

BELONGING IN A GRADE 6 INCLUSIVE CLASSROOM: THREE MULTIPLE
PERSPECTIVE CASE STUDIES OF STUDENTS WITH MILD DISABILITIES

by

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ABSTRACT

This study describes the experiences of belonging of three Grade 6 students with mild disabilities, Jacob, Leah, and Andy, educated in an inclusive classroom. In addition, I gained the perspective of the classroom teacher, Linda, who described her approaches to facilitating belonging in an inclusive environment. Data collection included field observations and interviews with the classroom teacher and with the three focal participants. After completing data collection, analysis of the classroom data and the data of the three individual students was conducted using standard methods of qualitative analysis. Themes that emerged from the classroom data included: developing a trust culture, developing trusting relationships, teaching pro-social behaviours, building competence, and fostering autonomy. The classroom teacher fostered a supportive community environment that encouraged the development of interpersonal relationships, and she actively supported the social-emotional needs and the academic needs of all her students.

Each student participant presented a unique case; therefore, the themes for the three student participants varied. Common themes included: sense of belonging, interpersonal relationships, and peer victimization. Themes that varied were sense of academic and social competence and fostering autonomy. For each individual student, belonging was fostered slightly differently and yet to fill this need, relatedness with others and a sense of academic or social competence was necessary. This study emphasizes that a sense of belonging is complex and multidimensional.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

My years as a special education teacher have given me the opportunity to work in a variety of settings with diverse learners. The most significant undertaking of my teaching career was co-teaching with a regular education teacher in an inclusive classroom. The goal of our teaching was to make all students feel like competent individuals and to help all students experience academic and social success. Many times, I observed students with exceptionalities collaboratively working on academic tasks with their nondisabled peers. And, yet something else was happening in our classroom that made our classroom an inclusive environment for students with exceptionalities.

There was one student in particular that I will always remember. This student was diagnosed with bi-polar disorder and struggled to build relationships with others. In this classroom, my team teacher had a weekly circle time during which the students participated in class meetings and the students learned more about each other. Early in the year, this student would leave the classroom every week. I knew that, when circle time ended, I would always find this student in the designated safe space. As the year progressed, this student would no longer leave the room during circle time, but would remain in the classroom at a desk and sketch pictures in a notebook while we shared and listened to one another in the seated circle. Then one day, to my surprise, this student sat in circle with the classmates and shared personal information with the class. As this moment happened, my co-teacher and I quickly glanced at one another, and I noticed we both had tears in our eyes. This student's story led me to wonder about the experiences for students with exceptionalities in inclusive classrooms, particularly the ways students

with exceptionalities feel like they belong. Thus this research focuses on three cases of Grade 6 students with mild disabilities and their experiences of belonging in an inclusive classroom.

Belonging has been defined as an individual's need for interpersonal, emotional connection with others (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Ryan & Powelson, 1991). Based on a comprehensive literature review, Osterman (2000) argued that students have a psychological need to belong, and students who experience a sense of belonging are more motivated to learn and are more engaged in learning. For all students, a sense of belonging is fostered by parents, teachers, peers, and friends (Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Murray & Greenberg, 2006; Ryan, Stiller, & Lynch, 1994). Interpersonal relationships in an individual's life play a specific role in fostering an individual's sense of belonging (Furrer & Skinner; Ryan et al.). To illustrate these effects, studies have demonstrated that feeling a sense of belonging with peers has an influence on academic achievement whereas feeling a sense of belonging with teachers promotes academic engagement (Furrer & Skinner; Ryan et al.). Unfortunately, students who do not experience feelings of belonging are at-risk for unhealthy behaviours and decreased engagement in school.

The studies that have been conducted in the area of belonging for students with disabilities focus mainly on students with severe disabilities (Schnorr, 1997; Williams & Downing, 1998). These studies are faced with the challenge of the participants' limited ability to verbally communicate their feelings. As a proxy for the perspectives of students with severe needs, the researchers have considered the perspectives of the nondisabled peers. For instance, Schnorr investigated a sense of belonging in middle and high school students with moderate and severe disabilities by capturing the perspectives of their

nondisabled classmates through the use of semi-structured interviews. The findings revealed that a sense of belonging for students with moderate and severe disabilities was dependent upon their relationships within classroom-based social groups. Similarly, Williams and Downing attempted to capture the experience of belonging for students with severe disabilities. They conducted interviews and focus groups with 51 nondisabled students. The results indicated that feelings of belonging are enhanced by developing relationships with peers, having friends, and participating in classroom activities. However, many aspects of the experiences of students with mild disabilities may differ from the experiences of students with severe disabilities due to the variability and intensity of needs, so it is reasonable to expect that their sense of belonging might also be different.

To date, there is little empirical research that investigates the sense of belonging experienced by students with mild disabilities within inclusive classrooms. A small group of studies suggests that students with learning disabilities experience a similar sense of belonging as their nondisabled peers. A study by Hagborg (1998) compared the sense of belonging for 37 high school students with learning disabilities with a group of 37 nondisabled peers using the Psychological Sense of School Membership Scale. The students with learning disabilities reported a similar sense of membership as nondisabled students. A subsequent study by Hagborg (2003) found similar results. In both Hagborg studies, samples were limited to students with learning disabilities, which affords a narrow perspective about students with mild disabilities (Hagborg, 1998, 2003). Thus the previous research infrequently reports the perspective of students with disabilities, particularly mild disabilities, and how they experience belonging in an inclusive

classroom. Developing a sense of belonging is especially important for students with mild disabilities because they tend to be less accepted than their nondisabled peers (Chamberlain, Kasari, & Rotheram-Fuller, 2007; Gresham & Reschly, 1986; Hoza, Mrug, Gerdes, Bukowski, Kramer, Wigal, et. al, 2005; Kuhne & Wiener, 2000). In addition, students with learning disabilities are more likely to be victims of bullying than their nondisabled peers (Luciano & Savage, 2007).

Purpose

The overall purpose of this study is to describe how three students who have been identified with mild disabilities experience belonging in an inclusive classroom. Specific purposes of this study are: (a) to describe the learning and social context of the classroom, (b) to learn about the ways the focal students talk about belonging, (c) to listen to what the classroom teacher and focal students report enhances the students' sense of belonging, and (d) to report how the classroom teacher and the students with mild disabilities describe the focal students' relationships with others in the classroom.

Key Terms

Belonging is defined as an individual's need for an interpersonal, emotional connection with others (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Ryan & Powelson, 1991). The literature also refers to a sense of belonging as relatedness, class membership, connectedness, or acceptance (Osterman, 2000). The term mild disability defines students who have learning disabilities, behavioral disabilities, health disabilities, mild cognitive disabilities, and other health impairments (Pearl, Farmer, Rodkin, Bost, Coe, & Henley,

1998). The term “invisible disability” is often used to describe students with mild disabilities because they do not have a visible disability such as a severe physical impairment or severe cognitive impairment. Specifically in this study, the student participants were identified with one of the following: learning disability, Asperger Syndrome, and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). A learning disability is a neurological disorder that may affect how a student processes information, retrieves information or stores information, most likely in the areas of oral language, reading, writing, or mathematics (Hutchinson, 2007). According to the DSM-IV (1994), the criteria for Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) include impairments in social interactions and levels of communication, as well as repetitive patterns of behaviour. Autism is considered a spectrum disorder because impairments range from mild to severe and affect level of functioning differently for each individual. For example, children with high functioning autism or Asperger Syndrome may have few deficits in cognitive and linguistic abilities and demonstrate the potential for average or above average academic achievement while demonstrating impairments in social interactions and communication (Minshew, Goldstein, Taylor, & Siegel, 1994). ADHD is characterized by three predominant types of behaviour: inattentiveness, hyperactivity, and impulsivity. As a result, individuals with ADHD may have difficulty concentrating on a task, developing peer relationships, and controlling impulsive behaviour (National Institute of Mental Health [NIMH], 2006).

Overview of the Thesis

The goal of this research was to understand how three students with mild disabilities experience belonging in a Grade 6 inclusive classroom. This research captured the experience of three students, Jacob, Leah, and Andy, and in addition gained the perspective of the classroom teacher, Linda, who described her approaches to facilitating belonging in an inclusive environment. The perspectives of the students and of the classroom teacher were essential for investigating belonging, especially since I was attempting to view the world through the eyes of students with exceptionalities.

The literature review in Chapter 2 addresses the implications of belonging for individuals, and highlights the importance of various interpersonal relationships (with teachers, peers, and friends) in fostering belonging. Chapter 3 outlines the methods used to conduct the case studies including the selection and the description of the case study site, the classroom teacher, and the three participants. Also, I describe my observation and interview techniques and outline the process of analysis. Chapter 4 provides a thick description of the classroom, and Chapter 5 reports the individual findings of each student: Jacob, Leah, and Andy. Finally, Chapter 6 compares similarities and differences of the cases and perspectives, discusses the findings in relation to the previous research, and concludes with limitations, recommendations, and final thoughts about the study.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review examines research on belongingness and why a sense of belonging is essential for students with exceptionalities who are educated in inclusive classrooms. In particular, this literature review addresses: (a) the significance of feeling a sense of belonging, (b) the importance of various interpersonal relationships (teachers, peers, and friends) in fostering the development of belonging, (c) the academic and psychological outcomes for students who experience belonging, and (d) the essential elements for fostering belonging within schools and classrooms. There are few studies that specifically focus on students with disabilities and their sense of belonging. Therefore, the literature being presented focuses on the research regarding nondisabled students and their sense of belonging. The studies reviewed regarding students with disabilities is the closest available to each topic but may not specifically address their sense of belonging.

Significance of Belonging

As the learning needs of students increase in today's classrooms, teachers are required to accommodate a diverse range of learning needs; however, the psychological need to belong should not be dismissed. Developing a sense of belonging is especially important for students with mild disabilities because even though they continue to be included with their nondisabled classmates, they generally are less accepted than their nondisabled peers (Chamberlain et al., 2007; Hoza et al., 2005; Kuhne & Wiener, 2000). Fulfillment of the need to belong enables positive psychological and academic benefits,

while a neglect of belongingness results in students at higher risk for experiencing psychological distress (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Through an extensive literature review, Baumeister and Leary established that humans have a fundamental need to belong, and humans are driven to develop interpersonal relationships. The need to belong has two premises: (a) interaction must occur on a regular basis, and (b) interactions must have a stable and foreseeable future. Thus belonging develops as a result of meaningful relationships that are reciprocal and frequent. Even a casual relationship may satisfy the need to belong though it may not be as fulfilling as a long term relationship. Evidence suggests individuals who have positive attachments with others express feelings of happiness and well-being; however, if individuals feel rejected, then they are at greater risk for experiencing depression, anxiety, and other psychological problems (Baumeister & Leary).

Ryan and Deci (2000) define the psychological need to belong in their Self-determination Theory (SDT) which states that individuals have three psychological needs: relatedness, competence, and autonomy. Relatedness refers to an individual's need "to feel securely connected with others in the environment and to experience oneself as worthy of love and respect" (Osterman, 2000, p. 325). Competence is defined as an individual's self-efficacy, with autonomy referring to behaviours and actions that are self-endorsed and about which one has some choice (Deci & Ryan, 2000). According to SDT, the fulfillment of these three needs supports an individual's psychological development and promotes an individual's well-being. SDT also recognizes that if needs are left unsatisfied then an individual develops defense mechanisms to protect himself or herself, resulting in effects on psychological well-being (Ryan & Deci).

SDT states that individuals desire continuous psychological growth and look for nutrients to fulfill their innate psychological needs through seeking supportive environments and maintaining positive relationships with others (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Ryan and Deci suggest that an individual who experiences relatedness with others has established a secure foundation so he or she is more likely to seek challenges that promote the development of competence and autonomy. Ryan and Deci agree that the satisfaction of an individual's needs may encourage motivation and internalization. Internalization occurs when an individual transforms externally regulated requests and integrates the requests into a sense of self (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Ideally, an individual's behaviour would become autonomous to the individual and therefore promote more self-determined behaviour. Thus the need for relatedness provides the secure foundation for the development of competence and autonomy (Ryan & Deci). The fulfillment of individuals' needs supports their psychological development and promotes overall well-being. Ryan and Deci share a similar view to Baumeister and Leary (1995) of an individual's need to have an interpersonal connection with others and identify that individuals function best in a stable context in which the feeling of relatedness is well supported.

Several similarities exist between Baumeister and Leary's and Deci and Ryan's theories of belonging. First, these theories suggest that all individuals have the psychological need to belong. Next, individuals must have needs satisfied so they can experience optimal health and well-being. Individuals whose needs are fulfilled are more likely to express positive feelings toward others. However, if an individual's needs are unsatisfied, the effects may be detrimental to an individual's mental health. Finally, the

need to belong is on-going, and frequent interactions with others are necessary. Therefore, according to these two theories, all individuals depend upon a sense of belonging.

Interpersonal Relationships

For the purpose of this literature review, interpersonal relationships include relationships with teachers, peers, and friends. Each relationship plays a specific role in fulfilling a child's sense of belonging (Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Ryan et al., 1994). An individual's sense of belonging with each relationship has both positive and negative psychological and academic effects. To illustrate these effects, studies have demonstrated that feeling a sense of belonging with peers has an influence on academic achievement, whereas feeling a sense of belonging with teachers promotes academic engagement (Furrer & Skinner; Ryan et al.). The effects of various interpersonal relationships on an individual's sense of belonging are detailed below.

Teachers

Teachers play a significant role in fostering a student's sense of belonging when they develop a positive teacher-student relationship and create a nurturing classroom environment. The teacher-student and student-student relationships play a predominant role in a student's sense of belonging (Nichols, 2006). The classroom teacher can create a sense of belonging by providing an environment where children feel safe and secure. In inclusive environments, classroom teachers have the opportunity to promote awareness about students with exceptionalities and to teach acceptance by others. With regard to students with mild disabilities, the development of a secure relationship with a teacher

may decrease students' anxiety levels (Murray & Greenberg, 2006). Studies have shown that nondisabled students who have a positive relationship with their classroom teacher(s) experience academic motivation, academic engagement, and positive attitudes toward school (Anderman, 2003; Goodenow & Grady, 1993; Ryan et al., 1994).

Ryan and colleagues (1994) proposed that a positive relationship with classroom teachers was a predictor of school motivation and school adjustment. Of the 606 nondisabled students surveyed, those who experienced a sense of relatedness with parents were more likely to have a positive view of teachers and therefore received greater emotional and academic support from the teacher. Furrer and Skinner (2003) further investigated the role of the classroom teacher and the effect the teacher-student relationship had on academic motivation and academic engagement. Results of survey data showed that students' emotional engagement was contingent upon relatedness with teachers. Students who felt appreciated by their classroom teachers were more apt to report a sense of comfort in class and were more engaged in learning activities, unlike students who experienced a lack of relatedness with teachers. In contrast, students who did not feel connected to the classroom teacher, reported feelings of dissatisfaction with school and disengagement from academic activities. In addition, relatedness to the classroom teacher generally decreased as students transitioned from Grade 5 to Grade 6; however, feelings of relatedness to the teacher had a greater effect on engagement in Grade 6. The findings of both studies indicate that students' perceptions of their relationship with the classroom teacher played an important role in fulfilling a sense of relatedness, which had an effect on the students' school experience and levels of engagement. These findings are also supported by a mixed-method study by Nichols

(2008) who surveyed and interviewed 45 nondisabled students. Her findings revealed that a positive teacher-student relationship contributed positively to a student's sense of belonging. Therefore, relationship development between teachers and all students is a vital component for creating a positive school experience for all students.

However, students with disabilities, who are educated in inclusive classrooms, may experience a different sense of belonging with their classroom teacher than their nondisabled peers. Hagborg (2003) examined sources of social support and their relationship to supporting a student's sense of belonging. His sample included 52 middle school students with learning disabilities who were compared to a group of 52 nondisabled students. The measures used for the study included the Psychological Sense of Group Membership (PSSM) and the Social Support Scale for Children. The results revealed the students with learning disabilities experienced a similar sense of belonging to their nondisabled peers and the students with learning disabilities had a greater sense of belonging with parents and peers than with the classroom teachers or the special education teachers. These findings are significant because studies have shown that positive relationships teachers promote increased academic motivation, increased academic engagement, and positive attitudes toward school (Anderman, 2003; Goodenow & Grady, 1993; Ryan et al., 1994). The results emphasize the need for continued development of social supports, particularly with teachers, for students with learning disabilities.

Similarly, Murray and Greenberg (2001) investigated teacher-student relations for students without disabilities and students with mild disabilities, specifically LD, emotional-behavioural disabilities (EBD), and mild intellectual disabilities (MID) in

Grades 5 and 6. This study was part of a longitudinal study; however, the data analyzed and reported for the purpose of this study were collected during the final year of the research. Students and classroom teachers completed questionnaires about student relationships with teachers and about student connectedness to school. Collectively, students with mild disabilities were more likely to report lower connectedness to school and were also more likely to be displeased with their relationships with their teachers than their nondisabled peers. However, when the data were analyzed for specific disabilities, students with EBD were more likely to report discontentment with teachers than other disability groups, and students with EBD reported lower levels of school connectedness than nondisabled peers. The students in this study were receiving special education support for at least 60% of the day in a resource room. These findings emphasize the significance of the development of a positive teacher-student relationship and the critical role this relationship has in fostering emotional and behavioural health (Murray & Greenberg, 2006). Further, the findings imply the challenges for teachers of developing a relationship with students with mild disabilities who have limited time in the regular education classroom. This lack of time in the general education environment may be problematic for the development of positive teacher-student relationships because the classroom teacher may be focused on the academic needs of students with mild disabilities and may not attend to their social needs.

Peers

Peer acceptance has been defined as an individual's relationship with members of a peer group and the degree to which these feelings are mutual between an individual and members of a group (Hamm & Faircloth, 2005; Ladd, Kochenderfer, & Coleman, 1997).

Students have a tendency to associate with peers like themselves in terms of race, class, gender, and perceived academic ability; thus developing a feeling of belonging with peers may be affected if group affiliation does not occur (Kagan, 1990). Membership with a peer group has pervasive influence on individuals (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). For instance, if an individual is accepted by a peer group that is negatively affiliated, the individual may still experience a sense of belonging but the negative influences of the group may have a detrimental impact on academic and psychological outcomes (McMillan & Chavis). The following study describes a sense of belonging with a peer group for nondisabled students.

Newman, Lohman, and Newman (2007) investigated various aspects of peer group membership. Participants of this study were selected by stratified sampling and included 733 students ages 11-18. Students completed questionnaires related to peer group membership such as peer group belonging and behaviour problems. A sense of group belonging was associated with students' overall mental health. For example, students who reported that group membership was important to them had a positive sense of group membership and reported significantly fewer behaviour problems, which may suggest that feeling a sense of belonging with peers may influence an individual's behaviour. These findings indicate the positive outcomes of peer group membership. Thus students with mild disabilities who are included with their nondisabled peers may also experience positive outcomes when they feel a sense of belonging to peer groups.

A search of the literature has revealed few studies that investigate a sense of belonging for students with mild disabilities to peer groups and the associated outcomes. A study by Hagborg (1998) compared a sense of belonging for 37 high school students

with learning disabilities to a group of 37 nondisabled peers using the PSSM. Unlike the findings from Murray and Greenberg (2006), Hagborg's findings revealed that the students with learning disabilities reported a similar sense of membership to that reported by nondisabled students. Even though the results indicate students with learning disabilities have a similar sense of belonging as their nondisabled peers, the results do not describe the ways students with learning disabilities experience a sense of belonging in schools.

