their behaviour and in their physical presence in the classroom. Anne described how important it was for teachers to be committed to students. She spoke that the staff members at her school are devoted, with teacher retention rates being very high. She described the term “teacher belonging” which refers to the connection that teachers develop to their schools. Anne argued that if teachers do not have this connection to the school, they “don’t tend to last long here. If you look around, most of the staff have been here for a few years” (Anne, 278-281). Anne also argued that teachers need to be consistent in their behaviour for students to begin to trust them. She questioned, “can they trust that what we mean is what we say and what we say is what we mean?” (Anne, 187)

For trust to develop, consistency also needs to be developed and maintained with the students’ relationships with friends. When describing a recent group of students who felt a strong sense of belonging to her class, Melissa spoke to the importance of having consistent relationships.

Here at this school, I think it is a lot harder to achieve a sense of belonging. It happens in cohorts where kids, the years where kids stay with their same peers throughout the year. I had two years ago a Grade 3 class and the majority of them are still in the same year and same classroom. They really hang out with each other. They have a big sense of community. The class that I have this year is the same

way. They've been with each other at the school for quite a while and they have stuck with each other all the way up. (Melissa, 152-161)

Roger and Melissa both agreed that having a highly transient student population impacts the sense of trust that students have for their peers and teachers. Roger stated, "they move a lot, not necessarily from school to school, but from house to house, house to apartment, or between mom and dad or a friend's place" (Roger, 166-168). According to these teachers, consistent relationships, both with peers and with teachers, can impact a students' sense of belonging to school. Because of the highly transient population of students at this school, it is vital that teachers are consistent in their support for students. According to the teachers, this consistency also influences students' sense of safety and encourages students to form trusting relationships with teachers.

Opportunities for Student Engagement. Similarly to the interviews that took place with students, teachers emphasized the importance of students becoming involved in a wide variety of school activities. Teachers described the importance of this in terms of its value for students' sense of contribution and pride.

Contribution. All of the teachers emphasized the importance of feeling a part of the school community. To encourage this, teachers provided students with opportunities to contribute to their community and school. "You can really see how connected they are to their community when they do something that benefits their community. They do take a lot of pride in that. They feel that they are a part of something important" (Jim, 77-79). Melissa also believed that when students contributed to the school community, they felt valued and that they are a part of something bigger, and part of a team. Roger described how every staff member at the school had to be willing to provide students with the opportunities to

contribute. “We provide the outlets for the kids to feel like they can contribute” (Roger, 138-141).

Involvement in school activities. Similar to the student interviews, teachers described the specific activities that the school offered that enhanced students’ senses of belonging.

Anne said:

We care about kids and want them to have that sense of belonging. One of the things we do is a Christmas dinner. And I think it’s little things like that too...we concentrate on literacy and numeracy but we don’t forget those little things that make a school, that make you want to belong...the crazy hair days, the success assemblies, the spirit days. These activities foster that we are all one, we all belong here. (Anne 268-274)

Jim spoke particularly about sports and the emphasis that the school has on developing belonging through the athletics programs.

In our community athletics is an up and coming thing in the last couple years. Being a coach of a lot of teams, it is great to see that. We had a very few teams when I started. Then we started pushing teamwork, team play, fair play, and so on. (Jim 225-229)

Participating in something special was another aspect of feeling a sense of belonging. Melissa felt that taking students on field trips was a great way to build teamwork and relationships. According to Melissa, taking students out into the community fosters a sense of pride and a sense of belonging to school. Roger also spoke about this when he stated that events organized by the community are a great way for students to learn about themselves and their peers. He spoke highly of various community organizations’ participation in the

school. Roger said these activities support the positive development of students and increase their connection to the school.

Pride. One of the positive consequences of participating in sports and extra-curricular activities is the development of pride. Melissa compared the sense of pride the students have now compared to when she started at the school. She said:

The kids now are a lot more proud of the school that they go to and each other. You know when the girls' volleyball team plays, the boys watch and the other way around, and they are cheering each other on and talking about it in the hallways and they are telling the other teacher because it is a really important part of their life. I think it is that belonging to a group. (Melissa, 77-81)

Jim believes that it is when you take the students out of the school that you can begin to sense their pride.

We push that their school is something to be proud of. They created it. When you leave the school you represent a whole group of people. They take pride in that. It's a big area where we see a big sense of belonging in terms of how they act outside. (Jim, 227-239)

Melissa and Anne also described how feeling a sense of belonging could increase the ownership that a student feels for his or her classroom. They see this when students clean up after an activity in the class, when they are showing their parents around on parent-teacher nights, and when they are representing their class at school functions. These behaviors show that students do have a sense of belonging to their classroom and schools and that they are proud to represent their community.

The interviews with the teachers indicated that teachers describe student belonging as fitting in and feeling a positive sense of self. They also spoke to some of the consequences of feeling too strong a sense of belonging or feeling it to the wrong group. The teachers also described their perceptions of how belonging is developed for their students: trusting relationships and opportunities for student engagement.

Summary of Results

The results of this study suggested that students experience a sense of belonging in multiple ways. Students and teachers described belonging and how it is developed for students at the school. The data showed that students felt that a teacher's practices and personality can influence students' senses of belonging to school. The students also felt that belonging is developed and enhanced through trusting relationships and opportunities to become engaged in school activities. The data also showed that teachers from this school felt that students need to be actively engaged so that they can feel a connection and sense of belonging to the school. There were some similarities and differences between students' and teachers' descriptions of belonging and of what developed belonging at school. The following section discusses the similarities and differences between participants' reports in closer detail.

Comparing Students' Experiences and Teachers' Perceptions of Student Belonging

The intent of comparing students' and teachers' responses was so that belonging factors, such as holistic teaching, trusting relationships, and opportunities for student engagement can be further examined. What teachers perceive to be influential belonging factors and what students actually experience may differ. This can have an impact on how students integrate themselves into a classroom and how they develop a sense of belonging.

Research suggests that feeling a sense of belonging can impact a student's engagement, motivation, achievement, self-perceptions, and mental health (Hagerty et al., 1992; Osterman, 2000). The potential effects of feeling a sense of belonging could be vital for students' success. It is imperative that teachers begin to understand the challenges that students have when developing a sense of belonging to school and what belonging factors positively influence students' experiences. Practitioners can begin to modify their programs, philosophies, and practices to meet the belonging needs of all students by examining what is perceived to be important to teachers with what is actually important to students. It is also important to recognize some of the similarities that are evident between the students' and teachers' responses. This can indicate that teachers are perceptive towards their students' socio-emotional needs for belonging and are active in establishing classroom atmospheres that enhance belonging. The similarities will be discussed first, followed by the differences.

