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## Anchored to a Community: Middle School Students' Experience of Belonging in the Classroom: A Qualitative Phenomenological Study

Angela Thera Butler  
*University of Northern Iowa*

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**Anchored to a Community: Middle School Students' Experience of Belonging in the  
Classroom: A Qualitative Phenomenological Study**

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Education

Angela Thera Butler

University of Northern Iowa

May 2023

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## Abstract

A student's sense of belonging in the classroom makes a difference. Students who experience a feeling of belonging within the learning environment are more engaged and prepared to learn and contribute. Students who do not feel this sense of belonging in the classroom often pull away from school norms, and may separate themselves from formal education entirely. This qualitative phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of belonging for a small group of 6th grade students from a suburban, midwestern school. Experiences and intentions of three educators who shared these students were also collected and compared to the experiences and perceptions of the students. The purpose of this research was to explore how middle school students define, experience, and perceive belonging within the classroom. Through student and teacher interviews, classroom observations, artifact collection, and the keeping of a researcher's reflective journal, several themes emerged, including teacher caring and effort in the classroom, trust between teachers and students, the role of power in the classroom, the acceptance of student differences, as well as concerns for equity. One key finding was the power of authentic connections between teachers and students, and the intentional moves made by teachers to connect with students in meaningful ways. Despite past efforts by some educators to construct communities of belonging through the implementation of purchased, explicit, social-emotional curriculum, or programming, the participants in this study seemed to value and respond more readily to simple, caring, and genuine relationships with their classroom teachers. Findings from this study are meant to aid educational leaders in creating and sustaining cultures of belonging for all students.

Key words: belonging, student belonging, relatedness, school community

This Study by: Angela Thera Butler

Entitled: Anchored to a Community: Middle School Students' Experience of Belonging  
in the Classroom: A Qualitative Phenomenological Study

has been approved as meeting the dissertation requirements for the  
Degree of Doctor of Education

_____	_____
Date	Dr. Timothy Gilson, Chair, Dissertation Committee
_____	_____
Date	Dr. Morgan Anderson, Dissertation Committee Member
_____	_____
Date	Dr. Darcie Davis-Gage, Dissertation Committee Member
_____	_____
Date	Dr. Benjamin Forsyth, Dissertation Committee Member
_____	_____
Date	Dr. Gabriela Olivares, Interim Dean, Graduate College

## **Dedication**

I would like to dedicate this to all of the strong women in my life, both those with unrealized dreams who have come before me, and those who are just now beginning to find their way. I hope that I have been able to model for them what it means to set challenging goals for yourself, and to then have the courage and determination to achieve those goals. I hope that the work I have done, and continue to do, will help to light the path, and put what might have seemed unreachable, within reach.

## Acknowledgements

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I would also like to thank the instructors that I, along with my cohort members, have had the pleasure of working with these past three years. Each brought a unique perspective, and found ways to challenge us to grow and improve as educational leaders. I also want to acknowledge the other members of the cohort. You represent a top-notch group of educators devoted to doing what is best for students, and I am proud to be a part of the crew. I would like to share my respect and appreciation for my educational leadership mentor and friend Sharon(a) Dentlinger for her non-stop support and encouragement every step of the way. She has modeled for me what hard work and dedication should look like, and is one of the reasons why I have had the confidence and drive to continue down this path.

Finally, I would like to thank my family for their never ending support and encouragement throughout this process. Not once have they doubted my resolve or ability to reach this lifelong goal, but instead have been flexible and understanding of the time and effort that it has taken. My hope is that by reaching this milestone, I have set an example for my children to follow.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

### Overview

Belonging matters. In all facets of life, people need to feel that they belong, that they are accepted, and that they are cared for. Anything less than that can leave people feeling unwanted and alone. This need to belong naturally carries over into the schools and classrooms of our society. Students come to school looking for connection, and seeking a sense of physical and psychological safety among their peers and the adults within the school. The sense of community created in a classroom by the teacher and others in the school can transform what might be considered sterile, utilitarian rooms, into warm welcoming spaces of learning and acceptance. Spaces that will allow all students, regardless of the world they face outside of school, or other circumstances beyond their control, to be curious, to be social, and to be engaged in learning.

Several researchers have studied the idea of student belonging and the influence it has on learning (Allen et al., 2018; Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Goodenow, 1993a; Juvonen, 2006; Nichols, 2006). Educators know that belonging matters, and work to help students improve on their social-emotional well-being. Belonging plays a big role to that end. Educators look for ways to create routines, rituals, and interactions that will engage all learners. They create systems that reward students for being kind to one another, for being respectful, and for being involved in the activities of the classroom. Many students respond well to these attempts; some do not. It is crucial that the adults in a building notice this disconnect, and adjust course as needed.

## **Background**

I came to this research after spending five years as a middle school building principal. In that role, I spent time with students who had been sent out of the classroom to the office for infractions that the teacher felt warranted such a response. Reasons for the visits were typically labeled as defiance, disrespect, or disruption; all very subjective. My position provided me with the opportunity to have one on one conversations with these students. During these chats, it often became apparent that there was miscommunication between student and teacher, a disconnect that served as the starting point of what ended in a referral to the office.

In most cases, my primary goal in these conversations was to reset the student and prepare them to return to the learning environment as soon as feasible. I understand and value the power of time in the classroom, where the learning is happening, and I struggle when someone is keeping a student from their inherent right to be in class. A quote that I have carried along with me on my educational leadership journey is this, “Few tragedies can be more extensive than the stunting of life, few injustices deeper than the denial of an opportunity to strive or even to hope, by a limit imposed from without, but falsely identified as lying within” (Gould, 1981, p. 50).

I interpret this to mean that sometimes people impose limits on others by keeping them from working towards, or even dreaming about working towards a goal. These limits may be based on assumptions about that person, related to circumstances that that person/child has no control over, and then postulating that there is something innately ‘wrong’ with that person/child because of it. For example, a child coming from a low income family, perhaps one that has a less than positive reputation in the community,

may be presumed by some people to be a troublemaker, unable to achieve at the same level as other students, unworthy of being given access to opportunities reserved for other students, simply because of a last name.

I agree with Horace Mann (1848) who believed that education (especially public education) was the great equalizer. When I see adults doing things that could negatively affect a child's ability to access what they have a right and need to access, it makes me very angry. To keep someone else from gaining the knowledge and skills they need in order to potentially improve upon their own lives, and take care of themselves as adult members of society, or to keep them from being able to join in as an equally welcomed members of the learning community is inexcusable. Whether this is done intentionally or unintentionally, the consequences are the same for the students affected.

While I know that students 'act up' for a lot of reasons, and that classroom teachers are only human in their responses, sometimes making decisions that are better for the group than for the individual, what I saw as a principal was often a revolving door of office referrals. No sooner would I return a now upbeat, ready to learn, time for a fresh start, student to the same classroom from whence they came, than they would be back, once again in the office. Once again, dejected from being a part of the learning culture of the classroom. Once again, due to a reason that appeared to stem from a cavalcade of misunderstanding and miscommunication or disconnect, that student was removed from the opportunity to learn.

### **Statement of the Problem**

A positive learning environment is not a concrete substance. It is socially-constructed by, and based upon the perceptions of the adults and students within it



(Anderman, 2003; Elen et al., 2007; Murphy & Zirkel, 2015). Additionally, the success of the students within the classroom is dependent upon many situational and contextual factors, including a sense of belonging (Goodenow, 1993a; Osterman, 2000). Schools have a responsibility to create and foster that sense for all learners.

Anyone who has spent time in a classroom can attest to the fact that some students are engaged and actively involved in the work of learning together, and other students are not. Often these uninvolved students do not feel they are a part of what is happening in the classroom, and make choices that allow them to avoid or escape the learning that is occurring around them.

Belonging is an innate need (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Maslow, 1943). Students in classrooms need to feel they belong, and are a part of the learning community. Failure to create an opportunity for all students to belong can have myriad adverse consequences, including student disengagement, stress, depression, and a lack of self-control (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Goodenow, 1993a).

Research going back more than 40 years identified that students who feel set apart from the rest of the class, will adopt what Elliott and Voss (1974) called normlessness. This disdain for the rules and norms of the school and classroom environment can cause these students to engage in ongoing conflict with those around them, harassment of others, and fighting. When students fail to feel a sense of membership, they perceive the learning environment as uncaring, and many will begin to deliberately work against the norms that others support. In fact, researchers have concluded that some of the major forces that lead to dropout from school originate in academic failure and feeling alienated from school (Finn, 1989; Kaplan et al., 1997; Osterman, 2000; Wehlage & Rutter, 1986).

Inversely, if students feel that they are an accepted member of the group, and that they are surrounded by people who believe they are capable members of the community, they will want to engage in a positive way (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Goodenow & Grady, 2010; Osterman, 2000). In this situation, students typically present themselves as content, calm, and motivated to learn (Wentzel, 1997). Additionally, a sense of belonging in the classroom can help students to internalize the goals and expectations of the adults around them (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Noddings, 1992). Learning for all in an environment such as this, is not only possible, but very likely.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to expose the reality of student experiences and their perceptions of teacher attempts to build belonging in the classroom. As educators, we owe it to our students to create and maintain environments that give them every opportunity to succeed. Part of that responsibility involves taking a closer look at what strategies and routines are actually working to achieve this goal and what, from the perspective of the student, is missing. This study is intended to provide information that will allow educators to create classrooms that reach all students in a positive way. By examining the ways classroom teachers act intentionally towards students to create and maintain cultures of belonging in their classrooms, and the experiences and perceptions of certain students within those learning environments, we can begin to better understand how students perceive and experience belonging in the classroom.

## **Research Questions**

The following research questions will guide the study:

1. What are the experiences of 6th grade students within a classroom setting in regards to how they define belonging?
2. How do students perceive teacher attempts to create a community of belonging among all learners?
3. What discrepancies exist in the definition and experience of belonging for students who possess demographic differences (gender, race, socio-economic status, ability)?
4. What are the teachers' perceptions in regards to how students in their classroom actually experience belonging?
5. In what ways do teachers work to build and maintain a sense of belonging for all students?

## **Assumptions**

This is a qualitative study involving semi-structured interviews of teachers and students. It is assumed that responses of all participants represent their honest opinions and perceptions. This research will also involve in-person classroom observations. It is assumed that events and experiences perceived during the observations represent what typically occurs within these classrooms on a daily basis. This research also involves the collection and analysis of physical artifacts that represent attempts to create and maintain positive learning environments. It is assumed that these artifacts existed in the classroom prior to this research, and were not created solely for the purpose of creating a false impression of a positive classroom culture. This research also involves the use of a

reflective researcher journal. It is assumed that the content of that journal will represent the researchers real-time field notes and reflections of the experience of conducting this research.

### **Limitations**

A limitation of this study is that the research will only occur within two mid-western classrooms, within one suburban middle school. Additionally, the number of student participants is limited to six students, selected based upon certain demographic characteristics, such as gender, race, socio-economic status, and ability, that might cause them to perceive teacher attempts to engage them in the learning community differently. Due to the small sample size, and limited number of classrooms, the results of this study will not be generalizable.

Additionally, as an administrator in the district, adult participants may act in a way that is not typical within the day to day activities of the classroom. Direct conversations about the purpose and intent of this study will take place between myself, the researcher, and the teachers prior to collaborating together. This will hopefully ameliorate the possibility of misrepresentation, and lead to honest and authentic experiences.

### **Delimitations**

The purpose of this study is to explore the reality of student experiences and their perceptions of teacher attempts to build belonging in the classroom. With that in mind, I am purposely selecting two middle school teachers who have been identified by their principal and/or other teachers as being highly skilled in creating positive learning environments that involve all students. I am interested in seeing how students experience

and perceive classroom cultures created and maintained by teachers who are considered by the building principal or other adults to be the best of the best. I have selected two classrooms that all six student participants are members of, in order to identify differences between the two. In other words, both classrooms might have shared practices, such as welcoming students at the door, but different teachers might engage in that action differently. This distinction, however subtle, might have an effect on student perception of belonging.

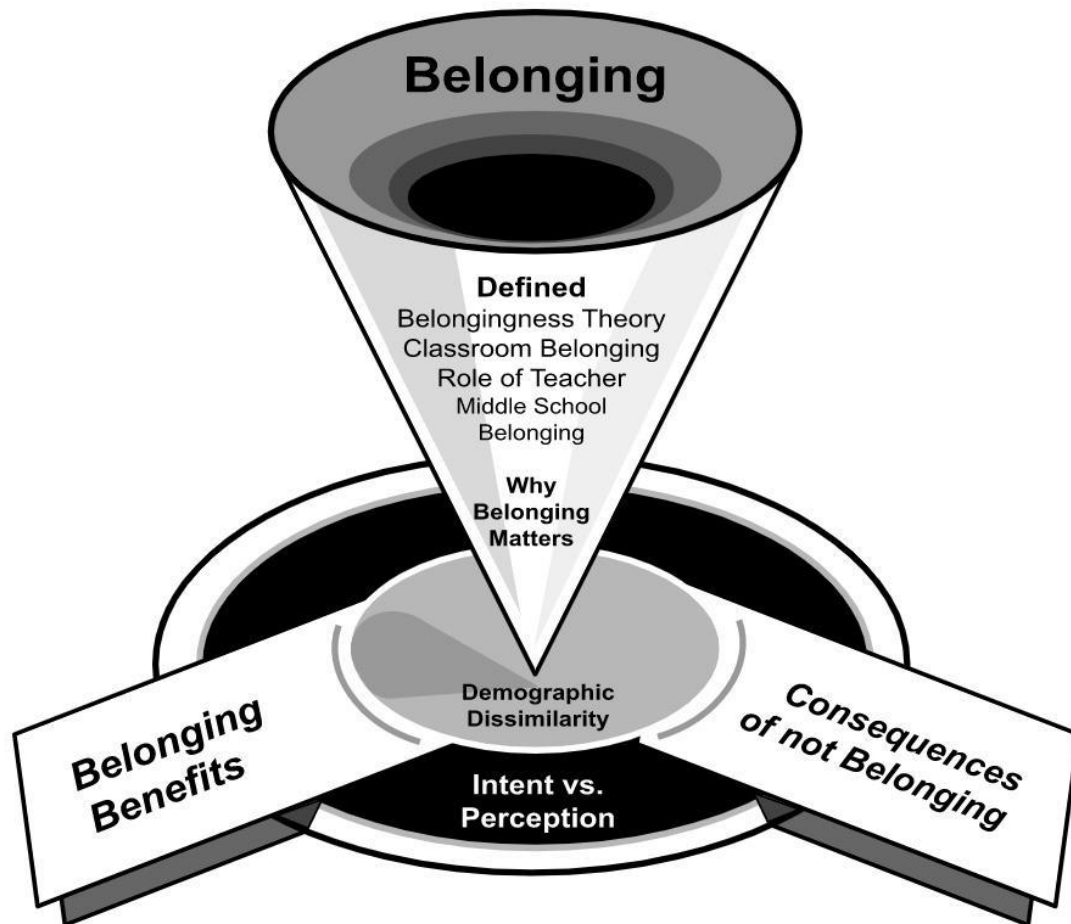
### **Summary**

This chapter was intended to situate the reader in regards to the purpose and potential of this research. By taking a closer look at the current reality of student belonging in the classroom, and giving students the voice to share their understanding and perception of what it means to belong in the learning environment, ineffective practices that are potentially being overlooked can be identified and corrected. Also, by examining the juxtaposition between teacher and student perception of belonging in the classroom, a fresh perspective can be explored that may lead to a more congruent and successful educational climate for all learners. Chapter two will provide a review of related literature on belonging.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### Introduction

Chapter 1 explained the reasoning behind this proposed research on student belonging. Chapter 2 of this study is a review of past and current literature related to belonging. This review begins with an examination of research regarding the innate human need for belonging, and the theoretical framework that supports this research: Belongingness Theory. That will be followed by an exploration of ways past researchers have defined and situated belonging within the frame of school. We will also explore the salient role the teacher plays in regards to belonging through direct and indirect interactions with students. From there we will consider classroom belonging, and belonging at the middle school level specifically. This will then lead our focus on what researchers have discovered regarding the benefits of belonging at school, as well as the consequences of not belonging. We will then take a brief look at four areas of demographic dissimilarity that will be considered during this research: gender, race, socio-economic status, and ability. Finally, this literature review will end with a look at the power of intent versus perception in the interaction between students and adults at school. A visual representation of the content of this chapter is displayed below, see Figure 1.

**Figure 1***Literature Review Visual Representation***Belonging**

Belonging is a concept that dates back as far as the beginning of human existence. Early humans relied on one another for safety, survival and reproduction, and grouped themselves for those protective purposes (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Baumeister and Leary (1995) reviewed existing literature on belonging and found that social connections

between individuals is universal in all societies. Decades later, a new generation of belongingness researchers, Allen and colleagues (2021) wrote, “belonging is not only good, but that the desire to belong is a deeply rooted, human motivation that, underpinned by our ancestral origins, permeates our thoughts, feelings, and behaviors” (p. 88). There is a need for each of us to find a place where we belong, although how people define and experience belonging may look distinct depending on their own demographic differences and individual perceptions.

People are motivated to make and keep connections with one another. Baumeister and Leary (1995) also considered the intense competition for resources that would have existed early in human history. Grouping could ensure that members would share the resources they have with one another. An individual on his own, competing with a group of individuals for the necessary items (food, water, shelter) would be at a disadvantage. Particularly if the members of the group were working together and genuinely cared for the well-being of one another (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Gray et al. (2020) concisely described belonging as a “fundamental human right” (p. 3). A right that motivates much of the behavior we observe in ourselves and one another.

Maslow found in his seminal work, *A Theory of Motivation* (1943), that people have five levels of needs, and that generally, they do not seek satisfaction of a need at one level until the previous level’s need is satisfied. The levels are from bottom to top: physiological (breathing, food, water, sleep, sex, excretion), safety (security of body, health, property), belonging/love (family, friends, spouse), self-esteem (achievement mastery, recognition), and finally self-actualization (creativity and fulfillment) (Maslow, 1943). Maslow also found that people who lack belonging:



will feel keenly, as never before, the absence of friends, or a sweetheart, or a wife, or children. He will hunger for affectionate relations with people in general, namely, for a place in his group, and he will strive with great intensity to achieve this goal. (p. 9)

Maslow (1943) shared that only once we find ourselves connected or “anchored to a community” (Kunc, 1992, p. 6), can we begin to develop to our full potential.

### ***Belonging Defined***

One challenge of exploring the idea of belonging involves ascertaining the meaning of the word. Osterman (2000) describes belonging as, “the need for relatedness that involves the need to feel securely connected with others in the environment, and to experience oneself as worthy of love and respect” (p. 325). Other terms are used in place of belonging throughout the literature. School connectedness (Jose et al., 2012), school attachment (Hallinan, 2008), and sense of community (Osterman, 2000), have all been used. Still others define belonging as a, “relationally derived social construct that has been used to describe the sense of fit or feelings of acceptance that an individual feels to one’s community” (Bouchard & Berg, 2017, p. 107).

McMillan and Chavis (1986) studied community and the sense of belonging individuals have within it, and stated:

The sense of belonging and identification involves the feeling, belief, and expectation that one fits in the group and has a place there, a feeling of acceptance by the group, and a willingness to sacrifice for the group. (p. 10)

McMillan and Chavis (1986) also identified key areas of importance related to successful membership or belonging to a community. These include trust, identified authority, and the development of an economy within a group.

### *Trust*

Trust comes from a willingness of members to share influence within the group (Furman, 1998; McMillan & Chavis, 1986). McMillan and Chavis (1986) explain that, “trust develops through a community’s use of power” (p. 318). Within a community, it must be determined what opportunities exist for members of the group to contribute, or to make a positive impact. If the appropriation of power and influence between the members of a community are seen to be equitable, members of the group generate and reciprocate trust (Furman, 1998; McMillan & Chavis, 1986; Osterman, 2000). Trust can evolve where there is autonomy for individual members of the group to share talents, skills, and effort for the greater good.

Another salient component of building trust within a community is related to a shared agreement about what is, and what is not acceptable in regards to behaviors among its members. People need to know what they can expect from others around them. Without a consensus on how members of a community will treat one another, members will feel a level of unpredictability, and mistrust (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). However, when group members feel a shared understanding and confidence in the rules and order in regards to social norms, they are freed to focus on other things such as achievement and their performance within the group (Battenhausen & Murnighan, 1991; Fuehrer & Keys, 1988).

### ***Identified Authority***

Once a group has created a sense of order through the use of agreed upon norms, it must also determine who will lead the group. Some person, or small group of people, within the group needs to be in charge of making decisions, and maintaining order within the group (McMillan & Chavis, 1986; Osterman, 2000). Without a leader at the helm, forward motion for the group is stymied. An effective leader needs to be someone who is not self-serving, but understands and is committed to doing what is best for the group. History has shown what happens when the person in charge is only interested in focusing on their own goals and desires.

A variety of social scientists (Bennett, 1991; Carrón et al., 1988; Newman, 1981) have studied leadership within a group and have shown that the ideal circumstances exist when, “leaders influence members and when members influence leaders concurrently” (McMillan & Chavis, 1986, p. 319). This type of collaboration between leaders and followers allows for the ongoing exchange of ideas and influence, something that benefits everyone. Shared leadership is an essential part of how effective leaders in any group or organization meet the variety of needs of its members, and positively influence the group as a whole (DuFour & Marzano, 2011; Sergiovanni, 2005). Many effective school leaders have realized this, and work to build and foster practices that involve and depend upon shared leadership.

### ***Development of an Economy***

Once a group has established that there will be opportunities for all members to contribute, and that members of the group will abide by an agreed upon set of norms, and that one member, or a small group of members, will lead the group by enforcing the

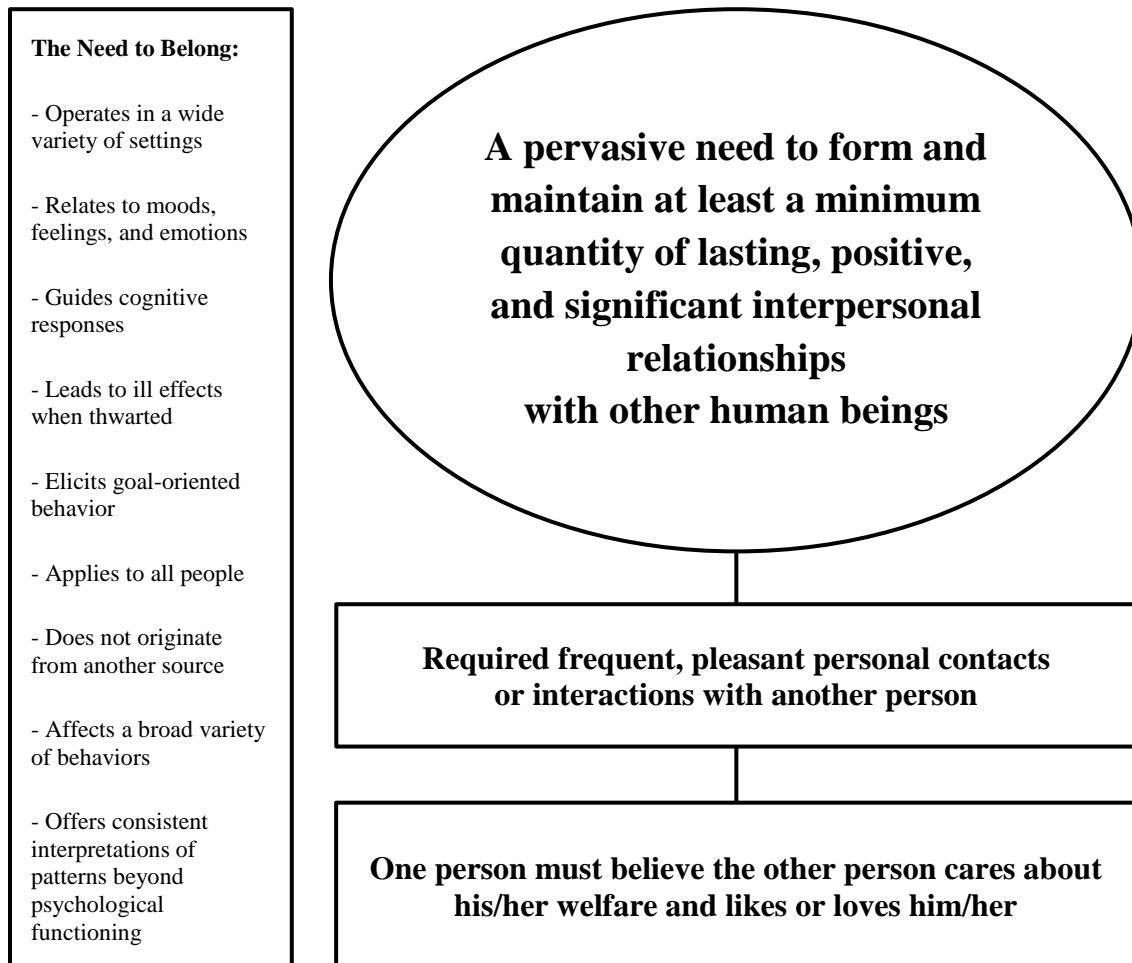
norms, and sharing some of the leadership load, the group is ready to begin working together to develop some sort of an economy (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Within this economy, members will begin to look for ways they can benefit one other and the group as a whole (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Lott and Lott (1965) had similar findings, stating, “It is taken for granted that individuals are attracted to groups as a direct function of the satisfaction they are able to derive within them” (p. 285). Group membership provides opportunities for its members to satisfy their own needs, as well as negotiating to help meet the needs of others in the group.