Researchers have focused attention on the notion of acceptance of students with learning disabilities (Kuhne & Wiener, 2000), ADHD (Hoza et al., 2005), and high functioning autism (Chamberlain et al., 2007) by their nondisabled peers through the use of peer rating scales, peer nominations, and social networks which require students to rate and nominate their peers. Unfortunately, the studies that investigate peer acceptance based on peer nominations make the focus of acceptance external to the students with disabilities, putting the emphasis on their peers' perceptions, and reduce acceptance to the construct of being popular with classmates. Based on peer nominations, studies suggest students with mild disabilities are less accepted than their nondisabled peers (Chamberlain et al., 2007; Gresham & Reschly, 1986; Hoza et al., 2005; Kuhne & Wiener, 2000). The results of these studies indicate peers' perspectives on which classmates are liked and disliked but fail to investigate whether or not an individual feels like he or she belongs and the nature of the relationship the student has with his or her peers. However, these studies contribute to our understanding of acceptance by identifying social skill deficits that may be linked to a lack of acceptance. For instance, students with learning disabilities may be less accepted by their nondisabled peers as a

result of their inability to control their aggression (Meadan & Halle, 2004). Additionally, girls with ADHD are more likely to be rejected by their peers, and their low social status may affect their academic achievement (Mikami & Hinshaw, 2006).

In addition, some studies investigate peer membership by using a social networking method that asks individual students to identify various groups, which takes into account the individual student's perspective. For instance, Estell et al. (2008) conducted a longitudinal study that investigated the social functioning of students with learning disabilities in comparison to their nondisabled peers in Grades 3 to 6. Students were administered multiple measures including social cognitive mapping, best friend nominations, peer perceived popularity, and social preference. Students with learning disabilities consistently held a lower social status in terms of popularity than their nondisabled peers; however, the findings also suggested that students with learning disabilities belonged to a social group. This finding indicates that the students with learning disabilities had a least one friend or acquaintance in the class. Similar results were found by Juvonen and Bear (1992) who reported that, although the students with learning disabilities were not as popular as their nondisabled peers, the students with learning disabilities identified at least one friend. The use of peer networking may establish group membership, which is an indicator for belonging but peer networking does not investigate the nature of the relationships.

Other studies that examined peer networking have included individual interviews with the students, teachers, and parents to gain a more complete understanding of the relationships for students with exceptionalities. Chamberlain, Kassari, and Rotheram-Fuller (2007) investigated the social networks of students with high functioning autism or

Asperger Syndrome in Grades 2-5. The findings indicated the students with autism were connected with a social group, and they were not completely socially isolated; however, in comparison to their nondisabled peers, students with autism were less accepted and had few reciprocated friendships. Although the social network showed the students with autism had lower social status, the interviews revealed that the students with autism perceived their relationships as more socially involved than their nondisabled peers reported. The findings of these studies may imply that students with mild disabilities may have a positive relationship with at least one other person, and this relationship may be sufficient for fostering feelings of belonging in school (Chamberlain et al., 2007; Estell et al., 2008; Juvonen & Bear, 1992).

Friends

Reciprocated friendships are defined as dyadic relationships (Wentzel & Caldwell, 1997). This type of dyadic relationship provides a sense of companionship, emotional support, and sense of security (Hamm & Faircloth, 2005). Once students feel valued and accepted by another student in the class, they feel safe to participate in a larger peer group (Hamm & Faircloth). Hamm and Faircloth used in-depth interviews of students in Grades 10 and 11 to investigate students' perspectives on the role friendships play in the development of their sense of belonging in school. In the interviews, the students reported that they felt disconnected from classes until friendships were formed within the class (Hamm & Faircloth). Friends facilitated a sense of belonging by providing support and acceptance when students felt disconnected from peers. Hamm and Faircloth stated that friendships play a supportive role through students helping one another cope with challenging academic situations.

The role of friendship was also significant in a study conducted by Wentzel and Caldwell (1997). The results of best friend nominations established a relationship between reciprocated friendship and group membership in relation to students' academic achievement. As students progressed from Grades 6 through 8, there was a connection between academic achievement and reciprocated friendships. However, students who reported reciprocated friendships did not consistently obtain a higher Grade Point Average (GPA). These findings suggest reciprocated friendships may play a role in academic achievement possibly by friends offering support and encouragement for one another. In addition, a study by Wentzel, McNamara Barry, and Caldwell (2004) revealed that students in Grade 6 who did not have a dyadic friendship demonstrated lower prosocial behaviours and lower academic achievement.

A major concern for students with mild disabilities is potential social skill deficits, which may impede their ability to make and maintain friendships (Korinek, Walther-Thomas, McClaughlin, Williams, & Toner, 1999; Semrud-Clikeman, 2007). For example, students with ADHD are less likely to have dyadic friendships than their nondisabled peers (Hoza et al., 2005). In the same way, findings by Estel et al. (2008) revealed that students with learning disabilities were less likely to receive best friend nominations in comparison to their nondisabled peers. Further, results indicated students with high-functioning autism or Asperger Syndrome had fewer reciprocal friendships (Chamberlain et al., 2007). However, when the relationships were further investigated through qualitative methods, the findings revealed the nature of the friendships.

Bauminger and colleagues (2008) compared dyadic friendships of 22 pairs of students from 8 to 12 years of age with high functioning autism or Asperger Syndrome

with nondisabled students. Each participant was paired with the participant's identified friend. The researchers conducted observations during various interactions between the pairs. In addition, Bauminger et al. used additional measures including interviews with the mothers of all participants and a self-report completed by all participants and his or her friend relating to qualities of their friendship. The findings indicated that students with high functioning autism or Asperger Syndrome were able to obtain and maintain mutual and long term friendships as verified by the participants' friends and mothers. In addition, observational data revealed that students with ASD participated in reciprocated play and interacted with their friends both verbally and nonverbally. Results of the self-report data also indicated that the friendship partners had a mutual understanding of their friendship. These findings are significant because they provide a more detailed account of the nature of friendships for students with exceptionalities.

The reciprocated friendship between students provides a cornerstone built on trust, support, and security. Forming dyadic relationships with peers appears to contribute to students with disabilities feeling a sense of belonging (Wentzel & Caldwell, 1997). After such relationships are formed, students may be more likely to feel safe, to take social risks, and to form connections with their peers (Hamm & Faircloth, 2005). Students in reciprocated friendships have a network to support and encourage their academic development.

To summarize, the role of interpersonal relationships is significant for fostering belonging. To date, there is limited research that investigates a sense of belonging for students with mild disabilities and the type of interpersonal relationship they rely upon to fulfill their sense of belonging. Each relationship fosters some aspect of the need to

belong and has an effect on students' school adjustment and emotional well-being. The roles of teachers contribute to a student's positive school adjustment and academic engagement, whereas relatedness with a friend serves a supportive role to help gain confidence in social and academic situations. Unfortunately for students with mild disabilities, studies have shown that they experience lower acceptance than their nondisabled peers (Chamberlain et al., 2007; Gresham & Reschly, 1986; Hoza et al., 2005; Kuhne & Wiener, 2000). Furthermore, students with mild disabilities have reported being dissatisfied with their teacher relationships (Hagborg, 2003; Murray & Greenberg, 2006). These findings are of concern because relationships are necessary in fostering a sense of belonging.

Outcomes of Belonging

Academic

A sense of belonging enhanced by social supports has an effect on a student's academic motivation and academic engagement. Although the previous studies used various measures to report belonging, the findings reveal a significant relationship between a sense of belonging and academic motivation (L. H. Anderman, 2003; Goodenow & Grady, 1993; Ryan et al., 1994). Students who experience a positive sense of belonging experience a sense of academic motivation, which increases willingness to engage in tasks (Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Goodenow & Grady, 1993). When students feel a sense of belonging with peers, teachers, or parents, academic motivation and positive engagement are influenced.

Goodenow and Grady (1993) examined the possible relationship between a student's sense of school belonging and academic motivation. The participants included 103 students in Grades 7-9 who were considered at risk of dropping out of school. The students included urban minorities, persons with low socioeconomic status, and non-English speakers. Measures used included self-report surveys related to sense of group membership, friendship, and school motivation. There were three significant findings. First, there was a relationship between sense of belonging and levels of academic motivation. The students who had a strong sense of belonging were more likely to be academically engaged. Also, there were gender and ethnic differences. For instance, girls were more likely to feel a sense of belonging than boys, and Afro-American students were less likely to feel a sense of belonging than European Americans. Lastly, peer groups had more influence over academic expectations than a reciprocated friendship. Academic motivation is not the only outcome for students who feel a sense of belonging; research refers to psychological outcomes as well.

Psychological

Students who feel a lack of belonging may be at risk for increased drug and alcohol use, feelings of depression or rejection, dropping out of school or being prone to school violence. For these reasons, students with exceptionalities need to have a sense of belonging. The following studies investigate psychological outcomes of school belonging. Baumeister and Leary (1995) suggested the experience of belonging for many individuals may lead to a variety of positive emotions, whereas rejection may lead to negative feelings including depression. Thus belonging also serves as a safeguard against negative emotional feelings (Furrer & Skinner, 2003). Through an analysis of data from

the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, Anderman (2002) investigated the psychological outcomes related to belonging. The data were collected from 1994-1996 with over 58,653 participants in 23 schools. For the purpose of his study, Anderman used a sample of 20,745 students who participated in home interviews and completed surveys related to self-concept, school problems, and school belonging. Students who reported a strong sense of school belonging felt a higher sense of optimism, had a better self-concept, and reported a higher GPA. This finding was confirmed by Ma (2003) who also found a positive relationship between students with high self-esteem and their sense of belonging. Also, Anderman's study showed students who reported higher levels of belonging indicated lower levels of depression and social rejection. Other studies have revealed similar psychological outcomes. Students who have a low sense of belonging are more likely to engage in risky behaviours such as using drugs and alcohol (Resnick et al., 1997), and drop out of school (Lee & Breen, 2007).

Although studies have not measured a sense of belonging for students with disabilities and psychological outcomes, studies have investigated the relationship between the lack of acceptance by peers and negative psychological outcomes for students with disabilities. A study conducted by Murray and Greenberg (2006) investigated social relationship and social context for students with mild disabilities. The 96 participants in Grade 5 and Grade 6 completed various measures related to social and emotional health including questions relating to school bonding. Even though these measures did not specifically evaluate a sense of belonging per se, the measures included aspects of belonging such as relationships with others, social competence, and emotional health. Findings suggested that relationships with teachers, parents, peers, and school are

associated with social, behavioural, and emotional health. For instance, the findings revealed that a positive relationship with teachers may reduce the likelihood of anxiety for students with mild disabilities. In addition, negative peer relationships may increase the likelihood of emotional and behavioural problems such as aggressive behaviour. Parvi and Lutfig (2000) found similar results in a study they conducted to determine social status of students with learning disabilities and its relationship to feelings of loneliness. The results of the peer nominations indicated students with disabilities were less likely to be nominated by their peers as popular, and students with learning disabilities also perceived themselves as lonelier than their nondisabled peers assessed themselves. Likewise, adolescents with ADHD and learning disabilities are more likely to report symptoms of depression and lower self-esteem than their nondisabled peers (McNamara, Willoughby, Chalmers, & YLC-CURA, 2005). These findings may indicate that the social-emotional health for students with disabilities is at higher risk when feelings of belonging are thwarted.

To summarize, students who experience a sense of school belonging demonstrate positive academic and psychological outcomes (E. M. Anderman, 2002; Furrer & Skinner, 2003). This evidence suggests that, when belonging is supported, students experience an increase in motivation to learn, more engagement in learning, and increased feelings of optimism. Not only is the need for belonging fulfilled but also the need to feel competence is evident in the study by Goodenow and Grady (1993). In Goodenow and Grady's study, students reported that they felt more academic success from group membership than from friendships, which demonstrates that students may have internalized the standards of the group, which may in turn have led to higher

academic expectations. Unfortunately, students who do not experience feelings of belonging are at-risk for unhealthy behaviours and decreased engagement from school, thus emphasizing the need to foster a sense of belonging for all students in schools.

Belonging in School

Baumeister and Leary (1995) suggest that “interactions must take place in the context of a temporally stable and enduring framework of affective concern for each other’s welfare” (p. 497). Further, Self-determination Theory states that the three psychological needs may be fulfilled in a variety of contexts but individuals function best in the environment where needs are best met (Grolnick & Ryan, 1990). On average, students spend 30 to 35 hours per week in school and in close contact with teachers and peers. Given the positive outcomes of belonging on academics and social-emotional health, schools need to ensure students are experiencing a sense of belonging. In order to create a feeling of belonging in school, students need to feel they are accepted, to trust in others, and to have a sense of security (Furman, 1998; Osterman, 2000). Unfortunately, there is little empirical evidence about methods for creating a sense of belonging in an inclusive classroom so the research being presented was investigated in the fields of community-based schooling and outdoor experiential education, as well as inclusive classrooms.

Role of Classroom Teacher

The classroom environment should be a learning environment where students develop recognition and acceptance of one another’s differences (Meadan & Monda-Amaya, 2008; Sapon-Shevin, 1990). Teachers who foster a nurturing and caring

relationship with their students, promote a sense of belonging (Nichols, 2008; Solomon, Watson, Battistich, Schaps, & Delucchi, 1996). In addition, they serve as role models who portray the message that all students are valued members of the classroom (Sapon-Shevin, 1990; Stainback & Stainback, 1990). Teachers who demonstrate and demand mutual respect among students are more likely to promote a sense of belonging for students (Anderman, 2003). For instance, students indicate they are more likely to view their peers with disabilities as members of a group, if students with disabilities are held accountable for their actions and treated respectfully by the teacher (Chadsey & Han, 2005; Peck, Gallucci, & Staub, 2002).

According to the findings of several studies, the relationship between the student and teacher had significant implications for a student's perceived sense of belonging (Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Hagborg, 2003; Murray & Greenberg, 2006). Specifically, a positive teacher-student relationship was related to social-emotional adjustment for students with mild disabilities (Murray & Greenberg, 2006). However, studies have revealed that the quality of teacher-student relationships is higher at the beginning of the school year and then declines throughout the school year (Gest, Welsch, & Domitrovich, 2005). These findings highlight the significance of long term relationship development. Other findings have indicated that girls were more likely to have a higher sense of belongingness than boys, and girls also felt higher sense of relatedness to their teachers (Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Gest et al., 2005; Nichols, 2008). Since the relationships between students and teachers play a significant role in fostering belongingness for students, teachers should continue to find ways to promote positive relationships with their students throughout the entire school year.

In inclusive classrooms, teachers have the opportunity to promote values such as caring, responsibility, and respect (Baker & Bridger, 1997; Meadan & Monda-Amaya, 2008). Teachers may choose to educate students about disabilities in order to break down barriers and to promote an understanding of individuals' similarities and differences (Sapon-Shevin, 1990). If students are aware of specific challenges that a student with exceptionalities experiences, then that awareness may facilitate nondisabled peers becoming more accepting of a specific behavior because they develop an understanding of the student (Chadsey & Gun Han, 2005). In addition, students learn ways to interact and to provide support for the students with exceptionalities (Chadsey & Gun Han).

Student Relationships

Studies of nondisabled students have indicated relatedness is experienced through reciprocated friendship, which provides a cornerstone built on trust, support, and security. In order for students to feel a sense of relatedness, a dyadic relationship must be established (Wentzel & Caldwell, 1997). Once formed, students feel safe to take social risks and form connections with their peers (Hamm & Faircloth, 2005). In addition, a sense of safety at school may serve as a protective factor for students' declining sense of belonging (Anderman, 2003). Students who associated with friends who had a positive affiliation with school had positive experiences with peer acceptance (Hamm & Faircloth). However, students with mild disabilities are less accepted than their nondisabled peers (Chamberlain et al., 2007; Gresham & Reschly, 1986; Hoza et al., 2005; Kuhne & Wiener, 2000). Given the fact that students with exceptionalities tend to have social skill deficits, the on-going enhancement of peer relationships is necessary to develop their sense of belonging in inclusive classrooms.

In addition to relationship development, opportunities should be provided for nondisabled students to interact with students with exceptionalities outside of the school day (Chadsey & Gun Han, 2005). Students who are involved in extracurricular activities tend to have a higher sense of belonging (McNeely, Nonnemaker, & Blum, 2002). According to students, extracurricular activities are an ideal way to interact in a non-academic environment (Chadsey & Gun Han). For example, a high school student with severe needs was involved with the band at school. His involvement in the band enabled his nondisabled peers to develop a relationship with him and, as a result, increased his interactions with them in other settings (Schnorr, 1997). Involvement in extracurricular activities provides an opportunity for students with exceptionalities to have shared experiences that will help further develop relationships with nondisabled peers.

Furman (1998) believes community in schools is more than a shared mission statement among staff and includes learning how to navigate in the social world by developing authentic human relationships. Therefore, building community in schools is teaching students how to live with each others' differences and how to value each other. In Furman's opinion, community is established when students feel like they belong, trust in others, and have a sense of safety. Similarly, Kunc (1992) believes communities should value diversity, and all children need to feel like they belong, especially children with exceptionalities. Rather than having children with exceptionalities conform their exceptionalities to fit within the parameters of the general education environment, students and teachers need to learn how to embrace each others' differences (Kunc). Thus the classroom should foster an environment where members feel cared for and supported. When individuals feel this sense of support, they are more likely to feel like they belong

to a community. Therefore, this sense of belonging is the most salient element of community, and we should endeavour to make belonging present in all classrooms. Without having a sense of personal connection, members will be less likely to adapt to group standards or accept others' differences (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Once individuals feel a sense of belonging, they are more likely to share their feelings of acceptance with others (Baumeister & Leary, 1995).

Summary

The literature has presented research findings that demonstrate the significance of a sense of belonging for all students: (a) academic motivation and academic engagement increases; (b) lack of belonging leads to psychological distress; and (c) interpersonal relationships fulfill an individual's sense of belonging. Due to the diverse range of learning and behavioural needs in our schools, a sense of belonging may have an impact on the academic, social, and psychological outcomes for students with disabilities. As several studies have indicated, students who do not experience belonging continue to be at risk for a variety of negative psychological outcomes.

Interpersonal relationships and social context provide the necessary environment and conditions for psychological needs to grow and develop. The classroom teacher serves as a role model who conveys the message that all students are valued members of the classroom (Sapon-Shevin, 1990; Stainback & Stainback, 1990). Students who feel this sense of belonging from classroom teacher and peers may be more apt to engage in actions and behaviours that are more academically motivating. Thus providing a caring and nurturing classroom environment that supports the needs of individual students and

should promote belonging, autonomy, and competence. Unfortunately, many students with exceptionalities are placed in structured environments which are designed to support their academic needs but fail to provide support for their psychological needs (Grolnick & Ryan, 1990). This lack of support could provide an explanation for lack of peer acceptance, for peer victimization, and for lower self-confidence (Grolnick & Ryan; Kuhne & Wiener, 2000; Luciano & Savage, 2007). The goal of my research is to describe how students with mild disabilities describe their sense of belonging and how their relationships with others, teachers and peers, impact their sense of belonging in an inclusive classroom. Additionally I report on the perspectives of the classroom teacher and of the students I interviewed.

CHAPTER 3: METHOD

This research uses a case study methodology to describe the experiences of three students with mild disabilities. In this chapter, I first describe the research design, the process of selecting the site and choosing the teacher participant and the three student participants, followed by a description of each of them. Then I explain the process of conducting the observations of the classroom environment, the classroom teacher, and student participants along with a description of the interview process with the classroom teacher and the student participants. Finally, I outline the process used to analyze each case and then conduct analyses across the cases.

Research Design

A qualitative approach includes several qualities that address the focus of this study: (a) gaining an in-depth understanding of a social experience, (b) reporting individuals' perspectives and experiences, and (c) examining experiences in a natural setting (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998). Also, the use of qualitative methods enables the researcher to capture and interpret the participants' viewpoint and life encounters (Patton, 2002). The use of qualitative research methods provides a way to further understand the daily lives of individuals with disabilities so that we are better able to meet the individual needs of people with disabilities (Brantlinger, Jimenz, Klingner, Pugach, & Richardson, 2005).

As a form of qualitative inquiry, a case study design provided an opportunity to focus on one phenomenon and examine the unique qualities of a specific case (Stake, 2000). In this study, I gained the perspectives of three students with mild disabilities and

described their experiences of belonging as well as the perspective of the classroom teacher on community building, on the students with mild disabilities, and on instructional approaches.