Similarities. Many similarities were found between the teachers' and students' responses. Most of these similarities were in the descriptions of belonging and the importance of belonging for student success. The teachers and the students understood the value that feeling a sense of belonging has for students while at school. To all participants, belonging was necessary so that students could feel comfortable to contribute to the class. Most of the participants also spoke of how important it was to feel a sense of belonging while at home and in the community, and that these feelings of belonging could transfer to feeling valued at school.

The major similarity that emerged from participant interviews was the emphasis that both groups of participants placed on support. Both the students and teachers recognized that belonging is felt when peers and adults support students. For both groups, belonging is a

social phenomenon that is enhanced through positive relationships. The forms of support varied between the participants' responses, but the overall understanding of belonging as being enhanced by others was consistent. Another similarity that surfaced from the two sets of interviews was the emphasis that was placed on becoming involved in school activities. The students spoke of how much they enjoyed participating on sports teams and in extra-curricular activities. The teachers agreed that these activities significantly enhance students' experiences of belonging at school.

Another similarity that was found within the interviews was the positive experiences of belonging that the participants expressed. The students spoke of many positive experiences that they had while being a member of this school community. They spoke to how supportive and encouraging their teachers were and how their teachers made them feel a sense of belonging to their class and school. These students all felt a strong connection to their schools and they were involved in many facets of the school. The teachers also spoke to these positive experiences and how they influenced belonging. While these positive experiences of belonging cannot be generalized to include all students from the school, the data still showed that the teachers from this school were successful in developing a sense of belonging for the six interviewed students.

In summary, students and teachers expressed the overall importance of feeling a sense of belonging to school and the community and that having positive relationships can affect students' experiences with belonging to school. Responses among participants differed in what makes a positive relationship. The following section discusses the differences that were found between the students' and teachers' responses and how these differences can

provide more information about the next steps that teachers can take when fostering a welcoming classroom that emphasizes student belonging.

Differences. The differences that were found between the students' and teachers' responses point to areas for improvement or modification when teachers establish welcoming classrooms. The results indicated that the students and teachers had similar descriptions of belonging and its importance. The differentiation between the responses occurred in the emphasis on the factors that influence a student's sense of belonging. The following sections discuss these differences in more detail. These sections are: the impact of peers and teachers, student involvement, student-teacher relationships, and teacher support.

The impact of peers and teachers. Students and teachers believed that personal relationships could have an impact on students' senses of belonging to school. The teachers discussed the importance of students' peer relationships, when asked what teachers felt was the most significant contributor to belonging. The teachers, Melissa, Jim, Anne, and Roger all felt that a student's peer relationships would have the strongest influence on that student's integration into the classroom, and that this would impact student success. Jim said that fitting in was a top priority for his students. "The need to feel liked that need to fit in, especially at the elementary level and even at the high school level. It's all about your friends right?" (Jim, 197-199). The students, conversely, did not believe that peer relationships were the most important variable when developing a sense of belonging to school. When the students were asked about any negative experiences with peers, they described how these students made them feel upset, but that this did not impact their sense of belonging. These students described their peer relationships as important, but that they did not need to be accepted by everyone to feel a sense of belonging. Student participants described their

resiliency when it came to issues with peers. They realized that these problems would be a reality of most relationships and they were willing to ignore the situation or move on from it quickly. Clark said,

Well, I'd try to figure out why they didn't accept me and then I'd try to fix it and if that didn't work, I'd get over it, maybe they wont. If they are rude to me, I can ignore them. If you bicker back and forth it can get bigger. But if I ignore them and leave it, it'll go away. (Clark, 216-219)

The students did agree that having one reciprocal friendship was enough to feel like they belong. Ian stated, "Well feeling like I belong is when one person accepts me. Say I had a friend and I was new and he accepted me by becoming my friend and hanging out out with me" (Ian, 19-20).

Interviews with students and teachers indicated that teachers may overemphasize the importance of peer relationships to feeling a sense of belonging. Specifically, teachers may overemphasize the need for students to feel accepted by the majority of their peers. Teachers may also underemphasize, or not completely comprehend the importance of the student-teacher relationship to feeling a sense of belonging. Student interviews indicated that issues with peers were solved with little impact on the student's sense of belonging, whereas negative relationships with teachers were attributed to low feelings of belonging in the classroom. This finding is meaningful because it suggested that teachers may have more influence on students' sense of belonging than students' peers. These findings suggested that there is value in developing and maintaining a positive student-teacher relationship, in addition to positive student-student relationships. One of the themes in this study is Holistic Teaching, and this theme relates to how a positive student-teacher relationship is developed

so that students can feel a sense of belonging. This will be discussed in more detail in the discussion chapter.

Student involvement. Both the students and teachers emphasized the importance of student involvement in school for developing belonging. Under the theme “opportunities for student engagement” the value that school and community activities have on positive student development emerged. The students and teachers gave detailed responses about the specific opportunities at school and how this enhances belonging. The teachers spoke of how important it was for teachers to provide students the opportunities to contribute. For example, Anne said,

I think its little things like that too...we have a concentration on numeracy and literacy but we don't forget about those little things that make a school, that make you want to belong...the crazy hair days, the success assemblies, the spirit days.

(Anne, 270, 273)

Students agreed with this argument, but felt that there was an additional component to feeling a sense of contribution. All of the students expressed the importance of their “student voice.” This refers to students being asked for their suggestions and opinions when teachers create and implement activities at the school. The students appreciated the opportunities that the teachers provided, but they would have liked to be more included in the creation of these opportunities. This desire for involvement points to the importance of student-teacher collaboration in developing a sense of belonging. This contribution not only included participating in school activities, but assisting in creating the activities as well. Ian recommended, “you [teachers] could figure out what they [students] all like and try to make a lesson that includes every one and what they like” (Ian, 274-275). Student belonging may

be enhanced if teachers addressed their students' needs by including students in the decision-making process.