These bargains or transactions made between members of a community strengthen the connection or sense of belonging they have (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). As members of the group look for ways to help or be helped by others in the group, they begin to notice and appreciate the ways members are similar and different. Individual skills, abilities, and knowledge, come to light and are often met by others with praise and demand. This sense of being useful to the group aids in members' feelings of inclusion and belonging (Hall, 2010). Members of a group want to feel that they are valued for what they bring to the group.

### **Theoretical Framework of Belonging**

The theoretical framework for this study is taken directly from a review of empirical evidence conducted by Roy F. Baumeister and Mark R. Leary (1995), titled “The Need to Belong: Desire for Interpersonal Attachments as a Fundamental Human Motivation.” This work is well-known within the study of belonging, and is cited often in other studies. Within their review of empirical findings, Baumeister and Leary proposed that the need to belong is a fundamental human motivation. They wrote, “to belong can

provide a point of departure for understanding and integrating a great deal of the existing literature regarding human interpersonal behavior” (p. 497). Their belongingness hypothesis stated that, “human beings have a pervasive drive to form and maintain at least a minimum quantity of lasting, positive, and significant interpersonal relationships” (p. 497). Baumeister and Leary (1995) added that in order to satisfy this need to belong, an individual must engage in repeated pleasurable interactions with others, and that these interactions need to occur within conditions of stability and ongoing concern for the well-being of one another. The Belonging as a Fundamental Motivation by Baumeister and Leary (1995) is portrayed in Figure 2 (below).

**Figure 2***Theoretical Framework: Belonging as a Fundamental Motivation*

In order to situate this theory as a fundamental human motivation, Baumeister and Leary (1995) were tasked with meeting the following metatheoretical criteria (noted in left column of Figure 2), stating that:

a fundamental motivation should (a) produce effects readily under all but adverse conditions, (b) have affective consequences, (c) direct cognitive processing, (d) lead to ill effects (such as on health or adjustment) when thwarted, (e) elicit goal-oriented behavior designed to satisfy it (subject to motivational patterns such as

object substitutability and satiation), (f) be universal in the sense of applying to all people, (g) not be derivative of other motives, (h) affect a broad variety of behaviors, and (i) have implications that go beyond immediate psychological functioning. (p. 498)

Through a critical examination of literature related to belonging, Baumeister and Leary (1995) found evidence to support their theory of belonging. Their findings included research on how easily people form social bonds with one another and their unwillingness to break those bonds (Leary & Cox, 2008). They found that the intense need to belong can lead some people to develop connections very quickly, and to be willing to overcome all sorts of challenges in order to maintain them (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Leary & Cox, 2008). They found that once a connection is made between two people, those two people will attempt to maintain that connection, even if the relationship is not a positive one (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Vaughan, 1986). Baumeister and Leary (1995) determined that, “this resistance appears to go well beyond rational considerations of practical or material advantage” (p. 503). For example, consider a spouse who refuses to separate from an abusive partner, or that old friend from high school that you never see but continue to message on social media. Once a connection has been established, people tend to hold on.

Baumeister and Leary (1995) also found evidence that significant cognitive processing is devoted to belonging. They found that the relationships that exist within a place of belonging matter to the participants. People spend time thinking about other people, and the relationship they have with them (Leary & Cox, 2008; Linville & Jones, 1980). The time many people spend on-line, sharing their life events, reaching out to long

lost friends, and sometimes even communicating the detailed minutiae of their daily tasks, attests to this need to be involved with others.

Baumeister and Leary (1995) found evidence to support the idea that changes in belongingness status would create an emotional response by an individual:

evidence suggests a general conclusion that being accepted, included, or welcomed leads to a variety of positive emotions (e.g. happiness, elation, contentment, and calm) whereas being rejected, excluded, or ignored leads to potent negative feelings (e.g. anxiety, depression, grief, jealousy, and loneliness. (p. 508)

Other researchers have also found a connection between belonging and positive feelings, as well as the negative effect of not belonging or of being rejected (Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Deci et al., 1991; Osterman, 2000; Resnick et al., 1997; Solomon et al., 1986; Wentzel, 1998).

Additionally, Baumeister and Leary (1995) discovered that a deprivation of belonging could cause, “decrements in health, happiness, and adjustment” (p. 508). Both relatedness and interaction are needed to provide a fully satisfying relational bond (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Even partial deprivation when an individual has relatedness without interaction, or interaction without relatedness was found to have a damaging effect on people (Leary, 1990). For most people, being surrounded by others who care about and support them can work to buffer against the strains and stresses of everyday life. Just as being a part of a group striving towards shared goals can reduce the workload and responsibilities on any individual.



Baumeister and Leary (1995) also discovered that not only do individuals eventually reach a state of satiation, once an adequate number of relationships have been established, but that they can readily substitute one relationship for another when necessary. “The belongingness hypothesis holds that individuals need a certain amount of social relatedness. Social relationships and partners should therefore be to some extent interchangeable” (Baumeister & Leary, 1995, p. 515). As people collect relationships, they eventually find that they no longer need or desire to continue meeting new people or forging new relationships (Audy, 1980; Reis, 1990; Wheeler & Nezlek, 1977). Also, although people value a sustained bond with one another built around shared experiences, they can, when necessary, successfully transfer feelings of connection from one partner to another (Lawson, 1988). For example, an old friend can be replaced by a new friend.

Finally, the researchers found substantial evidence supporting a working assumption that the need to belong is innate among all individuals, universal among all cultures, and directly related to evolutionary purposes (Barchas, 1986; Hogan et al., 1985). Baumeister and Leary (1995) even go so far as to suggest that, “it remains plausible (but not proven) that the need to belong is part of human biological inheritance” (p. 518).

### **Belonging Within the Context of School**

Educational leaders have worked to create healthy school climates, complete with classrooms that support learning for all students. Each classroom within a school provides a unique opportunity for students to belong, by connecting with others, and fully engaging in the process of learning. According to the National School Climate Center (NSCC, n.d.):

School climate refers to the quality and character of school life. School climate is based on patterns of students', parents' and school personnel's experience of school life and reflects norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching and learning practices, and organizational structures.

Additionally, NSCC shares the importance of making sure students feel respected and that they have opportunities to contribute and engage in meaningful ways that support both the physical and emotional space of the classroom. Also noted by NSCC, is the need for the adults in a school to both model and nurture attitudes that affirm the value of education and the gratification that can be realized through learning. These beliefs align well with what McMillan and Chavis (1986) discovered when they studied the idea of belonging within a community. People want to feel respected and valued for how they can contribute to the group.

For decades, well-known scholars have studied and written about the role social interaction plays in learning. Scholars such as Dewey (1938) wrote of classrooms within school environments that support students, while Vygotsky (1962) and Erikson (1968) wrote about social relationships within the school environment. They viewed learning as primarily a social process, instead of something done completely in isolation. Dewey also stated that the quality of education is, "realized in the degree to which individuals form a group" (Dewey, 1938, p. 65). Learning is a social activity occurring within a community created and fostered by those who exist within it.

Over the years, a variety of definitions and descriptions of school belonging have surfaced. Willms (2000) defined school belonging as, "a psychological construct related to attachment to school and underpinned by feelings of being accepted and valued by

others (including peers) within the school community” (p. 3). Still other researchers connect a sense of belonging at school to engagement in school activities, opportunities to have a voice in decision making, a sense of self-respect and self-esteem, feeling the support of others in the classroom, and a positive relationship with the teacher (Bouchard & Berg, 2017; Freeman, et al., 2007; Goodenow, 1993a; Juvonen, 2006). A prevalent, and often cited and operationalized definition of school belonging penned by researchers Goodenow and Grady (2010) is, “the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others in the school social environment” (p. 80).

Carol Goodenow is the primary author of three well known studies involving a student belonging at the secondary school level. Within that research, she examined belonging and its relationship to student motivation, effort, intrinsic value, and any expectations that students have for themselves to be successful within the classroom. In the first of these studies (Goodenow, 1993a.) Goodneow took the data from three studies using 1,366 students in grades 5-8 from a suburban middle school and two urban junior high schools, and was able to show a positive correlation between school membership, and how valued students felt within the classroom, as well as their own expectancy to achieve.

In the second study, Goodenow investigated 353 middle school students, focusing on one academic class (Goodenow, 1993b). Students in that class completed a survey using the Psychological Sense of School Membership (PSSM) scale that Goodenow had developed to measure classroom belonging and support, expectancies for success, and intrinsic interest and value in schoolwork at the secondary school level. Student grades were obtained for the course, as well as teacher ratings of the effort shown by each

student, and compared to the results from the survey. Findings showed that a strong student sense of belonging, “contributed significantly” (Goodenow, 1993b., p. 21) to the difference between student expectations for success, and their perceived value within the classroom. She also found that the supportiveness of the individual teachers in the classroom had the most influence on student motivation to engage in learning, but that this connection between teacher support and student motivation lessened as students moved from 6th to 8th grade. Finally, Goodenow discovered that students who expected that they would be successful, showed more effort and had better grades than those who did not.

A third study was completed with a colleague (Goodenow & Grady, 2010), and this time took place in an urban high school with a large Hispanic and African American population. Again, the PSSM was used to determine student sense of belonging, expectancy for success, persistence, and the value of schoolwork. Goodenow and Grady also looked at the value student’s peers placed on education and the effect this had on their own (student) motivation to succeed. Findings showed that the sense of belonging at school among these students was significantly lower than the sense of belonging found in students at the predominantly White, middle class school. However, there was still a connection between a sense of belonging and student expectation for success, value of schoolwork, effort (self-reported), and student motivation. The correlation between how students’ classmates felt about school and student expectation for success and effort, was not nearly as strong as the correlation to an overall sense of belonging at school.

### ***Role of the Teacher***

As Goodenow found (1993b), one necessary aspect of student belonging is the relationship between the student and the classroom teacher. Various studies have also taken a closer look at the role student-teacher relationship plays in student perceptions of belonging within the classroom, with many finding that teachers play a significant role in making sure that students know that they are accepted and cared for within the classroom (Bouchard & Berg, 2017; Chiu et al., 2016; Juvonen, 2006; Osterman, 2000; Sakiz et al., 2012; Wallace, et al., 2012). Interestingly, students from low income families were found to rely even more on the connection with teachers for positive school outcomes than their peers from middle to upper income families (Olsson, 2009).

Bouchard and Berg (2017) used a qualitative study to explore the perspectives of students in late elementary and middle school and their development of a sense of belonging at school, and compared that to the perspectives of their teachers. Using individual interviews with teachers and students, they found that the sense of belonging that many of the students had, came from the caring relationships they shared with their teachers, as well as through friendships with peers, and involvement in school-based activities. Bouchard and Berg also found that both teachers and students alike understood the importance of belonging at school, something also supported by work done by other researchers (Crouch et al., 2014; Ryan et al., 1990).

Results from the Bouchard and Berg (2017) study also found that students identified key characteristics of positive relationships with their teachers. These included students experiencing ongoing academic support from teachers throughout the learning process, teachers taking the initiative to get to know students as individuals, and teachers

taking into consideration the challenges students face outside of school. Students also expressed a desire for a reciprocal relationship with teachers that would allow them to get to know them as people. Several students in this study requested that teachers share some aspects of their private lives with their students so they could know them more personally.

The Bouchard and Berg (2017) study, not unlike the study planned for in this proposal, juxtaposed the beliefs and experiences of students and teachers within the same classroom setting. Bouchard and Berg (2017) found that teachers in the study identified different aspects of belonging than what student participants had shared. Teachers felt that there was substantial influence on student belonging from the values of the students' families, which in some cases, they felt impeded the students' feelings of belonging at school. However, Bouchard and Berg (2017) did not define what those family values were. The teachers also shared that, in some cases, due to poverty, and the transient nature of the community, the consistency and connection needed between students and teachers in order to build a positive relationship was not present.

Other researchers have substantiated the belief that the interactions between students and teachers make a difference in student belonging. They have found that students respond positively to teachers who are present, provide for student autonomy, listen to students, show respect, care, and love for students, create situations that seek active student participation, acknowledge student potential, and look for opportunities to develop student talents (Drolet & Arcand, 2013; Ibrahim & El Zaatari, 2019; Ryan et al., 1994).

Slaten and colleagues (2016) completed a qualitative study taking a look at the educational needs of marginalized students at an alternative high school, and found that students, “identified school belonging in the form of relationships with school faculty as a primary motivation to stay in school as opposed to dropping out” (Slaten et al., 2016, p. 7). This research is supported by others looking at the effect a caring teacher can have on students, especially our most needy students (Allen et al., 2018; Hattie, 2009; Ryan et al., 1994; Wentzel, 1998).

A qualitative study, also similar to the one in this proposal, was completed by Keyes (2019) and explored student voice through the collection and analysis of interviews of high school students. Interview questions addressed, from the student perspective, the various factors they felt were important for fostering belonging in the classroom. Keyes (2019) used semi-structured student interviews that lead to two overarching themes. One, that teachers need to build and foster positive relationships with and between students. Two, that teachers need to utilize teaching practices that engage and encourage students to take part in the work of the classroom. Students also remarked on the importance of trust between teachers and students, created through honest feedback and listening to one another. All three of those student identified themes are supported by past research (Allen et al., 2018; Goodenow, 1993a; Osterman, 2000; Ryan et al., 1994). Once again, the role of the teacher is at the heart of student belonging in the classroom.

Allen et al. (2018) conducted a meta-analysis across 51 studies involving more than 67,000 adolescent participants to examine factors that shape school belonging, and identified several themes that influence school belonging for students. Of those themes,

they found that teacher support was one of the strongest predictors of school belonging. “Students who believe they have positive relationships with their teachers and that their teachers are caring, empathic and fair, and help resolve personal problems, are more likely to feel a greater sense of belonging than those students who perceive a negative relationship with their teachers” (Allen et al., 2018).

Teachers truly are as stated by Hattie (2009), “major players in the education process” (p. 22).

### ***Belonging at Middle School***

A sense of belonging can be especially relevant to students during the challenging time of transition between childhood and adulthood (Erikson, 1968; Steinberg & Morris, 2001). Middle school aged students, unlike their elementary peers, are vulnerable in regards to how they experience and perceive interpersonal relationships with others (Bouchard & Berg, 2017; Goodenow, 1993a; Osterman, 2000). Often the transition from elementary school to middle school can lead to a breakdown in the relationship between student and teacher (Goodenow, 1993a; Osterman, 2000). Some students feel they can no longer trust teachers, or that teachers no longer care about them (Eccles et al., 1993; Harter, 1996). Ironically, the need to belong actually increases as students reach this early stage of adolescence (Ibrahim & El Zaatari, 2019). Maintaining that positive bond with their teachers is even more necessary than in prior years, but sadly for some students, doing so may become difficult.

Additional challenges for these students involve changes in the routines, rituals, and rules of middle school as compared to elementary school. Students who, in the past, had spent the majority of a school day in one classroom, with one teacher, and one set of



peers, are now expected to rotate between four or more classrooms, with different teachers, and in some cases a fresh set of peers in each classroom. Combine that with the added responsibilities and expectations adults have for students in middle school to follow schedules, find classrooms, procure the appropriate materials for each class, complete assignments, and navigate content specific learning, and it is not surprising that some students struggle to meet these expectations (Grills-Taquechel et al., 2010).

From a developmental perspective, early adolescent individuals are often occupied with thoughts of who they are, who they wish to become, and how they want to be perceived by others. There is a heightened sense of self-consciousness, and desire to fit in with the group (Elkind, 1967). Several researchers have found that as students begin the transition to secondary school, their sense of school belonging tends to decline along with the efforts they make to achieve at school (Anderman, 2003; Wang & Holcombe, 2010).

Students in early adolescence may become less assertive during classroom interactions, asking less questions, and opting for a more passive, seemingly less engaged demeanor (Good et al., 1987). Socially, it can be risky to ask questions in front of peers at this age, or to stand apart from the crowd. In fact, at no other time in their lives, will students be so concerned about what their peers think, and how they feel about them (Larson & Asmussen, 1991). This is when a sense of belonging, safety, and acceptance is crucially important to, “counterbalance the heightened sense of exposure and interpersonal risk” (Goodenow, 1993a, p. 24). Supportive, caring teachers can help to alleviate some of the stressful effects of these changes (Crouch et al., 2014), as can an overall supportive environment.

In addition to supporting them as individuals, students in early adolescence need to know that teachers are creating and maintaining learning spaces that are safe. Ryan and Patrick (2001) found that, when middle school students perceive that their teachers encourage mutual respect among classmates, their own self-reported academic self-efficacy and self regulation improve. Students who are confident that the teacher will foster a psychologically and physically safe environment, will feel capable and encouraged to engage fully, ask questions, and share ideas. This response aligns well with Maslow's Hierarchy of Human Needs (Maslow, 1943) that frames a need for safety before self-esteem or achievement.

Osterman (2000) wrote about belonging/relatedness within a middle school classroom, and found that students need to know that others in the room respect and care for them. Additionally, Osterman (2000) discovered that the beliefs individuals have about themselves come directly from interactions that they have with others. If those interactions are positive, students will be affirmed and feel a part of the learning environment. If those interactions are negative, students will decide that they do not belong, that they are not valued, and then are in turn less likely to engage in positive, community-building behaviors. In some cases, as shared previously by Elliott and Voss (1974), they may adopt a habit of normlessness, and begin to work against the norms others in the group hold.

According to Drolet and Arcand (2013), adolescents will display whatever behaviors will bring them the benefits they seek. This often includes attention from peers, avoidance of a task, social success, or feelings of effectiveness and competence. When these behaviors are positive, and align with the mores of the classroom, students will

have a feeling of fitting into the learning environment, and gaining acceptance from others (Libbey, 2004). When these behaviors are not aligned with the classroom norms, students will struggle to feel the security of belonging. In fact, Anderman (2003) found that when a high percentage of the group feel a sense of belonging, the more the few who do not, feel rejected. In other words, if the majority of students feel they are a part of the group, the few remaining who do not feel that they belong, experience an even more intense sense of rejection.

In the midst of all of the changes, challenges, and new opportunities, are the lived experiences of the students themselves. Much has been written about middle school classrooms, primarily from the vantage point of the adults within the schools. Rarely are the voices of the actual students experiencing or not experiencing this phenomenon of belonging ever heard. One salient aspect of this proposal is to do just that. To ask about belonging, and then to listen. Student voice is important at this precarious juncture of life development, as students are just beginning to learn to speak up and advocate for themselves. Olsson (2009) stated that, “When the questions concern self-concept, psychological well-being and social relations, only adolescents themselves can answer them correctly” (p. 264).

### **Why Belonging Matters**

Not surprisingly, there are pronounced repercussions related to belonging in the classroom. Osterman (2000) reviewed several studies looking at the connection between belonging and positive effect and found that people who perceive that they belong, demonstrate a higher level of confidence in their own abilities, seem more intrinsically motivated, have positive attitudes towards school, are more engaged, invest more in the

process of learning, and respond more willingly to norms and expectations set by others (Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Goodenow, 1993a; Wentzel & Caldwell, 1997). He also found that when people did not share this perception of belonging, they experienced intense feelings of anxiety, depression, grief, jealousy, and loneliness (Osterman, 2000). Considering the impact these contrasting effects could have on the day to day interactions, and relationships of individual students, it is not surprising that the way some students experience school looks and feels different than the way other students experience school.

### ***Benefits of Belonging***

Clearly, there is power in fostering authentic positive relationships at school. According to Goodenow and Grady (2010), "Almost all people find school settings more enjoyable, worthwhile, and interesting when they believe that others in the environment like and value them" (p. 63). This is true in any setting that involves people working together. We all want to exist within cultures where we feel a certain level of esteem from those around us. Students who feel the warmth of a classroom such as this will make efforts to be at school, on time, and will typically follow the norms set by the group (Allen et al., 2018). Students who feel that they belong in the classroom are also more committed to the work they are being asked to engage in, and more likely to accept the authority of others (Osterman, 2000).

Numerous research studies have shown that students who feel they belong also are more academically successful than those who do not (Allen et al., 2018; Anderman, 2003; Goodenow, 1993a; Libbey, 2004). They achieve at higher levels. Students who achieve at high levels tend to have a stronger sense of belonging within the classroom,

which in turn, encourages them to continue to succeed. (Anderman, 2003). This can create a repeating cycle of achievement and belonging, that can help to surface within students an overall optimistic outlook on the future (Slaten et al., 2016). Students feel self-assured and ready to take on what comes next. Success now, breeds success in the future.

The self-efficacy created by this belonging can also serve to bolster student resilience to stay in school longer. Students who perceive that they belong, and demonstrate to themselves that they can be successful, are less likely to drop out of school. (Allen et al., 2018; Libbey, 2004). The longer students remain in school, the more likely they are to graduate. Some students will even have the skills and stamina to persist through college or other post-secondary pursuits that can lead to gainful employment, and career opportunities. Belonging has also been shown to relate to an increase in the confidence with which students plan for future careers (Allen et al., 2018). When there is hope for a fruitful future, students get excited about the possibilities, and begin to plan for the life to come.

Overall, past research has shown that students who feel a sense of belonging in the classroom are more likely to develop positive psychological, academic, and social outcomes and better overall health and well-being when compared to students who feel unsupported and disconnected from their school (Juvonen, 2006). Simply put, belonging makes a positive difference for students. However, this also means that there are definite consequences when students do not feel that same sense of belonging in the classroom.

### *Lack of Belonging Consequences*

Lack of belonging can lead to a host of negative consequences. Karen Osterman, in her literature review (2000) found that when students do not feel that they are a part of the group, they demonstrate withdrawal, lack of interest in school, lower levels of academic achievement, lower self-esteem, and even aggressive behavior (Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Goodenow, 1993a; Sanders & Munford, 2015; Wentzel, 1998). Other research supports the link between social rejection and aggressive behavior. In fact, in some instances, students who are rejected will aggressively lash out at those who are rejecting them (Buckley et al., 2004; Downey et al., 2000; Stubbs-Richardson, et al., 2021). This aggressive behavior towards others only serves to create further separation from the group, as it is not only a violation of the agreed upon group norms, but it damages peer relationships and pushes the offenders even further from belonging within the school.

Many students who feel that they exist on the margins of a school culture, find it very difficult to engage in the learning that is happening in class each day (Allen et al., 2018). Not unlike the cycle created when belonging begets a sense of belonging, the same can hold true for those who feel they do not belong. Each failed opportunity to connect and achieve alongside other students in the classroom causes these students to doubt their own worthiness, and ability (Kunc, 1992; Sanders & Munford, 2015). This can leave students feeling even more like failures and outsiders.