Site Selection

My research was conducted at Terrance Ray Middle School (pseudonym) in a mid-sized city in the Midwest, United States. In the selected school district, middle schools include Grades 6, 7, and 8. One of the primary reasons for selecting Grade 6 students is the transition students experience when moving from Grade 5 to Grade 6. Students entering Grade 6 move to a new school environment and are confronted with new teachers, new students, and new routines. This transition can be particularly difficult for students with disabilities and establishing a belonging, trusting, and secure environment is critical to enabling a successful school transition.

Reasons for selecting this particular school board included: my experience as a special education teacher with this board had familiarized me with the staff and the resources, their emphasis on inclusive practices as part of their district philosophy, and my familiarity with several classroom teachers who have experience teaching in inclusive classrooms. I received ethical clearance from Queen's University in August 2007 and then sought approval from the designated school board.

After receiving board approval in October, 2007, I started the process of recruiting a classroom teacher. I purposefully selected a teacher who (a) had experience teaching in inclusive classrooms, (b) had been a former special education teacher, and (c) focused on community development in the classroom. Initially I contacted the teacher to

ask whether or not she would be interested in the study and then I contacted the middle school principal to explain the objectives of my study. After receiving approval from the school principal, I contacted the classroom teacher, Linda, by phone to schedule our first meeting to review the purposes of the study, the letter of information, and the consent form (Appendices A and B) and to discuss my role as a researcher and as a volunteer. The classroom teacher, Linda, informed me that she was part of a teaching team and the two teachers have equal responsibilities for the students. Linda suggested I meet with her team partner but, unfortunately, her team teacher was away on medical leave for the majority of my study.

My next step involved recruiting the three student participants and informing the non-focal participants of the study. My original plan was to volunteer in the classroom so I could develop rapport with the students and then select the students I thought would be willing to share their stories and would be able to articulate their experiences. Due to confidentiality rules of the district and legal restrictions of the IEP, the teaching staff was unable to identify to me the students in the classroom who had an identified disability and I was unable to obtain parent/guardian contact information. Upon receiving approval from the board, I was assigned a liaison who assisted me with the recruitment of the student participants. During the first week of my research, I had a meeting with my liaison at which we discussed the purpose of my study, and he outlined the process for recruiting my student participants. Between the two homerooms, there was a total of 11 students with disabilities. I decided to recruit students from both homerooms to increase the likelihood of obtaining three students. My study focused only on students with mild disabilities; therefore, the liaison eliminated three students from the list who had more

significant disabilities, one student with severe autism and two students with cognitive disabilities. All three students removed from the study were in Linda's homeroom. The liaison addressed and mailed eight letters of information and consent forms to the parents and guardians of the potential students (Appendices C and D). I received three completed consent forms and only one student was in Linda's homeroom. I decided to include all three students in my study so I would be able to have a population of cases rather than one in-depth case. The final step in recruitment involved mailing the information letters to the parents of the non-focal participants (Appendix E). Linda addressed and mailed these letters to the parents and guardians of the non- focal students in both classrooms.

Description of Site and Participants

The School

Terrance Ray Middle School is located in a mid-sized city in the Midwest with an estimated population of 223,300 people. Terrance Ray is situated in a school board that has a total of 53 elementary, middle, and high schools with an enrollment of 24,500 students. The school has 595 students with 50% minority population; 44% of the students receive free or reduced priced lunch, and 22% of the students receive special education support. The school has a transient population. During the 7 weeks of this study, four students from the class transferred to another school in the district or moved to a new city. The class gained two new students, one of whom only attended the school for 2 weeks and then moved again. Terrance Ray was referred to as the "ghetto school" by district staff and students. Linda informed me that Terrance Ray has the highest suspension rate and highest poverty rate of the middle schools in the school board.

Recently, the school was assigned a new principal, and the school continues to receive support from the school board's Positive Behaviour Support Team to learn how to reinforce positive school-wide behaviour.

The Classroom Teacher

Linda, the classroom teacher, has taught in the district for 19 years. This was her first year teaching at Terrance Ray Middle School. Prior to Terrance Ray, she taught in several elementary and middle schools in the district. She has a Master's degree in Experiential Education. In our first interview, she stated that she was one of the first teachers in the district to pilot a full inclusion co-taught classroom. Her previous roles in the district included a special education assistant instructing home-bound students and a special education teacher for students with emotional behavioural disabilities. For the past 15 years, she has been a general education teacher with a focus on inclusive education.

Focal Participants

Jacob was a student with Asperger Syndrome. He expressed that he enjoyed playing computer games and had a passion for fishing and the outdoors. During his free time, he had a business fixing small machines for friends and family. During his interview, he expressed that he really enjoyed classes where he could "do things with his hands."

The second focal participant, Leah, was a young girl of Hmong (Laos) heritage with a learning disability. Her strengths included art, reading, and working with others. She had an older sister who was in Grade 8 at the school and younger siblings as well. In

her interview, she stated that she enjoyed hanging out with her best friend, playing video games, and drawing in her sketch book.

Andy, the third participant, had been diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder and a learning disability. He has a twin brother. In our first interview, Andy stated that he enjoyed playing many sports including football. Linda described him as a student with a great sense of humour.

Data Collection

Data collection was conducted over a 7-week period through field observations and interviews with the classroom teacher and with the three focal participants. I spent the first two weeks of the data collection period volunteering in the classroom in an effort to establish rapport with the students and classroom teacher. Initially, I intended to spend one week collecting data on each participant and allotted extra time for situations that arose during the course of the research (e.g., difficulty recruiting participants, absence of participants, etc.). I collected classroom observation data on 16 separate occasions for approximately 50 minutes each time, focusing four observations on the teacher, and four on each of the three students. The classroom teacher was interviewed three times, and each of the students was interviewed four times for about 20 minutes. The interviews with the teacher occurred after the observations had been completed, and the interviews with the students closely followed each observation. I received board approval in October 2007, and data collection started Thursday, November 29, 2007 and ended January 28, 2008.

Initial Classroom Observations

As part of my initial data collection, I volunteered in the classroom for 36 hours over a 2-week period (Levesque, 1997). My objectives as a volunteer included establishing rapport with students and teachers, building relationships, and becoming familiar with classroom routines and functions (Eder & Fingerson, 2002). This 2-week period was an adequate amount of time to meet my objectives as I was able to spend a few hours every day in the classroom. I observed at the end of the 2-weeks that I had built rapport with the students. They started to ask for my assistance with class work, they discussed stories about their personal lives, and they noticed the days I was not present. During the initial 2-week volunteer period, I described the context of the classroom by considering the spatial and temporal relationships (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006). The use of spatial mapping enabled me to record the physical layout of the classroom, and, through temporal mapping, I described the schedules, routines, and tempo of the classroom. Because I have taught in inclusive environments, I did not want to overlook pertinent information unique to this context so this observational strategy enabled me to view the classroom with a fresh perspective and allowed me to capture the details of the classroom.

Data Collection with the Participants

Following my initial phase of classroom observations, I focused on collecting data from the classroom teacher. I was able to complete the observations of Linda within a 1-week period and the interviews with Linda were conducted during the remaining 3 weeks. In this particular district, the classroom teacher was responsible for teaching only the academic subjects; therefore, I observed during math, science, reading, and weekly

community circle. The length of each academic subject is approximately 50 minutes so I conducted observations for the entire class periods. I kept a record of the key phrases, actions, or ideas that best captured the moment, and I was cognizant of events that were related to the findings reported in the literature. Observations focused on: (a) instructional approaches used to engage students, (b) interactions between the teacher and the students, specifically the students with disabilities, and (c) strategies used to include students.

I interviewed Linda three times; one interview was approximately 40 minutes and two were approximately 100 minutes each. My initial plan was to conduct two interviews; however, I was unable to gather enough information in the first interview so I had to schedule an extra interview. The purpose of the interviews with the teacher was to gain a deeper understanding of my observations and to capture Linda's perspectives on the classroom context, her strategies for developing belonging, and the three focal participants. The interviews with the teacher were guided by a set of questions (Seidman, 1991). Our first interview was conducted in Linda's classroom but the interview was frequently interrupted so she suggested we conduct the following interviews at her house on the weekends or evenings so we could have uninterrupted time. During the first interview, Linda discussed her background as a teacher and described students with varying senses of belonging and interventions she used to promote belonging. The second interview focused on community building and the significance of creating community for the two classrooms. The third interview focused on Linda's perspective about each of the three students with mild disabilities (Appendix F). All the interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Data collection of the three Grade 6 students with identified mild disabilities was obtained through four 50-minute observations and four 20-minute interviews with each student. I collected the student data within a 4-week period. Each student was individually observed three times for approximately 50 minutes, the length of a class period, in the academic areas of math, science, reading, and community circle. In addition, one observation was conducted on a school field trip. This field trip presented an opportunity to collect data on the students interacting with one another during a stress challenge activity. During this trip, the students were spelunking in a small natural cave. After their caving experience, the students spent the night at a camp. I received verbal permission from the participants' parents and guardians to conduct one observation during the field trip and to conduct one follow-up interview.

Observations provided several strengths in this study. They enabled a detailed description of the setting so that the reader can be immersed in the experience, they opened the researcher to discovery, and they provided an opportunity to see events of which people in the setting are perhaps unaware (Patton, 2002). During the individual student observations, I used running records to make note of the key events, interactions, and phrases of the individual student (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006). Specifically, the data collected during observations were guided by the findings in the literature and described: (a) the activity or lesson the student was doing, (b) the nature of the student's participation, and (c) the interactions the student had with others in the classroom (Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Ryan et al., 1994).

Following each observation, each student was interviewed. The goal of the interviews was to understand the students' experiences and to make meaning of the

experience; specific to this study the goal was to describe a sense of belonging for students with mild disabilities (Seidman, 1991). All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Field notes were written during the interviews to capture the main ideas and key concepts.

“Interviewing youthful respondents allows youth to give voice to their interpretations and thoughts rather than relying solely on our adult interpretations of their lives” (Eder & Fingerson, 2002, p. 80). The interviews with the three students with mild disabilities enabled me to understand their worlds in their language through individual perspectives and experiences in an inclusive classroom. Specifically, the individual interviews addressed: (a) how students with mild disabilities talked about belonging, (b) what enhanced their sense of belonging, and (c) the role of various relationships in developing their sense of belonging.

To help structure the questions for the student interviews, I used the data collected from the observations and the information provided by the classroom teacher. I developed awareness of the students’ language through my observations so I could incorporate “kid speak” into the interview questions (Eder & Fingerson, 2002). For instance in the classroom, I observed that the students used a thumb rating scale (up, middle, or down) so when a student and I were discussing his or her sense of belonging, I used the same rating scale in the interview questions. This approach allowed the students to describe their individual experiences related to belonging. I asked open-ended questions, and I was careful not to guide the three students’ responses in a particular direction (Patton, 2002). The interview questions (see Appendix G) were related to

observed situations so that the three students with mild disabilities could add details and give an insider's perspective on their experiences that I had observed.

I needed to be conscious of my role as a researcher and as an adult so the students felt comfortable with my presence. I accommodated the needs of the students using the following approaches to interviewing: (a) provided breaks and snacks, (b) conducted the interviews in a location where the students felt comfortable, (c) allowed the students room to move and fidget, and (d) encouraged them to ask questions (Eder & Fingerson, 2002). Due to the nature of the study, each participant described in detail very compelling personal stories about their experiences of being harassed and teased by peers. During an interview with Jacob, he described details about being harassed so I obtained his permission to reveal this information to Linda. I was cognizant of their emotional well-being, and I delicately encouraged them to tell their stories but was careful to maintain their self-worth and trust in me. In addition, I started and ended the interviews with general conversation about their interests so the interview process was a positive experience for the children. To best meet the needs of each student, I asked each student when she or he preferred to have the interview. Typically we met after school and sometimes during the lunch break. The interviews with the students occurred in the school setting in locations that ensured privacy but were observable by teachers and by administrators including the library, the computer lab, and the conference room. Also, prior to each interview, the classroom teacher obtained verbal assent from the students without my being present. At the end of the study, as a token of appreciation for their participation, I presented each student with a thank you card and a gift certificate.

Role of Researcher

My personal beliefs and bias need to be identified and considered in this research. My major concern as a researcher was my experience as a special education teacher and my previous experience teaching with Linda. At our first meeting, I explained to Linda the aims of my study, and I was direct about my objectives as a researcher in her classroom. I voiced my concerns about our previous teaching experience together. For two years, I was a special education teacher with Linda and with another regular education teacher. Linda suggested the students should refer to me by my first name in order for the students to define the boundary between teacher and researcher; the students did not call the teachers by their first names. Also, I tended to dress casually so I appeared less formal than the teaching staff. Initially I was concerned that Linda would not see me as a researcher, but I soon recognized that I was the person who needed to define my role as a researcher rather than as a special education teacher. Naturally, in my first few weeks, I fell into the role of a teacher and had to remind myself that my objective as a researcher was completely different from that of a teacher. For example, I noticed that I was prompting students to open their books and reminding them about the volume of their voices during independent work time. After I had discovered my role, I viewed the classroom from a different perspective. As a researcher, I observed the subtle nuances occurring within the class such as listening to students interact with one another and observing students' body language in community circle. As a former special educator, I could draw on my experience to establish rapport with the students.

Data Analysis

Data analysis is a cyclical process of reading transcripts, recording one's thoughts, and identifying and exploring emerging ideas. As I started to collect my data, I typed my field notes and transcribed the teacher's and students' interviews and allowed my initial analytic thoughts to guide my decisions about data collection. This process allowed me to deepen data collection by asking participants for further explanation or clarification of their thoughts and ideas. I recorded my notes and insights in a separate journal but I was cautious not to construct premature conclusions about my data (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006).

After completing data collection, I started formal analysis of the classroom data, and this analysis was followed by the analysis of the three individual students. An analysis of the classroom data, which included observational data and the interviews with the teacher, enabled a detailed description of the classroom. This process allowed me to write a chapter reporting on the findings for the classroom under five themes. Then I analyzed the data regarding each of the three students with data that were collected from interviews with the students, interviews with the teacher, and the observations of the classroom. The boundaries for the case studies are the context of the classroom and the role of the teacher in building a trusting community. The students and I had different views of the boundaries of the case. They introduced data beyond the scope of Linda's classroom but their stories enhanced my understanding of their experiences. I attempted to explain the unique phenomena in these case studies by analyzing each layer of the case, specifically the three students with mild disabilities, the context of the classroom, and the role of the teacher in fostering a sense of belonging. The process of analysis

included both an inductive approach and a deductive approach allowing me to understand the uniqueness of each case and to situate the data in relation to the literature on belonging and to Self-determination Theory.

For each layer of the case studies I began my analysis using a strategy based on an inductive approach. This inductive approach allowed me to view the data with a fresh perspective and enabled patterns, categories, and themes to emerge from the data (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006). The use of open coding enabled meaningful pieces of data to emerge as I read and reread transcripts and observational data. Following the use of open coding, I used a deductive approach that allowed me to be cognizant of meaningful data that corresponded with the SDT theoretical framework (Yin, 1984). As I read through the data, I looked for meaningful bits of data related to a student's sense of relatedness, autonomy, and competence but I was careful not to allow the theoretical framework to influence the analysis of each student.

Through the use of opening coding, categories emerged from the data and categories were derived from the literature and theoretical framework and allowed me to represent the meaning of similar codes (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006). To develop categories, I colour coded similar codes, recorded them on large sheets of paper, and posted them. Also I recorded my thoughts in a journal. This method enabled me to think about my ideas more broadly and abstractly. Finally, themes were developed by connecting and defining the relationship among the categories, both emergent and in combination with the theoretical framework (Patton, 2002). For instance, themes based on open coding included embedded and purposeful trust, peer victimization whereas,

themes based on the theoretical framework included supportive relationships and developing autonomy.

Each student presented a unique case. Therefore I analyzed each student individually so each case was adequately represented (Patton, 2002). Then an analysis was conducted across the cases for comparisons so I could investigate common aspects (Stake, 2000). Themes were developed that were consistent across all three students along with themes that were unique to each individual student. For instance, all three students identified a best friend and described the role of the best friend. This process of analysis portrayed each student's personal story but highlighted the common threads among the students' experiences. Although one cannot generalize from case studies, the analysis of the cases provides information that may be applicable to other students who are in similar contexts (Stake, 2000).

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS FOR THE CLASSROOM

In this chapter, I report the elements in the classroom that fostered an inclusive environment in which the students and teacher were an integral part of a supportive community. First I provide an overview of the classroom. Then I discuss the themes that emerged from my data: developing trust and teaching pro-social behaviours. In addition, I discuss the themes based on the framework Self-determination Theory: trusting relationships, building competence, and fostering autonomy.

Description of Linda's Classroom

This Grade 6 classroom was one of 10 sections of Grade 6 in Terrance Ray Middle school. Each classroom teacher was part of a team that consisted of two regular education teachers, a special education teacher, and a special education assistant. The classroom teacher, Linda, and her team partner had a combined total of 40 students. Approximately 30% of these students had been identified with a variety of mild to severe disabilities. Linda was responsible for teaching math and science daily to each respective homeroom, and her team partner taught social studies and language arts. The classroom teachers taught reading to their respective homerooms. Throughout this paper, the description of events that happened in Linda's classroom includes data from students from both her homeroom and her team partner's homeroom. When the classes are discussed separately, I refer to Linda's partner's classroom as Class 2. The special education teacher supported Linda's class during her reading period and a special education assistant supported during one of the two math periods. Since Linda's classroom was only supported for two hours a day, she recruited several volunteers from

the community to assist in the classroom. The teachers instructed academics from 7:40am-12:50pm. From 12:50-2:35pm, the students attended Unified Arts (i.e., art, band, chorus, physical education), during which the classroom teachers had their planning time. The school day ended at 2:35pm. After school, students had the option to participate in extra curricular activities such as art club, chess club, basketball, climbing club, or homework club.

Developing a Trust Culture

The first theme that emerged from my analysis of the classroom data was developing a culture of trust. The foundation for this inclusive classroom was built on trust. Due to the demographic make-up of the school, the students in Linda's classroom had a wide range of academic, emotional, and psychological needs. Therefore, for the students to feel safe and develop a sense of belonging, the students needed to trust Linda, trust themselves, and trust one another. Linda commented:

When you are trusted, when people care about you, when you have options, when you get to voice your opinion to your teacher and to your classmates, when they care about what you have to say, you care about what they have to say. When you value one another, how much more could you belong?

Linda facilitated activities that were purposefully designed to establish trust, and trust was also embedded in the messages she conveyed to the students regarding their abilities to make decisions as individuals and their ability to make decisions as a class.

Trust by Purposeful Design

Linda fostered trust in her classroom through problem-solving initiatives and community circle. Problem-solving initiatives were group games and problem-solving scenarios designed to enable students to communicate and work cooperatively as a class. At the beginning of the year, Linda dedicated the first three weeks of school to these initiatives. During my observations later in the fall term, the class participated in these initiatives every Monday and Friday. According to Linda, these initiatives were “set up to be hard, to force kids to have to work together, to come up with a plan.” For example, I observed the class play a game called Pathfinders in which the objective of the game was to get your entire team across the tarp. However, the students did not know the path and every time they missed a step, they were required to start from the beginning. The students worked together to determine the path and to figure out a way to get everyone across the tarp. Another purposeful activity was community circle. On Monday and Friday mornings, I observed the students arranging their chairs into a seated circle where they discussed a variety of topics such as weekend plans and issues of bullying. According to Linda, the circle was also used to “talk a lot about non-threatening things but then get into things that were more serious...things that might be going on in the class that are hard, maybe the way people are treating one another.” This aspect of the class is discussed in more depth under the theme of teaching pro-social behaviours.