Student-teacher relationships. Teachers recognized the importance of establishing and maintaining positive student-teacher relationships. They felt that this was accomplished when teachers provided opportunities for students, academically and socially, and by being respectful, honest, and proud of students' accomplishments. Students' perceptions were closely aligned with the teachers' perceptions. However, students also emphasized the importance of getting to know teachers on a personal level for developing a sense of belonging. Getting to know teachers included teachers feeling comfortable enough to share their personal stories, show emotion, and be willing to incorporate their personality and interests into lessons. Many of the students responded that they liked to know what interests their teachers because it makes them want to trust the teacher more. Lia commented on the importance of teachers allowing their students to get to know them. "I think that helps because then they'll know a little more about you, you'll know a little more about them and they'll start trusting you to help them out with their problems" (Lia, 252-253). The students argued that teachers are more like real people when they feel comfortable enough to make jokes, share a personal story, or show emotion. This personal side to teachers enhanced student belonging because students felt that they could express their own personality and interests in a safe environment.

This is another aspect of Holistic Teaching that points to the importance of building the social and emotional student-teacher relationship. This finding suggested the importance for teachers to be willing to get to know their students, and allowing students to get to know them on a personal level. This may enhance trust in the classroom and may encourage

students to be more comfortable with their socio-emotional interactions with other students and adults.

Teacher support. Both the students and teachers expressed the contribution of teacher support to students' feeling a sense of belonging to the classroom and school. Teachers spoke of this in terms of academic support. They believed that teachers needed to be willing to provide the time and the support necessary to support students' academic success. There was some mention of supporting students socially, but this was also expressed in terms of how this social support could enhance student achievement. Students also emphasized the importance of academic support, but felt that the most valuable support a teacher could give would be in the students' social lives. This social support included providing opportunities for students to interact with each other, dealing with social issues when they arise, allowing students to express their personalities and interests, and helping students deal with other social issues. When Sophie was asked to describe the most important thing that a teacher can do to make her feel like she belonged, she responded that the teacher would help her make new friends and maintain her friends. When she was asked if she would also like her teacher to help her with assignments, she said "Yeah, if they didn't I wouldn't learn, but I still want them to help me with the other stuff too." (Sophie, 214-215). The students spoke to how this social support would benefit their achievement, but they mostly pointed to the importance of social support in benefiting their social development and feelings of belonging.

The next chapter discusses the students' and teachers' descriptions of belonging and the three themes that were found from the students' and teachers' perspectives of how belonging is developed. These themes were holistic teaching, trusting relationships, and

opportunities for student engagement. These themes emerged from the categories that were found in the axial coding process. These were developed from the participants' emphasis of each theme and the patterns that were found within the student and teacher interviews. In the following chapter, these themes are contextualized within the constructs of belonging theory: school characteristics, teacher support, and peer acceptance and friendship. Limitations of this study are also considered and the implications of this study for future practice and research.

Chapter 5: Discussion

The purpose of this study was to report students' experiences and teachers' perceptions of student belonging in one elementary school. The research questions for this study addressed students' experiences with belonging and teachers' perceptions of student belonging. This chapter discusses the students' and teachers' descriptions of belonging and the themes that develop student belonging: holistic teaching, trusting relationships, and opportunities for student engagement. These themes will be discussed in terms of their applicability to belonging research and the belonging constructs that were focused on in the literature review: school characteristics teacher support, and peer acceptance and friendship. Following this discussion, the limitations of this study are considered. Finally, the implications of this study on belonging research, as well as on teaching practice are discussed.

Students' and Teachers' Descriptions of Belonging

According to Baumeister and Leary (1995) belonging is fulfilled in two ways. People need frequent personal contact that the majority of the time is free from conflict or negative affect, and people need to perceive that there is an interpersonal bond marked by stability and affective concern that has continuation into the foreseeable future (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). The participants in this study described belonging in a similar way. In particular, students and teachers emphasized the importance of maintaining positive relationships that are enhanced through support and trust. Baumeister and Leary (1995) argued, "to satisfy the need to belong, the person must believe that the other cares about his or her welfare" (p. 500). The students in the present study felt a sense of belonging to their schools. When they described their sense of belonging, they used similar descriptions to Baumeister and Leary's

belonging theory, where there is an emphasis on building successful and supportive relationships.

Student's descriptions of belonging. The students described belonging in terms of being able to focus on what mattered to them. This corresponds to Maslow's hierarchy of needs that places belonging just below the need for food and safety. He argued that once an individual feels a sense of belonging to a group, they are then able to satisfy other lower-order needs. The students addressed this when they spoke of focus. They argued that it was difficult to accomplish their tasks or engage with others successfully when they were worried about their sense of fit within the class. Osterman (2000) also suggested that students who do not feel like they belong may display negative behaviours until their belonging needs are satisfied. Feeling a sense of belonging to a community may allow students to focus on their socio-emotional and academic development.

Teacher's descriptions of belonging. The teachers described belonging as feeling as though one fits in. Fitting in includes feeling supported, valued, and that similarities between members of a group are shared. This is also consistent with the belonging criteria that are described by Baumeister and Leary (1995). Feeling a sense of fit was also one of the main criteria for belonging used by Hagerty et al. (1992). These researchers argued that having a perception of fit relates to positive mental health outcomes in students (Hagerty et al., 2002). The teachers from this study also described student belonging in terms of having a positive sense of self. Positive self-perceptions were discussed as one of the outcomes of belonging in the literature review. Osterman (2000) and Ma (2003) wrote about the benefits of belonging for a student's self-esteem. The teachers from the present study did comment

on the outcomes of a positive self-esteem on student belonging, but they also spoke of belonging in terms of self-esteem. That is, they argued that belonging is about feeling that you have value and that you are able to contribute to your school. Roger, in particular spoke to the transferability of feelings of belonging from home to school and how this depends on the students' sense of self. Ma's research (2003) also found that how a student feels about themselves is transferable to how they feel they belong at school and that this relationship is reciprocal. In this present study, when the teachers were asked to describe belonging, they stated that belonging was about fitting in and feeling positive about your membership.

The teachers also spoke of belonging in terms of its potential consequences when too strong of a sense of belonging is felt or when belonging is felt to a group that promotes negative behaviours, such as cliques or gangs. The dark side of belonging was not extensively researched before this study took place, but the teachers' descriptions do indicate that belonging could be viewed on a spectrum, where negative behaviours can exist when students feel too little or too much of a sense of belonging. The dark side of belonging refers to when students may seek membership to an outside group, such as a gang, to fulfill their belonging needs. This may be a paradox of belonging that could be studied in future research. This is discussed in detail within the implications for future research section.