The differences that exist between students who perceive belonging at school and those who do not are not only noticeable to others at school, but can have lifelong effects beyond school. Social exclusion can result in students gradually disidentifying with

school, leading to diminished academic performance, and eventual withdrawal from school entirely (Allen et al., 2018; Goodenow, 1993a; Parr et al., 2020). Osterman (2000) noted an interviews done as part of a study of 100 students in Pittsburgh who dropped out of school, and reported that prior to leaving school, these students reported feeling estranged and alienated, and did not experience a sense of belonging with students who were successful at school (Altenbaugh et al., 1995). They lacked that connection to either adults or their peers while enrolled at school.

Dropping out of school is about more than the individual students themselves, and certain characteristics they either have or don't have. Stearns and Glennie (2006) found that when looking at dropout rates, there tends to be focus on the deficiencies of the student, more so than looking at what is happening or not happening within the school environment that might be playing a role in why that student no longer wants to attend school. It is crucially important that educators look beyond perceived deficiencies of individual students to discover what about the system of school is, and is not working to keep all students engaged and involved at school. It is important that educators reflect on practices that include, and those that might exclude, certain students from the group. Identifying which students are not perceiving a sense of connection at school is a critical first step.

Students who drop out of school sometimes leave school in search of connections elsewhere. According to Kunc (1992) students, "remove themselves from the school environment where they are devalued and enter into other, sometimes dangerous, situations in which they are valued" (p. 13). Often these alternative situations involve connecting with other students who have dropped out of school, and in some extreme

cases with criminal groups, or gangs. Kunc (1992) wrote about the ability for these former students to find the belonging or, “unconditional acceptance and inclusion” (p. 13), they have been seeking within gangs. A study completed by Henry, et al. (2012) showed a link between student connectedness to school and peers to have a significant impact on whether or not students engaged in violent behavior or drug use.

There is also a link that exists between dropping out of school and incarceration (National Center on Secondary Education and Transition, 2022). The school to prison pathway can begin as early as elementary school for some students who begin to feel that they are not a part of the school culture, and schools can play a critical role in either navigating students away from, or unintentionally creating circumstances that guide students directly towards incarceration. It is truly a case of fight or flight. Students who do not feel connected to school either remain, and engage in negative behaviors, including aggressive behavior, or they separate themselves entirely from the world of school.

### **Demographic Dissimilarity**

Not all students define or experience belonging the same way (Ryan & Grolnick, 1986).

As previously stated, a student’s sense of belonging in the classroom can be closely related to the relationship they share with the classroom teacher. The strength of the teacher-student relationship might differ depending on demographic dissimilarities of the student as compared to the teacher or to other classmates. When teachers feel they share similarities with certain students, they tend to like those students more, and have an easier time building relationships with them (Gehlbach et al., 2016). Some students are treated



differently (often subconsciously) by teachers based on characteristics such as gender, race, socio-economic status, and ability. That differential treatment can begin when students are young and increase as students move through the grades (Altenbaugh et al., 1995; Elliott & Voss, 1974; Osterman, 2000). Different students define and experience classroom belonging differently, and often those differences are related to one or more of these demographic dissimilarities.

### *Gender*

There is some evidence to suggest that female students experience and react differently to belonging through a positive relationship with the teacher, more than male counterparts. Gilligan (1982) found that girls are often more emotionally invested in relationships in general, a characteristic that intensifies as they get older (Hill & Lynch, 1983). If this is the case, then it would follow that the quality of relationship with a classroom teacher would be that much more impactful. A supportive relationship would increase the desire to achieve, and a less than supportive relationship would lead to disengagement, and a lack of achievement (Bouchard & Berg, 2017; Drolet & Arcand, 2013; Goodenow, 1993b; Ryan et al., 1994).

One study completed by Kramer (1991) of adolescent female students found that they perceived the support from their teacher, or lack thereof, as having a crucial impact on their own success or failure academically. Unlike boys, who seem to place a greater emphasis on interactions with their peers (Wentzel, 1989). Wentzel (1989) also noted that when considering positive interactions with peers, parents, and teachers, the support that students perceive from teachers has the, “most direct link to students’ interest in school”

(p. 412). In other words, despite the increased value that boys place on relationships with their peers, the interactions with their teachers may be more impactful.

### ***Race***

Belonging at school is important for all members of the learning community. However, research done by Murphy and Zirkel (2015) found that, “students from stigmatized racial and ethnic groups may have especially salient concerns about belonging in school because their social identities make them vulnerable to negative stereotyping and social identity threat” (p. 1). Social identity threat is the threat that an individual’s social group might be devalued in certain situations (Steele et al., 2002).

Within the world of education, there are, “longstanding stereotypes about the intellectual or academic capacities of African American or Latinx students, meaning that within those contexts, they can feel as if their social identities are threatened” (Murphy & Zirkel, 2015, p. 3). Minoritized students may experience the added pressure to prove themselves within the classroom setting. This burden might impact their ability to build and maintain relationships with others in the classroom. It can be especially challenging for students of color trying to fit in with their classmates within a predominantly White setting (Richeson et al., 2005). According to Murphy and Zirkel (2015), “a student’s sense of belonging is influenced, in part, by the representation of, and connection with, others from one’s own racial or ethnic group in school settings” (p. 7). Students need to be able to see themselves reflected in their environment.

In the quantitative study done by Murphy and Zirkel (2015), survey data showed that more than any other group, African American middle school students who felt a sense of belonging at school, were more likely to set higher educational goals for

themselves and feel a greater sense of self-efficacy in attaining those goals. Perception as valued members of the learning community can act as a protective factor for students to remain in school longer. Research has shown that the well-documented differences in the ethnicities of students who graduate and those who do not, develop gradually through a process of alienation from school, often beginning in adolescence (Janosz et al., 2008).

### ***Socio-Economic Status***

Students who experience a lack of resources at home, often come to school with a need for more than just academic instruction. Families facing hardships economically or otherwise, often do not have the ability or opportunity to provide the same warm, supportive environment outside of school for their children (McLoyd, 1990). The resources that can be provided through a supportive classroom environment should affect all students positively, but could have an even greater impact on disadvantaged students.

However, some research suggests that the social background or status of individual students may affect how others perceive them, and the level of expectation others have for them to perform when compared to their middle class peers (Alexander et al., 1994; Jaeger, 2008; Akar Vural et al., 2020). This lowering of expectation can have detrimental effects on individual student's sense of self-efficacy and belonging in the classroom. When students perceive that even their teachers don't believe they can achieve at high levels, why should they believe it themselves?

Social relations are beneficial for school-related outcomes (Olsson, 2009). Economically vulnerable students who do not have opportunities to build solid relationships at home, can also struggle to effectively build and maintain them at school. According to Olsson (2009), "Disadvantaged adolescents may also have greater problems

handling strained relations due to their vulnerable situation and therefore respond more negatively to weak relations than advantaged adolescents do” (p. 266). An inability to build healthy relationships with their classmates might impede upon their feelings of belonging. Economically disadvantaged students stand to benefit greatly from supportive, positive resources within a welcoming school environment.

### ***Ability***

Educational spaces are often places where there is a focus on sorting people based on academic achievement and performance. While this may simply be a pragmatic response to an attempt to meet the diverse academic needs of many different students, it can also lead to separation of students, and can create a culture that does not value all students as equal members of the community.

A review of research by Gamoran and Berends (1987) found that teachers behaved in a more positive manner towards students who were able to achieve at a higher level than those who were not. Other studies have found that classmates also show a preference for peers that are more capable and engaged in the work of the class, rejecting those who struggle to keep up with the class academically (Green et al., 1980; Kindermann, 1993; Wentzel & Asher, 1995). Observations done by Green et al., (1980) found that these rejected students were often seen to be more off-task during the school day, with few positive interactions with their classmates, or their teacher.

This preference for students who achieve at high levels can make it difficult for students who show a pattern of poor academic performance to maintain feelings of belonging and support at school. Kunc (1992) writes about an inversion of Maslow’s (1943) hierarchy of needs within a school setting. An inversion that places achievement

before belonging. In other words, students need to achieve at high levels in order to earn a place of belonging within the learning environment. He writes that in this setting, differences are not celebrated, and diversity is not valued. Kunc (1992) states that:

We live in a society that holds forth belonging as something that is earned through academic or physical achievement, appearance, and a host of other socially valued criteria. Belonging no longer is an inherent right of being human. And our schools, being a reflection of society, perpetuate this belief. (p. 27).

Students in our schools come from a variety of backgrounds, ethnicities, and abilities, some that differ from the majority of the students within a classroom or school. All of these students have the need and the right to be treated with the same level of dignity and respect, and to be welcomed each day into cultures of belonging, where they are valued members.

### **Intent Versus Perception**

As stated earlier within this review, belonging in the classroom is closely related to the interactions between students and teachers. With every interaction there is the intent of one person and the perception of another. Perceptions are unique to each individual. A person experiencing an interaction will have a particular perception of that experience. This perception may or may not be in alignment with the intent with which it was delivered. Students within a classroom will perceive actions or inactions of their teacher differently. Different from one another, and potentially different from how the teacher intended.

Moustakas (1994) shared that, “perception is regarded as the primary source of knowledge, the source that cannot be doubted” (p. 52). The way that a person perceives

an event is also how they experience it. One person cannot argue with or discount the perceived experiences of another individual. Students will perceive the actions of their teachers and classmates, and these perceptions will color how they experience their time in the classroom, and how they respond to attempts by others to foster and maintain a sense of belonging, or not.

More than four decades ago, Whitfield (1976) studied the perceptions students had of their teachers and stated that:

Students are always studying their teachers. They attend to every move the teacher makes. Indeed, students expect teachers to make certain moves and when the teacher fails to fulfill those expectations, the students become confused.

Affecting and being affected by their teacher's behaviors, students must understand their teacher's actions if they are to be successful students. (p. 347)

Teachers need to have some understanding as to how students are perceiving their actions within the classroom (Wentzel, 1997). Misunderstanding how students experience the routines and rituals of a classroom environment could have detrimental effects on students' sense of belonging, leading to disengagement (Goodenow, 1993a). Congruence between the teacher's and student's perceptions of a learning environment is of central importance for maintaining an effective learning environment for all students (Whitfield, 1976).

Nichols (2006) looked at student perception of belonging and found that students had divergent understandings of what, within a classroom, created that sense of belonging. Some students identified positive relationships with teachers and peers, and others remarked on their access to, and involvement with, school activities and sports.

These differences in perceptions could cause the adults in the classroom to erroneously assume that certain students feel that they belong, when they do not. “As a result, teachers may underestimate, minimize, or potentially ignore indications of students’ struggling to integrate into the classroom or school” (Bouchard & Berg, 2017, p. 113). Each missed opportunity to understand how students feel within the learning community is a gap, or missed opportunity to engage and connect with them.

Typically, a gap does exist between how students perceive a classroom environment compared to how adults perceive the same environment (Dernowska, 2017; Fisher & Fraser, 1983; Mitchell et al., 2010). This is not surprising considering the different roles each participant plays within a classroom. Due to societal norms, there is a power differential that exists between adults and children. This differential is present, and in some cases even more pronounced within some classroom settings. Regardless of adult efforts to create what they perceive as a welcoming classroom environment, if there is lack of understanding in regards to how students are experiencing and perceiving that environment, a mismatch will persist, and opportunities to foster belonging may be missed.

### **Literature Review Summary**

This chapter was a review of past and current literature related to belonging. Literature reviewed included an investigation of research related to the innate human need for belonging, and the Belongingness Theory - the theoretical framework that supports this research proposal. Additional literature related to the definition of belonging as well as belonging at school, was also reviewed. This chapter also included information regarding past research on the power of relationship between students and teachers in

relation to belonging, as well as student belonging at the middle school level.

Additionally, the literature review covered the positive effects of belonging, as well as the serious consequences of not belonging at school. Demographic dissimilarities, including gender, race, socioeconomic status, and ability to achieve, were also briefly considered. Finally, the chapter ended with a look at the differences between adult intent and student perceptions of efforts to increase and sustain belonging at school. Chapter 3 will provide details on the methods used to collect and analyze data to answer the research questions in this proposed study.



## **Chapter 3: Methodology**

### **Overview**

Chapter 1 provided an introduction and background on the purpose and focus of this research. Included were the statement of the problem, the research questions, definitions, assumptions, limitations, and delimitations. Chapter 2 reviewed the existing literature around belonging, and belonging at school, including the relationship between students and teachers, as well as the challenges faced by adolescent students working to navigate an often complex culture of middle school. Literature was also reviewed on the impact belonging or not belonging can have on individual students, the potential differences in belonging for students based on gender, race, socio-economic status, and ability, as well as the role intent and perception play on how individuals experience belonging.

This chapter describes the methodology for the proposed study, including information about the site selected, the participants involved, and the instruments/methods used to collect and analyze the data. In designing this research plan, several routines and procedures were pulled from various types of qualitative research, in hopes of taking a closer look at belonging and the experiences of students within the classroom.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this study is to explore how middle school students define, experience, and perceive belonging within the classroom, in hopes of aiding educators in creating and sustaining cultures of engagement and learning. Special attention will be

paid to the intentions and perceptions of both the student and teacher participating in the study.

### **Qualitative Research Design**

This will be a qualitative study. The decision to use qualitative research is primarily based on the desire to gain a better understanding of the classroom culture overall, as well as to learn about the lived experiences of the students and teachers within those classrooms. It is also based on a belief that the numbers and measures related to quantitative research would not be able to fully tell the story of what individuals are experiencing on a daily basis within a classroom setting. Student experience can be hard to represent through data typically collected in a quantitative research study.

In this study, I am also interested in learning more about the interactions between students and teachers. Human interactions are also challenging to quantify. The layers and subtleties of ongoing interactions help to illustrate the underlying feelings and beliefs of the participants. According to Saldaña and Omasta (2018), “Interaction is how relationships get constructed. They are collective chains of actions and reactions in which people in roles conduct routines and rituals in accordance with rules for living” (p. 22). Effectively telling the story of the people involved in those interactions can be difficult, and requires the empirical tools of qualitative research.

Creswell and Poth (2018) stated, “We conduct qualitative research when we want to empower individuals to share their stories, hear their voices, and minimize the power relationships that often exist between a researcher and the participants in a study” (p. 45). Student voice plays a salient role in this research. So often, adults within a school feel they know what is best for students, and sometimes they fail to get feedback from the

students actually living and working within the classroom environment. The design of this study will allow for detection of the nuances and experiences that sometimes go unnoticed during a school day.

### ***Phenomenological***

The research approach used in this qualitative study will be phenomenological in nature. Phenomenology “seeks essentially to describe rather than explain, and to start from a perspective free from hypotheses or perspectives” (Peoples, 2021, p. 30). Stated differently by Creswell and Poth (2018), “phenomenological study describes the common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon” (p. 75). Looking at belonging through a phenomenological lens will allow the researcher to synthesize the lived experiences of both the students and teachers in the classroom, to gain a shared understanding of the phenomena of belonging as they experience it.

Within the history of phenomenological research, Edmund Husserl, considered the father of phenomenology, was a proponent of transcendental phenomenology, a philosophy that does not allow a researcher to consider outside theoretical frameworks when viewing a phenomenon (Peoples, 2021). He believed that throughout research, the researcher should not take anything for granted, or make any assumptions about the phenomenon. He wanted to get at the, “pure essence of a phenomenon” (Peoples, 2021, p. 30). His colleague Martin Heidegger, on the other hand, believed that it was not possible to separate oneself from the phenomenon in that way. He wrote that we all exist within the circumstances of our own existence (Peoples, 2021), our experiences are unique to the knowledge and encounters we have previously had. This research will more closely follow Heidegger’s philosophy of phenomenology, than Husserl’s.

The emergent nature of this research will provide an opportunity for the researcher to engage in new learning experienced in real time. This type of research does not allow for what Creswell and Poth (2018) describe as a, “tightly prescribed” plan. A researcher undertaking qualitative research must be willing to come into a research setting with an open mind and a willingness to make adjustments and modifications as the situations unfold and change. Therefore the plan laid out in this chapter is initial and potentially transitory in nature.

The following research questions will guide the study:

1. What are the experiences of 6th grade students within a classroom setting in regards to how they define belonging?
2. How do students perceive teacher attempts to create a community of belonging among all learners?
3. What discrepancies exist in the definition and experience of belonging for students who possess demographic differences (gender, race, socio-economic status, ability)?
4. What are the teachers' perceptions in regards to how students in their classroom actually experience belonging?
5. In what ways do teachers work to build and maintain a sense of belonging for all students?

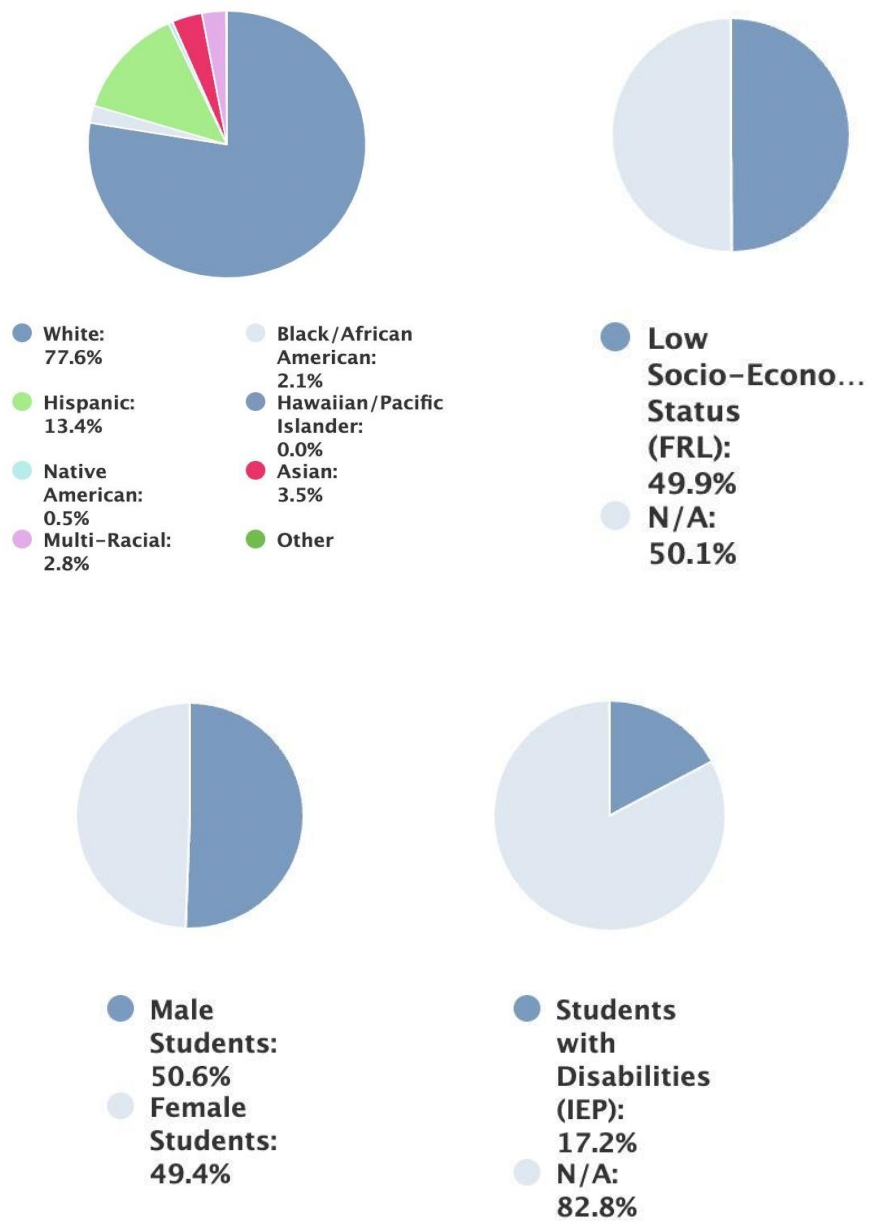
### **Site Selection**

The site selected for this research is Winnebago Middle School (pseudonym), in Winnebago County (pseudonym), Iowa. It was selected, due to both the proximity to the researcher, as well as being a district that the researcher currently works in. There is a

history of positive relationships with important gatekeepers in this district that will benefit the implementation of this study.

**Figure 3**

*Winnebago Middle School Demographics*



Winnebago has a town population of approximately 9,274 citizens. Winnebago Middle School (WMS) serves approximately 425 6th-8th grade students. The ethnic makeup of the student population is as follows: 77.6% White, 13.4% Hispanic, 3.5% Asian, 2.8% Multi-Racial, 2.1% African American, and 0.5% Native American. Of these students, 48.5% qualify for free or reduced lunch (FRL), 50.6% of those students are male, and 49.4% are female. 15.6% of the student population receive special education services. According to the Iowa School Performance Profile (<https://www.iaschoolperformance.gov/>). WMS is designated as 'Acceptable', but is targeted for underperformance of one subgroup: students receiving special education services.

Within the state of Iowa, the Conditions for Learning survey is taken online in grades 3 through 12 at all public schools, and is adapted to be appropriate for the ages of students taking it. There are additional surveys for staff and families of students. Conditions for Learning surveys are given as part of the federal law, Every Student Succeeds Act. Surveys are confidential, voluntary, and anonymous. The intention of these surveys is to inform school level leaders of the current reality of students, staff, and parents, and the results are meant to inform school safety, engagement of students, and the learning environment overall (<https://www.iaschoolperformance.gov/>, 2022). The thinking is that if students can be helped to improve upon social skills, conflict management, and interacting in a positive way with others, their overall learning and achievement will also improve.

Spring 2021 Conditions for Learning survey results for Winnebago CSD show students in grades 6-12 responding as compared to the state average. Results are listed as percentages of the student population who perceive proficiency in the given areas listed.

**Table 1**

*Conditions for Learning Spring 2021*

<b>Winnebago CSD Grades 6-12</b>	<b>Iowa state average</b>
Adult-Student Relationships 32.4%	Adult-Student Relationships 42.2%
Boundaries and Expectations 35.7%	Boundaries and Expectations 38.8%
Emotional Safety 11.65%	Emotional Safety 27.7%
Physical Safety 42.4%	Physical Safety 55.46%
Student-Student Relationships 36.59%	Student-Student Relationships 43.9%

## **Population**

One important feature of this proposed study is the comparison and contrast of the experiences, perceptions, and understandings of students who possess variances, or a dissimilarity, when it comes to certain demographics. In other words, students of a different gender, or with different life experiences, backgrounds, racial identities, or abilities, who might experience, perceive, or understand belonging in the classroom differently. For that reason, maximum variation sampling (Creswell & Poth, 2018) was chosen as a tool that would allow for the selection of student participants possessing those demographic differences. Maximum variation sampling allows a researcher to select participants who meet specific criteria to enhance potential differences in outcomes (Creswell & Poth, 2018). According to Creswell and Poth (2018) this, “approach is often

selected because when a researcher maximizes differences at the beginning of a study, it increases the likelihood that the findings will reflect differences or different perspectives” (p. 158). Those potential differences in perspectives are what drive much of this work. I am interested in exploring how one student might experience their time in the classroom, as compared to another student.

### ***Research Participants***

For this study, a select group of middle school aged students and two middle school teachers will be selected. More specifically, the students will be six 6th graders from WMS that represent a heterogenous group of students. According to Peoples (2021):

A phenomenological research study is used to answer the question, “What is it like to experience a certain phenomenon?” If this same question is posed to enough people in a certain situation, a researcher can analyze multiple experiences of the same situation and make certain generalizations of a particular experience. (p. 3)

Six students, while a small number, will be manageable, and should provide enough variance in experience to meet the needs of this study.



**Table 2***Potential breakdown of participants*

Female Special Education Ethnic Minority	Female English Language Learner Free or Reduced Lunch	Male Special Education Free or Reduced Lunch
Female Not identified for Special Education Services Not Free or Reduced Lunch Ethnic Majority	Male English Language Learner Ethnic Minority	Male Not identified for Special Education Services Not Free or Reduced Lunch Ethnic Majority

Three of the student participants will be female, and three will be male. At least two of the participants will be receiving special education services, and two will be receiving English language services. At least two of the student participants will be a minority ethnicity within this school. Two to three of the student participants will also qualify for free or reduced lunch. With these identified criteria, and such a small number of student participants, it is assumed that individual students will meet more than one of the listed criteria simultaneously. For example, a female 6th grade student might have been identified as needing special education services, in addition to belonging to the group of students receiving free or reduced lunch each day. The exact combinations are yet to be determined. These six students will also need to follow the same schedule rotation between the two selected classrooms used in this study. Placing them in the same classroom at the same time of day.