Although Linda dedicated the first few weeks of school to laying the foundation of trust through these various activities, this was only the beginning. Linda referred to building trust as a process, “It does not happen overnight; it has to be nurtured. It is not something you can throw an activity at here or an activity at there and have it instantly

happen.” As part of the process, Linda scaffolded the community building activities. For instance, at the beginning of the year, students participated in acquaintance activities such as “foot tag which they love” and throughout the year the games became “progressively more involved...to games where somebody is going to screw up and everybody is going to have to go back and start again. How do we handle that and how did it feel?” This process enabled the students to become “more familiar with one another” and initiated the building of relationships.

Embedded Messages of Trust

In addition to purposefully designed activities to facilitate trust, Linda conveyed embedded messages of trust to her students by treating them as “valued individuals.” For instance, Linda did not lock up her belongings or the classroom because she reported feeling that, “you are trustworthy until you show me that you are not trustworthy... and I think that in itself sends a powerful message to kids.” Also, Linda demonstrated trust in her students by allowing her students to make choices about themselves. In the interview Linda commented:

Choice is always an important part of building trust; giving options so that kids have some power, so they don’t feel like they are completely at the discretion of somebody else. You know, how in the world could I ever ask a child to trust me who I have put in a situation where they felt threatened.

Her trust in the students helped to facilitate the students’ trust in one another as demonstrated in their willingness to participate in more threatening group initiatives and to share more personal information in community circle. She relinquished control over many small aspects of the classroom and empowered the students to make choices about

their behaviour and their learning. For example, the students typically sat in groups of 4 at tables, and there were two single desks in the classroom that were not assigned seating. I observed students choose to sit in the individual desks during independent work time or during whole group instruction or they sat in the individual desk when they were having a particularly bad day. When an individual or the class made a decision, Linda listened and acted according to their decisions, thus sending a message of trust through her actions.

Developing Trusting Relationships

Creating Trust with Students

Linda created a “welcoming” space by making herself accessible to her students and by sharing personal attributes that allowed her students to view her as a person. For instance, every morning, Linda greeted her students at the door, and she interacted with the students as they were entering their classroom. During my observations, she spent the first 20 minutes of each day sharing stories about herself and engaging in “friendly banter” with the students. I noticed her desk was covered with pictures of her family, friends, and students. Linda stated that “there is not much about me that I would not share.... They ask my opinion, I tell them my opinion. They ask about me personally, and I tell them a lot.”

In addition to her honesty with her students, Linda made herself available to her students’ needs and concerns. For example, I observed in each student’s math binder, the students each wrote her phone number at school, her home phone number, and cell phone number. They were able to contact Linda whenever they needed assistance with their math assignments. In the same way, the students appeared to be comfortable approaching

Linda to discuss social and personal issues. Numerous times, I observed students approaching Linda to seek advice about personal issues such as relationship difficulties with friends or with other staff members. Linda also made considerable effort to reach out to students who had difficulty building trusting relationships. Through time, she nurtured relationships with those students by inviting them to have lunch time with her, personally acknowledging their presence, and respecting their personal space. Linda described these students, “like the oyster. They have a really tough shield on the outside, but inside they are just jelly and so peeling back that veneer is just really hard and it takes a lot of time.”

Trusting Each Other

As part of Linda’s belief in community in the classroom, she fostered relationships among her students so they had the opportunity to learn about each other and discover that “they have a lot of the same interests and fears.” Since the students had come from five elementary schools, the need to focus on building relationships was significant. During the first few weeks, Linda created a variety of ways for the students to establish relationships. For instance, in language arts, the students wrote a bio-poem about themselves to share with the class, and in math the students collected data about their classmates while learning to make various types of graphs. Linda also set the expectation for students to work with different people so she “pushed them [students], right from the start, past their comfort zone...they are working with different people every day.” I observed the students working with different math partners daily. The students’ ability to work together cooperatively on academic tasks was enhanced through a variety of classroom activities and clear expectations.

Initially, Linda did not take time to focus on acquaintance activities with the students from Class 2 since she only taught them 2 periods a day. After the first 6 weeks of school, she noticed that:

They were falling apart...It is like a pressure cooker. Their bickering back and forth across the room was totally out of control, out of their control, and so our ability to do anything academic or otherwise was completely impeded.

Rather than continue to resolve daily conflict and continue to lose teaching time, Linda decided to spend a portion of time on Mondays and Fridays developing relationships through “silly games” and community circle. She observed that, the students were able to work together without “constant bickering” and they were starting to have fun together. Leah, one of the participants, reported, “They [the students] are getting along. They are nice to you. They are not all like screaming and yelling and they listen to you.” Through community building activities and cooperative learning, the students in Class 2 began to learn more about one another and were able to work on academic tasks in groups and partners. This level of cooperation was evident in their field trip to the cave. I observed students encouraging each other with kind words and the students physically supporting each other during challenging sections of the cave. One girl was scared to crawl through a narrow section of the cave so several of her classmates offered her support by saying, “you can do this” and “it is not so bad.” As a result she was able to make her way through the section of the cave. Linda felt the activities had improved the students’ ability to work together on academic tasks “as community building really does impact their academics in a bigger way.”

Teaching Pro-social Behaviour

Linda was committed to developing personal responsibility among her students. This commitment was shown by her willingness to take time away from the mandated curriculum to focus on teaching pro-social behaviours. She facilitated conversations about social responsibilities with individual students, in small groups, and through whole class discussions. Linda hoped that the time she dedicated to building relationships and developing community with the students would establish a classroom environment that was “a place that is safe” and “a place where everyone is valued.” Linda saw the “incredible distance” students had come since the beginning of the year learning to work together and learning to listen to one another.

Establishing Guidelines

As part of facilitating a community in her classroom, Linda encouraged her students to “value one another” because she believed that “when we treat one another a certain way, it shows that we value one another. If we treat one another badly then it shows that we don’t value one another.” At the beginning of the year, the class developed a full value contract (FVC) or a set of “class guidelines.” The FVC had three ground rules: everyone has to be safe, physically and emotionally; no put-downs; and everyone has to try. Then, as a class, the students created the class agreement and “post[ed] it on a big bulletin board that was visible all year long” and displayed each student’s signature. Linda referred to the contract “throughout the year” and the students evaluated their performance on the goals and objectives. In the same way as she did for developing trusting relationships, Linda made “a real time commitment early on to lay the

foundation” for values, and she continued to guide her students through the process throughout the entire school year.

Ensuring Understanding

In order to be a “better community,” the students agreed “to respect everyone, work together, be responsible, and help one another.” However, the students were “very accustomed to parroting the buzz word” so Linda attempted to ensure the students’ understandings of social responsibilities by “breaking it down....in a meaningful way so that 11 and 12 year olds understand what it is that you are talking about.” As the class discussed a term like “cooperate,” Linda asked the class questions like, “So if you are cooperating, what are you doing?” When the students replied, “We are working together.” Linda asked the students, “Okay and how does that look? What are you doing when you are working together?”

Linda also attempted to teach empathy to her students by discussing current issues and having the students reflect upon their own personal experience. On one occasion, I observed that Linda stopped a science class and held community circle to discuss an issue that needed immediate attention. A student in the class who had Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) was having a difficult time paying attention in class and was continuously bothering classmates. With the student’s permission, Linda discussed the student’s situation with the class. “I felt like it was necessary to talk about it and gain their understanding, their sensitivity, ...I think the class has been a lot more tolerant of the student since then.” Rather than the class continually “having difficulty with getting along” with the student, Linda hoped the class would be understanding of the student’s current situation and find ways “to make it better” for the student. As she described the

experience of the student with ADHD, she asked the students, “Can you think of a time when you had difficulty sitting still?” The students were able to identify times like “sitting in church” or “drinking too much Mountain Dew” as times that it was difficult to sit still. These approaches allowed the students to develop a “deeper understanding” of the terms and to work towards “the ability to put yourself in another person’s shoes.”

Personal Responsibility

The students agreed to adhere to their FVC, so Linda held the students accountable to their agreement. She was “very upfront with kids” about her expectations and informed her students about “things that cannot happen here.” If problems or situations arose “in the community,” Linda found an “opportune moment” to confront and to deal with the situations. During numerous observations, I saw Linda negotiate with an individual or with a small group of students during class in the hallway, at lunch time, or after school. Linda facilitated discussion about various situations with students and she helped them to take ownership of their community by creating solutions together. She did not “just point out one child or another.” Because the class operated as a community, they needed to ask themselves the question, “What do I need to do to help this class?” This was evident during my observation of a science class. At the beginning of the class, Linda addressed the students, “We had a great deal of difficulty with the microscopes. What needs to happen before we get them today?” The class generated a list of ideas such as “listen,” “focus on task,” and “not screw around.” Linda posted the ideas on the board and at the end of the hour, the class evaluated their performance by giving a thumb up (good), down (needs improvement), or in the middle (okay). As she went through the list, I noticed students evaluated themselves almost equally between thumbs up and in the

middle but there were a few thumbs down. Ultimately, she wanted them to be able to “treat one another better” and “support one another” so they can “have fun together.”

Building Competence

Linda fostered a sense of competence by encouraging and supporting the students to take academic and social risks.

Validation

In the same way that Linda expected her students to value one another, she valued her students. She openly admitted, “It is not the need to be right...it is acknowledging that they know more than me about a lot of stuff.” For instance, during math warm-ups, Linda reviewed the instructions and then students had several minutes to work on the problems independently. Instead of Linda leading the class through ways to solve the problems, the students led the class through the problems. If a student who was explaining the answer was unsure of the next steps, Linda encouraged the student to call on a classmate, “Someone help him out.” Students were willing to call on their peers for support. Also, she looked for the students to share with her and the class new ideas or interesting facts. One day when I observed a math class, the class was learning about angles by studying the flight patterns of bees. One student questioned why the teacher referred to the worker bees as females, and this student began to explain to the class the role of the drones and the queen bee. Linda not only acknowledged the student had something to share, but she also was “willing to put aside the focus of the day” and provided an opportunity for the student to share his knowledge.

Self-realization

Linda encouraged the students to recognize a variety of ways to solve problems. Her students grappled with this concept because they were frequently in search of the one “right” answer, but she insisted they create their own understanding. For example, in math, a group of students was working on a problem set together and when students stated that they did not “get it,” Linda responded with questions such as, “Tell me what you know.” She also asked, “What do you think you should do first?” and “How can you use that to help you solve this problem?” Although this process appeared frustrating for the students at times, Linda wanted them to have a deeper understanding of concepts and to trust in their abilities. During the interview, Linda described a conversation with a student who was having difficulty finding the answer:

there were a lot of shut-downs with math.... ‘I don’t know what it is supposed to be’...Okay let’s talk about that –what part don’t you know? You already talk to me about this, so you clearly have some familiarity about that. So where does it start to go out of whack?

Linda “spent a lot of time reassuring them” about what they actually knew and teaching her students how to apply that information to solve new problems.

Reassurance

Linda fostered a sense of assurance by creating a space that felt “welcoming” and by using language that was encouraging. Above her door, hung a tie-dyed coloured flag with a peace symbol, the walls were decorated with posters containing messages of equal treatment, “a lot of kid’s work,” and the front corner of the room was designated as “community property.” On the students’ assignments, she always marked a plus number

correct rather than a minus number wrong and placed a star next to every correct answer. Her language included phrases like “nice job,” “there you go,” “alright, look at this,” or “you know how to do that.” But these were only a few examples of ways she built confidence in students’ skills and abilities.

Linda also helped students to see what “they are capable of” by accommodating individual needs and asking them to try. For example, I noticed that Linda tended to call on students randomly by selecting popsicle sticks that bore the names of students; however, for one particular student who was “clearly uncomfortable,” she negotiated a plan. She explained how she accommodated this student:

I pulled her stick out completely and the deal was when you know an answer and you want to answer it, then raise your hand. I know who has lots of anxiety, they don’t raise their hand very often; and when they do, they need to be called on because they have something to say and it deserves being heard.

When Linda made cooperative groups, she was conscious of whom she placed in each group to ensure there was at least one person, with whom the least comfortable student had a relationship, thereby making this student more comfortable. Further, Linda encouraged students to take risks by thinking creatively and reminding them that there is “not always one right answer.” Linda asked them “What is the worst thing that could happen? You might be wrong. Oh well. How bad would that be?” Her approach was to share the possible outcomes of the students’ actions and to reassure them that being wrong was okay.

Social Competence

Students faced a variety of social risks every day in middle school. In this inclusive environment, the students took social risks by working with partners and cooperative groups, by sharing in community circle, and by participating in group initiatives. In cooperative groups, the students offered their ideas and Linda ensured that every student had an opportunity to share. Students also faced social risks during community circle and group initiatives. Again, some students were willing to share and some did not feel comfortable sharing personal information. Linda described the growth of one of her students:

At the beginning of the year, this is a child who passed almost every time, because he was very threatened by the group. His first response was, 'I don't know, I can't do it, I can't do it'... because it had to be perfect. Even in community circle when it was something as non-threatening as if you were a cereal, what would you be? ...he would pass.

During my observation of community circle in January, this same student was sharing a story that had happened over winter break and the student was crying in front of the group as he described the story. Linda commented that, "He has come, just you know, incredible distance since the beginning of the year." If Linda noticed a child who was always passing in community circle, she would "find some opportune moment to pull aside" the student and discuss the situation with the student privately. As discussed earlier, Linda facilitated group work in every academic subject and set the expectation that when the students were working in groups, everyone was to be included.

Fostering Autonomy

Linda was able to relinquish control over straightforward decisions like students' "choosing a book to read" and "control over what happens as far as their academics go"; however, the students had "control within limits." She commented that, "We [society] want them to be responsible, caring, capable people. What better way to do it then giving some control, giving them some choice, making them responsible." Since the classroom functioned as a community, most of the students' decisions impacted the community. Linda guided the decision-making process for students to assist their choices about their behaviour, their learning, and their classroom.

Level of Choice

Students were given opportunities to make decisions about their level of participation during group activities and academic tasks. Linda explained her expectations to her students, "I will tell you what I expect, tell you what you are capable of, help you meet those expectations; but what you ultimately do is your choice." This level of choice is illustrated in the following example. In an interview, Linda described a situation where she had asked a student to work with another student with whom she was not comfortable, but Linda believed the request was not "unreasonable." She presented the student with her options and then reminded her, "You can choose to do it or not. I will leave that up to you, but you should understand that there are consequences of not doing it." In this incident the student chose not to work with the designated partner and took a zero on the assignment. Later in the week, I observed the student was asked to work as a partner again with the same student, and the student made the decision to be a partner. Although Linda set clear expectations for students to work together, she recognized that

there were situations “too threatening or too risky” and Linda knew certain students needed an “opportunity to do things with someone different or need[ed] to meet the expectations in a different way.” As the year progressed, Linda observed students who were initially hesitant to work with others who gradually started to share more, which indicated to her that the students were developing a sense of trust.

Supporting Their Decisions

Linda emphasized in her interview the significance of “giving options so that kids have some power” and so they do not feel like “whatever happens is at the discretion of somebody else.” For example, during community circle and group problem-solving initiatives, students always had the “right to pass” or they were given the option to participate, but they were not allowed to “sabotage the experience for others.” During my observations of community circle, students took the option to pass, and were not openly ridiculed or questioned by their classmates. At the end of every community circle, Linda asked students if there was “anyone who would like to share who passed.” Linda sent a reassuring message to the students by using a nonjudgmental response about their decision. Also, Linda supported their decisions by actively soliciting their input about the functions of the class and she made decisions based on their opinions and ideas without overly imposing her viewpoint. During my last few weeks of data collection, the students were preparing for an overnight field trip to a cave. The students were involved in making decisions about various aspects of the trip such as meals and their responsibilities at the camp site. In general, Linda believed that, “I can try my best to provide the circumstances to allow certain things to happen, but I do not make choices for anybody but me.”

Summary of Findings

Linda created a learning environment based on a foundation of trust. Through the use of specific instructional strategies and techniques, Linda fostered a supportive community environment that encouraged the development of interpersonal relationships. Linda built trusting relationships with her students, and she facilitated relationship development among the students. In addition, Linda took time away from the academic curriculum in order to teach pro-social behaviours. She believed that the time she dedicated to building community in the classroom would benefit the students academically. As these students learned more about each other, they began to trust one another. They felt more competent in their own ability and therefore were more likely to take social and academic risks without fear of being ridiculed by their peers or by Linda. Also, Linda enabled students to make decisions regarding certain aspects of the class such as book reports and to have choice about their behaviours and actions with the understanding that there were consequences. In summary, Linda actively supported the social-emotional needs and the academic needs of all her students.

CHAPTER 5: THE CASES OF JACOB, LEAH, AND ANDY

In this chapter, I describe the cases of the three student participants, Jacob, Leah, and Andy, using themes that emerged from the data as well as the themes of Self-determination Theory. Each case begins with a brief description of the student, followed by a summary of the student's sense of belonging. I then discuss themes relating to relationships, peer victimization, social and academic competence, and autonomy.

Jacob

Description of Jacob

Jacob was quick to share that he “loved fishing” and his “favorite species to catch is bass.” His mother was a veterinarian so he had plenty of pets including: three cats, two rats, and one dog. He also had “like a little business” with his relatives where he repaired “small engines.” He reported that he “can disassemble a small engine; totally rebuild it without getting anything wrong.” Also, during his free time, he enjoyed playing his computer game “Runescape.” Aside from these hobbies, Jacob “loved” any activity that involved the outdoors.

Jacob was diagnosed with Asperger Syndrome. Of the three participants, Jacob was the only student who had Linda for a homeroom teacher. Linda taught Jacob math, science, and reading, and also provided the accommodations and modifications he needed to support his learning. Jacob was instructed by Linda's team teacher for social studies and language arts. During social studies and language arts, Jacob, along with the other students with exceptionalities, received in-class support from the special education teacher. Jacob reported that he had difficulty in class because teachers “just say stuff too

fast” and he “didn’t like to read,” but he learned best by “doing stuff.” In Linda’s opinion, Jacob had “a lot of knowledge” but “social situations were the most difficult for him of the three kids [participants].” Jacob attended Linda’s homework club twice a week. Homework club was an afterschool club that met Monday through Thursday for one hour after school. This club provided a supportive environment for students to complete their homework. This was an arrangement made by Linda, Jacob, and his parents because completing homework at home was a struggle for Jacob. In addition, the quantity of homework Jacob was expected to complete was modified, and he was not penalized for incomplete assignments. Linda marked only the assignments that Jacob completed. In general, Linda and Jacob had a good working relationship, and she was able to provide emotional and academic support for Jacob when he was in her classroom.

Sense of Belonging

Jacob described belonging as “that place where your friends are or you should be there...at home kinda.” When he was asked to rate his sense of belonging as thumbs up, thumbs down, or thumbs in the middle, he responded “in the middle.” Further he explained, “I am not down because then I won’t be like really good. I am not up because everyone is criticizing me. I kind of belong in middle school.” Similarly, Linda described Jacob’s sense of belonging:

On a scale of 1 to 10, I would be very pleased if he identified at a level 5. I would think that would be progress for him because my sense is that he has not necessarily had that level of belonging before [in elementary school].

In comparison to other students in the class, she felt his sense of belonging was “higher than a couple of other kids who have no identified disabilities.” However, Linda found

describing his sense of belonging difficult because “feelings are not something that he is comfortable with so there are very little cues that he feels some sense of belonging.”

Some of the cues Linda used to monitor his sense of belonging included that he “identified certain students in the class as friends,” at recess he “played with other kids,” and “he identified that losing recess is absolutely not an option” as a consequence. Linda acknowledged that, “I feel like at least in my class, he feels like he belongs, like he is okay, like he is safe there... and outside that space for him it becomes an issue.” For instance, Jacob did not attend class on a regular basis with Linda’s team teacher. He either worked with the special education teacher or he sat in the hallway. All in all, Jacob had a moderate sense of belonging.