Belonging Themes

The following paragraphs discuss the major themes that were found for this study: holistic teaching, trusting relationships and opportunities for student engagement. These themes are described in terms of their relationship to belonging research. These themes are similar to the factors that have been identified throughout the literature on belonging: school characteristics, teacher support, and peer acceptance and friendship. These themes are not

separated into students' and teachers' responses. Rather, they have been analyzed together to create a more complete picture of the belonging factors that help to develop and enhance student belonging to school.

Holistic teaching. Holistic Teaching in this study referred to teachers who were connected to their students' lives, academically, socially, and emotionally. The definition used in this study was derived, in part, from holistic education theory. This theory suggests that students engage in optimal learning when the social and affective domains of student development are considered (Tirri, 2011). Holistic learning involves both the personal and academic development of students, as impacted by close social interactions with the teacher (Patel, 2003). There is also emphasis on both the teacher and the student as learners, where both are supported by caring classroom and school environments. The term Holistic Teaching in this study was used to capture the essence of student-teacher relationships that were based on more than academic support. Holistic Teaching is an attempt by teachers to affect students' social and emotional development through personal connections. Most of the research on holistic education has been focused on its impact on higher education and adult education (Patel, 2003). Specifically, these studies seek to examine the student-teacher relationship and how students' social and emotional development is addressed by holistic teaching (Patel, 2003).

The findings of this current study suggested that students feel a sense of belonging when teachers employ holistic teaching practices. That is, when teachers are not only concerned about the student's academic development, but also the student's social and emotional development. This was a major theme within the student interviews. A major component within this theme was teacher support. Students suggested that they felt most

supported by teachers who listen, who are engaged in their students' social lives both inside and outside school, and who allow students to share their own experiences and opinions. These students felt that teachers showed they cared by showing interest in their lives. These results are consistent with research on positive student-teacher relationships. Cert, Cauley, and Chafin (2003) found that students describe teacher support as being interested and connected to students' holistic lives. This included listening to the students, letting students have some input, and by learning about the student's interests.

The present study is also consistent with research that examined the importance of teacher support in students' social domains. It is suggested that teacher support should go beyond the traditional application of providing support only for student achievement. Johnson (2009) argued that teachers have multiple roles to play and that their support needs to consider the multiple facets of students' lives.

The results from the current study suggest that students feel a sense of belonging when they are holistically supported by teachers. Students also appreciate when student-teacher relationships are personal and connected, even beyond the academic realms of school. These findings complement other research on belonging that suggested that the dynamics of the student-teacher relationship are influential in shaping a student's sense of belonging to school (Goodenow, 1993; Osterman, 2000). In the present study, the student-teacher relationship was found to be a contributing aspect in students' descriptions of belonging. Specifically, students emphasized the importance of holistic teaching, where teachers are concerned with students' social and personal development in addition to their academic achievement.

Trusting relationships. The results of this study suggest that trust was a major component for students to feel a sense of belonging to school. Trusting Relationships refers to the student-student and student-teacher relationships that exist within a school. Students all stated that they had very positive relationships with their teachers and friends because they could trust them. The concept of trust underpinned all three themes (holistic teaching, trusting relationships, and opportunities for student engagement) and it was a popular topic of discussion during the interviews when the students were speaking about teacher support and student engagement with school activities. Trust, for the students was about feeling safe and feeling respected. Another important element that surfaced throughout the interviews with the students was that they also wanted to be trusted in return. They wanted to have friends and teachers who also trusted them. This reciprocal trust made students feel comfortable and encouraged them to connect with teachers and students on a personal level.

Research on reciprocal friendships has indicated that it is the quality of the friendships rather than the quantity that may influence student outcome variables, such as self-esteem or achievement. (Hamm & Faircloth, 2011). The students who were interviewed for this study argued that they did not need to be friends with all of their classmates, as long as they had a couple really close friends. Close friends were those who were trusted and who trusted in return. From this study's results, it was also evident that the interviewed students placed less emphasis on group membership with peers than on acceptance and trust from the teacher. This finding does not correspond with some of the work that has been done on belonging and peer relationships. Goodenow (1993) found that middle school students placed an emphasis on friendships and peer relations and less emphasis on direct personal contact with teachers, especially in the middle-school years (Goodenow, 1993). The sample

of students that were interviewed for this present study emphasized how important it was to have a few good friendships that are based on trust and to have a caring teacher. These students did not feel that peer acceptance and group membership significantly influenced their sense of belonging to school.

This present study also contributes to the complexities of belonging research because of its contribution to understanding the misalignment of students' experiences and teachers' perceptions of student belonging. The teachers felt that belonging was developed through positive peer relationships, whereas the students felt that positive student-teacher relationships may be more influential. These results are contextual, however, they do highlight the importance of considering both students and teachers views of belonging.

Opportunities for Student Engagement. Nichols (2006) argued that students want to engage in and contribute to school activities and that this will enhance belonging. The results from this present study contribute to this argument. Students and teachers continually cited the importance of school activities in developing an inclusive school where students felt they belonged. These school contextual variables are influential in shaping students' experiences, and according to Johnson (2009), it is the teacher's role to provide students with these opportunities. She also argued that these activities provide students with the opportunity to collaborate and interact with teachers and peers, and that this enhances personal relationships (Johnson, 2009).

Eccles et al. (1993) wrote about the influence of allowing students to have a voice. The researchers argued that these opportunities for students to contribute to the classroom, support students' autonomy development, and that this sense of autonomy can transcend into other domains of the students' lives (Eccles et al., 1993). They also argued "psychological

changes result from a mismatch between the needs of developing adolescents and the opportunities afforded to them by their social environments” (Eccles et al., 1993, p. 90). As students get older, there is an increasing need for opportunities for autonomy. These students want to be consulted and treated as important members of the classroom. Eccles et al. (1993) argued that this is one of the major difficulties that adolescents face. Schools need to consult students and provide them with the opportunities for autonomy and self-determination. The students that were interviewed for this study described this sense of autonomy in terms of participating in sporting and extra-curricular activities. They also wanted their opinions to be considered in the classroom.

Research on school characteristics and belonging suggest that there are many contextual factors that can influence a student’s sense of belonging to school (Johnson, 2009). The contextual factors that were present in the interviews for this study were school activities, such as celebrations or sporting events, and opportunities to become involved in and contribute to the school, in a school play or club for example. These opportunities provided students with the chance to explore their interests while developing their sense of autonomy and self-determination. This helped to develop a sense of belonging to the school.