Additionally, this study will include two sixth grade teachers from WMS who have been identified by the building administrators, or fellow teachers, as being high performing in regards to classroom culture and student belonging. Given the relatively

small size of this school, there are only a couple of core content teachers for each content area for sixth grade students. This will help to ensure that all selected student participants attend the same classroom at the same time.

## **Instrumentation**

### ***Interviews***

A phenomenological lens, true to the origins of the approach, relies solely on data gathered from interviews with participants (Moustakas, 1994). From those one to one conversations, a researcher is typically able to gather an understanding of the essence of the experience a participant has related to a particular phenomena (Peoples, 2021). Interviews provide opportunities for participants to share colorful descriptions of their lived experiences. These, “conversations with a purpose” (Saldaña & Omasta, 2018, p. 90), depending on the level of structure, can allow a researcher to imagine what it would be like to be in the shoes of the participant. Interviews will play a salient role in this research. However, in breaking with phenomenological tradition, this study will also include observations, artifact analysis, and researcher reflection. It is hoped that these additions will help to add flavor to the findings, as well as to help enhance the credibility of this work.

Semi-structured interview questions will be used for this study, both before and after a set of classroom observations. This will allow the researcher to gain what Peoples (2021) calls a, “lived sense of participants’ situations” before observing in the classroom, as well as a more, “detailed assessment of descriptions utilized later” (p. 55). The semi-structured nature of the questions will also allow me, the researcher, to begin with a

general frame of questions, while maintaining the ability to re-direct, or completely change questions in response to answers given by participants, if needed.

### ***Observation***

Observation is a prime tool for collecting data in qualitative research. What better way for a researcher to begin to understand a phenomena, empirically, than to spend time in the setting in which it occurs. Observation is not traditionally used in phenomenological research. However, it is believed that data collected in this way will aid in rounding out information collected in other ways, providing a glimpse into what Saldaña and Omasta (2018) call the, “dynamics of human interaction” (p. 29). Observing, taking notes, and reflecting on what is happening in the classroom may also inform follow up questions in post-observation interviews.

Observation will also allow an ability to gain insight into the interactions between members of that particular learning community during a school day. Saldaña and Omasta (2018) cited the work of Chirkov (2016), Duhigg (2016), and Gobo (2008) stating:

Culture is constructed and interpreted by the researcher through observing a group of people’s particular actions and words, social practices, and routines (i.e., their norms and traditions), tacit or hidden rules for conduct, and rituals and ceremonies that produce and reproduce what the group “is” during a particular span of time. (p. 30)

In this study, the phenomena of belonging, if it exists, will exist within the microcosm of a classroom, ripe with actions, reactions, interactions, routines, rituals, and rules. Failing to add that telling data to this study, would leave any researcher or reader feeling less than fully informed.

### ***Artifacts***

Another instrument used as a part of this plan will involve culling various artifacts from each classroom, during observational visits. Based upon the researcher's past experiences in classrooms, there are typically visual clues in the form of posted learning targets, norms, routines, and behavioral management plans that line the walls of a classroom. By collecting, observing and analyzing these materials, a more complete illustration of the learning environment may be obtained.

### ***Researcher Reflection***

Within the theoretical framework of phenomenology, the role of the researcher within the study can look one of two ways. Edmund Husserl, was a proponent of what is known as bracketing the researcher. Peoples (2021), explains bracketing as putting the researcher in the position of becoming, "like a stranger in a strange land - kind of like an alien coming down to planet Earth for the first time" (p. 30). To do this, a researcher would share with the reader any personal experiences with the phenomena, and then attempt to set them aside, or suspend them, as much as possible during the study. In an attempt to not allow them to play a role in the work.

On the other end of the spectrum, Martin Heidegger, whose work was an offshoot of the work done by Husserl, believed in what he described as an hermeneutic circle (Peoples, 2021) where new information is added to what is already known, and as data is collected and analyzed, "the parts make sense of the whole and the whole makes sense of the parts" (p. 33). He believed that as learners, we constantly update and revise our understanding based on intake of new information. This form of phenomenological research asks that a researcher make explicit, personal experiences and biases, and

instead of suspending them, as with bracketing, they actively incorporate that understanding into the interpretation and analysis of the work. New learning is added to knowledge the researcher already possesses, and in cases of cognitive dissonance, newly created or updated information is added to what is known. This will be the chosen framework, and role assumed throughout this study.

### **Data Collection**

This section will describe the data collection procedures to be followed in order to satisfy the research questions. This research will take place in three distinct phases.

**Table 3**

*Data Collection Plan*

Phase 1	Phase 2	Phase 3
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Participant recruitment and preparation (parent meetings)</li> <li>- Initial 1:1 participant interviews (parent may opt to attend)</li> <li>- Member checks following interviews</li> <li>- Initial transcription and analysis of interview data</li> <li>- Researcher written reflection</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Classroom observations (once each week for four weeks)</li> <li>- Observation notes initial analysis</li> <li>- Artifact collection and analysis</li> <li>- Researcher written reflection</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Participant post interviews (parent may opt to attend)</li> <li>- Interview transcription and analysis</li> <li>- Researcher written reflection</li> <li>- Formal analysis and synthesis of all data to determine findings and to inform write up of Chapters 4 and 5</li> </ul>

In phase one, participants will be selected and prepared for involvement. This will include meeting with parents of each student in order to fully explain the purpose and

protocol of the research, and to obtain both written parental consent, as well as student assent to take part in the research. Similar meetings will be held with the participating teachers, and written consent from both adult participants will also be obtained. Initially, and throughout the study, participants and their parents will be reminded that involvement in the study is voluntary, and exit from the study can happen at any time, for any reason, if the participant or parent (for students) so chooses.

During the first phase of data collection, one on one interviews with each of the eight participants (lasting from 30-45 minutes in length) will be conducted in order to begin to build a rapport with each participant, and to better understand some of their past school experiences. It will also be important to learn more about the values and beliefs each participant holds regarding education, community, and a sense of belonging. Having access to this knowledge may help frame future reactions/interactions that are observed in the classroom. For the student participants, parents will be given the chance to be present during the interviews. This data will be transcribed, and an initial analysis of the collected data will take place in phase one. Participants will have the opportunity to conduct member checks (Peoples, 2021) to ensure that responses were recorded accurately.

Phase two of this research will involve weekly hour long classroom observations in each of the two participating classrooms. This researcher is estimating that four visits, of 1-2 hours in length, to each classroom over the course of four weeks will provide enough information to meet the expectations of this study. Transcription of the observational notes from the weekly observations, as well as initial analysis, will also happen during phase two. Artifacts of attempts to create or sustain student belonging in each classroom will also be collected and analyzed during this phase.

Phase three of this research will involve final one on one interviews of each participant to address topics and questions that might arise from the observations, or to seek clarification and explanation as needed. Once again, parents will have an opportunity to be present during their child's interview. This new interview data will be analyzed on its own initially, and then all of the information gathered from the interviews, observation, and artifacts, combined with researcher reflections collected throughout the time in classrooms, will be formally analyzed and synthesized in an attempt to gain a better understanding of lived experiences of the participants. This information will be used to guide the writing of Chapters 4 and 5 of this study.

### ***Recruitment***

The researcher will meet with the building administrator in the Fall of the 22-23 school year to begin looking through class lists to determine potential participants. Insight and feedback from the building administrator will be used throughout this process. Once a list of students has been collected, the researcher will reach out to the parents of each potential student participant in order to arrange for a meeting with parent and student. At each meeting, the researcher will begin with an informal introduction to create a relaxed atmosphere for the parents and student.

Parents and students will be informed of the nature and purpose of the study, and given details as to what involvement in the study will entail, including timelines. Parents and students will also have an opportunity to ask clarifying questions related to the planned study. At that time, parents of students who are interested in taking part will be asked to sign consent for their child to take part in the research. Students will also be

asked to sign an assurance stating their understanding that involvement in the study is voluntary, and that they can cease involvement at any time before or during the study.

Once students have been selected, two sixth grade teachers who have been deemed by the building administrator as being particularly qualified in creating classrooms that provide a place to belong for all learners, will be contacted via email, in order to set up one on one meetings with them. Both participants will be informed of the nature and purpose of the study, and given a chance to ask questions related to their participation in the study. If they agree to participate, they too will be asked to sign consent for involvement, and also notified that they can revoke that consent at any time. It is also at this time that a conversation with each teacher will take place in hopes of assuring them that no part of this study is evaluative in nature.

### ***Interview Data Collection***

The interviews used in this study will be semi-structured, allowing the researcher to have some control over the initial direction of the one on one conversations, by sharing questions relevant to the belonging. True phenomenological interviews allow only for queries related to participant experiences, not about thoughts, feelings, or perceptions (Peoples, 2021). However, for the purposes of understanding both the participant's experience as well as their definition and perceptions of belonging in the classroom, this researcher has designed some of the interview questions to look beyond just experiences, and into how the participant perceives certain interactions or experiences. Some of the questions selected are similar in nature to questions used by Keyes (2019) in her study on classroom belonging. The way the student participants define belonging will be used as a



framework to consider how they interpret the ways in which school belonging is fostered within their classrooms.

**Interview Protocol.** After participants have been recruited, as outlined in the recruitment section, they will be scheduled to participate in a set of two, 1:1 interviews with the researcher. The first set of interviews are meant to help “situate participants’ lived experiences” (Leedy & Ormrod, 2015, p. 233). Questions will revolve around the past experiences each participant has had in regards to general belonging at school. The second set of interviews is meant to provide an opportunity for the researcher to clarify previous answers given, to gain additional related details or to ask questions related to observations, and to give participants another opportunity to give voice to the experience.

Interviews will take place in the conference room of the school. Parents or guardians of individual students will be given the opportunity to be present during all student interviews. Prior to each interview, participants will be reminded that their participation in this study is voluntary, and that they can revoke their participation at any time. They will also be informed that they do not have to answer any questions they are not comfortable answering, and that all responses will be coded in a way to avoid participant identification. Responses will be kept confidential throughout the entirety of the research and beyond.

Participants will once again be reminded of the purpose of the study (as some time between initial meeting and interview will have passed). They will also be asked if they are comfortable with the interview being recorded, again with the understanding that their identity will be kept confidential. The audio recordings will be used to capture the interview dialogue, and to ensure accurate representation of what is being shared.

Interview recordings will be kept on a password protected phone initially, and then transferred to a password protected laptop that is kept secure. The interview protocol, including the semi-structured interview questions can be found in the Appendices.

### ***Observation***

Observations in each classroom will take place over the course of four weeks, with four separate visits lasting approximately 1-2 hours in each classroom, during different times of the day. A thick description or, “a written interpretation of the nuances, complexity, and significance of people’s actions” (Saldaña & Omasta, 2018, p. 31), will be used to record each experience. The researcher’s own positionality (Saldaña & Omasta, 2018) will influence what is observed and how it is observed. The researcher will be looking through the lens of an educational leader, interested in seeing and hearing the experiences of the students and teachers within the classroom, with a filter on student belonging, and an angle that is zoomed in to individual actions, reactions and interactions between the members of the classroom environment.

I am curious about what typically goes unseen and unheard by the adults within the room. In addition to the thick description, reflections and reactions from me, the researcher, will also be noted throughout these observations. A two column field note electronic document, see Appendix B, will be used to record data/memos during each observation. The left hand column will be for descriptive notes, and the right column will be for reflective researcher notes. These notes taken in the field will later be translated into a more formal reflection that will be added to the researcher reflective journal.

### ***Artifact Collection***

During visits to both classrooms for observations, the researcher will be on the lookout for classroom artifacts that communicate expectations, procedures, or routines that relate to student belonging in the classroom. Artifacts will be photographed, and/or collected for future analysis. Any questions regarding the artifacts, or how they related to day to day life within the classroom, will be asked during the second round of interviews. Particular attention will be paid to similarities and differences between the two classrooms, and the artifacts found within them.

### ***Researcher Reflection***

As the researcher, I will keep a reflective journal of what is happening both in the field, as well as before and after working in the field. Reflective journals are more often used in ethnographic studies (Saldaña & Omasta, 2018), but for the purposes of transparency, this practice will be used throughout the study. Thoughts on what I am seeing, hearing, and experiencing will be recorded and reflected upon in an attempt to make very explicit my role throughout this research project, as well as my own perceptions and new learning. I am optimistic that by sharing any bias or preconceptions early in the process, I will be able to identify data that contradicts those biases, and make the necessary adjustments to my own beliefs. The exercise of journaling in a reflective manner will also allow me to see the phenomena of belonging more objectively.

### **Data Analysis**

Each piece of data collected over the many weeks in the field will be analyzed independently, as well as holistically. Triangulation of all four data sources should help to produce a sound understanding of the experiences of the participants within the

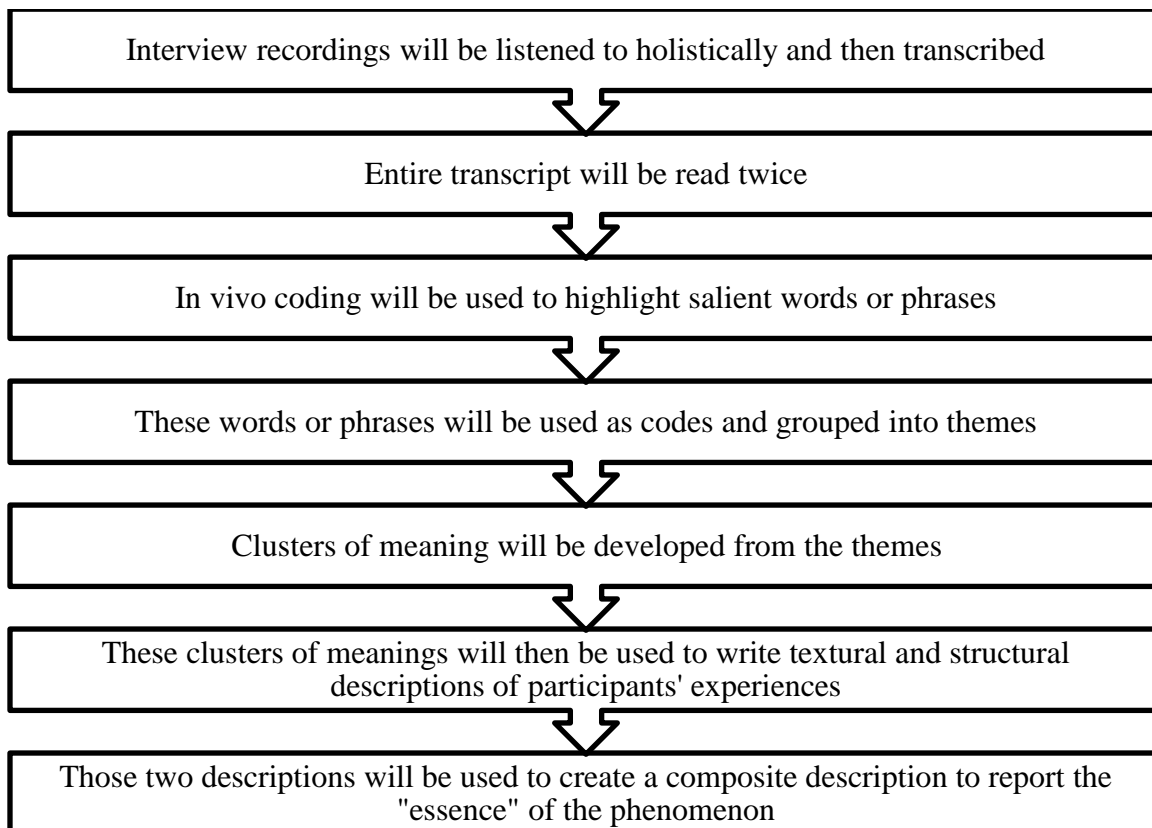
classrooms, as well as providing some answers to the presented research questions. “The goal of phenomenological data analysis is to present a description from essential themes of an experience in a way that is comprehensible and identifiable to anyone who has had that particular experience” (Peoples, 2021, p. 58). I am confident that the information garnered in this study will ring true to experiences other educators have had within their middle school classrooms.

### *Interview Data Analysis*

Analysis will take place before, during, and after the collection of the data. A plan for formal analysis of the interview data is listed below.

#### **Figure 4**

##### *Interview Analysis Flowchart*



Interview recordings will be listened to holistically and then transcribed. The entire transcript will then be read twice with attention paid to the overall sense of the conversation. Next, in vivo coding (Creswell & Poth, 2018) will be used to pull out important words or phrases used by the participants in answering the interview questions. In vivo coding was selected because it lends to using the actual words of the participants, including student voice, to tell the story. These words or phrases will then be used as codes that will be grouped together into themes. The themes will be used to create textural descriptions (Creswell & Poth, 2018) of the experiences, what the participant experienced. Language and phrases used by the participant can and will be recorded verbatim. Next, how the experience happened will be written, based on the collected themes. This structural description (Creswell & Poth, 2018), includes reflection on the setting where the phenomenon (belonging) was experienced by the participants. Nvivo software will be used to aid in the interview data analysis.

Finally, both the textural and structural descriptions will be combined into a composite description (Creswell & Poth, 2018) creating a culmination of what the experience was like for the participants, as well as how they experienced it. Moustakas (1994) describes this final write up as the, “essence” of the experience.

### ***Observational Data Analysis***

Descriptive coding (Saldaña & Omasta, 2018) will be used to analyze the data collected during the classroom observations. Initial analysis will be done on each observational event independent of one another. I will first read through the entire thick description of each observation in its entirety. The data will then be split into naturally occurring sections or stanzas to help organize it. Upon re-reading each section,

descriptive coding will be used to summarize, using a short phrase or word that represents what is written. Once each observational event has been coded in this way, comparably coded data will be grouped together into topics, or if necessary, sub-topics. The information garnered in this manner will be used to further inform data collected during the interviews, artifact analysis, and researcher's reflective journal.

### ***Artifact Data Analysis***

The routines and rituals of each classroom in this study will be explored through the collection of artifacts during observational visits to each classroom. These artifacts will consist of photographed or photocopied documents, signage, worksheets, or other items that relate to the experience of belonging in the classroom. Special attention will be paid to objects used by students or the teachers to communicate or perpetuate belonging. Analysis of these objects, as described in Saldaña and Omasta (2018), will involve a process in which key artifacts or items are identified as gerunds (-ing words). This process will help me to transform what each object actually is, into what it does or what it is used for within the classroom. These gerunds will then be organized and related to the participants and the site they were collected from. This will provide me with a list of the actions, reactions, and interactions happening within each classroom.

### ***Researcher's Reflective Journal***

Using a reflective journal as I complete the field work for this research will provide me with an opportunity to consciously acknowledge my own values and beliefs as they relate to belonging in the classroom. The process of recording my own thoughts, beliefs, and relationship to the phenomenon of belonging, will help me to convey my own

reflexivity (Creswell & Poth, 2018) or position in relation to the research, and how that relationship might affect the findings and results of the study.

My own thoughts and feelings will be evident in the reflective journal, but they will not necessarily show up in the transcribed data collected in the interviews, or even from the thick description of the observation, or analysis of artifacts within the setting. According to Ortlipp (2008), “the process of reflection helps to bring the unconscious into consciousness and thus open for inspection” (p. 703). These thoughts and feelings will help me to work through my role as a researcher as it grows and changes throughout the course of this research. Additionally, taking a critical look at what is working, and what may not be working as well, might lead to changes in the research design.

Documenting these changes and the reasoning behind them via the reflective journal will only add to the trustworthiness of the research.

### **Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness as addressed in this paper is based on the four criteria set by Lincoln and Guba (1986): credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Below, I will describe how each of these criteria will be met in this study.

#### ***Credibility***

Credibility will be demonstrated in several ways, beginning with the use of methods that have been well-established within the world of qualitative research. Each tool and process, while perhaps not necessarily aligned with an organic phenomenological approach, originate from well-known and well-used practices. Additionally, my educational background, as shared in chapter one, demonstrates my more than adequate understanding of the classroom/school environment that this research

is being conducted in. As a former middle school building administrator for five years, I feel that I have a solid appreciation of both the unique challenges at the middle school level, as well as the complexities of a middle school classroom setting. This will aid in the collection and analysis of data.

Significant time and effort has been made to explore previous research findings related to this study, and many findings have been shared in the literature review of chapter two. Other attempts to ensure credibility of this research will include the efforts I will make to build rapport with the participants, in order to help to secure open and honest responses to interview questions. I also want to ensure that participants understand that their responses and participation are voluntary, and that they can end involvement in the study at any time, for any reason. Throughout the onboarding process, as well as the remainder of the study, participants will be reminded of this option.

Added attempts to ensure credibility will include writing a thick description of the research setting as part of the classroom observations. I will also employ member checks (Peoples, 2021) following the first round of interviews, to ensure that participants have communicated what they intended to communicate. Triangulation of the data collected from interviews, observations, artifact collection and analysis, as well as completion and analysis of the researcher reflective journal will also aid in meeting the credibility criteria.

The use of a variety of sources of data will also help to create a deeper and broader understanding of the phenomena of belonging. According to Guba (1981), and as cited in Shenton (2004), “the use of different methods in concert compensates for their individual limitations and exploits their respective benefits” (p. 76). I am confident that



studying the phenomenon of belonging in these classrooms from different angles, and in different ways, will truly provide a robust understanding.

### ***Transferability***

Trustworthiness will also be fostered through the provision of a significant amount of information regarding the field work of this study. This will allow the reader to fully understand the context, and to potentially consider how the results of this study might relate to their own situation or setting. Given the small number of participants used in this study, generalizability is not a consideration, but transferability of results may be possible in situations that mirror those presented here.

### ***Dependability***

Each component of this study is shared in adequate detail to allow another researcher to re-create the study if desired. Specific analysis practices, change in plans, or other alterations will be reported out in the final two chapters of this study in an attempt to fully inform the reader.

### ***Confirmability***

In regards to confirmability, the findings of this study will be taken directly from the research collected. One piece of research that will be used, is a researcher reflective journal kept throughout the study. Beliefs, predispositions, and any identified bias will be shared using that tool, and made explicit to the reader. Also, any findings from the study that run counter to preconceived theories or suppositions of the author will be discussed. Readers of this study will be able to trace the course of the research step by step throughout the process. The components listed above supporting credibility,

transferability, dependability, and confirmability, all work together to ensure the trustworthiness of this research.

### **Ethics**

This research involves participants under the age of 18, potentially some who have been identified as having special needs. An important part of this research requires accessing the voice of students in the classroom. Hearing how students experience and perceive belonging in the classroom is essential if the adults in a school want to truly improve upon their own actions and responses. As a researcher I will make appropriate accommodations throughout this process to ensure that all participants, but especially student participants, are fully informed about what is happening, and protected from any interactions or conversations that might be upsetting to them, or might make them feel uncomfortable. All participants will be asked to provide informed consent (assent for student participants), and will be reminded before, during, and after the study of the option to end involvement in the project for any reason. Parents of individual students will have an opportunity to be in the room during both interview sessions. Additionally, all mandates and requirements set by the University of Northern Iowa Institutional Review Board will be followed.

The anonymity and confidentiality of all participants will be maintained before, during, and after the study. Participants will be given alternate names from the start of the research process. All collected information and data will be maintained by keeping interview and observation records on a password protected computer only accessible to the researcher. I will make every effort to acknowledge and respect the ideas, feelings,

perceptions, and beliefs of all participants. It is important that I create a safe space for them to share openly and honestly.

Additionally, I will work to avoid any deception, misunderstandings, or exaggeration related to the participants and/or the information they share with me, or data collected from the research site.

### **Methodology Summary**

This chapter described the detailed plans for this proposed study. Information was shared about the setting selected, the participants, and the tools and methods that will be used to collect and analyze data. This qualitative research study follows the emergent style of phenomenological research seeking to understand, through interviews, the experiences of the participants. This research strays from the phenomenological style in that, observation, and artifact analysis, as well as a researcher's reflective journal are also being used as research instruments. All data collected in this study is intended to give a rich understanding of the experiences and perceptions of both students and teachers within the classroom. This research is an attempt to better inform professional practice, and ultimately improve upon student experience as it relates to belonging at school. Additionally, I am hopeful that new learning taken from this study will add to the existing literature related to student belonging at school. Significant contributions to research around belonging have been made by others, but often that research was quantitative in nature, and student input was limited to survey results. It is hoped that by hearing directly from the students themselves, by giving them a voice in the discussion, that a more impactful understanding of their lived experiences in the classroom can be obtained.