Interpersonal Relationships

Friendship. Although Jacob struggled with social situations, he identified several boys in his class as friends and I observed that his interactions with the boys were reciprocated. He also suggested that friends contributed to his sense of belonging. Jacob admitted that he was “not perfect at making friends” but “I got them.” He considered one of the boys in his class to be his “best friend” and considered several other boys in his class as his friends. The boys had been to each others’ houses, and I observed them exchanging laughs and discussing computer games on a daily basis. Jacob’s friends “helped him” and he enjoyed “doing stuff” with his friends like “playing soccer.” He articulated that students who do not have a strong sense of belonging might “have really hard troubles making friends” whereas “students who had a strong sense of belonging can make friends easily.” He advised that students who did not feel like they belonged, “should try and make friends because once you have friends, you can talk to them and

you can get better and better at it [being social].” In general, he felt that friends supported others’ sense of belonging by offering to “help you with homework.” Jacob’s friends were important to fostering his sense of belonging.

Teacher Relationships. Jacob struggled to articulate his relationships with his teachers. Therefore, in our second interview, Jacob and I created a list of all of his teachers and I asked him to identify which teacher he felt the strongest sense of belonging with. He identified Linda because Linda was “the one [teacher] I have the most.” Upon further questioning, Jacob expressed that he appreciated the support he received in her classroom and overall they “mostly got along.” He recognized that Linda actively helped students and stated that she would not allow students to “get bad grades.” Although he really enjoyed his technology class, he had difficulty describing his relationship with his teacher but he was able to describe in great detail the activities he was doing in the class. Jacob was clearly able to articulate his frustration with one of his teachers. He explained that she “does not do anything except tell us stuff...she doesn’t really do anything special.” In general, Jacob focused more on what he wished his teachers would do to support his learning than on his relationships with them.

Social Competence

Due to the fact that Jacob was diagnosed with Asperger Syndrome, interactions with his peers, according to Linda, were the “most difficult” for him. Further, he admitted, “I am not really perfect at making friends. I am not bad at making friends. I still got friends, not horrible at making friends.” He really wanted to continue to make friends but, according to Linda, Jacob struggled with “reading social cues from his peers and social situations are the most difficult for him.” In comparison to other students with

Asperger Syndrome, Linda felt Jacob was “more aware of the social aspects of the class,” and yet “peers were not a motivator for him.” The “social aspect of helping his peers was more than he could handle” and “it stress[ed] him out.” For instance during the field trip to the cave the students were in a seated circle and were attempting to sit silently in the dark for 30 seconds and listen to the cave. Jacob chose to leave the group before the start of this activity. His peers tried to encourage him to rejoin the circle but their attempts were ineffective and their encouragement made his anxiety about the activity and about being part of the circle more difficult. He physically removed himself further away from the circle and then sabotaged the activity by making noises and playing with his flashlight. Additionally, Linda stated that Jacob had difficulty when his perspective was different than his peers. It appeared that Jacob really wanted to be accepted by his peers and to be well liked by them but he did not know how to handle his anxiety about social situations. Linda expressed, “He needs to maintain that [level of control] in order to feel safe.”

Peer Victimization

Being Bullied. Jacob experienced several isolated incidents of bullying on the playground as well as frequent and ongoing harassment throughout the school day but mostly in band class. During this study, two isolated incidents occurred on the playground at lunch recess. On both occasions, Jacob was injured and went home for the remainder of the day. He described one of the incidents:

When we do not have a soccer ball and we are all together in a group at recess, that is just a bad thing waiting to happen. I was up on top of the soccer goal and people kept grabbing at me and they took my shoe off and threw it as far as they

could. I was crawling over there because I did not want my foot to get wet and people kept pushing me down and then and then it got a bit too far.

He had a small bruise under his right eye and he said, “it still hurts.” He showed me the places around his eye where it hurt but, according to Jacob, it did not hurt “as much” anymore.

When we discussed how he felt about these situations, he commented, “I am used to it by now” and further explained, “My old school had so many fights and I am not even kidding how many, like 100 per month.” He was “not normally” involved but “sometimes got hurt” but he felt that he was “not as much” involved with the fights in middle school. He felt safe most of the time at school. The only times he did not feel safer were “when the two incidents happened at recess.” Further, his friends provided him with feelings of safety. Jacob would “stay with” his friends and not “hang out with the bad people” because he felt if you do hung out with bad people then you might “get into fights” so it was better to “stick with” your friends.

Being Criticized. Jacob also experienced ongoing bullying or “criticism” from classmates; however, he “did not want to pick out their names.” He was willing to tell me that they were always the same group of students “in sixth grade” and that this group included some students that he did not even know. He stated that it happened “everywhere” and he described in detail the comments that were made to him by two students in his band class. He revealed, “I mean they can criticize me so bad. I mean like constantly people say I am gay and that stuff....totally criticize me...they say like ‘You’re so gay’ or ‘Shut up gayo.’” In our discussion, Jacob explained that he had not discussed this information with anyone because he felt, “it’s happened to me since I was

like in third grade.” One could assume he had become accustomed to the harassment or grown tired of trying to make the harassment stop. Jacob demonstrated resilience in the face of both forms of peer victimization by not responding to the bully. I asked Jacob to describe how the bullying and the daily harassment made him feel and how he handled those situations. He responded “mad.” Although it frustrated him, he said that he “did not do anything really,” meaning he “did not hit them or anything” even though he stated “that the students got really mad and say they were going to hit him [Jacob].” Jacob’s response to the students was, “I don’t hit them.” On days when these situations occurred, Jacob felt like his friends could do “really nothing” and he “look[ed] forward to going home all day.”

Fostering Autonomy

Power Struggles. Linda confessed that Jacob was “difficult to read” because Linda had difficulty distinguishing “when he was uncomfortable and stressed out” and when he was “choosing to create a power struggle.” The ongoing power struggle really tried her “patience,” but she “liked him” and felt they “got along.” According to Linda, Jacob needed “explanations that made sense for why he needed to do or not do things,” and when “his world view conflict[ed] with the expectation or the norm, he struggle[d].” In Linda’s classroom, the expectation was to “interact cooperatively, offer ideas, and listen to others” and since Jacob struggled when “his world view conflict[ed],” he had a “very difficult time letting go of that, even with lots of explanations.” In an effort to expand his comfort zone, she “continually push[ed] him a little beyond his comfort level and support[ed] him in that.” Linda provided Jacob with choices to help him regulate his level of stress. Further she explained that “sometimes what he perceive[d] as his need]

could be accommodated” and sometimes his need could not be accommodated so she felt the “next best scenario” was to offer “some mode of control.” For example, the students had a silent reading period every day after lunch for about 15-20 minutes. Students were able to choose any selection of reading as long as they were reading. Jacob “did not like to read” and according to Linda “he only likes to read certain kinds of things so finding things that fit is really a very narrow window.” There was a “little dance” between Jacob and Linda almost daily during this time. Linda stated, “he likes to draw and he knows this is not an option.” Linda would say to him, “Jacob this is not an option, it is reading time now, these are things you need to be doing, you can either do this or you can do this but drawing is not an option.”

Another example of the “little dance” occurred during math class. Although Linda did not insist that Jacob participate in warm-up, she did prompt him five times within a 20- minute period to open his math notebook and his math textbook. Every time she prompted him to open his math book, he closed it, but after the fifth prompt, his book stayed open. In order to understand his perspective relating to an issue in the classroom, Linda would have a “conversation in the hallway” and “not in front of his peers.” Linda described the conversation:

I would ask him to come chat with me in the hall and say ‘Okay this is what just happened. This is what I am asking you to do. This is what you did. Help me try and understand what is going on here. So do you want to work? Do you want to come back in? What is going to work for you?’

Linda continuously made an effort to engage Jacob in the activity or lesson but also reminded herself that she needed to “give him an out” to avoid the “power struggle.”

Needing Control. Linda preferred that the situations be a “win-win” but “there are times he is totally stressed out” and he “chooses to leave the group.” During these incident, Linda provided Jacob the space and support he needed in order to maintain some level of control. For instance, there were a few times during group initiatives, when I observed Jacob removing himself from the group. At the beginning of community circle, he was seated in the circle and was sharing information about himself. Then when the class transitioned to the next game, he left the circle and stood by his table. The game was called “Baby, I sure do like you.” The students stood in a circle and there was one person in the middle. The person in the middle walked up to a student in the circle and said, “I sure do like you.” Without laughing or smiling the person in the circle said, “I sure do like you too but I just cannot smile.” Prior to the activity, Linda stated that “this is your choice and if you choose not to play, that is fine. You are welcome to stay in the circle and be an observer.” Students knew if they chose to not participate, they could not sabotage the activity. Jacob chose to completely remove himself which indicated his level of stress about participating in the activity. One student commented to Linda that Jacob was no longer in the circle and she simply stated, “That is okay.”

After the game had ended, Linda was starting the next activity and, without knowing what the activity was going to be, Jacob came back to the circle. When Jacob and I discussed this incident in a subsequent interview, he identified that he “did not want to play” and leaving the circle was his way of “rebellling against the game.” He disliked the game so much that he “would much rather do a really unphysical game then do that game because at least you don’t get embarrassed.” The social risk was too great for Jacob, and he needed to remove himself from the group to have some “mode of control.”

During a game called “Wind in the Willow” in which students have to trust one another for physical support, Jacob volunteered to go first in his group. I observed a number of students choosing not to participate in the game. Jacob did not understand why people were “scared of doing it.” He liked the game because he had “total control” and was able to “save” himself. Again this activity demonstrated his need to have some level of control in order to feel safe.

Engagement in Learning

Learning by Doing. Jacob admitted to me very early in our interviews that he “did not like school, well parts of it.” He blamed his dislike of school on the style of instruction most teachers used and stated that he “did not learn by what school does...because they [teachers] just speak to you and that is pretty much it.” Further, he explained, “teachers just say stuff too fast and I cannot process it.” He preferred to “learn by doing stuff” and he wished teachers would teach using a more hands-on approach. At the beginning of the year, the students took a learning inventory in Linda’s class and Jacob thought that the teachers should determine “the majority of the class and teach that way; like if it was verbal linguistics then they would teach verbally linguistically or something.” For example, technology was Jacob’s favourite class because they were able “to move around and get to do stuff.” Also in technology, “You go to different stations and actually put together a robot and move robot arms and put together and disassemble engines.” Also, Jacob described science class as one of the classes where he was able to “do stuff.” At the time of the study, the students were studying the diversity of life and working with microscopes and Jacob liked “science where you get to do stuff.” Unfortunately, Jacob struggled to engage with any lessons or activities that involved

whole class instruction rather than hands-on activities. For example, in lessons that were “this plus this minus this” Jacob reported that he was “like so bored, so bored.” He identified that he was better at “looking up stuff on the internet” which was needed for a big project than he was at “sitting around and taking notes.” In addition to “doing stuff” Jacob also appeared more engaged in activities that corresponded with his interests.

Finding a Connection. Jacob learned not only by completing hands-on activities but also when material was relevant and meaningful to his particular interest. Jacob’s preferred way of learning presented some challenges in the classroom. Linda expressed, “Jacob has a lot of knowledge. He has a lot of exposure to a lot of scientific concepts.” During this study, the class was working on a science unit called the diversity of life, and the students were using microscopes to investigate a variety of living organisms. Jacob had expertise in this area but, despite his level of knowledge, Linda said she “found it difficult to find a convincing argument to try to coax him into participating.” She explained the argument:

So part of it is show me what you know because you are in school and I have some responsibility for grading what you know. Help your classmates. You have a lot of experience with this. Help them with the skills of learning how to focus the microscope. You have experience with that. They do not have as much.

Additionally, Jacob had a “very narrow window” and only read material that was “sports and wildlife” so Linda introduced him to some Gary Paulsen stories that “fit Jacob’s comfort zone.” To further illustrate this point, technology was a course in which Jacob reported that he felt a strong sense of belonging because he was “just really good at that class” and he “pretty much just loves” technology. The class was not only hands-on,

which matched his preferred way of learning, but also the class supported his interest. Jacob emphasized that “it [activities in technology class] is pretty much what I do.” He explained:

Like if you don’t have a tech ed class, you pretty much don’t have a job because you would have to like work at McDonalds. You don’t have a well paying job because most well paying jobs are in technology education.

The challenge for Linda was to help Jacob use his expertise as a way for him to interact with his peers, to help build his social competence, and to advance his learning.

Academic Support. Jacob identified that he felt the strongest sense of belonging with Linda, and he expressed that she “really helped me a lot” and she was “good at teaching.” He respected her because “she did not just sit there and have students do the work and get bad grades. She, like, helps them.” For instance, she conducted “little conference things.” According to Jacob:

She goes off the side of teaching...like breaks off into a little conference thing on the newspaper book report project and in science we are doing nonfiction, another student and I. She pulled us aside and just talked to us about what we should do.

In Jacob’s opinion, he “work[ed] better that way” because he “just learn[ed] more.” In band, however, the teacher did not “break off from the whole class and she doesn’t just do a certain person. She does like groups or the whole class.” He appreciated the individualized academic and emotional support he received from Linda. All in all, Jacob benefited academically from individualized attention to his unique learning needs.

To summarize, Jacob’s sense of belonging was dependent on his sense of autonomy and dependent on the match between his preferred way of learning and his

interest. This match was illustrated by the success he experienced in technology class. The technology course was hands-on and relevant to his personal interests. Linda understood his social-emotional and academic needs, and she provided ways for Jacob to make choices so he felt more in control.

Description of Leah's and Andy's Class

This description provides information regarding Leah's and Andy's homeroom. Both students had Linda's team teacher as their homeroom teacher, and they received instruction from Linda for only math and science. Linda supported both students at her homework club, and she organized and supervised their class on the field trips to the school forest and the overnight trip to the cave. There were differences in the instructional approach used by Linda and by her teaching partner. In Linda's class the students were "expected to work with a partner, to think creatively and expansively about concepts." According to Linda, her team partner had the students work "independently and quietly," and "assigned paper and pen tasks."

At the beginning of the year, Leah's and Andy's class struggled to work together. As mentioned earlier, Linda "did not have community circle" at the beginning of the year with this class. Linda described how Leah's and Andy's class "would come into my class and [it] would be literally a bickering session. They would bicker across the room. They could not ignore a thing from one another." Similar to Linda's perspective, Leah described her class as "being noisy" and "there are a lot of arguments between people." Andy described his class as "mean" and "they yell at each other." He "stay[ed] out of the way so they didn't mess" with him.

The first six weeks were “hell” for Linda and “they were hell for them [students].” Linda stated that it became “clearer over time that they needed community circle.” Leah observed that community circle had an impact on the class because “it has gotten a bit better.” She commented that in her classes these students were, “sometimes noisy, sometimes calm, and listening and a good class because a lot of people listen to each other now because of community circle.” During the first few weeks of the study, I noticed the students had difficulty interacting with their peers and often blamed people for their mistakes. At the beginning of each class, Linda spent time reminding the students how they needed to treat one another. Another challenge for the class was not having a consistent homeroom teacher so Linda helped them make the transition to the long-term occasional teacher. The class had several community circles with Linda in which she acknowledged their frustrations and helped them to develop solutions. All in all, the class slowly learned to work together but Leah and Andy each had their own struggles with their classmates.

Leah

Description of Leah

Leah is a 12-year-old girl whom Linda described as “really nice almost all of the time” and “very kind.” Leah identified her ethnicity as Hmong. Many Hmong families moved to the Midwest of the United States as refugees to escape persecution in Laos. Although Leah did not describe her ethnicity in detail, her culture was part of her identity. At home, Leah and her family spoke Hmong, and Leah frequently translated information from school for her parents. Leah said that during the winter break, she was

attending a “special occasion” where all the families from the same tribal name gathered together. Leah explained that at the party, “We are going to go there and just have fun. Typically it is dancing, eating, [and] talking. [We] get to see other people, meet old friends, and meet new friends.” In addition to spending time with her family, Leah’s hobbies included “reading comic books” and “playing video games.” Leah had a learning disability. She was fully included and received support from a special education teacher for Language Arts. According to Linda, Leah was “very easy to like and she has a great sense of humour.”

Sense of Belonging

On most days, Leah felt as though she “belong[ed] here sometimes.” Leah’s description of belonging referred to a place that was familiar, secure, and where she was loved. Leah described belonging in the following way:

If I was in a dark alley and I was seeing strangers and I would not feel like I belong there and I would be like scared. If I am in a happy place like I’m in a meadow with people that I know and it is a sunny bright day and everybody is happy and laughing. I feel like I belong there.

Further, she explained that belonging means, “You can stay here. You feel comfortable here. You don’t want to go away. You like coming here and you like the people here.” Leah’s sense of belonging or her sense of “comfort” was fostered by developing supportive relationships and gaining social and academic confidence.

Interpersonal Relationships

Friendship. Leah’s relationships with her friends, particularly her best friend, served as a protective barrier from feelings of loneliness by providing both a physical

presence throughout the day and a sense of companionship. Leah explained that “having someone become your friend” enhanced her sense of belonging “because you know every single day you come to school, you have someone to hang out with.” In our interviews, she described her relationship with her best friend and she referred to the physical presence:

We hang out together every single morning while we wait for school to begin. We always stand next to the door and talk to each other and we sit right next to each other so we talk to each other.

During my observations, Leah and her best friend found ways to sit near one another. For instance, in math, they were assigned different partners and they managed to arrange themselves in close proximity to each other. In community circle, if they could not sit by one another, they made certain they could see one another from across the circle. They would make faces at each other while the teacher was talking to the class. This physical presence created a sense of belonging for Leah because it protected her from feeling lonely. She stated that even when she did not like a particular class, she felt like she belonged because, “there is someone with because um so I won’t feel so lonely because if I am alone, then I don’t feel like I belong here.”

Teacher Relationships. In general, Leah liked all of her teachers and she described particular qualities that she liked about each of her teachers. Her teachers fostered her sense of belonging by being “kind” and making Leah “feel happy.” Additionally, Leah appreciated the expectations set by one of her teachers. Leah acknowledged, “She cares about our future so she makes us do hard work so we get to do good in our futures.” Further, teachers provided support for her and treated her respectfully. Leah described,

“When I do something wrong, she tells me nicely that I did something wrong....she will come as soon as she can and she will help me.” Leah felt the “same thing with every single teacher” meaning she felt most of her teachers were “really nice.” Although she mentioned that she did “not like it” when teachers “scream[ed]” at students or when they “start[ed] yelling,” she recognized that “it was not the teachers’ fault, it was the person who made them mad.” Overall, Leah had a positive relationship with her teachers and did not describe any of her teachers in a negative way.

Social Competence

According to Linda, at the beginning of the year, Leah “did not ask for help” or “make overtures” to other students. For example, Linda described that Leah worked “really well with particular partners” like her best friend but with others she worked “side by side” and “did not risk much in working with a partner.” At homework club, she “usually sat alone by her choice” and “would only take one chair down and leave the rest up.” During weekly community circle, Leah would “often pass” even if the activity was “non-threatening”; she would “not volunteer.” Leah’s lack of comfort was compounded by the fact that Leah was “a little overweight” and “her clothes aren’t trendy” and therefore “some of the more trendy girls did not like working with her.” Within the first six weeks of school, Linda “started community circle and the students came up with some ground rules” about ways they should treat one another. Linda felt that “over time Leah has become more and more comfortable in the space and with her classmates” and “I think she feels safe in the class.” Linda elaborated:

Leah discussed some things in community circle that were really kind of personal....there was a boy that she had a crush on....you know that is very

personal. To share that is kind of putting it out and she blushed but nobody teased her and I thought it said a lot about her feelings of safety within that group.

In my observations, Leah discussed information with her partners, contributed to class discussions, and participated in almost all of the community circle activities. I observed what Linda expressed, “Leah has a pretty positive relationship with almost all if not all the kids in the class.”

Peer Victimization

Leah was the victim of peer harassment and of a physical assault during the school year of this study. Because fights were a common occurrence in this school, local police officers were called to the school several times a week and there was a liaison officer who monitored the hallways throughout the day. Recently, the school had added a second liaison officer and a Dean of Students to attempt to deal with the ongoing conflict among students. Unfortunately, Leah was a victim of bullying; but despite the adverse conditions, Leah demonstrated resilience. She demonstrated coping skills by ignoring offensive remarks, accommodating others, and feeling empowered to advocate on her own behalf. In my recent conversations with Linda, she reported that Leah had joined two clubs at school: the social justice club, and the bullies and allies club.