Summary

The themes in this study were holistic teaching, trusting relationships, and opportunities for student engagement. Each theme represents the different aspects that are important to developing a sense of belonging to school, according to the interviewed students and teachers. The three themes are comparable to belonging research and the three constructs that were discussed in the literature review: school characteristics, teacher support, and peer acceptance and friendship. The students and teachers all described belonging in terms of

positive interpersonal relationships. This is consistent with Baumeister and Leary's (1995) theory of belonging and Goodenow's (1993) definition of school belonging. The following sections discuss the limitations of this study, and the implications for research and practice.

Limitations

There are limitations that must be considered when considering the results of this study. The first limitation is that only one school was consulted. However, the purpose of the study was to examine students' experiences and teachers' perceptions of student belonging to one elementary school. The focus was on the particular experiences of these students, and how the school's context impacts the students' ability to develop a sense of belonging. While it is difficult to generalize the results of this study to other schools or school boards, the student and teacher interviews depicted the experiences and perceptions of the reality that is felt by them at Joseph Arthur Elementary. This study examined the depth of belonging experiences for this group of students and teachers at this particular school. This school was located in mid-sized city in Ontario. This school also served a community with a lower socio-economic status. Many of these students required special education services. The results found for this study are bound by the context of this school and the experiences of its members. This study contributes to the complexities of belonging research because of this school's and these students' and teachers' unique characteristics.

Another limitation that also must be considered is the population of students that were interviewed for this study. The students that consented to this study all expressed a high sense of belonging and connection to their school. When these students were asked what challenged their sense of belonging to school, many of the students had a difficult time thinking back on their past experiences to answer the question. These students were involved

in their school, had reciprocal friendships, and did not have any significant negative experiences with teachers and peers. While it was a major purpose of this thesis to examine some of the positive experiences of belonging that these students had, however, the results of this study could have been enhanced if the interviewed students were able to express experiences they had when they struggled to develop a sense of belonging or felt that their belonging could have been enhanced.

An additional limitation of this study was the potential impact that the researcher had on the discussions with the students. This researcher had worked with these students on numerous occasions as a volunteer. While it was felt that the responses from the students were genuine and reflective, there was still a student-teacher dynamic that occurred during the interview. The students might have perceived the researcher to be a teacher, and may have been less inclined to voice any negative perceptions of the school or other teachers. However, the trusting relationships that were previously formed between the researcher and the students may have increased the comfort the students had discussing this topic. During the interviews, the students were assured that what was discussed in the interview was confidential and would have no bearing on their position at school.

Implications for Research

This study sought to examine students' experiences and teachers' perceptions of student belonging to one elementary school. One of the main objectives was to ask students directly of their particular experiences. It was important to consider the lived experiences of these students so that more knowledge could be gained on the challenges that students have when developing a sense of belonging to school. Research has already suggested that adults may misjudge students' experiences by placing more value on their own perceptions of a

certain phenomenon. It is valuable to listen to students' experiences, as separate from adult's perceptions because it is indicative of what is important to them. This study contributes to belonging research because it is based on students' accounts of belonging. This study is also unique because it sought to compare the results from the students with the findings from teachers to uncover any misalignments between the groups. It is valuable to consider teachers' beliefs because when they are compared to students' beliefs, it becomes more obvious where any modifications or development of new policies and practices could be focused. For example, this study found that teachers may overemphasize the need for students to be accepted by all of their peers, and teachers may underemphasize the value of the student-teacher relationship to developing a sense of belonging.

This study also showed how dynamic and contextual belonging is to individuals. For all of the participants, belonging was vital to success. Belonging felt comfortable and safe. Belonging was about having positive relationships. The emphasis within these feelings and the practices that enhanced belonging were individual and could change depending on contextual factors. Students that were interviewed in this study were a unique group. In spite of the high transient population of the school, the students all felt a strong sense of belonging to the school. This can be attributed to a number of factors that include the teachers, the school, and the students' individual personalities and beliefs. The teachers interviewed in this study were very passionate about their students and believed that it was paramount for these students to feel a sense of belonging to school.

This study showed that there are many ways for students to feel like they belong, but the factors that were consistently found to develop belonging surrounded positive relationships. More research should consider the value that student-teacher relationships

have on student belonging. This research could begin by looking at the effect of holistic teaching practices on student-teacher relationships.

One particular area of research that should be explored further is the concept of the dark side of belonging. This term was defined by the researcher as the consequences of feeling too strong of a sense of belonging, or feeling a sense of belonging to a group that is not conducive for a child's pro-social development. For example, when students begin to feel territorial about their membership in a group and act confrontational to outsiders or when students seek to fulfill their belonging needs with an outside group, such as a gang or clique. This finding was unique to belonging research because most studies on belonging view belonging as a necessity that produces positive outcomes for members of a group. However, this study suggests that belonging could have potential negative effects, especially if it is felt by a group that displays negative behaviours, or when too much of a sense of belonging is felt.

More research could focus on the experiences of students who feel a strong sense of belonging to a group that is not associated with the school and does not share the same values that are encouraged at school. Sharkey, Shekhtmeyster, Chavez-Lopez, Norris, and Sass (2011) suggested that schools can compensate for the attraction of these outside groups, such as gangs, by addressing students' belonging needs. Past research has posited that students may be drawn to gangs because of the desire for companionship, support, and a sense of belonging. Sharkey et al. (2011) also argued that students seek gang-membership because they want to have opportunities to participate in something that makes them feel valued and supported.

Future studies could also focus on some of the negative impacts of having too strong of a sense of belonging to school. In this study, Jim and Anne spoke of these consequences. They stated that students become territorial and mistrusting of others (especially substitute teachers, volunteers, and other visiting staff members). Feeling a sense of belonging to school creates positive outcomes for students, but this phenomenon could be viewed on a spectrum, where feeling too much or too little may influence negative behaviours. These two consequences of belonging should be looked at in greater detail, and especially in children and young adolescents. This is the age when students will begin to seek out other options if they do not feel a sense of belonging to school (Finn, 1989).

Implications for Practice

This study suggested that teachers should listen to their students, be caring, trustworthy, and continually strive to provide students with opportunities to explore their interests and experience autonomy. Teaching so that students feel a sense of belonging requires teachers to support students academically, socially, and emotionally. Students want to contribute to decisions about their education and they want their teachers to value their suggestions and opinions. Above all, students want to feel connected to their schools, to feel that they fit in, and to feel a sense of belonging that is enhanced by their relationships.