## Chapter 4: Results

### Introduction

The purpose of this research study was to examine the lived experiences of 6th grade students and their classroom teachers in regards to belonging in the classroom setting. The definition of school belonging penned by researchers Goodenow and Grady (2010), “the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others in the school social environment” (p. 80) is used to frame this work. Conducting this research provided the researcher with an opportunity to explore how both sets of participants define, and perceive student belonging at school. This research also considered how the participant teachers are working to foster belonging within their classrooms, as well as how the student participants are interpreting those efforts. The demographic differences of gender, race, socio-economic status, and ability were considered throughout the research.

Chapter three gave detailed information about how this research was to be executed. This chapter will include specific information related to how the planned research project actually developed. Also in this chapter, the research questions will be reshared, along with information regarding the selected setting and participants, including the specific demographics of each chosen participant. That section will be followed by how each planned research method (e.g. interview, observation, etc.) was implemented in regards to data collection and analysis.

The findings will then be framed within each of the five research questions, with related themes identified along the way. Special attention will be paid to student voice throughout this section. Narratives of each student experience will also be woven into the

themes. Near the end of this chapter, Lincoln and Guba's (1986) criteria of: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability will be revisited. Each will be considered in regards to how well they aided in maintaining the trustworthiness of this research. This chapter will end with a chapter summary.

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions guided the study:

1. What are the experiences of 6th grade students within a classroom setting in regards to how they define belonging?
2. How do students perceive teacher attempts to create a community of belonging among all learners?
3. What discrepancies exist in the definition and experience of belonging for students who possess demographic differences (gender, race, socio-economic status, ability)?
4. What are the teachers' perceptions in regards to how students in their classroom actually experience belonging?
5. In what ways do teachers work to build and maintain a sense of belonging for all students?

### **Setting and Participants**

#### ***Setting***

This research was conducted in the planned location, Winnebago Middle School (pseudonym), in Winnebago County (pseudonym), Iowa. This location was selected, due to both the physical proximity to the researcher, as well as there being a history of positive relationships with important gatekeepers in this district that would benefit the

implementation of this study. Working closely with both the building principal and the instructional coach for this building provided an understanding of, and access to the educators and students within it.

### ***Participants***

A heterogenous group of 6th grade students from Winnebago Middle School (WMS) were selected for this research study. Students selected were all members of the two participating teachers' classrooms. Student participants were selected, in part, based on demographic dissimilarity from one another. Specifics on each student participant is listed on Table 4. Students, like all participants, were each given a pseudonym that was used as an identifier throughout the course of this study.

The initial plan for this research was to include up to six students. However, the process of connecting with parents in order to obtain parental consent proved to be quite time consuming, as many parents did not call back. Multiple attempts were necessary to make contact. Additionally, it took considerable effort to obtain signed consent forms from each parent in a timely manner. Due to these circumstances a final student group of only four students was included in this research.

Parents were contacted via phone initially so they could learn directly from the researcher about the purpose and intent of the study. Once verbal consent was obtained, an individual meeting with each student was held to make sure they (students) were also interested in being a part of the research. Finally, a parental consent/student assent form was either mailed home, or sent home with the student. Of the six potential students participants, only four returned the signed paperwork.

The initial plan for adult participants was to include only the two classroom teachers that had been previously identified by the building principal and other adults as being especially skilled at creating classroom cultures that focused on student’s social emotional well-being, as well as fostering positive student relationships. However, through the course of student interviews, student ‘clubs’ were mentioned several times as a potential connection tool. The teacher responsible for facilitating these clubs was added as a participant for the second round of interviews only. All teacher participants returned a signed consent form.

**Table 4**

*Student Participants*

Pseudonym	Gender	Ethnicity	Free & Reduced Status (SES)	Special Education	English Language Learner
Yolanda	Female	Hispanic	No	No	Yes (past)
Elaina	Female	White	No	No	No
Zeke	Male	White	No	Yes	No
Julian	Male	African American	Yes	No	No

**Table 5***Teacher Participants*

Pseudonym	Gender	Ethnicity	Number of Years Teaching	Content Area
Stacey	Female	White	17	Social Studies
Kris	Female	White	16	English Language Arts
Aaron	Male	White	12	Physical Education

**Data Collection***Interviews*

Each of the six initial participants took part in two separate semi-structured one on one interviews. Questions for the first set of interviews can be found in Appendix A (students) and Appendix B (teachers). Questions for the second interview were related to information collected during the classroom observations, and therefore were for the most part, specific to each participant. Although all students were asked during the second interview to compare elementary to middle school, and to provide feedback related to whether students or teachers had more of an impact on the ‘mood’ of the classroom. Due to being added to the participant list very late in the research, the third teacher participant, Aaron (pseudonym), was only interviewed once.

Time was spent during the initial interviews engaging in general conversation in hopes of putting the participants at ease with sharing their thoughts and experiences. Prior to the start of each interview, participants were reminded that they could pass on any questions, and could stop the interview at any time. They were also reminded that



conversations were being recorded. During interviews, one student passed on one question. All participants remained a part of the study throughout its entirety. None of the participants had any issue with the interviews being recorded.

Parents of the student participants were notified via a phone call and in writing of the opportunity to be present while their student was being interviewed. However, none of the parents communicated a desire to do so. Students were pulled out of class during non-instructional times for interviews. Approximately 30-45 minutes was allotted for each participant interview, but all interviews were completed within 15 minutes or less. Students were especially brief in their responses, and some effort had to be made by the researcher in order to access more in-depth feedback. The adult participants, not unlike all teachers, were always pressed for time during the school day. Requests to meet at the conclusion of the school day were not met with a positive response, so interviews took place primarily during teacher planning time.

### ***Observations***

A total of four observations were completed, two in each of the participating classrooms. Observations were each approximately 45 minutes, or one class period long. One observation at the very beginning of the research after the first interview, and one toward the end, prior to the final interview of each teacher participant. Initially, more observations were planned, but it soon became apparent that information gleaned from interviews was more enlightening and robust than the information gathered from the observations. In this researcher's opinion, the data gathered through observation seemed somewhat superficial, or lacking the depth of understanding garnered in the one on one

interviews. Perhaps this is due to the fact that observational information is taken in and reported out (filtered) only through the lens of the researcher and not of the participants.

### ***Artifacts***

Several classroom artifacts were collected (via photography) during observational visits to each of the two classrooms. Saldaña and Omasta (2018) remarked that when considering the use of artifacts in research, it is the researcher that must make inferences about the history and purpose behind the artifacts, and to seek additional information from the participants when looking for a relationship between the artifacts and the people within an environment. Artifacts collected included inspirational posters and writings that were found on the walls of both classrooms, including a tool called a Mood Meter. Additionally, an ‘all about me’ collage of the classroom teacher and students was also collected as relating to student belonging. Finally, a photo was taken of one classroom teacher participant (with her permission), along with an instructional coach, who dressed head to toe in a costume that matched a new unit of instruction in one classroom.

Given (2008) stated that, “artifacts can be used to support or challenge other data sources and literature, to generate or confirm hunches, and to help provide thick description of people and/or settings. The story they can tell is valuable” (p. 24). Both student and teacher participants were asked about these artifacts collected during the follow up interviews, in hopes of doing just that.

### ***Researcher’s Reflective Journal***

Throughout the course of conducting this research, a reflective journal was kept. I was able to record reflections of what I was observing in the classroom, how the interviews were going, and how I was managing all of the data that was being collected.

Doing so was meant to allow a place for me to make explicit my role in the project, as well as any new learning I experienced as a researcher. It also helped me to position myself in relation to the research topic itself.

### **Data Analysis**

According to Peoples (2021), “the goal of phenomenological research is to illuminate the lived experience of the phenomenon, the method of analyzing data is emergent” (p. 58). Data analysis involves allowing the data to emerge organically, and to change if necessary. Peoples (2021) goes on to explain that the goal of analysis of phenomenological research is to share a description of the observed phenomenon or experience that is relatable to someone who has also experienced that phenomenon. According to Martin Heidegger (as cited in Peoples, 2021), “interpretation is a constant revision” (p. 33). That was exactly what this researcher experienced throughout the process of analyzing the data. Each new visit to the collected data produced a new, more informed understanding of the perceptions and experiences of the participants within each classroom. Each exposure created a more complete, holistic illustration.

### ***Interviews***

All interview recordings were reviewed in their entirety soon after being recorded. Interviews were then transcribed by hand into word documents. Doing it this way was time consuming, but allowed for initial informal analysis to begin. Transcribed interviews were then shared with adult participants in order to conduct member checks (Peoples, 2021). Only one participant requested an alteration be made to one answer, and that change was made.

After re-reading each transcribed interview as a whole, the files were uploaded into the NVivo software system, where in vivo coding took place. Words and phrases that stood out or somehow connected to the research questions were highlighted and sorted into codes. As the number of transcribed interviews increased, so did the number of codes. Notes of the changes/additions in codes were kept in the researcher's reflective journal.

Germane to this study is the relationship between teacher intent and student perceptions. Therefore, each code was divided into what the students were saying about a topic, versus what the teachers were saying about a topic. Additionally, in following Heidegger's philosophy of phenomenology (Peoples, 2021), the data collected during the classroom observations were used as a third source of feedback under many of the codes. Over time, the number of codes was reduced as they were grouped into related themes.

The creation of themes seemed to happen quite organically, as the themes seemed to emerge on their own, and once they became apparent, they helped to bring to light the experiences of each participant. Textural and structural descriptions of the participants' experiences taken from the themes were then combined in order to share the essence of the phenomenon of belonging relevant to each research question.

### ***Observations***

A two column note taking tool (Appendix E) was used to record both descriptive and reflective researcher remarks. These thick descriptions included detailed depictions of each classroom layout, wall signage, location of student desks, etc. Additionally, reflective notes were recorded related to the researcher experiences and thoughts while in the classroom. These notes and descriptions were then read through several times as a

whole, in an effort to get a sense of the climate and functioning of each classroom. Those notes were then split into related sections that were uploaded into the NVivo software and coded right along with the interview transcripts. This allowed for the voice of the researcher, and what was witnessed, to be compared with the words of the students and teachers within the classroom.

### ***Artifacts***

Artifacts that were collected during the visits to two 6th grade classrooms were analyzed using a process shared by Saldaña and Omasta (2018) that involved identifying each artifact as a gerund (-ing word). Once each artifact was identified in that manner, it was attached to either the setting or individuals within that setting via the conversations that took place during one on one interviews with the participants. Doing this created an opportunity for the researcher to better understand the teacher's intent of displaying/using each artifact, as well as the student perceptions of whether or not the artifact aided in fostering a culture of belonging.

### ***Researcher's Reflective Journal***

The mere act of reflecting and writing those reflections down provided a chance for me to analyze what was happening in the research. I was able to record what was working well, what was not working well, and even determined aspects of the research that I had not previously considered. Analysis of the reflective journal essentially equated to writing, reading, and re-reading the entries prior to the next steps of research. The journal also proved an ideal way to keep track of the changes made to codes within NVivo. Specific reflections will be shared within the findings section of this chapter, as well as in chapter five.

## **Findings**

Findings are framedd by the five research questions identified for this research project. Through the use of interviews, observations, and artifact analysis, several themes related to each research question have been identified. These themes are based primarily on the stories told by the participants. Within each research question, teacher intent versus student perception was considered and compared when appropriate.

### ***Research Question One***

What are the experiences of 6th grade students within a classroom setting in regards to how they define belonging?

Through student interviews, and classroom observations, two themes surfaced as most pertinent regarding question one: fitting in, and feeling comfortable.

**Theme: Fitting In.** Early in the research, a question was raised about the difference between fitting in and belonging. Social researcher Brene Brown (2013) studied belonging and stated that,

fitting in is one of the greatest barriers to belonging. Fitting in is about assessing a situation and becoming who you need to be in order to be accepted. Belonging, on the other hand, doesn't require us to change who we are; it requires us to be who we are. (p. 145)

Question one asks how students define belonging using their own words and how they experience belonging for themselves. Two of the four student participants used the phrase 'fitting in' when defining belonging, but each then also spoke of being accepted for who they are, and not having to change to be accepted. It would seem the term 'fitting in' means something different to the students in this study than it does to some adults. I

wonder if the topic of ‘fitting in’ has not yet been explored fully by these students, allowing it (the term) to retain a positive connotation in their minds. Or perhaps, these two students have been fortunate enough to not have encountered a situation where they were told or made to feel they did not ‘fit in’. In other words, their behaviors and appearance may have aligned so closely with the behaviors and appearances of other members of the group, that they have not stood out as different, or needing to change in order to be accepted.

Student participant Yolanda (pseudonym) stated, “to belong is to fit in and be like equal.” She went on to state that when she feels like she belongs somewhere, it makes her feel, “more comfortable and not excluded.” She also shared how “sad and lonely” she felt when she was excluded, however, she was not able to remember a recent example of when she had been excluded. I wonder if Yolanda has made changes about herself in order to ‘fit in’ without even realizing she had done so. Yolanda seemed a bit more mature than the other student participants, and very aware of how she wanted to be perceived.

Yolanda did share that some students in her classroom separate themselves from other students. She stated that they:

Stay to one side of the room and don’t talk to anyone, and they don’t like being partners with other people, and they like talking to themselves. I don’t think they like sharing anything with other people, like they don’t feel comfortable.

Her description of some of her peers was detailed and seemed readily accessible, as if she was able to picture specific classmates who behaved in this manner.

Yolanda's description matched what was observed in classroom visits. During the initial observation in teacher Kris's (pseudonym) classroom, I took note of three different students who appeared to be struggling to engage in the work they were being asked to do. One student had his hood up and head down on the desk. Another female student was exploring a non-school related website (despite repeated teacher requests to get on the correct site), and one male student seemed frustrated with the work he was doing on the computer, and actually began to punch the screen, and his desk repeatedly. None of these three students interacted with others in the classroom.

Elaina (pseudonym) was the second student participant to use the term 'fitting in' to define belonging. She stated that belonging means, "being able to fit in a place, you can be you, and you don't have to be someone else." When asked what it meant to not belong, she stated, "like, if they don't include you in stuff that everyone else gets included in, and it's not for any reason." When Elaina was asked to share her own experiences being excluded from something, she paused, sighed, and then asked to pass on answering that question.

Elaina seemed very unsure of herself, and her responses. Her body language communicated that she was afraid of giving the 'wrong' answer. However, she did mention that feeling connected, or like she belongs at middle school, is more difficult than it was in elementary school. She stated, "I think elementary (was different) with the same, or mostly the same students for all my years there, but I am kind of new here, and I am in different classes, meeting new kids, it's just different." In describing what it looks like when a student is excluded, Elaina shared that:



It looks like they just don't, they're staying away from everyone, not wanting to socialize or anything, and even if they are a person who doesn't socialize a lot or anything, they just don't even want to do anything, like not even the work.

This matched, both what was shared by Yolanda, and what was observed during the classroom visit.

**Theme: Feeling Comfortable.** Student participant Zeke (pseudonym) shared that to him, belonging meant, "that you feel comforted and safe." He described students in his classroom who seemed disconnected by sharing that "they don't talk, they put their head down, they are kind of looking somewhere else, talking to somebody else." He then shared that when students seemed troubled by something, that the teachers would:

Bring them back (to the back of the classroom) and same old, same old, see if they're doing okay, probably keep an eye on them to see if anyone is bullying them or anything. Kinda what they did for me. I mean that didn't happen to me (laugh). Usually, I guess, I kinda just tough it out.

When I then asked him if his response to being bullied was to 'tough it out', he stated, "No, no (laugh) nobody is bullying me. Like when I am just feeling down I just kinda tough it out and go on with the day." I found Zeke to be very self-aware, and perhaps a little 'street smart' in some of his responses, but not completely willing to share information that might make him look vulnerable or weak, in his estimation.

Student participant Julian (pseudonym) was quite taciturn. He often responded quickly with one word answers. Even follow-up questions were answered with very brief responses. However, he did describe belonging, stating that it is a place where, "you feel like you want to be there." When asked how it made him feel when he belonged

somewhere, he shared that it made him feel “calm.” He could not give an example of a time or circumstance when he felt like he did not belong, nor was he able or willing to give very much information about other students in his classroom that seemed to not belong.

When Julian was asked if he could imagine what it would be like to not belong, he answered, “I have no idea.” Julian seemed to be a very matter of fact individual, focused on doing what he needs to do at school, and not letting himself get pulled into what other students are up to. He was quiet in class, and very much a rule-follower. The other three student participants, on the other hand, were quick to describe what it looked like when a student felt excluded. They all seemed aware that some students are beginning to separate themselves from what the rest of the class is engaged in.

Further consideration of the responses to question one suggests that the student participants seem to have some understanding of belonging, and a desire to belong at school. They also appear to know what it looks like when others within the classroom have excluded themselves (or perhaps have been excluded) from the group. None of the participants gave personal examples of being left out or not belonging. However, a revelation of that type would require a level of vulnerability not present, given the superficial nature of my relationship with each student participant. Additionally, as a researcher I was ever aware of the emotional well-being of all participants, but especially of the vulnerable student participants. At no time did I want to push too hard, or dig too deeply into topics that might be upsetting or uncomfortable for the students to discuss.

### ***Research Question Two***

How do students perceive teacher attempts to create a community of belonging among all learners?

Through student interviews, classroom observations, and artifacts, four themes surfaced as most pertinent regarding question two: caring teachers, making an effort, trust, and power.

**Theme: Caring Teachers.** Student participants made comments related to the fact that the two participating classroom teachers Kris (pseudonym) and Stacey (pseudonym) cared about their well being.

Yolanda shared that in Stacey's classroom she felt, "more like joy and happiness in there." Julian, also speaking of Stacey, stated that, "she's really kind, she always greets us at the door." These comments matched what was observed in this classroom. On both visits to her classroom, Stacey was standing at the classroom door, welcoming incoming students and sending students from the previous class period off with a few encouraging words.

In fact, thoughtful language was observed being used by Stacey throughout both visits to her classroom. Language, presumably intended to encourage and communicate caring for her students, was used regularly. At one point, as students were entering the classroom at the start of class, Stacey commented, "I like how some of you are getting out your materials, that makes my heart happy." This caused other students to also begin to prepare for class by getting their materials out.

During another interaction in Stacey's classroom, as the class was discussing Egyptian scribes, one student raised his hand and then excitedly shared a connection he had made, stating:

It's just like becoming a Youngling from a Padawan when you are a Jedi. They train all day and all night, and they were taken from their homes at a young age. But like the scribes, it is all worth it in the end.

Stacey responded in a very excited voice, "Nice connection! Let's give him snaps!" The rest of the class snapped their fingers in approval, while this student beamed with pride.

Similar interactions were observed in the classroom of teacher Kris. When questioning students, she received an answer that was not quite correct. She repeated the answer aloud, validating it in front of the class, and then remarked, "you're almost there" to the student. In another instance, students were working to rewrite a section of text on their laptops. As one student sat, struggling to get started, Kris said, "You gotta give it a try" three times in a friendly, encouraging way. Followed by, "I shouldn't see a blank screen, you can do this!" At that, the student started typing, seemingly ready to take on the task. Additionally, when students did something well, Kris would remark, "You did a good job! Didn't she do a good job?" (asking the class).

During another visit to Kris's classroom, an endearing interaction between Kris and Zeke was observed. Zeke had been called to the counseling office during class. When Kris told him he needed to head there, he froze and looked at her with an unsure expression. She came over to him and placed her hand on his shoulder, and then very quietly asked if he knew where to go. He shook his head that he did not. She then knelt down by his desk and very quietly whispered exact directions to the counseling office,

ending with a “got it?”. Zeke smiled, stood up, and left the classroom without anyone else knowing he had been unsure about where to go. This simple interaction was handled in a way that allowed Zeke to ‘save face’ among his peers, something I have perceived as being very important to him.

Zeke shared a little about his past during one interview, when he referenced how caring some teachers could be, and in some instances, how uncaring he felt they could also be. He stated, “I have had teachers in the past that were too strict, and I just had to move to another school because they didn’t like me, and I fully understand that. I was an ornery kid back then. I will tell you this, I told a lot of people this, I wasn’t a kid that paid attention. I would, I had anger issues and everything. I am doing way better now.”

This was the second reference Zeke had made regarding not connecting with a teacher. He spoke of another teacher he currently has, not one of the participant teachers, and made the following remark:

Yeah, Ms. S. doesn’t really, kind of welcome, I mean she is not really that nice to me. I mean, I think they (teachers) all have a bad side, and I think she has been teaching for a pretty long time. I try to be nice to her and everything, and, (shrugs) it just doesn’t seem to help.

Elaina also shared how teachers in the past seemed uncaring, stating that, “maybe just how they didn’t really welcome people. I mean they do, but they don’t at the same time, and how they’re always a little bit grumpy.” Her advice for things teachers could do to show that they care included:

Maybe try to like, I get that it’s hard and everything, but make sure that everyone is doing okay, and make sure that they’re on task and everything, because some

adults don't do that. Talk to them after class, tell them 'great job', or maybe just talk to all the students, tell them to have a great day, you know, just be really friendly and nice.

**Theme: Making an Effort.** Another theme that surfaced repeatedly in both student interviews and observations was that the teachers made an extra effort in the classroom to engage students and to make learning fun. Yolanda shared that she has noticed that some of her teachers try to get students who are not paying attention or who are not part of the learning process to join in by, "telling them to like work with other people, and they bring them back to the conversations so they can answer questions." She seemed to appreciate the extra effort to keep everyone involved.

Elaina also spoke of the importance of having fun and feeling supported at school. She stated, "Mrs. X (Stacey) likes to sing when she reads stuff, and Mrs. Y (Kris) really likes to help people more." She added that not all teachers do that when she said, "they (other teachers) like, they don't make anything fun. I mean, I know learning is not supposed to be that fun, but you could try."

I shared with Elaina that I had observed teacher Stacey and another adult dressed in full Egyptian costume (artifact) to introduce an Egyptian themed escape room activity at the beginning of an Egypt unit. When I asked her what she thought about that, she replied:

I thought it was pretty cool because a lot of the teachers don't put work into an act, or something. Like we just started that new unit and she dressed up as the part and everything. She did it again today. I think it's pretty cool that teachers do put effort into it.

When I asked if seeing her teachers put that much effort into teaching made her want to put more effort into learning, she said that it did, and added:

Well this is different for a lot of students, but for me especially, it is nice to just have teachers put in a lot of effort. Yeah, because normally they will have just some fidgets or like comfy chairs or things like that, there's tons of stuff that teachers put in the rooms and everything to make them (students) feel that way (connected), but you can just really tell when they are making an effort.

One activity that Elaina and other student participants mentioned often was the Friday clubs that are held every other Friday afternoon. According to the teacher participants, the staff have worked very hard to create and maintain a variety of opportunities for students through clubs. Each club is made up of a teacher and students from 6th-8th grade who share an interest in that theme (sports, video games, art, music, cooking, etc.). The purpose of the clubs was to build student and staff relationships in an engaging and positive way. I asked Elaina how she felt being in clubs with 7th and 8th grade students. She responded, "Oh yeah, because some clubs have older students in older grades in them, and since I am in sixth grade, it means it can be pretty nice to meet some of the older people."

Zeke also shared his appreciation for the extra effort made by some teachers to make learning fun, including the Social Studies escape room activity. When asked about what he enjoys at school he shared, "Well, there's one in Social Studies right now, you know those mummies and temples thing (Egyptians), we're doing that. That is something I enjoy doing." Zeke had been observed in teacher Kris's classroom early one day and then again later in that same day during the escape room activity in Stacey's room. When

he was expected to sit quietly, and work on his own in Kris's room, Zeke struggled greatly to meet the expectations. However, when he was engaged in the social problem solving, kinesthetic learning of the escape room in Stacey's room, he took on a leadership role within his group, fully engaged, and enjoying the work.