Being Picked on. Leah felt she was a “target” for teasing and bullying and did not like when her classmates made “faces,” were “scared” of her, or “scoot[ed] away their chairs.” In one of my interviews with Leah, she described to me situations where she was bullied or teased by her classmates or by older students. During the first few months of school, Leah was involved in a physical altercation with an older student. Leah described the situation:

It was one day after school and I was standing next to my sister and my best friend. We were waiting for the bus [and] she [the older student] started coming and walking to me. I asked her why she was mad at me and stuff because I knew she was mad at me for something. Then she started swearing at me and then I pretended not to hear her.... She was pulling my sister's hair and I was asking her to stop. She started screaming at me and she wants to kill all Asian people. I told her to stop it because I don't like what she is doing to my sister and she started screaming at me and pulling my hair.... And then she said she was going to come off the bus and beat me up if she could.

Leah stated that "it [the harassment] has stopped." Leah believed that her learning disability was the reason she was a target for bullying and teasing. "I think I am a random pick or they just pick on me because I am really mental on some stuff... I am not really good at math, social studies, sometime science."

Leah also experienced teasing in the classroom. During two observations I conducted in her science class, Leah was observed being teased by her partner. In one incident, Leah's partner told her, "Will you talk to me and not at the ground? You sound all blah, blah, blah." Further when Leah attempted to help with the microscope, he yelled at her, "Don't do it that way." In another science observation, a girl accepted a zero on an assignment rather than work with Leah. Linda felt that Leah was "able to take those things in strides" and did "not need to put the other person down." During these observations, I did not see Leah respond to the negative remarks made by her partners, and she commented to me, "I just go with the flow."

Coping Strategies. Leah was able to cope with peer harassment by learning to ignore the person and by finding support in her teachers and friends. For instance, when Leah was working with a partner in science, who was teasing her, she did not respond to any of his remarks. She completely ignored him and began working on another task. She was able to “ignore the bad words” students said to her because she “hears the ocean” or she “pretends I am on the beach.” If Leah was talking with a group of people and “someone was saying something bad” to her while conversing, she “won’t hear them” because she paid “attention to” the friend versus the person who is “saying something bad.” Although she has developed ways to cope, Leah stated that she still “doesn’t like it when they [students] say they are going to come after” her but she knew they couldn’t because “a lot of people help” her, “mostly teachers.” Leah felt comfortable to talk with her teachers about situations that were occurring at school and knew that her teachers would help her, “whenever they can and as quickly as they can.”

Getting Along. Although Leah reported that on most days she felt like she belonged “sometimes,” she described days when her sense of belonging was affected by the messages sent by her classmates. She disapproved of the “constant bickering” and “screaming at each other over stupid things” that occurred in the class. Leah described an example of a pencil that “rolled over to someone and somebody thought that someone had stole it.” She wished her classmates would learn to “be nice to each other.” Leah emphasized:

If you don’t like them [classmates], then you can just say it nicely. Say to them, ‘I am sorry but I cannot help you’ instead of saying, ‘I don’t want to help you because I don’t like you.’ You can just say it nicely.

This conflict affected her feelings of belonging. Leah described, in an interview, a day when she felt a strong sense of belonging, “Everyone was listening and the teacher did not scream.” Since Leah had experienced bullying, she modelled how she wanted to be treated by treating all of her classmates with respect and dignity.

Accommodating Others. Linda described Leah as one of those students who “really goes above and beyond” when working with students who are “challenging.” Leah’s ability to accommodate others was evident in her ability to not respond to her partners despite their less than cooperative attitudes. Externally, she did not appear upset or frustrated with their comments and continued to stay focused on the task that she needed to complete. In the interview, she stated that she “did not mind” working with challenging partners. Linda acknowledged to Leah her effort by saying comments like, “I know so and so is really hard to work with and you are really patient with them.” Also, Linda felt Leah had an “opportunity to showcase what she knows because she is so patient and so deliberate about what she does.” For instance, Leah did not confront her partner in science; rather she circumvented his words and actions. Leah’s ability to work with others did not go unnoticed. She was nominated by her teachers for a school award, Respect Terrance Ray. In the school entrance, Leah’s picture and accomplishments were displayed along with those of 10 other students.

Academic Competence

Leah displayed growth in both academic competence and social competence. Early in the school year, Leah “did not risk much” when she worked with partners or in small groups and “worked side by side” with partners. After she started to take academic

risks and started to feel more comfortable with her peers and her surroundings, her sense of competence was enhanced.

Academic Confidence. Leah's growth in her academic confidence was facilitated by her relationships with others and her willingness to seek support from others. Initially, Leah "did not ask for help" from Linda so Linda had to "solicit from Leah any misunderstands" about class assignments. Without being asked, Leah attended homework club one to two nights each week, but because "there were so many students," Linda "did not get more than 5 to 10 minutes with her." Fortunately, Leah connected with an adult volunteer. Linda stated, "An Asian woman who was working on a practicum was required to volunteer so many hours working with students with IEPs [Individualized Education Plans]," and Linda made certain the volunteer was partnered with Leah during homework club. As Leah "became more confident about her skills...she shared an answer or how she solved a problem." For example, during a science class, I observed Leah making observations about her brine shrimp digesting yeast containing red dye. To support Leah's self-confidence, Linda asked Leah to share her observations with the class. Leah demonstrated her understanding to the class and stated that "The brine shrimp did not turn red. It looked red because it is actually transparent but the yeast is showing it is red." Linda acknowledged Leah's answer and said, "This word Leah said is really important, transparent." Further, Leah's best friend supported Leah's answer and her friend added information by comparing the brine shrimp and a flamingo. Leah and her best friend continued to have a discussion together with the class about the flamingo. Similarly in math, I observed Leah answering questions during warm-up and contributing her thoughts to class discussions.

Reassurance. Linda supported Leah's academic abilities by accommodating Leah's academic challenges and by focusing on her academic strengths. Linda stated that, "Early in the year, she was very intimidated by those [written tasks] and did absolutely the minimum required." In Leah's homeroom class, she was penalized for spelling errors but this was not the approach that Linda implemented with students. Linda reassured Leah:

Do your best on spelling. I am not taking off for spelling. That is not what this is about. This is about your ideas. Get them down on paper. If you need help with something let me know but you can do this and...I expect for you to do this.

Linda also taught Leah how to be more independent when working through challenging tasks by using the information that was provided. For instance, she instructed Leah to "Read through the whole thing first. See how the things that are there might help you with what you don't know." And during large group directions, she told Leah, "Listen while I am going over the directions so that you are sure you understand what you are being asked to do, clarify things so you know you are on the right track." During my observations, I recorded that Leah did not rely on her partner to further clarify the directions that were given to the class and, on one occasion, Leah explained to her partner the directions for the given activity. Leah appreciated the academic support from Linda, "She helps me when I need some help...when I ask her something, she answers me and she is really nice."

Feeling Successful. Leah stated that she thought belonging was dependent upon whether or not a student liked the class. For example, “if you like social studies, then you feel like you belong there and if you like math, then you feel like you belong there.” Classes that Leah described as “fun” were math and science because, in science, she was able to “work with the microscopes” and, in math, she was able to “be partners and get to work with them.” During my observations of class, Leah’s engagement during these classes was evident because she had her eyes on the teacher, her body was faced towards the speaker, and she contributed in both large and small group discussions. Additionally, Leah said that another reason she liked Grade 6 was because “you get to cook in Family and Consumer Education” and Leah enjoyed cooking. However, Leah’s sense of belonging was related to her level of success with an activity as illustrated by a situation in physical education. She felt like she had an okay sense of belonging in “every single class except for gym.” In physical education, Leah liked activities such as “playing volleyball” but did not like gym if the activities were “really hard” like the “crunch test,” “push up tests,” or having to “weigh ourselves.” Similarly, she enjoyed math class on days when the math games were not “really hard for me.”

To conclude, Leah’s sense of belonging was dependent on her relationship with others and her sense of competence. Specifically, her relationship with her best friend provided Leah with a sense of companionship and also her best friend supported Leah socially and academically. In addition, her sense of belonging was fostered by her growth in her social and academic competence. Linda supported this growth through words of encouragement and by providing reassurance when Leah took an academic risk. Also, Leah demonstrated her ability to cope with adverse situations with peers. She disliked the

way she had been treated by some of her classmates so she strived to ensure that she treated her peers with respect and dignity. Further Leah demonstrated social maturity and resilience by the way she positively interacted with challenging peers.

Andy

Description of Andy

As described earlier, Andy was a student who had been diagnosed with ADHD and with a learning disability. He was involved in activities outside of school, such as football and baseball, and he also participated in the school's snowboarding and ski club and occasionally attended homework club. For Andy, the transition to middle school meant "a lot more responsibilities" such as "knowing where to go...trying to find your classes, knowing which day is which...remembering your gym clothes and your instrument." He found these extra responsibilities "very confusing." But Andy also enjoyed having "a lot more freedom" in middle school. Academically, Andy received average grades. The special education teacher provided in-class support in Language Arts. Andy expressed that he did not "like to write because it is hard." Linda described that earlier in the school year, Andy's hands and feet "were going" and "now some of that has really toned down." In my observations, Andy contributed to class discussions and cooperated with his partners. Linda explained, "he was goofy earlier and some of that was his hyperactivity and some of it was just he likes to play." According to Linda, Andy still had a tendency to be "very disorganized" and "his stuff is everywhere." Regardless, in her view, Andy had "a great sense of humour and is a really funny guy."

Sense of Belonging

Andy defined belonging as feeling “right here at Terrance Ray and um it is right for you.” Linda reported Andy’s “sense of belonging is his personality” and she felt that “he belongs wherever he is and he may not realize that.” According to Andy, he felt that his sense of belonging “alternates” depending on whether or not someone has been complimentary to him or critical of him. In our interview he stated, “sometimes it [sense of belonging] moves up [points thumbs up] because someone makes me feel good and someone calls me ‘big’ or ‘fat,’ then I go back down [points thumbs down].” In Linda’s view, Andy’s sense of belonging was fostered by his “extremely supportive parents” and “a twin brother who loves him and who he loves so clearly.” Andy described that his twin brother fostered Andy’s sense of belonging by being supportive and providing encouragement. Andy stated, “If I am feeling sad and grumpy, he would just say to me, ‘Is something wrong?’ and uh try to help me and if it would work then it [sense of belonging] would go back up.” In Andy’s case, his sense of belonging was facilitated by his supportive relationships with others who encouraged his sense of competence in his abilities.

Fostering Andy’s Belonging. Andy described various accounts of his relationships with his classmates, his friends, and his teachers and, through these relationships, his sense of belonging was supported. On days when Andy did not feel he belonged, he appreciated when his friends, teachers, or classmates asked him, “is something wrong?” He felt students who had a strong sense of belonging would be “participating in class” and “joining a lot of clubs.” They also would be “helping a lot of people.” On the other end of the spectrum, Andy described students who might not feel a strong sense of

belonging, as students who “would not participate in class and they would probably move to another school, go late to class and probably be very bad in class.” To help facilitate an individual’s feelings of belonging, Andy believed that a person needed to “make a lot of friends and stuff and talk to more people.” Personally he thought he could “try to make friends...and hang out with a person a little bit more because if you do not have any friends then they cannot do anything social.” Andy described days when he had a strong sense of belonging. He commented that he “feels great” because of “having lots of friends” and “friends are helpful to each other.”

Interpersonal Relationships

Friendship. Andy had a twin who also attended Terrance Ray Middle School. Andy described his relationship with his twin as “awesome” because “a lot of people do not have people to play with if they do not have brothers and sisters so if I need someone to play with, he is right there for me.” In Linda’s description of the boys, she commented, “they have a lot of common interests” such as “they both play baseball” and “they both play football” but “it is not like they are inseparable.” Further she explained that, “Andy knows that he is not his brother and his brother knows that he is not Andy.” Although the boys were different in some respects, “they enjoy[ed] one another.”

Andy described his twin brother as someone who helped him “the most” on days he struggled with relationships with his peers. Linda recounted that earlier in the school year, Andy and “a particular other student did not get along at all” and “he [Andy] got teased a lot about things.” When situations with his peers arose, his brother helped mediate those situations. For instance, when a classmate was “being mean” to Andy, he would “get really mad” and his brother interceded and told Andy to “just settle down, he

[the classmate] did not really mean it because he is your friend.” Andy talked about his twin being his “friend” and explained that “friends support each other and have your back.” Linda felt that his brother fostered a “certain sense of confidence” in Andy. This confidence was evident in my observations of Andy participating in the classroom and in his interaction with difficult peers. Particularly, I noticed how Andy handled an uncomfortable situation with a peer, without his brother’s support. All in all, “his brother is a huge supporter to Andy and Andy is a huge supporter of his brother.”

Teacher Relationships. Andy discussed his relationships with most of his teachers and highlighted ways teachers could support students’ sense of belonging. In general, he commented that teachers should “just do what my friends do like if someone says a lie about someone, it doesn’t matter because you did not do it.” Andy described a few specific actions that his teacher took to support his sense of belonging. For example, in gym class his relationship with his teacher was “good” and Andy considered his teacher to be “really nice.” Andy described the accommodations that his gym teacher made for students. For example, on one occasion, Andy had an injured toe and he tried to participate but was “unable to climb the wall” because his toe hurt. He informed me that his gym teacher said it was “okay” and that “it did not matter.” He described his relationship with Linda as “awesome” because “we get along well.” He stated that, “she is really fun and she can make fun out of almost anything.” He also liked the fact that “she tries not to focus on just one person” and they were able to “go on a lot of field trips.” In contrast, he did not like teachers that “have favourites” or “talk way too much.” Overall he felt his teachers were dedicated to “helping out” students.

Social Competence

In general, Andy was liked by his peers and “he liked all of them.” In Linda’s classroom, Andy was “often chosen in a lot of pairing activities” that involved academic tasks and students identified him as a “kid to sit near” when they selected their seating arrangements. As I observed partner work, Andy and his partner supported each other and cooperated to complete the assignment. Their task was to use the microscope to make observations about plant cells. During the 35 minutes that the boys worked together, Andy and his partner were mostly engaged in conversation about science and Andy’s partner was able to guide and redirect Andy throughout the lab. For example, his partner was attempting to focus the microscope and Andy really wanted to assist but his lab partner said, “no I am adjusting,” but after the student had focused the object, he moved aside so Andy could have a look. His partner asked him questions like, “What do you see?” or “Do you see any movement?” At one point Andy could not see anything so his partner took time to show him how to focus the objective lens of the microscope versus the fine course adjustment knob. In addition to supporting his academic needs, his partner also supported Andy’s emotional needs. The pair of students who were sitting next to Andy and his partner, told Andy, “You have issues.” Andy’s partner responded, “Everyone has a little problem. Everyone is a little stupid.” And after the remark, the two boys continued with their work and discussed the specifics of their drawings. Andy felt that his partner was “nice, a good friend, and a good helper.”

Challenges in Relationships. Andy had a relationship with a peer that he described as “friends”; however, this relationship was filled with challenges for Andy. Andy and one of the students had played football together on a team for three years and

“know one another really well.” They sat by each other every day in every class and Andy said that was “okay” but “it is a little distracting.” Andy “trie[d] to stay focused on what the teacher was talking about” but the classmate “talks” to Andy so Andy attempted to “ignore and then tell him ‘one second.’” Andy also stated that this boy, “blames stuff on me that I didn’t do which makes me really mad but I am okay with it.” Andy explained that, “he just does stuff like um he could write on the table and then blame it on me and I kind of get a little mad but I know that he is just playing around.” In another situation, Andy and the boy were reprimanded by Linda for their behaviour during a science movie. The two boys had to “stay in after lunch” to discuss what they could “do better” and “just settle things out.” Linda facilitated “a mediation” with the boys and she felt as though “we have worked through those difficulties.” Despite the fact that Andy and this student struggled in their daily interactions, Andy considered this student “a friend.”

Peer Victimization

The Target. Although Andy attempted to “stay out of the way so they didn’t mess” with him, he too was a “target” for his peers. Linda explained that he “was the easiest target because Andy did not shoot back.... and did not have the same coolness factor.” Also one student in the class targeted students “who he is likely to hurt but won’t hurt him back”; thus Andy was a target. Specifically, in my observations, this student made remarks to Andy such as, “you’re stupid” or “you’ve got a problem” and made comments that Linda described as “intentionally hurtful.” Andy usually deflected the comments and continued with his assignment. At the beginning of the year, however, Andy had a difficult time not responding to such comments but Linda said that, by the

time of the study, he “does not engage.” Andy considered the student who teased and harassed him as his friend. He described their relationship as, “sometimes we get into fights and sometimes we are friends.” Although Andy stated that this student’s comments “did not really matter....I just let it go,” he acknowledged that the insults still made him feel “bad.”

Coping Strategies. Earlier in the school year, Linda described Andy as a student “who could often not not respond to other students in the classroom. He and a particular other student did not get along at all.” Andy described his brother as someone who supported him during challenging peer situations by helping Andy “settle it out.” Andy did not engage in the teasing and demonstrated the ability to “let it go,” “ignore it,” and relied on his sense of humour. During an observation in science class, Andy’s lab partner made a comment that Andy was a “slow at colouring.” Andy demonstrated his sense of humour by responding in a gangster voice, “you got a problem with that,” and his partner started to laugh. Linda commented that even though students said, “hurtful things” and Andy did not “necessarily like it, he is the bigger person all along.”

Academic Competence

Taking Academic Risks. According to Linda, Andy was able to take academic risks “well before some of his peers.” For instance Linda discussed that, in math, Andy volunteered to demonstrate an answer to daily warm-ups “even if he was way off base,” and he felt comfortable asking for assistance from a classmate, a friend, or “the kids that might give him a hard time.” Linda supported Andy through her words of encouragement. For instance in math class, they were reviewing the homework from the previous night and Andy gave an answer that was not quite the response Linda was

looking for and so rather than saying no, she said “you are very close” and followed that with the correct answer.

Initially, Andy asked Linda for academic support and “did not hesitate to ask.” Linda explained that, “as he has become more comfortable with his classmates...he interacts more academically with them, [rather] than needing me to answer [all] questions.” This was evident in the way he interacted with the students at his table group during math. The students were using their knowledge of estimation and fractions to draw angles without using a protractor. Most days in math, the students worked with partners but the day I observed, Linda conducted a guided activity. As she instructed the students, she modelled her thinking, she demonstrated on the overhead for the students, and then the students independently drew various angles. Throughout the observation, Andy appeared to be engaged by the way he looked at the overhead and then at his work and asked clarifying questions. Whenever the students would begin to draw an angle independently, Andy asked the question, “Is this right?” or he looked at his neighbour’s drawing relying on visual supports to ensure his understanding. At the end of the lesson, the teacher assigned homework and Andy immediately asked Linda if he was supposed to complete both parts of the assignment and she responded, “Yes.” Then he turned to his classmates at the table and said, “I don’t get what we are doing on this? So we are supposed to go to the flowers?” Similarly in science, as Andy and his partner were completing their lab worksheet, Andy asked his partner where to draw one of the specimens, and needed reassurance about the specific details of the drawing. Clearly, Andy was comfortable asking his classmates for academic support.

Challenges with ADHD. Although Andy demonstrated the ability to ask questions and to engage in learning, he experienced challenges in academics which had an impact on his sense of belonging. His overall challenge was staying focused during lengthy discussions and periods of instruction. He discussed openly with me his concerns about having ADHD. He described that he “never knows if someone has it” and “it is hard to focus on what is happening in the classroom” because “there are a lot of distractions.” In an academic setting, Andy sat at the front of the classroom. Linda verbally prompted and redirected his attention. On one occasion, Andy was clicking his new pen and Linda grabbed it out of his hand and laid it on the table while she continued to talk to the class about homework. She did not draw any attention to Andy but the nonverbal message was clear for Andy.