Specifically, teachers should consider students' suggestions and opinions when creating opportunities for students to become involved in the classroom or school. Teachers should also recognize that students want to learn about their teachers as much as students want to learn about their peers. Teachers need to be willing to share their personalities and their experiences with students. This will help to establish a classroom that has reciprocal relationships that are based on trust. Teachers should also be willing to assist students in

students' social lives. If students have issues with friends or are having a difficult time fitting in, teachers should allow for more activities that develop student cooperation and collaboration. The results from this study suggest that students' senses of belonging are developed when they are supported by caring and trusting reciprocal relationships.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to examine student belonging from two perspectives: elementary students and teachers. The students and teachers who consented to this study were asked to participate in individual interviews that addressed their experiences and perceptions of students' sense of belonging to school. The results indicated that students experience belonging through holistic teaching, trusting relationships, and opportunities. The alignment and misalignment of the students' and teachers' responses indicate that teachers do have an understanding of students' experiences of belonging, but that more can be done in the classroom and school to further enhance students' sense of belonging. Teachers should consider consulting their students to understand how their students develop a sense of belonging, and then modify or develop programs, practices, or philosophies that enhance these feelings. The outcomes of feeling a sense of belonging to school can include improvements in motivation and engagement, achievement, positive self-perceptions, and overall mental health. These are all aspects that contribute to ongoing student success.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Sample Interview Questions

Students.

1. What does feeling like you belong mean to you?
2. Do you think it is important to feel like you belong to school? Why?
3. Do you feel happy to go to school every day?
4. (if answered “Yes” to question 3) What is it about your school that makes you want to go to school every day? (if answered “No” to question 3) What is it about your school that makes you not want to go to school everyday?
5. (if they answered “Yes” for question 3) Has there ever been a time in your life when you felt that you didn’t want to go to school? Why did you feel this way? (if answered “No” to question 3) Has there ever been a time in your life when you felt happy to go to school? Why did you feel this way?
6. Is there a time in your life that you felt that you really belonged to school? Tell me about this time.
7. Do you feel like you have great relationships with your friends?
8. What makes a good friend?
9. How do these friends make you feel?
10. Have you ever had any bad relationships with students that you go to school with?
11. How did this student or students make you feel?
12. Do you feel accepted by your classmates?
13. How did this acceptance make you feel?
14. Have you ever not felt accepted by a student or a group of students?

15. How did this make you feel?
16. Describe a quality that makes a teacher welcoming.
17. Can you think of any other qualities?
18. Describe a quality that makes a teacher not welcoming.
19. Can you think of any other qualities?
20. Name the most important thing that teachers can do to make you feel like you belong.
21. If you were in charge, what would you do to make sure that everyone felt included in the school?
22. If you could make a suggestion to a new teacher about how to make a school where everyone felt like they belonged, what would you suggest?

Teachers.

1. What does feeling sense of belonging mean to you?
2. What do you think it means for your students? a) emotionally b) socially c) academically d) behaviourally
3. Do you think it's important for your students to feel a strong sense of belonging to your classroom? (Yes or No) What about the school in general? Why is it important?
4. Can you tell when students have a high sense of belonging to the school?
5. What are some of the characteristics or behaviours of students who you think have a high sense of belonging to school? What about too high – can this be negative?
6. Can you tell when students have a low sense of belonging to the school?
7. What are some of the characteristics or behaviours of students who you think have a low sense of belonging to school?

8. Tell me about a classroom that you have had where you believe that most students felt a strong sense of belonging to the classroom. Describe these students' senses of belonging to the school.
9. Tell me about a classroom that you have had where you believe that not all students felt a strong sense of belonging to the classroom. What about the school?
10. What made these experiences with the classes different?
11. When students first arrive in September, what do you think they do to begin to develop a sense of belonging or connection to your classroom or school? What about new students?
12. How do you think students begin to develop a sense of belonging to a new classroom? What is the most important element that can help a student feel a sense of belonging?
13. What do you perceive to be a challenge that your students have when developing their sense of belonging to the school?
14. Can you think of any other challenges?
15. What is one challenge that you have when creating a classroom where students feel like they belong?
16. Can you think of any more challenges?
17. What are some of your practices that you have in your classroom to facilitate belonging?

Appendix B: Consent Form Principal

Students' Experiences and Teachers' Perceptions of Student Belonging in Elementary School

Karen O'Shea

Faculty of Education, Queen's University

I have read the Letter of Information and have had any questions answered to my satisfaction.

I understand that teachers and students from my school will be asked to participate in the study called "Students' Experiences and Teachers' Perceptions of Student Belonging in Elementary School." I understand that this means that students and teachers may be asked to participate in an interview. This interview will take approximately 1 hour for the teachers and 30 minutes for the students. I understand that students and teachers may be asked to participate in 1 follow-up interview that may last for 30 minutes. I understand that these interviews will be audio-recorded. I also understand that the interviews with the students will take place during school-hours within the school. Interviews with the teachers will take place outside school hours at a location of the teacher's choice.

I have been informed that participation in this study is voluntary and that teachers and students may withdraw from the study at any time without reason or consequence. I understand that every effort will be made to maintain confidentiality to the extent possible.

I understand that only the researcher Karen O'Shea and supervisor will have access to the data. The data may also be published in professional journals or presented at conferences, but any such presentations will be of general findings and will never breach individual confidentiality.

I am aware that if I have any questions, concerns, or complaints, I may contact Karen O'Shea, 5klo@queensu.ca or at 613-449-7484, her project supervisor, Dr. Derek Berg, derek.berg@queensu.ca or at 613-533-6000 ext. 77413; or the Chair of the General Research Ethics Board (613-533-6081) at Queen's University.

If you agree to allow your students and teachers to participate, complete and sign one copy of the Consent Form and return it to Karen O'Shea. Keep one copy for your own records.

Name (please print): _____

Signature: _____

Today's Date: _____

Appendix C: Letter of Information Principal

Dear Principal,

I, Karen O'Shea, under the supervision of Dr. Derek Berg, in the Faculty of Education at Queen's University in Kingston Ontario, invite students in Grades 4 to 8 and teachers who teach Grades 4 to 8 to be a part of my study looking at student belonging to school. I am a master's student completing a thesis. My study is called, "Students' Experiences and Teachers' Perceptions of Student Belonging in Elementary School." The purpose of this study is to have teachers describe student belonging and students to describe their sense of belonging to school. *This study has been granted clearance according to the recommended principles of Canadian ethics guidelines, and Queen's policies.*

Students and teachers that consent to the study will be asked to participate in an interview. Interviews with the students will be 30 minutes in duration, with the possibility of a follow-up interview that may also be 30 minutes in length. This interview will take place during the school day, at a location within the school. Interviews with the teachers will last for one hour with the possibility of a 30-minute follow-up interview. These interviews can take place at the discretion of the teacher. Interviews will be audiotaped so that the researcher can make accurate transcriptions of the data. Students and teachers will be asked questions that will help the researcher understand how students experience belonging in the school. These questions will ask for teachers' perceptions of student belonging, in terms of its development and incidence in the school. Interview questions will ask students to describe their sense of belonging and how their sense of belonging could be enhanced, both specifically to them and also hypothetically.