The Egyptian escape room activity, not only included a teacher costume, but also physical and virtual hidden clues related to Egyptian culture. Clues were placed within and outside of the classroom, and had to be re-set prior to each new class period. Students were divided into groups of three to five students, given a short explanation of the purpose of the activity, as well as the tools they needed, and then set free to solve the puzzle as a team. In observing this activity, one group reached a point of being taken out of the classroom by another adult. They came back inside very excited, with a pink paper mummy. All three students were fully engaged and enthusiastic.

As groups worked their way through the clues, teacher Stacey asked a group, "So do you like doing this? What do you like about it?" A student responded, "I do! Because when I was a little girl, I always liked sneaking around like this." A student in another group could barely contain her excitement, she giggled, and wiggled, and kept high-fiving others in her group. As teams solved the puzzle and the class neared an end I overheard one student state, "this is now my favorite class!" Another student remarked, "we should do this all the time!" as she was exiting the classroom.

Julian echoed the thoughts of his fellow participants regarding the extra effort some teachers make, stating excitedly, "one of my teachers will sing when she is teaching lessons. She will sing in some parts!" He seemed very appreciative of the enjoyment a simple sing-song voice added to a lesson presentation. He shared that he also enjoyed



some of the activities the teachers do with the students, including the clubs. When asked if being a part of the clubs helped him to feel connected to others, he shared, “Yeah, because it works. You get to know them (teachers) better.”

Teacher effort was witnessed several times during classroom observations. In teacher Kris’s classroom, while students completed online assignments, Kris pulled students one at a time to revisit or re-teach content that they did not understand the first time. She did this quietly at the back of the classroom. In one exchange, a student who was working with her on a math assignment, and was beginning to understand the content, stated loudly, “Oh, I got it!” Kris responded, “See, now you got the hang of it, good job!”

**Theme: Trust.** Several times during student interviews, the importance of a trusting, solid relationship between student and teacher emerged. Yolanda, especially, seemed to appreciate the authentic connection between student and teacher that allowed her to trust her teachers. When she remarked that she preferred some teachers over others, I asked her why. She responded that, “They feel more comfortable to talk to. Like, if I wanna ask a question, I won’t feel scared to ask them”. I then asked if she felt like she could come to those teachers with a problem. She responded adamantly that she could do so.

Yolanda then referenced teacher Kris’s classroom by sharing, “ She (Kris) ‘shares things up’. She makes it more comfortable for everyone to belong there.” When I asked her to explain what it means to ‘share things up’ she said that it meant the teacher would talk about themselves to the students. She continued, “they will say, like this weekend I was there and I had a volleyball game to go to, and I had a basketball game to coach at.”

She also shared that it helps when teachers do that, “because you can see that you can trust them with your stuff, and they are telling stuff about them to you, like they have lives outside of teaching.”

While in Kris’s classroom I photographed one of several collages (artifact) with a name, in this case the teacher name, surrounded by images cut from magazines. When I asked her about this, she stated that creating ‘all about me’ collages is something that she and her students do at the start of every school year. She gives them a list of things to represent about themselves (favorite food, people, activities, etc.), as well as a choice of other things to add to the collage so that it illustrates who they are as individuals. She does one for herself as well, and then everyone shares their collage with the class before displaying them on the wall for the year. Kris shared that it is very important to her that her students get to know her as a person, not just a teacher.

**Theme: Power.** A final theme that became apparent when considering student perception of teacher attempts to create a community of belonging was power. Within many of the student interviews, a variety of interactions were discussed. Interactions between students as well as interactions between students and teachers. When Yolanda was asked to think about things at school that she doesn’t necessarily like or enjoy, she shared that, “sometimes people can be mean.” I asked if she meant the people being mean were adults or kids, or both, she adamantly responded that it was other students. I then asked if she was willing to tell me what they do, she shared, “They like, they’ve called me names before, and made fun of my weight.” I then asked her what she does when that happens. She said, “I just ignored them at first, but if they keep on bugging me, I will tell them to stop.” She then said that this usually works.

We then talked about how unfortunate it was that some people mistreat other people. I asked her what seems to matter more at school, how the adults treat you or how the other students treat you. Her response was, “I think the adults, because they already know how they should be treating you, while with the students, well they’re learning.”

When considering who has the power in the classroom to set the mood or climate for the day, Elaina had mixed feelings. She responded:

I feel like it kind of depends. I mean the students can kind of be ornery and that can kind of change the adult and everything. The adult’s attitude can just go down from there, or the adult can be having a bad day, or something. Then the students can get a little grumpy. So they affect each other.

Elaina went on to share her frustration with the behavior of some peers when she shared, “Well, people who just are rude for no reason, no explanation, for really nothing. Normally, the teacher says something, but if that doesn’t work, I try not to say something but if I do, I ask them to please be quiet.” When asked if that usually worked, she commented, “No, not normally.” She seemed frustrated by the lack of ability some teachers have to control the behavior of students she felt were unruly or rude to others in the classroom.

Zeke also shared the belief that both students and adults in a classroom affect the climate. He stated that the split between who has more of an effect was, “Like 75/25, the adults have more power because they’re the adults, but I also do feel like they sometimes let the kids, you know, say what the plan is; like make the decisions.” In regards to which is more concerning, a teacher or a student being irritable or grumpy, he stated, “I would say, the teacher because, if it’s just one kid they can get that solved, but if it’s the teacher,

it's a whole different thing because she is responsible to take care of the classroom.”

Zeke then shared how he typically responds when a teacher is ‘grumpy’. He shared that when teachers are, “not talking, or they sound different, or (they’re) not interacting with anybody” he said, “I get kicked out.” When I asked him if he purposely gets kicked out to avoid a ‘grumpy’ teacher, he said (with a smile) that he sometimes does.

When it comes to peer interactions, Zeke mirrored what was shared by Yolanda and Elaina, that students in middle school treat each other differently than they did in elementary school. For example, he shared that they (students) don’t talk kindly to one another, He then commented, “I don’t know, I think it’s just the generation.” He also shared that it is challenging to fit in with his friends at school, but that he knows “how to fight”, so he is “not worried about it.”

Julian, however, had a more positive outlook on the difference in power dynamics between elementary and middle school. When asked which he preferred, he stated:

Definitely the middle school because it has a nicer atmosphere. They treat you like you are a bit more grown up here. I like middle school better since elementary school is chaos. Last year it started off, not a good start. One new kid came and it (behavior) started up, and it just snowballed up from there, and it just didn’t stop.

I asked him to clarify if he meant there were negative behaviors. He responded, “Everywhere. We got our bathroom taken away, so the teacher would have to be standing by the door, not in the bathroom, but by the outside door because of the kids.” This was the most talkative I have heard Julian be during our time together.

The power dynamics were also evident between students and teachers during classroom observations. Teachers shared and enforced expectations, and managed behaviors. For the most part, students responded as expected. There was one interaction between three students during the escape room challenge that was interesting. As they began to work together, one student sat back a bit from his group mates. He watched but didn't actively manipulate the materials. While a second student tried to move things around and get to work, a third group member, without speaking, took the materials from that student's hands and, using body language alone, made it very clear that he would be leading the group and using the materials. The other two students did not protest, or make any remarks, but seemingly fell in line. They sat down and let him take charge. It was clear who in that group had the power. At no point did either of the other two group members tell an adult about what had happened.

Analysis of the themes identified for question two: teacher caring, teachers making an effort, trust and power in the classroom, are all closely related to the relationship between student and teacher. Both classroom teacher participants seemed innately aware of the need to consider students as individuals. They were also conscious of student emotions, and appeared to work to create classrooms that provided students with a safe space, where student dignity could be honored. In many instances, the interactions between students and teachers took on a nurturing, almost child/parent relationship, with teachers working to sustain and to protect their students.

Each teacher participant interacted with students in unique ways. Stacey demonstrated an energy and passion in her teaching that not only helped to engage students, but also showed them that learning could be fun. Kris was no less caring in her

more understated style of teaching and interacting with her students, and perhaps attracted those students who did not respond to the high energy in Stacey's classroom. Through interviews and direct observation, it was obvious that these two teachers have genuinely worked to build solid relationships with their students, and that they sincerely care for the wellbeing of each student.

The theme of teacher's making an effort in their teaching spoke to the awareness that some student participants have in regards to the role teachers should play in the classroom. Whitfield (1976) stated 40 years ago that, "teachers are forever under the student's watchful eye" (p. 347). Students are observing, listening, perceiving, and responding to so much of what the adults are doing each and every day. For example, the effort made by Stacey to create and implement the Egyptian escape room not only engaged, but excited the students. Even Zeke, who had admitted to struggling with paying attention in class, was engaged and active during this exercise. His active engagement was a direct response to the efforts made by Stacey.

Not unlike most relationships, trust plays a big role in the relationship between student and teacher. Without the ability for students to see their teachers as individuals navigating challenges outside of the classroom, students like Yolanda would perhaps not be willing to attempt open and honest communication with her teachers. Some of this trust building comes through the intentional, explicit activities such as the 'get to know you' collages done in Kris' classroom, but, based on student interviews, much of this trust has come from teachers and students engaging in simple, powerful, honest, and consistent conversations that allow each to see the other person as fully human.

I was not surprised to see power come up as a theme in this study. Experience has shown me, and data collected in this study has supported, that whenever you have people interacting with other people, power dynamics come into play. Within that theme, students expressed a desire for the teacher to demonstrate the power to maintain a certain level of control over student behavior in the classroom; power that would ensure a safe and orderly learning environment for all students. Considering the information shared by several of the student participants regarding the challenges they face interacting with some of their peers in a positive manner, the creation and management of a safe and predictable environment is especially important.

Additionally, student participants seemed to understand the power teachers have regarding establishing and maintaining the emotional climate of the classroom, and the direct link the classroom climate has to the personal mood of the teacher. Zeke especially seemed sensitive to the emotions of his teachers, perceiving on more than one occasion that his teachers did not care for him. He picked up on teacher tone, body language, and interactions to help him determine whether he would remain in the classroom, or misbehave in order to avoid what he perceived to be a negative situation, by getting kicked out.

### ***Research Question Three***

What discrepancies exist in the definition and experience of belonging for students who possess demographic differences (gender, race, socio-economic status, ability)?

Through student interviews, teacher interviews, and classroom observations, two themes surfaced as most germane regarding question three: acceptance, and equity for all.

Maximum variation sampling (Creswell & Poth, 2018), was used in this study to select students that represented heterogeneity in regards to demographics. This was meant to allow for potential dissimilarity in experiences and responses from students. However, throughout much of the study, the students, regardless of their demographic differences, be it gender, race, socioeconomic status, or ability, reported very similar understandings and realities within the classroom setting. They shared both positive and negative experiences. What variance does exist, primarily for students with ability differences, and English language learners, will be shared in this section.

**Table 6** (*reshared for consideration of question three*)

*Student Participants*

Pseudonym	Gender	Ethnicity	Free & Reduced Status (SES)	Special Education	English Language Learner
Yolanda	Female	Hispanic	No	No	Yes (past)
Elaina	Female	White	No	No	No
Zeke	Male	White	No	Yes	No
Julian	Male	African American	Yes	No	No

Note: In the time since this research has been completed, an updated Iowa School Performance Profile (<https://www.iaschoolperformance.gov/>, 2023) has been released for this school. WMS has now been assigned a status of ‘Needs Improvement’ instead of the previous designation of ‘Acceptable’. Additionally, WMS was previously identified as



targeted for underperformance of one subgroup only: students receiving special education services. However, they are now additionally targeted for underperformance of Hispanic students.

**Theme: Acceptance.** Overall, there seemed to be an acceptance by many participants for students who possess differences, especially when it comes to differences in ability in the classroom. Stacey gave details of the efforts she makes when working publicly with a student who struggles in class. She shared, “I never want anyone to feel embarrassed, or like pointed out, you know when your cheeks turn bright red and you want to die in your chair? To me, that will hurt the learning because that will hurt the relationship.” She added that she also tries to not be sarcastic with students, “because I think they can see right through that, and then your genuineness is impacted and the relationship is also impacted.” She also works to validate students who volunteer an answer, even if it is incorrect. She shared that “if they give a wrong answer, I will say ‘close’, because you don’t want someone feeling, here they are volunteering an answer, they are trying, especially someone who doesn’t really talk a lot.”

Elaina shared that she appreciates how some of her teachers help her, “they let you, do it at your own pace and everything, and it really just helps you in your education” she shared. When asked if some students were being treated differently in her classes, Elaina shared, “a little bit differently because it matters what needs they have and everything. Like if they are a slow learner, the teacher might have different expectations, like they might be able to get extra help.”

Yolanda shared that she too understands that some students get treated differently. She stated, “I am ok with it because other people go at their speed, and some people like the boy in front of me, he takes longer to write and type so, I am ok with it.”

Kris consistently demonstrated acceptance and compassion for students in her classroom struggling with academics or in some cases, social-emotional and behavioral issues. I mentioned to Kris one boy that I noticed while visiting her classroom, sitting in the back of the class with his hood up, and not engaged in what was going on. She knew right away who I was referencing, and stated:

Oh, yeah that is B. He really keeps to himself. He has anxiety. We got an email at the beginning of the year to allow him to keep his hood up, to not say anything to him about it, don't try to argue with that. So there are certain things that we allow him to do, that we don't let others do. I find that if we assign things on the computer he will do it, but if it's on paper, he will not do it. I'm not kidding.

Another student I mentioned seeing was a female student sitting near B. Again, Kris knew right away who I meant, sharing:

She only attends partial days, and she can't go to the bathroom by herself kind of thing (self-harm). There are some mental health things going on with her. So, she is here for ELA (English Language Arts) during that time so I can help her to get some instruction and to try to work with her. I mean I do the best I can.

This was the same student I observed, who when the teacher was passing out missing work lists (something most students want to avoid receiving) at the end of class, yelled out, “What about me, aren't I part of the class too?”

I then mentioned the student who I had observed becoming so angry during quiet work time, he began to repeatedly punch his computer screen and his desk. Kris's body language softened, and she took on a somewhat maternal tone when she responded:

Oh yeah, every once in a while, he can't control his anger. He's trying, I mean we're working on that, trying to figure out different ways to cope, to handle that. Sometimes he just asks for a hall pass, sometimes it's just something he can't control, but when you go over and have that conversation with him, he's like, 'I'm sorry, I know'. So he realizes it, but it's just something that is not controllable yet.

Finally, Kris brought up Zeke, mentioning that he is doing better than he did in the past, as far as being able to stay in class. She shared that he has a lot going on in his life outside of school, and really just struggles at school with his attention and focus. I asked her how his classmates responded to his off task behavior. She shared that:

They're really good with those things, a lot of students have been together since elementary so they try to help, or they are really good at working with him. I really don't think it affects his connection with others. I see him in the hallways, talking to other kids, he seems to have friends. I don't think it affects him.

Zeke was observed in her classroom, off task, whispering to others, getting up to get a kleenex three times in 45 minutes, logged into a website different from where he needed to be, and seeming to do all he could to avoid the assigned seat work. However, Julian, who is typically doing 'the right thing' in the classroom, was also observed during that same class period, quietly off task. Julian was on his computer and was looking at the screen. However, upon closer inspection, I noticed he was simply tracing around the logo

on the screen with his mouse, over and over again. When I asked him about this, during an interview, he seemed surprised that I had noticed, but then said, “Yes. I wander off in my mind, and so I just zone out. I just forget I am even doing it.”

Aaron, the additional adult participant shared what he has witnessed in his physical education classes in regards to students in his classroom accepting one another. He shared that:

Especially for students with more challenging needs, these kids are really welcomed and celebrated in my classroom. Not just by me, but like the other students. There is a culture where the rules (of activities or games) will be bent, and none of the kids will have a problem, and they will really encourage. I have seen kids put winning to the side just so another kid can have a moment, and like, that’s not always the case for middle school, they’re very competitive beings.

**Theme: Equity Concerns.** Another theme that emerged throughout this study related to educator concerns that some students were either not being given equitable access and opportunity at school, or that the uniqueness of individual student needs created additional challenges for students related to belonging. The groups considered included, English language learners, students living in poverty, students receiving special education services, students receiving support from the talented and gifted program, and students of color. Teacher efforts to foster equity in the classroom were also considered.

***English Language Learners.*** Teacher Aaron shared his concern for the population of English language learners which has grown to 4.7% of the population of Winnebago Community School District (Iowa.gov/Iowa School Performance Profile, 2023). He shared that in his experience:

Language barriers can be a thing where students unintentionally get ignored in ways that are not equitable. I am not necessarily intentionally ignoring a student who doesn't speak English but if there is not a lot of support in there (classroom), like you're doing the best you can but you know that kid is not always getting the same experiences as an English language speaker. We need more opportunities to translate for students that speak different languages, or have more one-on-ones (paraprofessional support) for kids that have behavior or academic challenges. I think there is definitely room for improvement for those students.

This concern was echoed by Stacey who was expressing frustration in her ability to work with students who do not speak English. She shared a story about a student in her classroom who:

Redid his assignment and I don't even know what he is saying, like, I don't even know these words. So if we don't have people, I would love to have a translator in the classroom. I mean I can't understand what he is saying, and he did it (the assignment) twice, so I am going to have to go back and ask him again.

Stacey continued to share her concerns that, not only can the students not communicate at school, but their families also have limited English ability, which makes it very challenging to partner with them in a meaningful way. She then explored the flipside of the language challenge, stating:

I mean these kids that are bilingual, let's work on that, I mean that's a skill, that's an asset, where they don't feel like they want to hide. Yesterday there were three of them (Spanish speaking students) in a group, and I was like no, you guys talk however you want. The other kids were looking at them 'like this was weird'. I

said ‘aren’t they awesome, isn’t it amazing?’ and they said ‘yeah!’ It’s the mentality that in a White middle class school, we aren’t thinking that being bilingual is an asset, only that it’s so different.

While completing observations within these two classrooms, non-English speaking students were observed seated near other non-English speaking students, with little active engagement with the rest of the class. They did interact with one another. The suggestion by two of the three adult participants to add additional adult support for these students, in the form of translators/paraprofessionals, could potentially cause additional separation between students learning English and the classroom teacher, as well as from peers. During one observation, I witnessed a paraprofessional, meant to assist English learners, seated next to them. However, the students were turned away from the classroom teacher, and appeared only to interact with the paraprofessional, not with the rest of the class.

Teachers, not unlike Stacey, seem unsure as to how to navigate relationship building with non-English speaking students. Unfortunately, some of the interactions between Stacey and the students learning English, namely the incident where she pointed them out to the rest of the class, could potentially lead to further ostracization by native English speaking students.

***Students Living in Poverty.*** Another demographic group that featured quite prominently in the data collected during this study were students living with fewer resources than their middle class counterparts. Stacey, in particular, was passionate about building relationships and meeting the needs of these students. She also pointed out the barriers they may face at school due to a lack of resources at home. She shared that, in

her experience, some students in poverty lack social skills in certain situations. She referred to it as, “the norms of being at school.” She then shared, “if they don’t know it, we have to teach them, and we have to practice.” Stacey also spoke of the challenges many students, including those in poverty, face at home. She then got a bit emotional and shared:

You know I am an adult, and I am barely able to hold it together with the trauma I have experienced, and these kids don’t have the... I can make decisions on my own. I can make decisions about what I am going to do tonight, what I am going to eat. These kids can’t make any decisions and don’t have food at home. They can never get out of that negative environment. This is their best place. But then they freak out, or they swear, and they get in trouble at school. If I can make a difference in a kid’s life that will get them to move forward and to be happy, and to want to come to school, then that’s my goal.

Some comments she made regarding students living in resource deficient homes, “not knowing how to act” or not following the “norms of being at school”, made me wonder about what the norms of school are, and who decided upon those expectations. Are these White middle class expectations? Are we expecting all students to learn these same unwritten rules in order to be considered successful at school?

***Students Receiving Special Education Services.*** Students identified for special education services, especially those with social-emotional, or behavioral challenges garnered a significant amount of discussion from all participants. Stacey shared concern that co-teaching that allowed identified students to receive special education services within the general education classroom setting, instead of being pulled out of the

classroom, was not happening nearly as often as they had in the past. She shared it is now happening only in small pockets throughout the district. Her concern is that students miss out on learning when they are pulled from a general education class for special education services.

Stacey continued to share that she would like to find ways to assist students struggling with attention deficit and related behavioral challenges in connecting more readily with their peers. She shared:

I have a few students this year that exhibit extreme ADHD behavior and I have heard their peers say they were annoyed with their constant talking, blurting out, constant moving etc. I know one of these students has told me that his group doesn't like him, so he is internalizing their frustration. I don't want them (students with behavior challenges) to feel 'disliked'. I want to help them develop skills, and self control, as well as how to work with others that see things differently than they do. Especially since working with people will be something all students will need to do for the rest of their lives. Teaching them coping or regulating strategies could help.

Interestingly, the student of concern that Stacey was talking about, was Zeke, and her beliefs about Zeke and his ability to manage his behavior and social interactions with other students is the exact opposite of the perceptions of teacher Kris, who was not concerned about him socially. When I asked Zeke about the behavior I witnessed from him in one class compared to the other, he shared, "Yeah, I kind of have ADHD. I like to move around a lot." We talked about him repeatedly getting out of his seat, and other off



task behaviors. I asked if he thought his behavior was a distraction to other students, and he responded with:

It depends on how you are doing it (distracting). If you are yelling and screaming, then yeah that would be disruptive, but if you are just walking around, then they would just kinda just ignore it. I mean I don't scream, I just usually get up. I just do my work and hope to get out of school so I can do what I want outside in life like go four wheeling, stuff like that. I hope to be in the service when I get out of school. I want to be in the Army. I'm not sure if I want to do engineering, or be a medic, or go into combat.

When Elaina was asked about students misbehaving in class she had some strong feelings that ran counter to those of Zeke. She shared that:

It's very hard for me to focus, just because I am trying to sit here and do my work and all of a sudden these kids are yelling, talking, and everything while I am trying to focus. I mean let's say the teacher is talking; there will be some kids whispering and stuff. I just want to listen to it so I don't fail. I want to get a good grade in my class.

Ability, whether academic or social, clearly makes a difference for these participants in regards to belonging in the classroom.

***Students Receiving Support from the Talented and Gifted Program.*** Students receiving the support of talented and gifted (TAG) services also came up in discussion, despite not being a population even considered at the start of this research. Stacey shared, "You wouldn't think that students that are excelling academically would have challenges. Most (people) wouldn't think that, but I know having taught them that they are one of the

most extreme (examples) of high anxiety.” Stacey uses a tool called a Mood Meter (artifact) in her classroom, as do many of the teachers at WMS. The idea is for students to do a social-emotional ‘check in’ by selecting a word on the Mood Meter that names how they are currently feeling. Naming their current emotional state then opens the door to writing about it in a journal, and/or discussing it with an adult if they need to.

Stacey shared that she was surprised to see that high performing students, students in TAG, were using the Mood Meter as a way to pose questions to her privately about projects in the classroom, presumably because they did not feel comfortable asking in front of peers. She stated that, “they’ll write it on their Mood Meter sheet that they know I’m going to read.” These students are using the tool, perhaps not in the way it is intended to be used, but Stacey is concerned that they are so highly stressed and afraid to look incompetent, that they won’t even ask questions aloud.

I witnessed an example of the stress a high achieving student experiences during an observation in Kris’s classroom. As she passed out the missing assignment lists to students, I noticed that one boy seemed surprised and frustrated that he was handed one. He raised his hand and waited patiently to talk to Kris. She was busy with another student. After several minutes, he got out his computer and wrote an email, presumably to the teacher of the class with the missing assignment, typing ‘I know I turned that in.’ I was actually impressed at his problem solving abilities. I found out later that this student is indeed receiving TAG services, and can get very emotional if his academics are not perfect.

***Racial Equity.*** Selecting students with demographic differences was an intentional move made to explore possible disparities between how students either

defined or experienced belonging at school. The population at WMS is primarily (77.6%) made up of White students. All three teacher participants in this study are also White, English speaking individuals.