Along with being easily distracted, Andy felt that writing was hard. He identified “language arts” as one of the classes in which he did not feel a sense of belonging. He stated, “It is hard for me to write and I don’t know if it is hard for a lot of people with ADHD to write but it seems like that to me.” Along with writing difficulties, Andy also described feelings of loneliness. As previously discussed, Linda described one of Andy’s classmates who had ADHD. During the community circle, I observed Andy whispering something in the student’s ear. When Linda and I discussed this particular community circle, she commented that Andy told the student, “I take meds too” and Linda continued to say, “Nobody else could hear this student except the student...and me but you know it was really an incredibly kind gesture on the student’s [Andy’s] part to show that I get it, I know, I care and it makes a difference.” The above situation described Andy’s understanding about having ADHD and finally feeling like he was “not alone” in his

challenges with ADHD. Linda also helped Andy's classmates develop a sense of empathy towards some of Andy's actions so they could be more understanding of Andy. During community circle, Andy continuously rolled his sock up and down. One of his classmates made a questioning face at Linda, and Linda responded to her, "It is okay." That is all Linda needed to say and the classmate stopped making disapproving faces.

Confidence in his Abilities. Andy discussed classes in which he felt a strong sense of belonging; specifically Andy identified "gym" as his favourite nonacademic class. He felt he could "set aside everything and just think about gym and having fun" and they did not "have a schedule for each day because it is gym." In the area of academics, Andy identified "social studies, math, or science" as classes where he felt like he belonged but when asked to identify the class where he felt he belonged the most, he stated "social studies." In social studies, the students were required to complete a weekly geography sheet as homework and, in class, they learned about ancient civilizations. Andy liked social studies because he "got second place in the geography bee" and he enjoyed "knowing where places are and knowing capitals and countries." He also identified that he was "good at math." In math class, I observed that Andy participated in warm-ups, and contributed in the review of homework and in class discussions. He was clearly engaged in the curriculum and had confidence in his abilities. During one of my observations, Linda announced that the warm-up for the morning was "going to be mental math problems." Andy responded with an enthusiastic "yes" while making a hand gesture showing his excitement. Each time Linda asked for volunteers, Andy raised his hand emphatically. When Linda called on Andy for a response, the feedback she provided was

supportive. She used phrases such as “you are right, nice job,” “good thinking,” or “that is a good question.”

In summary, Andy’s feelings of belonging were fostered by his relationship with his twin brother and by Andy’s feelings of confidence in his abilities. Andy considered his twin his best friend and, in Linda’s view, Andy was well supported by his family. In Linda’s class, Andy received academic and social support from Linda and similar support from most of his peers. However, some of Andy’s peers teased and harassed Andy but he was able to cope by using his sense of humour.

Summary of Findings

All three participants described a similar sense of belonging. On most days, Jacob, Leah, and Andy reported a moderate sense of belonging, but they also articulated days when they felt a positive sense of belonging and days when they had a low sense of belonging. They discussed their interpersonal relationships with their friends, classmates, and teachers as relationships that positively and negatively influenced their sense of belonging. Their sense of belonging was also influenced by their sense of confidence in their abilities and their level of interest in activities. In addition, Jacob, Leah, and Andy experienced bullying and harassment from their peers and each of them explained ways they coped with the harassment. The differences in their stories emphasize how a sense of belonging in a given context may vary for each individual. The cross-case comparisons and comparisons to the literature are described further in Chapter 6.

CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION

This study investigated how students with mild disabilities experience belonging in inclusive classrooms. I begin this chapter by making comparisons among the findings from the three cases and the data describing the classroom and relate these findings to the research on belonging and on inclusive education. Finally, I conclude with recommendations for further research and practice, and with final thoughts about this study.

Cross-case Analysis and Comparison to the Literature

As comparisons were made among the data from the three cases and the data from the description of the class, several themes emerged. These themes included: defining belonging, the significance of interpersonal relationships, coping with bullying, psychological outcomes, sense of competence, and sense of autonomy. Individual themes are presented and each theme is accompanied with comparisons to the literature.

Defining Belonging

The data in this study revealed that definitions of belonging varied among the participants. In general, a sense of belonging as expressed by the participants was dependent on supportive relationships and on academic and social competence. In addition, the participants' sense of belonging was an individual and contextual construct. The participants described individuals who have a strong sense of belonging as academically and socially competent. For example, Leah explained that a student with a strong sense of belonging would be "talking to their friends." Likewise Jacob stated that, "you got a lot of friends and you talk a lot, you make friends easily." Jacob also believed

students with a strong sense of belonging “got an A in everything” and Andy noted that these students “participate in class.” Linda described a student with a strong sense of belonging as

A student who feels comfortable and confident speaking his or her own ideas and thoughts but is also aware that he or she is not the only one with ideas. He or she is aware of themselves and what his or her role is in the group; how he or she fits, how he or she can be supportive and how he or she is supported.

A low sense of belonging was described by Leah, Andy, and Jacob as a characteristic of a student who has struggled academically and socially in school. Andy explained that students who had a low sense of belonging, “do not help each other, not participate in class, and they would probably move to another school and go late to class and probably be very bad in class.” Leah also expressed that a student with a low sense of belonging would likely not “want to come to school.” Jacob further stated that such a student may experience “hard social troubles.” Linda described a student with a low sense of belonging as passive in class, frequently tardy, and having “very closed body language.” Linda and the three students indicated that students with low sense of belonging struggle with attendance and engagement.

To get a full understanding of the participants’ personal sense of belonging is challenging because their sense of belonging varied from day to day and from context to context. For instance, Leah’s sense of belonging was impacted by the continuous conflicts among her peers. Leah described her peers this way: “some people are screaming, some people are happy and stuff, and sometimes the teacher is yelling.” Linda expressed that Leah’s sense of belonging has developed since the beginning of the year as

Leah started to become more “comfortable” with the class. In Andy’s case, his sense of belonging was dependent upon his level of confidence in his abilities and his level of self-esteem. For example, Andy explained that his sense of belonging was lower on days when people referred to him as “fat.” On the other hand, Linda described Andy as a student who “belongs wherever he is and [he] may not realize that.” Jacob perceived his sense of belonging in the following way, “I am not down [points thumbs down] because then I won’t be like really good. I am not up [points thumbs up] because everyone is criticizing me.” Similarly, Linda described Jacob’s sense of belonging as 5 out of 10. She stated, “I think he probably feels outside of the group but more connected than he has in the past two classes.”

Further, the students’ sense of belonging fluctuated depending on the quality of their relationships with others. Andy and Jacob both identified they had the strongest sense of belonging with Linda, compared to their other teacher. Leah, in contrast, identified positive relationships with each of her teachers. The three students also described positive relationships with their friends and they recognized that their friends help foster their sense of belonging. Jacob, Leah, and Andy also described situations in which their feelings of belonging were affected by their relationships with peers. In addition to their relationships, belonging was also fostered by the participants’ sense of confidence in their abilities. Andy’s, Jacob’s, and Leah’s level of confidence are described in greater detail in the section titled sense of competence.

The literature defines belonging through two different approaches: educational and psychological. The educational definition identifies belonging as a connection to school, sense of community, or feelings of school membership (Goodenow & Grady,

1993; Osterman, 2000). In comparison, the psychological literature defines belonging as an interpersonal connection with others, sense of relatedness, or sense of acceptance (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Ryan & Powelson, 1991). The findings from this study revealed that the students' definitions of belonging drew on some aspects of both definitions. In our first interview, the students defined belonging as a connection to context such as the school itself or the classroom. This definition parallels that offered in the educational literature. For instance, Leah and Jacob described belonging as a familiar place where one is surrounded by familiar people. Andy's definition described someone who "feels right." In subsequent interviews, the students discussed in greater detail the term belonging and their descriptions then were closer to the psychological definitions. According to their later descriptions, students with a strong sense of belonging had interconnected relationships with others similar to the relationships described by Baumeister and Leary and Deci and Ryan (2000).

Research on belonging is beginning to investigate the school characteristics that may enhance feelings of belonging for students. For instance, students report feeling like they belong in schools that make them feel comfortable (Nichols, 2008). Likewise, Linda's definition described students who had established relationships with others and also felt confident and comfortable in their environment. Linda provided a safe and nurturing context by promoting a sense of trust among the students. By her promoting a sense of trust, students learned more about their classmates, and this trust impacted their ability to work together cooperatively. Thus the definition of belonging in this inclusive classroom is not simply about relationships with others; belonging in this case also involves levels of comfort and safety in one's environment.

Significance of Interpersonal Relationships

Teachers. As discussed in Chapter 2, students who feel a sense of belonging with their teachers are more likely to be engaged in learning and more likely to feel comfortable in school (Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Ryan et al., 1994). The three students all reported they had a positive relationship with most of their teachers. In Linda's class, Andy and Leah were engaged in learning activities, which was demonstrated by their level of participation and willingness to work with others. However, Jacob's level of engagement was primarily related to his interest in an activity. More importantly, the students each described a positive relationship with more than one teacher. This finding is significant because these students were in multiple environments with multiple teachers so having positive relationships across environments might have contributed to their overall sense of belonging. Nichols' (2008) findings revealed that a positive teacher-student relationship positively contributed to a student's sense of belonging. From Linda's perspective, she focused on building a positive relationship with her students throughout the year, which is significant because research has found that a sense of belonging for students tends to decline throughout the school year (L. H. Anderman, 2003).

Friendships. All three student participants identified that "having friends" fosters belonging for students who have a low sense of belonging. Jacob, Leah, and Andy each identified someone in their class whom they considered a "best friend," and each of them identified several other classmates who were friends. They perceived that their friends fostered their sense of belonging by supporting their academic and social needs. For instance, Leah's best friend provided Leah with a sense of companionship and thwarted

her feelings of loneliness; likewise, Andy's best friend, his twin brother, mediated the challenges Andy experienced in peer relationships. Linda too acknowledged Andy's twin's support for Andy. Jacob expressed that making friends was difficult for him but, on the other hand, he recognized his ability to make friends. In addition, he stated his friends supported him academically. In each case, best friends served a critical function that enabled a deeper sense of belonging.

Studies have indicated that students with mild disabilities are less likely to have dyadic friendships (Chamberlain et al., 2007; Estel et al., 2008; Hoza, 2005). Contrary to these findings, Jacob, Leah, and Andy identified a best friend and also several additional classroom friends. According to Hamm and Faircloth (2005), friends facilitate a sense of belonging by providing academic and social support and also contribute to feelings of acceptance. Jacob, Andy, and Leah each stated that their sense of belonging was fostered by their relationships with their friends. Hamm and Faircloth further explained that friendships enable one to develop a sense of security, emotional support, and companionship. Leah and Jacob both articulated ways their best friends academically supported them. The relationship between Andy and his twin brother demonstrated the social support of best friends and also family members. In addition, the friends of the three students provided a protective factor in challenging situations with their peers.

Peers. Studies have reported that students with mild disabilities are less likely to be accepted by their peers (Chamberlain et al., 2007; Hoza et al., 2005; Kuhne & Wiener, 2000). In this study, the students faced challenges with peers; however, their challenges were similar to the experiences of their nondisabled classmates. As described in Chapter 3, this school had the highest suspension rate in the school district and the school was

working towards a positive behaviour support plan. During the duration of this study, I observed Linda intervening on several occasions with nondisabled students who were experiencing difficulties with their peers. Linda recognized the challenges the students experienced when interacting with one another, which is why she worked diligently to establish and maintain positive peer interactions. For instance, Leah was openly rejected by a peer. Linda intervened and, during subsequent observations, the two girls worked collaboratively with each other. In my observation of the overnight field trip, all three students positively interacted with their peers, played games, and were included by their peers.

Coping with Bullying

Students with learning disabilities are more likely to be victims of bullying (Luciano & Salvage, 2007). Bullying was an issue for this school. The students in this study described days when they did not feel like they belonged as days when they experienced teasing and bullying from their peers. For instance, Jacob experienced two forms of bullying: on going harassment and physical assaults. In the same way, Leah experienced a physical assault after school and on going harassment. It is important to note that the physical assaults that happened to Leah and Andy did not occur within Linda's classroom. They happened after school and on the playground. Even though Andy did not experience a physical assault, he faced on going harassment from his peers. According to Salvage (2005), students with learning disabilities may be at risk of bullying because they are more likely to be rejected than their nondisabled peers. Peer acceptance may serve as a protective factor from bullying (Salvage). In the case of the

three students, most times, their friends served as protective factors when they were bullied or harassed by their peers.

Resiliency. Interestingly all three students demonstrated a sense of resilience when dealing with their situations. For instance, Jacob expressed being “mad” at the situation; however, he did not act revengeful towards his bullies. Similar to Jacob, Leah did not engage in hurtful words or actions towards her bullies. Instead, Leah ensured that she treated every student with dignity and respect including those who relentlessly teased her. In addition, she joined several clubs at school like the Social Justice Club and advocated for those students who had been a victim like herself. Like Leah, Andy did not engage with his harassers. He tried to ignore comments from the other students, and he relied on his sense of humour to defuse situations. All in all, these students faced bullying situations frequently but had developed coping strategies. Their sense of belonging may have contributed to their ability to cope with bullying.

Psychological Outcomes

Studies that examine the psychological effects of belongingness indicate that those students who do not have a positive sense of belonging are at higher risk for negative psychological outcomes (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Lee & Breen, 2007; Resnick et al., 1997). In addition, students with exceptionalities tend to be at higher risk than their nondisabled peers for depression and anxiety (Maag & Reid, 2006; Murray & Greenberg, 2006). In my observations, Andy, Leah, and Jacob displayed emotions similar to their peers. Most days, the three students showed positive well-being and they also experienced emotions such as sadness, anger, and loneliness. Leah stated, “It is not good being angry because my sister says that depression or being mad at someone is really bad

for your health.” Jacob’s anxiety was not related to his sense of belonging; his anxiety was related to his level of control in a given situation. Andy, being the most upbeat of the three students, thwarted negative feelings by using his sense of humour. In addition, all three students relied on their social supports to serve as a protective factor against negative feelings. The findings in this study are similar to those of Furrer and Skinner (2003) who reported that belonging may serve as a safeguard against negative emotional feelings.

Sense of Competence

During the individual interviews, the students identified classes in which they felt a sense of belonging and classes where there was a lack of belonging. Two notable factors that influenced their sense of belonging in these learning contexts included: (a) the type of activity and (b) their confidence in their ability level. For instance, Andy disliked language arts class because he stated that writing was challenging for him but he enjoyed social studies because he felt confident in his knowledge about the topics. Leah reported physical education as the one class in which she did not feel a sense of belonging because she was required to do sit-up tests, run a mile, and weigh herself. Perhaps these activities challenged Leah because she was slightly overweight, and she felt they were “really hard.” She identified Family and Consumer Education (FACE) as a class where she felt the strongest sense of belonging. She felt successful in FACE class because she was successful at and interested in aspects of the subject, like cooking. Jacob also identified that he felt a strong sense of belonging in technology class because he was genuinely interested in the activities and he was confident in his abilities. In addition, there was a connection between the activities in technology class and his small business.

Although Andy and Leah both experienced classes that were challenging for them, they still participated in the activities with minimal accommodations by their teachers. On the other hand, Jacob struggled to engage in activities that were challenging for him and in activities that he perceived as uninteresting.

Linda provided individualized support for Leah, Andy, and Jacob that enhanced their learning, and she also focused on the strengths and interests of her students to foster their sense of competence. For example, she recognized when Jacob became disengaged with an activity and then she met with him individually to make a learning plan so he would be more likely to complete the activity. In addition, Jacob was allowed to create a book report project relating to his personal interest. In Leah's case, Linda knew writing was challenging for Leah, so together they devised specific academic strategies to help Leah to be more independent. Similarly, to help Andy overcome his social challenges, Linda developed a plan that addressed how the students were going to treat each other with Andy and the students with whom Andy was experiencing difficulties. For all three students, Linda also used words of encouragement and reassurance to bolster their feelings of competence.

Sense of Autonomy

Linda fostered a sense of autonomy for her students through her ability to relinquish control, and she provided guidance to help students make decisions regarding their behaviour and their learning. In my observations of the three students, there was evidence of the students' autonomy in Linda's class. At times, the students worked collectively to discuss types of book reports or to plan meals for their overnight field trip as a class. Mostly, I observed the students experiencing a sense of autonomy about their

behaviour. As discussed in Chapter 5, Jacob needed to be autonomous so he could cope with situations that overwhelmed him as illustrated in having a choice to take a time out as needed. Andy needed the freedom to move around the classroom without being penalized or ridiculed; for instance, being able to sharpen his pencil or to stand while completing his work. In Leah's case, there were times when she elected not to participate in game activities because she admitted that she did not trust her group members. When her group members asked her why she chose not to participate, she stated, "I don't want to and I don't have to either, and it is my choice." By enabling the students to make choices about their actions, Linda provided a sense of ownership over their decisions and supported their decisions but she also helped them work toward taking more risks.

Deci and Ryan (2000) argue that three innate psychological needs – namely, relatedness, competence, and autonomy – are dependent upon one another. The findings in this study support the interplay among the three constructs. Through the use of specific instructional strategies and techniques, Linda fostered a supportive community environment that encouraged the development of interpersonal relationships. Deci and Ryan would argue that an individual who experiences relatedness with others has established a secure foundation so he or she is more likely to seek challenges that promote the development of competence and autonomy. As these students learned more about each other, they began to trust one another. As a result, they felt more competent in their own abilities and, therefore, were more likely to take social and academic risks without fear of being ridiculed by their peers or teacher. In addition, trust was necessary for making autonomous decisions. Students had to trust themselves to make appropriate decisions because they were held accountable for their decisions. In this particular

classroom, the constructs of trust, autonomy, competence, and relatedness were a continuous work in-progress for the class as well as for each individual student. In summary, this inclusive environment supported the academic needs of the students in addition to meeting their psychological needs.

Overall, the findings indicated belongingness varied for these three students. Their sense of belonging was fostered by the quality of their relationships, their sense of competence, and contextual factors such as interest level.

Limitations of the Study

There were four notable limitations to this study. The first limitation is Linda's expertise as a teacher in an inclusive classroom. Linda is an advocate for inclusive teaching and is knowledgeable about inclusive practices and students with disabilities, thus limiting her perspective on inclusive practices. Novice teachers may experience many challenges teaching in an inclusive classroom and may not be able to identify with Linda's experience. However, Linda's expertise provided a way to understand how belonging is fostered in inclusive classrooms for students with mild disabilities. By selecting knowledgeable participants and information-rich cases, researchers are able to study topics in depth (Patton, 2002).

The second limitation is my past experience teaching with Linda. I was cognizant of my previous teaching experience with Linda and my experience as a special education teacher. Prior to the start of the study, I addressed my concerns with Linda and defined my role as a researcher versus my role as a teacher. And although I was familiar with the school board and Linda, the school itself was a new context for me. The purpose of this

study was to understand the students' experiences of belonging through the perspective of the students with exceptionalities and the classroom teacher, not to evaluate Linda's performance as a teacher. Thus my experience with her enabled me to purposefully select a teacher who had knowledge and experience in inclusive classrooms, creating an ideal context.

The third limitation of this study is that Andy and Leah were not students in Linda's homeroom class. Initially I planned on the participants being students in Linda's homeroom but several students in Linda's homeroom were removed from the study because of the severity of their disabilities. Since Linda teamed with another teacher, I decided to include the students from both homerooms. Linda taught Andy and Leah for math and science so she had them one hour less per day than her homeroom students. Linda made an effort to develop a positive relationship with both of them. Leah attended homework club on a regular basis, which helped build a relationship between Leah and Linda. I observed Andy and Linda joking with one another during class and interacting with one another in the hallways before and after school. Linda also supervised the class on several school field trips including the overnight field trip that included exploring the cave. In addition, both students identified having a positive relationship with Linda.