There are minimal risks for students and teachers being part of this study. Some questions may be personal or sensitive. Their participation is entirely voluntary. They do not have to answer any questions that they do not want to. They can withdraw from the study at anytime without reason or consequence. They can request removal of all or part of their data.

Students and teachers' identities will be kept confidential to the best of the researcher's ability. Students may be aware of other students participating in the study, but the discussions in the interview will be kept confidential. Students will be reminded of this before the interview takes place. Only the researcher, Karen O'Shea, and her supervisor, Dr. Derek Berg will have access to the data. If the results of this study are published, there will be no identifying information of the school, teachers or students. Should your teachers and students be interested, they are entitled to a copy of the findings. In accordance with Queen's policy, data will be retained for a minimum of five years and data will either be destroyed after five years or retained indefinitely.

If you decide to participate in this study, please complete the consent form attached to this letter of information. Keep one copy of the consent form for your own records.

For questions, concerns, or complaints about the research ethics of this study, contact Karen O'Shea at 5klo@queensu.ca or 613-449-7484 or her supervisor, Dr. Derek Berg at Derek.berg@queensu.ca or 613-533-6000 ext. 77413, the Education Research Ethics Board at ereb@queensu.ca or the chair of the General Research Ethics Board at 613-533-6081 or at chair.greb@queensu.ca

Sincerely,

Karen O'Shea

Appendix D: Consent Form Teachers

Students' Experiences and Teachers' Perceptions of Student Belonging in Elementary School

Karen O'Shea

Faculty of Education, Queen's University

I have read the Letter of Information and have had any questions answered to my satisfaction.

I understand that I will be participating in the study called "Students' Experiences and Teachers' Perceptions of Student Belonging in Elementary School." I understand that this means that I may be asked to participate in an interview. This interview will take approximately 1 hour. I understand that I may be asked to participate in 1 follow-up interview that may last for 30 minutes. The total time for my participation will be approximately 1 hour and 30 minutes. I understand that my interview will be audio-recorded. I understand that should I consent to participate in this study that does not obligate me to distribute letters of information and consent forms to my students.

I have been informed that my participation is voluntary and that I may withdraw from the study at any time without reason or consequence. I understand that every effort will be made to maintain confidentiality to the extent possible.

I understand that only the researcher Karen O'Shea and supervisor will have access to the data. The data may also be published in professional journals or presented at conferences, but any such presentations will be of general findings and will never breach individual confidentiality. Should you be interested, you are entitled to a copy of the findings.

I am aware that if I have any questions, concerns, or complaints, I may contact Karen O'Shea, 5klo@queensu.ca, project supervisor, Dr. Derek Berg, derek.berg@queensu.ca; or the Chair of the General Research Ethics Board (613-533-6081) at Queen's University.
Dereks phone numbers

If you agree to participate, complete and sign one copy of the Consent Form and return it to Karen O'Shea. Keep one copy for your own records.

Name (please print): _____

Signature: _____

Today's Date: _____

If you would like a copy of the findings, please provide your email or postal address below:

Appendix E: Letter of Information Teachers

Dear Teacher,

I, Karen O'Shea, under the supervision of Dr. Derek Berg, in the Faculty of Education at Queen's University in Kingston Ontario, invite students in Grades 4 to 8 and teachers who teach Grades 4 to 8 to be a part of my study looking at student belonging to school. I am a master's student completing a thesis. My study is called, "Students' Experiences and Teachers' Perceptions of Student Belonging in Elementary School." The purpose of this study is to have students describe their sense of belonging to school and have teachers describe their perceptions of student belonging. *This study has been granted clearance according to the recommended principles of Canadian ethics guidelines, and Queen's policies.*

In this study, you may be asked to participate in a 1 hour interview (with the chance of a follow-up interview lasting 30 minutes). Interviews will be audio-taped so that the researcher can make accurate transcriptions of the data. You will be asked questions that will help the researcher understand how students experience belonging in the school. These questions will ask for your perceptions of student belonging, in terms of its development and incidence in the school. You will also be asked to describe some of the characteristics that you perceive to be indicative of a low or high sense of belonging. You will be asked about student belonging in general as well as school characteristics that you believe have a relationship with student belonging.

Your participation is entirely voluntary. There are minimal risks for participating in this study. Some of the questions may be personal or sensitive. You do not have to answer any questions that you do not want to. You can withdraw from the study at any time without reason or consequence. You can request removal of all or part of your data. If you do not wish to participate in this study, you may still distribute letters of information and consent forms to your students. If you wish to participate but do not want your students to participate, you are not obligated to distribute the letter of information and consent forms to your students.

Every effort will be made to ensure your confidentiality. The interviews will take place outside school time so other teachers and students may not be aware that you are participating in the study. All the discussions in the interview will be kept confidential. Only the researcher, Karen O'Shea and her supervisor, Dr. Derek Berg, will have access to the data. If the results of this study are published, there will be no identifying information of the school, teachers or students. Should you be interested, you are entitled to a copy of the findings. In accordance with Queen's policy, data will be retained for a minimum of five years and data will either be destroyed after five years or retained indefinitely.

If you decide to participate in this study, please complete the consent form attached to this letter of information. Please keep one copy of the consent forms for your own records.

For questions, concerns, or complaints about the research ethics of this study, contact Karen O'Shea at 5klo@queensu.ca or 613-449-7484 or her supervisor, Dr. Derek Berg at Derek.berg@queensu.ca or 613-533-6000 ext. 77413, the Education Research Ethics Board at ereb@queensu.ca or the chair of the General Research Ethics Board at 613-533-6081 or at chair.greb@queensu.ca

Sincerely,

Karen O'Shea

Appendix F: Consent Form Students (addressed to Parents/Guardians)

Students' Experiences and Teachers' Perceptions of Student Belonging in Elementary School

Karen O'Shea

Faculty of Education, Queen's University

I have read the Letter of Information and have had any questions answered to my satisfaction.