All participants were asked at some point, in some manner, about issues surrounding racial equity. Students were asked if they noticed people being treated differently based on how they looked, or their race, or the way they acted. Teachers were asked a similar, more direct question. None of the participants shared, or perhaps were willing to share, experiences or observations related to discrimination or mistreatment of others based on race. I was not comfortable pushing student participants on this issue. Teachers were quick to point out other areas of inequity, but no one seemed interested in discussing race. Again, given my role within the district, I was not comfortable pushing too hard on this with any participants, beyond the initial question that was diverted by all of them.

Two of the student participants are students of color. Yolanda, an Hispanic student, who had been identified as an English language learner in elementary school, did not speak of challenges related to her ethnicity or her language abilities at any point during the study. She did mention being teased for her appearance related to her weight, but not her race. Julian, an African American student, also did not seem to acknowledge any difference in how he defined or experienced belonging. I wonder if the lack of adult conversations at school related to race impacts the willingness or interest students of color have in broaching the topic at school. I also wonder if the age of this participant group lessens the likelihood that they have spent as much time considering who they are as individuals and how their identity or ethnicity might affect interactions with others, as

their 7th or 8th grade peers may have. Another possibility is that participants were not comfortable enough with me to have a conversation about something so personal and potentially controversial.

Throughout the study, Julian in particular, seemed to be doing all he could to not stand out. In conversations with his parent prior to the start of the study, his mother shared, in a very direct way, that he was at school to learn and achieve, not to make friends and socialize. She shared that she had very strict expectations for Julian to behave at school. These parental expectations matched what I observed while in his classrooms, as well as when Julian was interviewed. Reasons for her emphatic stance would be interesting to explore further.

*Equitable Treatment by Teachers.* All three teacher participants seemed to be doing their best to treat all students in an equitable manner. However, student Elaina shared her perception that not all students are treated equitably. She pointed out that both teachers and other students play a role in this. Sharing that:

Some students treat other students differently. Like let's say for example, you have this new kid who just moved here, and let's say he's just learning English. Some kids might make fun of him, or they might not like to be his friend. You never know.

In regards to teachers, she shared that they treat students "fairly" most of the time, "but sometimes there is a tad bit of difference. It's like them just having a favorite student, like giving them more attention. Usually the ones who are doing really well in the class."

When Kris was asked about this perceived inequity, she responded by saying:

No, I mean in the classroom they all know my expectations. They know they need to meet my expectations. They know that they have to work together, no matter who they are working with and sometimes you find out different things about other students that you wouldn't normally find out unless you worked with them.

#### ***Research Question Four***

What are the teachers' perceptions in regards to how students in their classroom actually experience belonging?

Through student interviews, teacher interviews, and classroom observations, only one theme surfaced as most relevant regarding question four: uniqueness of 6th grade belonging.

**Theme: Uniqueness of 6th Grade Belonging.** Teacher perceptions of student belonging involved sharing what it looked like when students did not seem to feel belonging. Teacher Stacey shared, “We do a lot of group work in 6th grade, and sometimes you can really tell in group work because they (students who do not feel like they belong) sit back and they are not really outgoing. She shared that, “involving them is so hard.” She continued to tell me about some students who actually, “do the work and everything you ask, but they don't say a word, and you really don't get to know them.” She expressed frustration, that despite her efforts, she was not able to reach all students.

Teacher Kris echoed this sentiment stating that she tries to ask students who seem disengaged to give their opinion on whatever the classroom topic is, to get them to join in, but it does not always work. However, she is sometimes able to connect with them through the daily journaling they do in her classroom. She shared, “Sometimes I can tell

through their journaling when they are struggling, or if they are dealing with something, and we can talk about it.”

The differences between 6th grade students and older students (7th and 8th) came up many times during teacher interviews. Teacher participants were quick to point out those differences. Stacey shared:

Yes. I taught 7th grade one year, and I had many of the same kids, so I don't know if that was a dynamic or not, but the attitudes increased like up the wazoo. (They are) Too cool for school. But then if they're in a sport, boy they will work for you. Sixth graders don't have sports so you kind of have to baby them along, and teach them, 'like your grades matter, you need to do your grades.' They (6th grade students) have more buy-in I think. That's why I love 6th grade because you can do fun, silly things.

Stacey continued to share that some of her 'silly' things were not so readily appreciated by the older students. She claimed they thought of her as the, “silly weird one”, but she felt they still connected with her, even if they did not “buy in” like the 6th graders. She continued, “I think by 7th grade they're torn. That's when they start dating, and start thinking, 'what do the boys think of me', whereas with 6th grade they're still little kids.”

Kris was also convinced there was a vast difference between 6th graders and the older students. She shared:

In 6th grade they seem to be more engaged just for the simple fact that middle school is a big change for them and they still want to please the teacher. With 8th grade, they have already been here two years, so they kind of push those buttons

to see how far they can go. I would say 6th grade is definitely more engaged. Not that you don't have problems sometimes, but it is more controlled in 6th grade than 8th grade.

Aaron agreed with his colleagues when sharing his experiences and perceptions of students during club time. He shared:

Yeah, there is more excitement for the younger kids. Sixth graders are more into it than anybody. I think apathy is just more prevalent in 8th grade. I would say that it (apathy) is not any more than you would see in school (during the regular school day). I honestly say that there is more excitement for clubs than there is for school for most of our 8th graders.

He continued:

I think that is just because of the curious mind of a 6th grader, versus the more reserved, mature, 'I don't want people to judge me' mind of an 8th grader. We hope to keep that 8th grade mind curious with clubs, because sometimes kids get set in their ways and don't want to try new things.

All four students mentioned the differences between elementary school and middle school. Elaina shared:

Well, first of all there are a lot more people, and some of the stuff (schoolwork) is a little bit harder. I guess in middle school, they (teachers) try to put a little more effort into stuff. They try to help you more with study guides and stuff.

Yolanda shared that the days in middle school seem to go by much faster because students are moving to a different room each hour, instead of being in one room all day.

She added, “The teachers in middle school act really, really nice. I mean some are (nice) in elementary, but more (teachers are nice) in middle school.”

When considering question four, and the identified theme of the uniqueness of 6th grade, all three teacher participants pointed out what they perceived to be a significant difference between 6th and 8th grade students in the classroom. Words used to describe 6th graders included, “more buy in”, “still little kids”, “more controlled”, “more into it”, and “curious”. Whereas 8th grade students were reported as being, “too cool for school”, “reserved and mature”, “not wanting people to judge them”, and interested in, “seeing how far they can go”. Connection in the classroom, while still possible with older students, would potentially sound and look much different than it does for the 6th grade students participating in this study.

#### ***Research Question Five***

In what ways do teachers work to build and maintain a sense of belonging for all students?

Through student interviews, teacher interviews, and classroom observations, three themes came to the forefront regarding question five: clear expectations, authentic connection, and intentional moves.

**Theme: Clear Expectations.** In both classrooms visited during this research, clear expectations were shared, and well practiced routines were witnessed. In teacher Kris’s classroom, expectations were posted for each day, including materials needed for each task. Kris ran her classroom in a structured, calm, consistent manner. Students were held accountable with care. When Zeke was out of his seat and distracting students around him, Kris maintained a very calm demeanor and simply approached him and



quietly said, “I am not amused.” He got the message and sat back down (for a bit). When asked about this, Kris responded with, “Oh, they (students) know my expectations. I make it pretty clear.”

Stacey also has very clear expectations in her classroom with a little ‘sparkle’ added. She used a routine throughout her teaching to make sure students were paying attention and were ready to learn. She would say the first part of a (well-rehearsed) statement, and students would loudly share the second part. For example she would say, “Ready to rock?” and the students responded with, “Ready to roll!” or she would say “Hot dog, hot dog” and the students would respond with, “Hot diggety dog!” When the student participants were asked about this, they smiled, laughed, and in Zeke’s case, shook his head. None of them commented, but my perception was that they found the routine silly or embarrassing. However, while in the classroom, I saw that it was effective in gaining the students attention and engagement.

Another routine used in Stacey’s classroom involved explicit sharing of the expectations for group work. She posted a list of six expectations including: getting along with others, being kind, taking turns, using a vote to solve a disagreement, staying on task, and respecting the words of others. The last one is very important to Stacey. She shared that it is pertinent in her classroom that, “Every voice is heard. I make sure on group work that the expectations are clear and everyone does feel like their voice matters.” Stacey shared that she spends the first two weeks of the school year implementing and having students practice the routines that they will use all year. She added, “People think you can just put them in groups and they’ll work, no. We have to teach them how to interact with each other positively.”

While observing in Stacey's classroom, I noticed that she often referred students back to classroom expectations when one was violated. One student was answering her questions without raising his hand, and after ignoring him the first two times, she said to him, "Remember I ignore you if you don't raise your hand, because one of our classroom expectations is that you raise your hand and wait to be called on before you talk." In another instance, prior to starting an activity, she asked students to share out what it should 'look like'. She asked, "Should we be working together?" The students responded "yes". "Should we be able to hear each other across the room?" The students responded "no". While doing this took some time, it helped students to see from the start what they should, and should not be doing. Potentially keeping violations of the agreed upon expectations from happening in the first place, while still maintaining positive relations.

**Theme: Authentic Connection.** Another theme that came to light while exploring research question five was the power of authentic connection. Kris shared her need to remind herself that building authentic relationships with students takes time. She said that there are often times that a student does not want to share anything about their lives, and does not seem interested in learning about her either. She has found that if she is patient and consistent, many students warm up to her. She shared, "You know, sometimes it takes time to build that relationship, and sometimes you stand off, but by the end of like second quarter, maybe you've picked it up." She added, "I am good at building relationships with students, my flexibility, just my listening. I listen to them and actually give them the time that they need."

Students in Kris's classroom complete journal entries each day that are graded every other week. Students know from the start that their journal entries will be read by

Kris. She said she is surprised by what they are willing to disclose in their writing. In grading the journals (for completion only) Kris shared:

I just write little messages, or like smiley faces or sad faces, and kind of let them know that somebody does care. However, I also make it clear to them that if they reach out for help, I gotta report it. I've had that incident happen twice now, and they (students) got the help that they needed, and that's kind of inspiring.

Aaron also seems to understand the power of authentic connection. He shared, "I'm big on just small talk all the time, asking kids how their days are going. I try not to end on just fine or good. I try to get to know them a little bit, by asking them more." He shared that he will look for connections based on a team they might be wearing on a shirt, or something they might be wearing from a trip, some way to start a conversation that could lead to a connection. He also shared one of the benefits of teaching physical education (PE) when it comes to relationship building is having time to connect. He shared that:

One of the main reasons I like to teach PE is because you get to know kids and you can really place an emphasis on relationships because there is just a lot of time for talk. You can be multitasking in ways that I haven't found that you can always do in other settings.

He shared that while students are playing pickle-ball, they can also be talking and laughing and connecting with one another and with him.

Aaron shared that he also holds kids accountable within that teacher-student relationship. When a student seems to be having an 'off day', Aaron will approach them.

I will say to a kid, I said to one today, 'is something going on? You don't seem like yourself today. You're behaving in a way that's just really out of character for you, tell me what's up'. Just being called out like that, like not in a threatening way, lets them know that I have this expectation of our relationship and I think they respect that.

He continued to share that when he feels there is a breakdown in the communication between him and a student he had a connection with, he takes ownership of that, and wonders what he is doing wrong, or what he could be doing differently to make that student feel more welcomed or connected.

Stacey shared the same sentiment as her colleagues regarding authentic connection and caring. She shared:

You gotta meet them where they are before there is ever any learning that is going to be going on. You gotta have a relationship and be honest and vulnerable before they're going to be willing to trust you. There are some kids that haven't been able to trust anybody. They can't rely on their parents, or grandparents, or they've been abused. So that is where my heart is coming from. Having experienced it, now I get it. Lying, fibbing, not being authentic, they call that out right away.

Stacey shared that she is willing to be vulnerable and open with her students so they begin to trust her, and are then willing to be vulnerable and open with her. I observed some of this caring and concern for students in the hallway, when a student bumped into me, crying and quite distraught. I tried to ask if she was alright, but she walked past me and into the arms of Stacey, who escorted her to a less crowded space to

talk. Ironically, this was a student that Stacey had been wanting to connect with. She had noticed this student behaving oddly in class the day before. Stacey shared:

I was thinking, 'I gotta get a relationship with her', I gotta find what gets her.

That day that you saw her crying, was the day that her and I's relationship cemented. I get five hugs a day now. By me stopping and acknowledging, rather than going about my day, we connected. That's where I want them to know that if they have something going on, a really hard day, they can come share with me and talk about it rather than blowing up and leaving.

**Theme: Intentional Moves.** Throughout the research several intentional teacher moves, meant to build and maintain belonging within the classroom, were observed and shared. Some of these moves were mentioned by the students, some were not. The Mood Meter tool, mentioned earlier in this chapter, is used by most of the teachers at WMS, and is meant to open the lines of communication related to a student's social-emotional well being. Students who are struggling with regulation have an option to leave the classroom setting for ten minutes to relocate to a therapeutic classroom called 'The Zone'. There they can either interact with a support adult or re-regulate on their own with the use of manipulatives, fidgets, flexible seating options, or other therapeutic activities. While both Stacey and Kris mentioned the Mood Meter and related supports, none of the students did. Nor were any students observed taking advantage of these supports during classroom observations.

When Kris was asked about the Mood Meter poster in her classroom she responded, "Yes, it's up there by the door." When asked how she uses it with her class, she shared that some students refer to it but that in her advisory period, when social-

emotional lessons take place, Stacey shared that her students were, “pretty outgoing; all of them are pretty well rounded.” I perceived this to mean that she felt they did not require the support of the Mood Meter or Zone.

Also found on the walls of both participant classrooms were a myriad of inspirational, motivational, encouraging posters. With phrases such as, ‘Believe in yourself’; ‘It does not matter how slowly you go, so long as you do not stop’; ‘It takes courage to grow up and become who you really are; and ‘Whether you think you can or you think you can’t you’re right’; to name a few. When the participant teachers were asked about these they both responded that they do talk about them, and they do try to incorporate them into classroom discussions.

However, when students were asked about the posters, their body language led me to believe that they were telling me what they thought I wanted to hear. For example, when asked if she noticed the posters in the classrooms, Yolanda shared in an uninspired tone, “Yeah. Sometimes they help me. I notice them a lot, like sometimes if I need help, or I am struggling, I just look (at the posters) for motivation.” Elaina matched Yolanda’s lack of excitement about the posters when she stated, “Yes, I kinda read them sometimes. Like sometimes when I am feeling down, or just under the weather or something.” Zeke, on the other hand, was honest when he shared his answer to whether or not he noticed the posters, “Yeah when I am bored.” When asked if they were helpful, he responded, “No, not really, not for me.” Julian had a one word response to the same question on whether or not he noticed the posters, “Nope”. When asked if his class ever talked about them, he again responded with, “Nope”.

One intentional move that seemed to reach students more readily were the clubs started by teacher participant Aaron. He explained:

So the clubs are offered on the Fridays that we have a full day of school and the intent was a way for students to connect with staff and feel like they could get to know each other and staff members without an academic grade or anything attached to it.

When asked if that was the catalyst to start the clubs, he shared:

We were having behavior problems that really led to Fridays feeling off. Just a terrible feeling around the building of bad morale and student behavior issues, and teachers not having great attendance, and students not having great attendance.

We were trying to find ways to leave school (each week) on a good note.

The teachers did a book study and learned about another district doing something similar and decided to give it a try.

For clubs, Aaron shared that teachers select a topic or hobby that interests them, one that they are passionate about and willing to share with students. Each topic or hobby becomes a club, and students are given the autonomy to select the club that interests them. Clubs start in the late Fall each year and last the remainder of the school year.

Aaron shared that it takes time to get everyone in the right club, and there is a process if a student wants to change clubs, but he shared:

I tell you this, the kids that are in the right spot absolutely love it. They look forward to it. There will be kids that really shine, that maybe don't usually get that spotlight. It's just been a cool way to see some other kids stand out.

Aaron continued to explain that through clubs the teachers are finding new ways to connect with students that they have not been able to connect with before, as both teachers and students are learning more about each other. Aaron called the clubs a, “tangible thing that we do that makes a difference.” He continued:

I just think the more tangible, real things that we do for students and for staff the better. I think we all get the why. The question is how can we get this to work for us more often and more efficiently.

Question five considered the efforts teachers make to build and maintain a sense of belonging within the classroom, with themes of clear expectations, authentic connection, and intentional moves surfacing. Using clear classroom expectations and routines seemed effective in fostering safe, engaged learning environments for students, where connection between students and teachers could blossom. Several of the other explicit adult efforts, such as the inspirational posters, Mood Meter, and Zone did not seem to have the intended impact.

The creation of clubs, on the other hand, was one tangible adult attempt to establish relationships between students and teachers that seemed effective. Both student and teacher participants shared their positive experiences while involved in clubs. In general, the research shows that when it comes to student belonging at school, there is power in authentic care and connection between students and teachers.

## **Trustworthiness of the Research**

### ***Credibility***

Efforts made throughout this study in order to ensure credibility included the use of well-established qualitative research methods, including the use of observation,



participant interviews, and artifact analysis. Additionally, my own background as a middle school administrator benefitted me in being able to situate myself within the 6th grade classroom. In order to obtain open and honest responses, efforts were made to build a rapport with each research participant prior to interviewing. All participants were reminded before and during each interaction that their participation was voluntary, and they could decline answering a question, or drop out of the study entirely at any time.

A thick description was written for each classroom observation, and member checks (Peoples, 2021) were used with the adult participants following the first round of interviews.

Data collected from interviews, observations, artifact collection and analysis, as well as from the researcher reflective journal was triangulated to aid in meeting the credibility criteria.

### ***Transferability***

Enough detail was provided to allow others to understand the setting, and to potentially relate the findings to their own experiences or context. Transferability might be possible in situations that mirror those presented here.

### ***Dependability***

Components of this study are shared in adequate detail to allow another researcher to re-create the study if desired. There were some adjustments made in the analysis practices that were detailed in the data analysis section. There was also an additional adult participant added towards the end of the study, in response to information gleaned from student interviews.

### ***Confirmability***

The findings of this study were taken directly from the research collected. Excerpts from the reflective journal kept throughout the study by the researcher were considered and included in the findings. The components listed above supporting credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, all work together to ensure the trustworthiness of this research.

### **Chapter Summary**

This study was meant to examine the lived experiences of 6th grade students and their classroom teachers in regards to belonging in the classroom setting. This chapter provided information about how the research was implemented, as well as the findings from the research.

The findings were framed within the five research questions, with special attention paid to participants, especially student participant voice, and their lived experiences at school.

## Chapter 5: Discussion

### Introduction

Through the collection and analysis of data gathered from participant interviews, classroom observations, the collection of artifacts, and the use of a reflective researcher's journal, several themes emerged and were discussed in chapter four. Within this final chapter, these themes will be compared to researchers' past findings related to belonging. Also explored in this chapter are the implications related to the previously identified theoretical framework, as well as implications for educator practice. Recommendations for future research, as well as limitations of this study will be included, followed by a chapter conclusion.

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the experiences of 6th grade students and teachers within the middle school classroom, in relation to student belonging. The five research questions explored were:

- (Q1):** What are the experiences of 6th grade students within a classroom setting in regards to how they define belonging?
- (Q2):** How do students perceive teacher attempts to create a community of belonging among all learners?
- (Q3):** What discrepancies exist in the definition and experience of belonging for students who possess demographic differences (gender, race, socio-economic status, ability)?
- (Q4):** What are the teachers' perceptions in regards to how students in their classroom actually experience belonging?

**(Q5):** In what ways do teachers work to build and maintain a sense of belonging for all students?

### **Connection to Past Research**

Several themes were identified in this study as having a strong connection to student belonging in the classroom. While there were a few differences, many of the themes identified aligned well with the findings of researchers identified in chapter two. Those similarities are shared below.

### ***Teacher Caring***

During interviews for this current research, student Zeke shared personal experiences he had had with his teachers that left him believing that they, “didn’t like him”, because they were, “not really that nice to me.” At the same time he shared that he was, “an ornery kid back then” who did not pay attention and had “anger issues.” Zeke’s feelings about himself as a learner seemed at least partially based on how others, in this case his teachers, responded to, and interacted with him. This mirrored what was discovered in past research done by Osterman (2000) who found that the beliefs individuals have about themselves come directly from the interactions they have with others. In order for students like Zeke to feel a sense of acceptance and belonging, they first need to understand that the adults at school respect and care for them, and believe that they can achieve in school.

Caring teachers in the current study seemed to make an impactful difference for several of the student participants. Language used consistently by both teachers, Stacey and Kris, within the classroom seemed effective in communicating that care with the student participants. Each student interviewed expressed a belief that these two teachers

cared about them as individuals, and each seemed to find some level of engagement within the two classrooms.

The fondness demonstrated by the teachers for students in their classrooms also appeared to bolster students like Zeke, who despite his own past struggles with school, shared his plans to persevere through to graduation, and potentially on towards military service. It would seem that despite his challenges, and perhaps due to the solid relationships he has with some of his teachers, he is not only willing to stay in school, but is also optimistic about his future. This aligns well with findings from Slaten and colleagues (2016), who completed a qualitative study exploring the education needs of marginalized students at an alternative high school and found that such a connection with teachers as a, “primary motivation to stay in school as opposed to dropping out” (p. 7).

### ***Making an Effort***

Throughout the study, students commented on the positive impact of teacher effort in making the learning engaging and fun. Stacey did just that with her Egyptian escape room activity. By taking the time to get creative and enlist students into group problem solving, she was also able to engage their emotions. This aligns well with what Vygotsky (1962) and Erikson (1968) shared in regards to learning as a social process. Students taking part in the escape room challenge were actively involved, excited, and collaborating with one another. The cognitive load of the activity was placed firmly on the shoulders of the students, with Stacey participating as a facilitator of learning.

Bouchard and Berg (2017) found that one key characteristic of positive student teacher relationships was the experience students had of ongoing academic support from teachers throughout the learning process. All of the student participants in the current

study remarked on the efforts teachers made to help them by providing additional time they needed, re-teaching concepts, or providing study guides when needed..

### ***Trust***

One of the key areas identified by McMillan and Chavis (1986), who attempted to describe the dynamics of a sense of community by focusing on literature related to group cohesiveness, was trust. They determined that members need to be able to trust that they would be seen as valued by the group they belong to (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). During this current study, much of what was shared in interviews, and observed during classroom visits supported this finding, with trust being identified as a prominent theme. Students, not unlike all people, want to be valued and seen. The student in Kris' classroom who struggles with mental health to a point that she is only able to attend school for part of the school day, demonstrated that interest in being noticed and included a class member when, as the missing work lists were being handed out she yelled, "What about me? Aren't I part of the class too?"

Bouchard and Berg (2017) found that trust was also fostered as teachers took the initiative to get to know their students as individuals, as well as considering the lives their students face outside of school. On several occasions, Stacey remarked on the challenges faced by some students at home, and made attempts to help them to find success at school, in spite of those challenges. Additionally, just as the students in the Bouchard and Berg (2017) study expressed a desire for reciprocal relationships with their teachers, so did at least one student in the current study. Yolanda shared her appreciation that teacher Kris was willing to, "share things up." She explained that having an opportunity to hear

about her teacher's life outside of school helped her to see Kris as a person that she could then trust with her own experiences.

### ***Power***

Much of what was shared by students in their interviews regarding power had to do with the adults in the classroom demonstrating the power and skills to manage the learning environment in a way that fostered safety and security for all students. This relates to a study by Ryan and Patrick (2001) who found that when students were confident in the teacher's ability to create and maintain learning spaces that were psychologically and physically safe, they were better able to actively engage in, and feel a sense of belonging at school. Student Julian especially, shared his struggles with elementary classrooms where, according to him, misbehavior from his classmates was not controlled by the adults and therefore impeded his ability to engage. He also shared his relief that the teachers at the middle school seemed to have a better handle on misbehavior.

This also aligns well with what McMillan and Chavis (1986) found regarding the need people have to know what they can and cannot expect from one another. They found that people need to trust that leaders within a community will ensure that rules of order related to social norms will be followed by classmates and enforced by teachers. In Maslow's (1943) levels of need, safety/security comes before belonging. People need to know they are safe, before they can engage effectively with others.