The fourth limitation is Leah's and Andy's homeroom teacher was on medical leave during the study and they had a long term occasional teacher. This created a challenge when the students were asked to describe their relationships with their teachers. When I asked the students to describe their relationships with their teachers, I made sure to include their homeroom teacher even though she was absent. In addition, having a long term occasional teacher caused more tension among the students. This tension caused the

students to disagree more with one another, which may have influenced the focal participants' perspectives about their peers. In response to the increased frustration, Linda held at least two community circles to listen to their concerns regarding the long term occasional teacher and to help them problem solve.

Recommendations

I make four recommendations, two recommendations for further research and two recommendations for teaching practice. The research recommendations include suggestions for conducting interviews with students with exceptionalities and considerations for further case study research that investigates belongingness in various school contexts. The two recommendations for practice focus on the specific role of the classroom teacher in facilitating relationship development and in fostering a sense of academic and social competence.

Recommendations for Further Research

Qualitative research methods enable the researcher to capture and interpret participants' perspectives and experiences so the researcher can develop an understanding of a phenomenon (Patton, 2002). My goal as the researcher was to understand the phenomenon of belonging through the perspectives of the classroom teacher and three students with exceptionalities. Some may argue that students with exceptionalities may not be the best informants or may have difficulty expressing their thoughts. However, the goal of interviews is to understand a person's experiences and to make meaning out of the experiences (Seidman, 1991). Thus I recommend that researchers continue to gain the perspectives of students with exceptionalities and to use them as informants so we truly understand their lives.

Qualitative research methods in the field of special education allow researchers to give voice to students with exceptionalities who are, in some cases, marginalized. Their voices help inform practice and lead to a better understanding of their world (Brantlinger et al., 2005). As an experienced special education teacher, I felt prepared to conduct this research because of my expertise with students who have a range of exceptionalities; however, I was a novice researcher. Through this research, I used a few techniques when interviewing the students with exceptionalities and these techniques enabled them to articulate their stories. For instance, I built rapport with the students so during the interview process the students were familiar and comfortable with me (Eder & Fingerson, 2002). I continued to develop a positive rapport with the students by starting and ending each interview with candid conversations about the various interests in their lives. Also, during the interviews, I discovered the importance of giving the students time to think about the questions and to formulate responses. The questions were asked one at a time and were clearly stated in a language accessible to the student (i.e., “kid speak”; Eder & Fingerson, 2002). Often Andy would need to have a question repeated or clarified since he would “lose focus.” Jacob had the most difficulty answering open-ended questions so it was necessary to have a list of probes for him. Also, knowing that students with autism have difficulty expressing feelings and difficulty sharing other students’ perspectives or thoughts, I provided a specific context and more detail so Jacob was able to share his insights. In this study, the student participants articulated detailed stories about their daily experiences regarding belonging. These techniques should be employed when interviewing children with exceptionalities.

The second research-based recommendation relates to conducting further case studies that investigate the various learning and social contexts that students with exceptionalities experience throughout the school day. This study focused mainly on Linda's classroom. However, belonging has many dimensions such as social relationships and feelings of competence. Past research on belongingness has mainly focused on the various academic and psychological outcomes using survey data. To better understand belonging, future studies should investigate this phenomenon in a variety of contexts. In this study, the students alluded to ways belonging was or was not fostered in other contexts. For example, they described feelings of belonging on the playground and in their nonacademic courses like physical education. This type of case study would allow researchers to draw comparisons among the contexts and make recommendations for future practice.

Recommendations for Practice

Linda had considerable knowledge about teaching in inclusive classrooms and this level of expertise might be an unrealistic expectation for all teachers; however, there are two main suggestions that current and future teachers should consider. First, teacher-student relationships and student-student relationships should be established early in the year and further developed throughout the year. At the beginning of the year, Linda focused on developing relationships with her students, and she also continued to facilitate these relationships throughout the year. Developing relationships throughout the school year is imperative as research has suggested that teacher-student relationships tend to decline during the year (Gest et al., 2005). Also, the participants acknowledged their relationships with others positively contributed to their sense of belonging.

The second recommendation for current and practicing teachers is that they create a context that supports the academic and social growth of all students. These positive feelings of belonging have academic and psychological outcomes. In Linda's classroom, she created an environment that fostered competence, autonomy, relatedness, and trust. She facilitated a supportive environment through encouraging her students, recognizing their strengths, teaching pro-social behaviours, and developing relationships. This type of environment enabled the students to take various social and academic risks while feeling supported by both teachers and peers. However, creating this type of environment involves a lengthy process and, as Linda explained, "it has to be nurtured."

Final Thoughts

To conclude, this study suggests that belonging is multidimensional and is not exclusively based on an individual's relationships with others. Belonging is fostered slightly differently for each individual and yet to fill this need, relatedness with others and a sense of competence is necessary. Thus belonging is complex and multidimensional, and belonging involves individual and contextual constructs. For instance, Jacob needed to feel a stronger sense of competence in his abilities and, although his relationships with others were important to him, they were not a primary need. In contrast, Leah gained confidence in her academic abilities by establishing relationships with others. Given the social, academic, and psychological benefits of belonging, it is important for educators to foster this multidimensional construct within schools and classrooms.

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APPENDIX A: INFORMATION LETTER FOR THE TEACHER

Participants (Principals and Teachers) in the Case Study of students with mild disabilities and their experiences with feelings of belonging

Dear Teachers:

I am inviting you to be a participant for a research project conducted by Wanda Beyer, a master's student, at the Faculty of Education at Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario Canada. The research has been cleared by the Queen's University General Research Ethics Board and approved by your school district.

The purpose of this study is to examine the ways students with mild disabilities experience a sense of belonging in an inclusive classroom. Belonging is defined as an individual's need for an interpersonal, emotional connection with others. Specific purposes of this study are to describe: the context of the classroom, what the classroom teacher and students with mild disabilities report enhances the student's sense of belonging, how the classroom teacher and students with mild disabilities describe the student's relationship with friends, classmates, and teachers in their classroom, the ways students with mild disabilities and the classroom teacher talk about belonging. The goal of this research is to contribute to the understanding of life for students with mild disabilities in inclusive classrooms by listening to their stories and by sharing their experiences of belonging and acceptance.

The case study of the classroom will consist of observations and interviews of the classroom teacher and three students with identified mild disabilities. To establish rapport and build a relationship with the students in the classroom and the classroom teacher, I would like to be a volunteer for approximately 30 hours during a 2-week period before my data collection. I would like all of the students to be comfortable with my presence in the classroom. Each of the three students with mild disabilities will be observed for three 50-minute sessions and I will conduct three 20-minute interviews with each of the three students. The classroom teacher will be observed three times for 50 minutes and will be interviewed for two 60-minute taped sessions. The taped interviews will be transcribed, and then the tapes will be destroyed. Notes will be written up and stored on a computer file. The data will be secure in a locked office and confidentiality is guaranteed to the fullest extent possible.

There are no known risks, discomforts, or inconveniences associated with participation in this research study. Participation in this study is voluntary. You are not obligated to answer any questions that you find objectionable, and you are assured that no information collected will be reported to anyone who is in authority over you. You are free to withdraw from the study at any time and you may request the removal of your data without consequences. If you chose to withdraw, you may contact Wanda Beyer at (608) 455-8035.

This research may result in publications of various types, including journal articles, professional publications, newsletters, books, and instructional materials for schools. To protect your privacy; no names will be used in the data or published work. Your name and identity will not be disclosed. Pseudonyms will replace the participants' names and the name of the school in all forms of data and publications. If the data is made available to other researchers for secondary analysis, your identity will not be disclosed.

If you consent to participate in the research study, please sign the accompanying consent form and return it to Wanda Beyer. Your signature on this form tells us that you understand the procedures involved and that you consent for participation. Please keep this letter for your information.

If you have any question about this project, please contact Wanda Beyer at (608) 548-3424 or my supervisor, Professor Nancy L. Hutchinson at (613)533-3025 or email hutchinn@educ.queensu.ca. For questions, concerns, complaints about the research ethics of this study, contact the Dean of the Faculty of Education, Dr. Rosa Bruno-Jofre, (613) 533-6210 or email brunojor@educ.queensu.ca, or the Chair of the Queen's University General Research Ethics Board, Dr. Stephen Leighton (613) 533-6081 or email chair.GREB@queensu.ca

Sincerely,

Wanda Beyer

APPENDIX B: CONSENT FORM TEACHER

Participants (teachers) in the Case Study of students with mild disabilities and their experiences with feelings of belonging

I have read and retained a copy of the Letter of Information and my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I am aware of the purpose and procedures of this study and I have been informed that my interviews will be recorded by audiotape.

I have been informed that my participation is voluntary and that I may withdraw at any point during the study and may request the removal of my data without consequences. I have also been told the procedures that will be taken to ensure confidentiality of all information.

I understand that if I have questions about this project, I can contact Wanda Beyer at (608) 455-8035 or Professor Nancy L. Hutchinson at (613) 533-3025. I am also aware that for questions, concerns, or complaints about the research ethics of this study, I can contact the Dean of the Faculty of Education, Dr. Rosa Bruno-Jofre, (613) 533-6210, email brunojor@educ.queensu.ca or the Chair of the General Research Ethics Board, Dr. Stephen Leighton (613) 533-6081 or email greb.chair@queensu.ca

Please sign one copy of this Consent Form and return to Wanda Beyer. Retain the second copy for you records.

If you would like a copy of the results of this study, please add you email or address to the bottom of the sheet.

Participant's Name: _____

Participant's Signature: _____

Date: _____

I give my permission for the items checked "Yes" below:

_____ I approve of being a participant in this research project.

_____ I approve of being observed in the classroom

_____ I approve of being interviewed

_____ I approve of being audio recorded.

APPENDIX C: INFORMATION LETTER FOR THE STUDENT PARTICIPANTS

Participants (students) in the Case Study of students with mild disabilities and their experiences with feelings of belonging

Dear Parent/Guardian:

Your son/daughter has been invited to be a participant for a research project conducted by Wanda Beyer, a master's student at the Faculty of Education at Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario, Canada. The research has been approved by the Queen's University General Research Ethics Board and your school district. The students were selected by using the following criteria: (a) the students have an identified mild disability, (b) the students are being taught in inclusive classrooms for 75% of the day, (c) the students are willing to share their perspectives as students with mild disabilities, and (d) the students are able to talk about their experiences in the classroom.

The purpose of this study is to look at ways students with identified mild disabilities experience a sense of belonging or acceptance in an inclusive classroom. In this study I would like to describe the classroom environment and what the classroom teacher and students with mild disabilities report enhances the student's sense of belonging. Also I would like to look at how the classroom teacher and students with mild disabilities describe the student's relationship with friends, classmates, and teachers in their classroom and the ways students with mild disabilities and the classroom teacher talk about belonging. The goal of this research is to understand the life for students with mild disabilities by listening to their stories and by sharing their experiences of belonging and acceptance.

To build a relationship with the students and the classroom teacher, I will be a volunteer in your child's classroom for approximately 30 hours. I will be making observations and doing interviews with the classroom teacher and three students with identified mild disabilities. The classroom teacher will be observed three times for 50 minutes. Also I will interview the teacher for two 60-minute sessions. With each of the student participants, I will conduct three 50-minute observations during academic periods. I will conduct three 20-minute taped interviews. The interviews will occur at your child's school during non-instructional hours (e.g. before or after school, lunch, recess, etc.). The interviews will be audio recorded. The taped interviews will be transcribed, and then the tapes will be destroyed. Field notes will be written up and stored on a computer file. The data will be secure in a locked office. Your child's teacher will not have access to the data. This information will not be used to evaluate your child in any way. Confidentiality is guaranteed to the fullest extent possible.

Participation in this study is voluntary. Prior to each interview, the classroom teacher will obtain verbal permission from your child without my being present. During the interviews, your child does not have to answer any questions that would make him/her feel uncomfortable. If I sense any discomfort in your child I will stop the interview. Due

to the nature of the study, children may express they do not feel like they fit in with their classmates or share they do not have a close friend. If your child is experiencing any psychological or emotional risk, I will notify the school psychologist and/or the school counselor. Also, your child is free to withdraw from the study at any time. You may request the removal of your child's data without consequences. If your child chooses to withdraw, you may contact your child's homeroom teacher who will contact Wanda Beyer.

This research may result in publications of various types, including journal articles, professional publications, newsletters, books, and instructional materials for schools. To protect your child's privacy; no names will be used in the data or published work. Your child's name and identity will not be disclosed. Pseudonyms will replace the participants' names and the name of the school in all forms of data and publications.

If you consent to participate in the research study, please sign the attached consent form and return it the addressed envelope to Wanda Beyer. Your signature on this form tells me that you understand the procedures involved and that you consent to your child's participation. Please keep this letter for your information.

If you have any question about this project, please contact Wanda Beyer at (608) 455-8035 or my supervisor, Professor Nancy L. Hutchinson at (613) 533-3025 or email hutchinn@educ.queensu.ca. For questions, concerns, complaints about the research ethics of this study, contact the Dean of the Faculty of Education, Dr. Rosa Bruno-Jofre, (613) 533-6210 or email brunojor@educ.queensu.ca, or the Chair of the Queen's University General Research Ethics Board, Dr. Stephen Leighton (613) 533-6081 or email chair.GREB@queensu.ca

Sincerely,

Wanda Beyer

APPENDIX D: CONSENT FORM STUDENTS

Participants (parents/students) in the Case Study of students with mild disabilities and their experiences with feelings of belonging

I have read and retained a copy of the Letter of Information. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I am aware of the purpose and procedures of this study and I have been informed that the interviews with my son or daughter will be recorded by audiotape.

I have been informed that my child's participation is voluntary. He or she may withdraw at any point during the study. I may request the removal of my child's data without consequences. I have also been told the procedures that will be taken to ensure confidentiality of all information.

I understand that if I have questions about this project, I can contact Wanda Beyer at (608) 455-8035 or Professor Nancy L. Hutchinson at (613) 533-3025. I am also aware that for questions, concerns, or complaints about the research ethics of this study, I can contact the Dean of the Faculty of Education, Dr. Rosa Bruno-Jofre, (613) 533-6210, email brunojor@educ.queensu.ca or the Chair of the General Research Ethics Board, Dr. Stephen Leighton (613) 533-6081 or email greb.chair@queensu.ca

Please sign one copy of this Consent Form and return it in the enclosed addressed envelope to Wanda Beyer. Retain the second copy for your records.

If you would like a copy of the results of the study, please add your email or address to the bottom of the sheet.

Student's Name: _____

Student's Signature _____

Guardian/Parent's Name: _____

Guardian/Parent's Signature: _____

Date: _____

I give my permission for the items checked "Yes" below:

Yes	No	
_____	_____	I approve my child's participation in this research project.
_____	_____	I approve of my child being observed in the classroom
_____	_____	I approve of my child being interviewed
_____	_____	I approve of my child's interview being audio recorded.

APPENDIX E: INFORMATION LETTER FOR THE NONFOCAL PARTICIPANTS

Classmates in the Case Study of students with mild disabilities and their experiences with feelings of belonging

Dear Parent/Guardian:

My name is Wanda Beyer and I am a master's student at the Faculty of Education at Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario, Canada. During the fall semester, I will be conducting research in your child's classroom. The research has been approved by the Queen's University General Research Ethics Board and by your school district.

The purpose of this study is to look at ways students with identified mild disabilities experience a sense of belonging or acceptance in an inclusive classroom. In this study I would like to describe the classroom environment and what the classroom teacher and students with mild disabilities report enhances the student's sense of belonging. Also I would like to look at how the classroom teacher and students with mild disabilities describe the student's relationship with friends, classmates, and teachers in their classroom and the ways students with mild disabilities and the classroom teacher talk about belonging. The goal of this research is to understand the life for students with mild disabilities by listening to their stories and by sharing their experiences of belonging and acceptance.

To build a relationship with the students and the classroom teacher, I will volunteer for about 30 hours in the classroom. I will be making observations and doing interviews with the classroom teacher and three students with identified mild disabilities. As part of my observations and interviews, I will be describing the interactions between the focal student and potentially your child. Specifically, the observations will describe: (a) the activity or lesson the focal student is doing, (b) the nature of the focal student's participation, and (c) the type of interactions the focal student has with others in the classroom. For example, your child and the focal student may be working on a math project together. I will be listen to their conversation and watch how they interact with one another. I will record what I see and hear between the focal student and your child.

Participation in this study is voluntary. If you do not want your child to participate in the study, sign the form and return the form to your child's classroom teacher. Your signature on this form tells me that you understand the procedures involved and that you do not want your child to participate in this research.

This research may result in publications of various types, including journal articles, professional publications, newsletters, books, and instructional materials for schools. To protect your child's privacy; no names will be used in the data or published work. Your child's name and identity will not be disclosed. Pseudonyms will replace the participants' names and the name of the school in the data and publications.

If you have any question about this project, please contact Wanda Beyer at (608) 455-8035 or my supervisor, Professor Nancy L. Hutchinson at (613)533-3025 or email hutchinn@educ.queensu.ca. For questions, concerns, complaints about the research ethics of this study, contact the Dean of the Faculty of Education, Dr. Rose Bruno-Jofre, (613) 533-6210 or email brunojor@educ.queensu.ca, or the Chair of the Queen's University General Research Ethics Board, Dr. Stephen Leighton (613) 533-6081 or email chair.GREB@queensu.ca

Sincerely,

Wanda Beyer

_____ I do not want my child to participate in this study.

Parent/Guardian's Name

Parent/Guardian's Signature

Date

APPENDIX F: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS WITH TEACHER

- 1) Background information about yourself
 - a. Years of teaching
 - b. Experience with special education
 - c. Specific training related to special education, community building, inclusion
- 2) What does it mean to you for students to belong? Describe a student who would have a strong sense of belonging. What do you think contributes to this sense of belonging?
- 3) Think about a student you have taught who has not had a strong sense of belonging. Describe him or her. Describe what that looks like in the classroom. What do you think contributed to his/her lack of belonging? What helps to develop his/her sense of belonging?
- 4) Describe some of the things you observed that gave you an indication that this student does not have a strong sense of belonging.
- 5) How would you describe your homeroom's sense of belonging since the beginning of the year until now? What contributes to that?
- 6) What about Class 2's sense of belonging? Describe their journey from the beginning of the year. What do you think contributes to that? How would you compare the two classes?
- 7) I noticed you do different activities with the classes in community circle. How do you determine what activities/games to do with each class? How do you know when they are ready for something more challenging or they need to stay where they are?

Focus on the Focal Participants

- 1) How would you describe their sense of belonging from September until now? What do you see happening in the classroom?
- 2) Tell me about what do you to ensure the focal student's sense of belonging? How do you know what to do for the focal student? What evidence do you see in the classroom?
- 3) Describe your relationship with each of the students.
- 4) Describe their relationships with their peers.

APPENDIX G: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS WITH FOCAL PARTICIPANTS

- 1) So let's talk about the students in your class. If I was a new kid in your class what would it be like for me? How would you describe your class?
- 2) I noticed that on Monday and Friday during community circle you played _____. Tell me about that game.
- 3) I noticed in _____ you worked with _____. Tell me what was it like working with _____.
- 4) We are going to talk about the word belonging. If I said, I feel like I belong, tell me what do you think that means.
- 5) When someone in your class feels like they belong (feels thumbs up), what might that look like? Tell me about what I might see. What might it look like if a student sort of feels like they belong (thumbs in the middle)? What might it look like if a student does not feel like they belong (thumbs down)?
- 6) Let's make a list of your classes. Tell me about a class that you have a strong sense of belonging.
 - a) Tell me what that is like.
 - b) What does the teacher do to make you feel like you belong? What is your relationship like with the teacher?
 - c) What do your classmates do to help you feel like you belong?
- 7) Let's look at your list of classes. Where do you not feel like you belong?
 - a) Tell me about that. What is happening in class to make you feel that way?
 - b) What are some things the teacher does to help you feel like you belong? What is your relationship like with the teacher?
- 8) I would like you to:
 - a) Tell me about a day when you felt thumbs up.
 - b) Tell me about a day when you felt thumbs in the middle.
 - c) Describe a day when you felt thumbs down.