I understand that my child will be participating in the study called "Students' Experiences and Teachers' Perceptions of Student Belonging in Elementary School." I understand that this means that my child may be asked to participate in an interview. This interview will take approximately 30 minutes. I understand that my child may be asked to participate in 1 follow-up interview that may last for 30 minutes. I understand that my child's interview will be audio-recorded.

I have been informed that my child's participation is voluntary and that my child may withdraw from the study at any time without reason or consequence. I understand that every effort will be made to maintain confidentiality to the extent possible.

I understand that only the researcher, Karen O'Shea and her supervisor will have access to the data. The data may also be published in professional journals or presented at conferences, but any such presentations will be of general findings and will never breach individual confidentiality. Should you be interested, you are entitled to a copy of the findings.

I am aware that if I have any questions, concerns, or complaints, I may contact Karen O'Shea, 5klo@queensu.ca or at 613-449-7484, her project supervisor, Dr. Derek Berg, derek.berg@queensu.ca or at 613-533-6000 ext. 77413; or the Chair of the General Research Ethics Board (613-533-6081) at Queen's University.

If you agree to participate, complete and sign one copy of the Consent Form and return it to your son's/daughter's classroom teacher. Keep the second copy for yourself.

Son's/Daughter's Name (please print): _____

Parent/Guardian's Name (please print): _____

Parent/Guardian's Signature: _____

Today's Date: _____

If you would like a copy of the findings, please provide your email or postal address below:

Appendix G: Letter of Information Students (addressed to Parents/Guardians)

Dear Parent(s) or Guardian(s),

I, Karen O'Shea, under the supervision of Dr. Derek Berg, in the Faculty of Education at Queen's University in Kingston Ontario, invite students in Grades 4 to 8 to be a part of my study looking at student belonging to school. I am a master's student in the Faculty of Education completing my thesis. My study is called, "Students' Experiences and Teachers' Perceptions of Student Belonging in Elementary School." The purpose of this study is to have students describe their sense of belonging to school. *This study has been granted clearance according to the recommended principles of Canadian ethics guidelines, and Queen's policies.*

In this study, your son or daughter may be asked to participate in a 30 minute interview (with the chance of a follow-up interview lasting 30 minutes). Interviews will be audio-taped so that the researcher can make accurate transcriptions of the data. Students will be asked questions that will help the researcher understand how they experience belonging in the school. Students will be asked to describe situations when they felt or did not feel a strong sense of belonging and how their belonging could be enhanced, both specifically to them and also hypothetically.

Your child's participation is entirely voluntary. There are minimal risks for your child being a part of this study. Some of the questions may be personal or sensitive. Your child will be informed that they do not have to answer any questions that they do not want to. Your child will be informed that they can withdraw from the study at any time without reason or consequence. You or your child can request removal of all or part of his or her data. Participation or withdrawal from the study will have no influence upon your child's academic standing in school.

Every effort will be made to ensure the confidentiality of your child. Your child's classmates may be aware that your child is participating in the study but they will not be aware of what was talked about in the interview. The interview will take place in a private place within the school. Your child will be reminded to keep the discussions during the interview confidential. Only the researcher, Karen O'Shea and the researcher's supervisor, Dr. Derek Berg will have access to the data. If the results of this study are published, there will be no identifying information of the school or student. Should you be interested, you are entitled to a copy of the findings of your child. In accordance with Queen's policy, data will be retained for a minimum of five years and data will either be destroyed after five years or retained indefinitely.

If you decide to participate in this study, please complete the consent form attached to this letter of information. Keep one copy of the consent forms for your own records.

For questions, concerns, or complaints about the research ethics of this study, contact the researcher Karen O'Shea at 5klo@queensu.ca or 613-449-7484, the researcher's supervisor Dr. Derek Berg at derek.berg@queensu.ca or 613-533-6000 ext. 77413, the Education Research Ethics Board at ereb@queensu.ca or the chair of the General Research Ethics Board at 613-533-6081 or at chair.greb@queensu.ca If you would like to remove your data or withdraw from the study, contact the researcher, Karen O'Shea or the researcher's supervisor.

Sincerely,

Karen O'Shea

Appendix H: GREB Approval



September 19, 2011

Ms. Karen O'Shea
Master's Student
Faculty of Education
Duncan McArthur Hall
Queen's University
511 Union Street
Kingston, ON K7M 5R7

GREB Ref #: GEDUC-576-11; Romeo # 6006261

Title: "GEDUC-576-11 Students' Experiences and Teachers' Perceptions of Student Belonging in One Elementary School"

Dear Ms. O'Shea:

The General Research Ethics Board (GREB), by means of a delegated board review, has cleared your proposal entitled "**GEDUC-576-11 Students' Experiences and Teachers' Perceptions of Student Belonging in One Elementary School**" for ethical compliance with the Tri-Council Guidelines (TCPS) and Queen's ethics policies. In accordance with the Tri-Council Guidelines (article D.1.6) and Senate Terms of Reference (article G), your project has been cleared for one year. At the end of each year, the GREB will ask if your project has been completed and if not, what changes have occurred or will occur in the next year.

You are reminded of your obligation to advise the GREB, with a copy to your unit REB; of any adverse event(s) that occur during this one year period (access this form at https://eservices.queensu.ca/romeo_researcher/ and click Events - GREB Adverse Event Report). An adverse event includes, but is not limited to, a complaint, a change or unexpected event that alters the level of risk for the researcher or participants or situation that requires a substantial change in approach to a participant(s). You are also advised that all adverse events must be reported to the GREB within 48 hours.

You are also reminded that all changes that might affect human participants must be cleared by the GREB. For example you must report changes to the level of risk, applicant characteristics, and implementations of new procedures. To make an amendment, access the application at https://eservices.queensu.ca/romeo_researcher/ and click Events - GREB Amendment to Approved Study Form. These changes will automatically be sent to the Ethics Coordinator, Gail Irving, at the Office of Research Services or irvingg@queensu.ca for further review and clearance by the GREB or GREB Chair.

On behalf of the General Research Ethics Board, I wish you continued success in your research.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Joan Stevenson".

Joan Stevenson, Ph.D.
Professor and Chair
General Research Ethics Board

cc: Dr. Derek Berg, Faculty Supervisor
Dr. Lesly Wade-Woolley, Chair, Unit REB
Erin Wicklam, c/o Graduate Studies and Bureau of Research