### ***Acceptance***

Students in the study were able to explicitly describe classmates who, to them, appeared to struggle with belonging within the classroom. These disengaged students, not

unlike those who were sent to the office when I was a principal, seemingly made choices that allowed them to avoid or escape the learning happening all around them. In the current study, Zeke shared his intentional actions to get ‘kicked out’ of class in response to his perception that the teacher was in an unfriendly or ‘grumpy’ mood. This also matched comments made by students sent to my office when I was a principal, who shared that the teacher who sent them was being rude or disrespectful, or simply did not care for or accept them.

Within the current study, teacher participant Aaron shared a story of acceptance during one interview about his students adjusting the rules of a game in order for another student, with special needs, to experience success. He seemed surprised that students who he had witnessed as quite competitive in the past were willing to do this for a classmate. This coincides with findings from Lott and Lott (1965) regarding the tendency of group members to not only seek to satisfy their own needs, but to also consider, and work to meet the needs of others within the group. McMillan and Chavis (1986) found that these negotiations between group members can serve to strengthen the connection between them. This too aligns well with the descriptions shared by Aaron of the students in his classroom.

### ***Differences in 6th Grade***

Carol Goodenow and Grady (2010) found that supportive teachers had a strong connection to students’ motivation to engage in learning. However, she also found that this connection lessened as students moved from 6th grade to 8th grade. This matched much of what was discovered during this current study. All three teachers readily shared their beliefs and past experiences regarding 6th grade students as compared to 7th and 8th



grade students, noting a change in the attitudes and relationships with teachers in the classroom. According to the teacher participants, as students became more self-aware, as well as more aware of their peers, their interactions with adults at school seemed to change. They described older students as having, “less buy in.”

Evidence gleaned from past research on adolescent students showed a heightened sense of self-consciousness, and a desire to fit in with the group (Elkind, 1967), as well as a decline in the efforts made to achieve in school (Anderman, 2003; Wang & Holcombe, 2010). All of these were mentioned by teacher participants within the current study, who shared their perceptions that older students (7th and 8th grade) tended to be more concerned with what their classmates thought of them, and more likely to demonstrate apathy towards school work and teacher-led activities.

Also matching what Good and colleagues (1987) termed a, “less engaged demeanor” (p. 183), participant Aaron spoke of the, “more reserved, mature, ‘I don’t want people to judge me’ mind of an 8th grader”, while Kris shared that the older students, “kind of push those buttons to see how far they can go.” Despite these challenges all three teacher participants worked to sustain close, positive relationships with their students, regardless of age; something Goodenow (1993a) found to be crucially important for all students.

Each of the student participants also pointed out differences between middle school and elementary school, with several commenting on the increased challenges related to the large number of students, the more difficult content, and the need to navigate sometimes formidable peer relationships. Several researchers highlighted in chapter two found that middle school aged students, more so than elementary students,

are more vulnerable in regards to the experiences and interactions they engage in with their peers (Bouchard & Berg, 2017; Goodenow, 1993a; Osterman, 2000). Yolanda, Elaina, and Zeke all shared details of their struggles with peer relationships, as well as frustration with how some students treated others. Zeke, shared his belief that the rude interactions he had experienced with some classmates were related to his generation, and followed up that statement with his reassurance that he “knows how to fight.”

### *Authentic Connections*

Throughout this study, the impactful role of the teacher in fostering and maintaining a sense of belonging at school was apparent. As shared in chapter two, many studies have been done that have shown the positive effects of an authentic connection between the teacher and the students (Bouchard & Berg, 2017; Chiu et al., 2016; Juvonen, 2006; Osterman, 2000; Wallace et al., 2012). During the current study, participant teachers shared stories about their students that mirrored many of the interactions I also observed. The care and compassion the adults in this study hold for their students was evident, especially those small but nurturing moments between Kris and her more struggling students, like Zeke. Additionally, the time and energy Stacey seemed to put into supporting students who face challenges beyond the classroom walls, and her ability to relate to some of the trauma they face, have potential for lasting positive effects on her students.

When looking holistically at the themes identified in chapter four, it would seem that some intentional moves made by teachers (e.g. inspirational posters, Mood Meter, the Zone) were perhaps not as impactful as intended by the adults implementing them within the classroom. Students in this study seemed to respond more readily and

consistently to efforts made by the adults to form and foster sincere connection with them. The power and impact of authentic connection and relationship between student and teacher could potentially create a solid sense of belonging at school.

Stacey in particular expressed a sincere passion for making sure students have what they need, going so far as to share her own experiences with trauma, and a struggle to, “hold it together.” Her comments about school being the, “best place” for some students was touching if for no other reason than the accuracy of it for many students. Stacey commented that her goal as an educator is to, “make a difference in a kid’s life that will get them to move forward and to be happy, and to want to come to school.” That level of commitment and compassion has the potential to elevate the impact an educator can have on individual student belonging and possibly their futures’ beyond middle school.

### **Implications for Theory**

The theoretical framework used in this study, Belonging as a Fundamental Motivation, was taken from a review of the empirical evidence conducted by Roy F. Baumeister and Mark R. Leary (1995). Baumeister and Leary proposed that the need to belong is a fundamental motivation humans have to engage in a certain number of lasting, positive relationships with others that involve repeated, pleasurable interactions. Additionally, those involved must also feel and reciprocate an ongoing concern for the well-being of one another. Many of the nine metatheoretical criteria supporting this theory aligned with what was found during this study.

One of those criteria involved the efforts people make in order to maintain connections with one another, even when the relationship between them is challenging, or

not necessarily a positive one. Through the teacher interviews, both Kris and Stacey shared their understanding of Zeke and his social relationships with other students in light of his behavioral challenges. Kris mentioned, “I see him in the hallways, talking to other kids, he seems to have friends. I don’t think it affects him.” Stacey, who was also speaking about Zeke, mentioned that he had told her that, “his group doesn’t like him, so he is internalizing their frustration.” However, mirroring what was found by Baumeister and Leary (1995), it would seem that Zeke, based on what Kris witnessed, is continuing to make efforts to maintain those peer relationships, despite the challenges he may be having to do so.

Another criteria considered in the belonging theory posited by Baumeister and Leary (1995) involved the emotional responses people experience in relation to belonging and to not belonging within a group. They wrote that feeling excluded could lead to, “potent negative feelings such as anxiety, depression, grief, jealousy, and loneliness” (p. 508). This brings to mind the observations and later conversations regarding the three students in Kris’ classroom who seem to have separated themselves from the rest of the class.

One student, identified as B sat several rows back from his classmates, with his hood up, and his head down. According to Kris, he had been diagnosed with anxiety, and required individualized accommodations within the classroom in order to receive even a modicum of access to instruction. Another student in that same class, a female sitting near B, struggled so much with healthy interactions that she only attended partial days of school, and again according to Kris, had to be monitored for self-harm. A third student, the one seen punching his computer screen, also appeared to not engage meaningfully

with his classmates, and seemed prone to emotional outbursts involving some physical aggression. All three of these students demonstrated emotions in one form or another in relation to their place within the classroom.

Another criteria necessary for belonging, according to Baumeister and Leary (1995) involved the need for both frequent positive interactions with others, as well as a demonstration of authentic care or concern for the well-being of one another. Several of the themes identified in this study mirror those criteria, including the student desire for caring teachers that they could trust, acceptance of all students, and perhaps most directly with the theme of authentic connection between student and teacher. All three teacher participants seemed to have a solid understanding of the importance of, and need for, real connections with their students. They all made efforts, some implicit, and some more explicit, to connect to students individually and as a class.

## **Implications for Practice**

### ***Intent and Perception***

As educators engaged in ongoing interactions with students each day, we must consider and reflect on how our intentions and actions are perceived and experienced by the students we aim to educate. Whitfield (1976) found that:

It makes little difference what the teacher's intentions are and how "good" the methods he uses; if he fails to see what meaning his behavior has for the students he will not be able to understand their reactions to him. (p. 347).

The things that we as adults do and say have a direct, and oftentimes lasting impact on the children we are charged with educating. Students will act and react to what they are seeing and hearing, and unless they are seeing and hearing authentic attempts by

educators to connect, to value, to challenge, and to care for them, they will not fully engage as members of the class.

### ***Student Voice***

One of the best ways to discover and truly understand how students are perceiving the words and actions of the adults in a classroom is to listen to what they are saying. A qualitative study done by Keyes (2019), like the current study, focused on student experiences, as well as student voice in relation to student belonging. Findings from that study included the need for trusting interactions between student and teacher that included opportunities for honest and ongoing feedback. “Students can provide valuable information for personalizing classroom interactions, the teacher must establish the kind of climate that is conducive to obtaining student perceptions” (Whitfield, 1976, p. 350). As educators, we must create those opportunities for students to share how they are perceiving the classroom around them, and how we might better meet those students’ needs.

### ***Authenticity***

As research participant Aaron shared his experiences with the clubs at middle school:

I just think the more tangible, real things that we do for students and for staff the better. I think we all get the why. The question is how can we get this (connection) to work for us more often and more efficiently.

This powerful statement seems to get at the heart of these research findings. No one is doubting that students need and want to belong at school. As people who have chosen to work in education at the K-12 level, we know that part of our job is to find ways to

connect and make student belonging a reality. The challenge is in discovering what works and what does not. Several of the artifacts documented in this study, the Mood Meter, the Zone, and the inspirational posters demonstrate explicit adult attempts to foster belonging. However, analysis of the data collected in this study would indicate that these attempts are less impactful than what Aaron called the more, “tangible, real things” we can do each day.

With this in mind, educators need to work to create those authentic connections in order to foster genuine relationships with their students. Connections that provide the care and compassion many students need, not only to help them experience belonging at school, but also to help counteract the challenges they might face outside of school. Connections, such as those made by Stacey and the crying student who now gives Stacey, “five hugs a day”. Connections, like the partnership that has evolved between Kris and her student who is working to find more effective ways to manage his frustrations, besides punching his computer screen. Connections like those shared by Aaron, who has found ways to engage meaningfully with his students while they are also taking part in a variety of physical activities within his physical education classroom. In spite of the time, money, and energies that have been invested into social-emotional learning programs, resources, or curriculum, belonging at school would appear to at least begin with simple, authentic connection between the students and teachers.

### ***Reframing Belonging for Students***

Another impactful modification in practice that can be taken from this current research, is an adjustment in how we talk about belonging with our students. Researchers Greg Walton and Brady (2011) conducted quantitative research that engaged a group of

college freshmen of different ethnicities in a brief study on belonging. Using various strategies, students were repeatedly told that feelings of exclusion or lack of connection with others within the new college environment was something shared by all new freshmen, and in no way related to either individual student race, or other personal attributes. Walton and Brady (2011) wrote, “Concerns about belonging were thus represented as common at first, as temporary, and as due to the challenging nature of the college transition” ( p. 38). He found that this simple intervention was effective in preventing students from seeing the adversity they might face on campus as, “an indictment to their belonging” (p. 56).

This straightforward strategy was used by Walton and Brady (2011) to create a social-belonging intervention that, while created for use within a college population, could easily be employed within a K-12 setting. Simply helping students to understand that feelings of not belonging are shared by all individuals placed within a new setting, are temporary, and are to be expected, can, based on Walton’s findings, help those students to make a more seamless transition to a new setting, such as middle school.

Walton (2014) also recommends that adults working with students experiencing difficulty related to belonging or connecting within the school community, engage in storytelling with that student. He asserts that adults sharing similar past experiences or detailed narratives with students can help them to understand that they are not alone in what they are experiencing. Walton goes on to encourage educators using this strategy to assume that students are capable of growing and finding community within the school setting, and not that they are victims in need of being rescued (Walton, 2014).



In an online article by Walton (2021), he writes about the problem with telling students that they belong at school. He claims that students are inundated with messages of belonging. He writes about his time as an instructor at Stanford University, and overhearing one freshman student saying, “The constant reiteration of ‘you belong here’ made me doubt that it’s true since they (college staff) felt the need to repeat it with such fervor and frequency” (para. 4). Walton alleges that just telling students that they belong at school, does not acknowledge or affirm real concerns that they might have, and could even, “shift the onus onto the student.” In other words, if after being told they belong, they still do not feel that way, there must be something wrong with them.

Instead, Walton (2021) recommends frequent, ongoing conversations with students where their concerns are heard and they are encouraged in the knowledge that everyone struggles at first within a new setting, and that over time connections and new relationships will be built. Additionally, Walton (2021) encourages educators to support the diverse identities of individuals within a classroom, seeing differences as strengths and not as deficiencies. Something participant Stacey alluded to when she shared an interaction with students who are English language learners. As educators, according to Walton (2021), “It’s not our job to tell students how they feel. It is our job to create ways of thinking, cultures, and personal relationships that make school a place of genuine belonging for every child” (para. 18).

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Much of what was discovered and discussed within this study aligns well with past research. There were some topics that came up during this process that could potentially lead to future research, such as looking at the experience of belonging related

to older students and English language learners. Other areas of potential research include taking a closer look at the pressure placed on students receiving TAG services, as well as exploring the unexplored topic of issues related to race at WMS.

### ***Older Students***

The decision to use 6th grade students in this research was made due to the fact that this population typically undergoes a fairly significant transition from elementary school to middle school. I predicted that this transition might create some challenges for students in regards to belonging. However, what I found instead were teachers who treated 6th grade students as what Stacey called, “little kids”. None of the student participants seemed to be struggling with belonging to the degree that I had anticipated, potentially due in part to their age. From what was shared by all participants, I would be interested to see how 8th grade students define and experience belonging, especially as they begin to ponder, what some would argue, an even more challenging transition to high school.

### ***English Language Learners***

Results of this study have opened my eyes to the unique challenges faced by students who come to school without the initial ability to communicate in English. Observations in the classrooms evidenced these students chose to physically separate from their English speaking peers at school, set apart socially, and perhaps misunderstood by their teachers. Future research on how this population of students experience belonging would prove to be very interesting, and perhaps produce information that would be useful in improving the current situation.

### ***Talented and Gifted Students***

Another group of students that caught my attention during this research are students identified as requiring additional services provided by the talented and gifted programming at WMS. The information shared by the teachers, as well as my own observations, have begun to bring into focus a picture of students who are quietly experiencing significant levels of stress and anxiety related to their abilities and an expectation, either internal or external, to sustain high levels of performance at school. This is another area ripe with potential future research possibilities.

### ***Issues Related to Race***

The final, and perhaps the most concerning, area of focus for future research might be the reticence all participants had to discuss the implications race plays within the school community. While the population of WMS is primarily made up of White students, and there are no people of color on staff at WMS, it would seem that for those students of color who do attend each day, there certainly must be experiences and potentially practices that need to be discussed and explored further. The conversation with Julian's mother regarding how she expected her son to interact at school, while brief, left enough unsaid that might make this topic worthwhile to explore in future research.

### **Limitations**

#### ***Participant Recruitment***

One of the first challenges of this research involved getting signed consents for enough student participants from the two identified classrooms. An additional detail related to this challenge is the fact that I researched in the same district that I am also

working as the director of instruction. While reaching out to parents of potential student participants, I had to keep in mind my role, and the need to not damage any relationships. One parent in particular, who did end up consenting, was initially very suspicious, and unsure of why I was reaching out to her. After having a chance to explain the purpose and intent of the research, she was on board. The amount of time it took to get all signed paperwork back caused me to move forward with fewer student participants than originally planned for.

### ***Interview Challenges***

**Time.** A researcher's reflective journal was kept during this study, and allowed for consideration of what was working well in regards to the research and what challenges existed. Some difficulties that I reflected on in the journal included not feeling like there was ever enough time to really get into a solid conversation with any of the participants. I had to keep in mind that the participants were doing me a favor by being a part of the research, and giving me time away from what they would normally be doing.

While the students I interviewed did not seem to mind being away from the classroom, the teachers did seem a bit distracted as we primarily met during what would have been their planning time. As a consequence, I felt rushed. As I listened to the recordings from the initial interviews, I realized that I was also not being a good listener, as I tended to interrupt, and not allow the interviewee time to finish a thought.

Thankfully, I was able to correct this in later sessions.

**Awkward Interactions.** Another struggle involved the somewhat inorganic nature of the interactions I had with some of the student participants. Students in general were not very talkative, and it took several additional questions to get any substantive

responses from them. Julian especially, was a willing participant, but often only provided one word responses. I did try to allow time for general conversation, in order to help students feel more comfortable talking to me, but there simply was not enough time to build a relationship that might allow for even more candid conversations. I am confident that there were details, feelings, and emotions left unexplored.

I was also aware during all exchanges with the teacher participants that my role as an administrator within the district had some impact on the interactions we had. Stacey, a passionate educator, tended to try and direct the conversations towards her perceived deficits in how the district had done things in the past, or continued to do them now. It was my impression that she perhaps was taking advantage of the fact that she had a one on one opportunity with me to share all that she felt needed to be fixed. When this happened, I listened, took notes, and thanked her for the information. I did have to consider how much of what she was telling me was simply her experience, and how much of what she was telling me was intended to sway or otherwise affect my decision making as the director of instruction.

### ***Observations***

Observations were challenging primarily due to my struggle to remain focused on the research at hand. I had to be thoughtful at all times to remember that I was observing as a researcher, not as a director of instruction. One unavoidable aspect of visiting different classrooms within a district that I am meant to lead instructionally, is that I am always looking for things (in buildings) that are working well, and things that need more attention. Teachers might perceive this frame of reference (or even my presence) as evaluatory, and either feel uncomfortable or adjust their typical way of interacting within

the classroom because of it. I know that perceptions of my reaction or lack of reaction to staff/student interactions within a building can have far reaching effects. Especially, as people are still getting to know me during my first year in the district.

When having conversations with the participant teachers, there were some comments made by teachers that, had I been in the role of director, would have had to have been addressed, rather than simply recorded. For instance, some of the language used by Stacey when she was telling me about the group of students speaking Spanish, was potentially troublesome. Had I not been in the role of researcher AND administrator, I would have felt more comfortable pushing back on what she was saying, and how she was saying it.

Throughout my time with the teachers, I was extra cautious of my body language, my reactions, and of my responses. Even after the fact, there are things that I witnessed that now that I know about them, need to be addressed at some point. However, I do not want it to appear to the teachers that my being in their classrooms was me simply spying on them. In other words, I want to honor the fact that they willingly opened their rooms, and were quite open and honest in our discussions. Before beginning this project, I had not considered how completing research within the same district you are working could have ramifications after the project is completed.

Additionally, observing an entire room full of people can be overwhelming. I found myself focusing on only a handful of interactions to make it manageable. The two column tool selected, did not quite work as well as I had hoped, as there was not always a clear delineation between what I was seeing and what I was thinking or reflecting on about what I was seeing.

### ***Coding***

Finally, actually taking the transcripts and coding it within NVivo was a challenge. Each time I entered new files into the system, I saw the need to add additional codes. As the codes grew, I became overwhelmed. At one point in the journal I wrote, “I am walking around in the dark trying to not stub my toe at this point in the coding process.” Little by little, I was able to combine codes and shorten the list a bit. Through repeated re-readings, revisiting the research questions, and ongoing reflection, themes started to make themselves known. There was actually a moment when, as I was writing in my journal, the words began to come to my mind, and were recorded.

### **Contrary to Literature**

There were some topics shared in chapter two that were either not experienced or witnessed during the current study or in some way did not align with past research findings. Bouchard and Berg (2017), found in their qualitative study of late elementary and middle school students a connection between school belonging and involvement in school-based activities such as after school sports teams or clubs. While the in-school clubs were discussed by many of the participants, there was no mention of other school activities made. However, students at WMS are not eligible to participate in afterschool activities (sports) until 7th grade, and have very few options to engage in other extra-curricular experiences. This lack of access is something that was not considered when selecting 6th grade students for the study versus older students.

Another area explored in chapter two that was not well represented in the current study was the variance in belonging experiences for students possessing demographic differences. Goodenow and Grady (2010) using the Psychological Sense of School

Membership (PSSM) in a study with urban high school students, found that for students of color, a sense of belonging was significantly lower within a predominantly White school, than for White counterparts. Attempts to explore those findings within the current study were limited by the willingness of participants to discuss racial differences or challenges, as well as the small number of student participants of color. The two student participants of color, attending WMS (a predominantly White school) did not share any information related to a challenge to connect or a feeling of difference in their sense of belonging at school due to race. Both students did, however, express positive feelings of acceptance and belonging within the two focus classrooms.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the experiences of 6th grade students and teachers within the middle school classroom, in relation to student belonging. Completing this research has created an opportunity to take a closer look at the experiences of 6th grade students within the classroom in regards to how they define and experience belonging. It has also allowed for the consideration of the efforts being made by teachers to create and foster student belonging, as well as how those intentions were being perceived by the students. Through student and teacher interview, classroom observations, artifact collection, and the keeping of a researcher's reflective journal, the following themes emerged: fitting in, feeling comfortable, teacher caring, teacher effort in the classroom, trust between teachers and students, the role of power in the classroom, acceptance of student differences, concerns for equity, the differences between 6th grade students and their older counterparts, the need for clear



expectations in the classroom, the power of authentic connections between teachers and students, and the intentional moves made by teachers to connect with students.

Those themes have been compared to research completed by others in the past, with several similarities, and a few differences noted. From those themes a few implications for practice have been identified, including a need for educators to create circumstances that give students a chance to share how they perceive and experience the actions or inactions of their teachers; truly valuing the voice of students. An additional implication is for educators to take the time to engage in authentic conversations and interactions with students. Interactions that communicate the care and compassion felt by educators for their students.

One final implication spoke to need for educators to proactively reframe the idea of belonging at school in ways that communicate to students that not only are they not alone or unique in feeling set apart from others from time to time, but that perceptions of not belonging are felt by all new members of a group, and are often ephemeral in nature.

A sense of belonging at school is essential for students in order for them to remain engaged in the learning and skill attainment that will support them through to graduation and beyond. As shared in Chapter 2, according to Maslow (1943) we as human beings cannot begin to develop to our full potential until we find ourselves, “anchored to a community” (Kunc, 1992, p. 6). We, as educators, must do everything we can to ensure that our students experience that community within the walls of each classroom they occupy.

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## Appendix A: Interview Questions Round 1

Interviewer Opening Remarks for Student:

Thank you for agreeing to participate in my study by answering these questions. I would like to ask about your experiences at school.

But before we begin, I would like to remind you that your involvement in this is completely voluntary. You can change your mind at any time, and you do not have to answer any questions that you do not want to answer. At any point that you want to stop this interview, simply tell me.

Also, I want to explain that all of your answers will be kept confidential. No one outside of the University of Northern Iowa graduate department will know what we discussed here today. This includes your teachers, the principals, and your classmates. The only time I would break this confidentiality is if I have reason to believe someone is harming you or that someone else is being harmed or is in danger of being harmed. By law I am required to do that.

Also, your name will not be used as a part of this research. Your information will be assigned to a fake name with no connection to you. This interview will last between thirty and forty-five minutes. In order to really pay attention to what you are saying, I would like to record this interview. Is that okay with you? You can always tell me to turn off the recorder at any time. Before we start, do you have any questions or concerns?

Student Interview Questions:

1. What are some things about school that you enjoy?
2. What are some things about school that you do not enjoy?

3. How do you define belonging? What does it mean to belong?
  - a. What does it feel like when you belong? To not belong?
4. Tell me about a time when you felt like you belonged somewhere? How did you know that you belonged?
5. Tell me about a time when you felt like you did not belong somewhere? What made you think that you did not belong?
6. Have you ever noticed other students at school who do not seem to belong? How can you tell them apart from students who do seem to belong?
7. What are some things that teachers and other adults at school do to create a place where all students can feel that they belong?
8. Do the things that the adults are doing in school to help all students feel that they belong seem to be working?
9. What are some ways that they can do things differently that might help more students feel that they belong?
  - a. Are there things about school that you wish would change to help the students feel like they belong?
10. Tell me about your favorite class or teacher? What makes them your favorite?
  - a. What kinds of things does this teacher do that make them your favorite?
11. Tell me about your least favorite class or teacher? What makes them your least favorite?
  - a. What kinds of things does this teacher do that make them you least favorite?
12. What else would you like for me to know?

## Appendix B: Interview Questions Round 1

Interviewer Opening Remarks for teachers:

Thank you for agreeing to participate in my study by answering these questions. I would like to ask about your experiences at school.

But before we begin, I would like to remind you that your involvement in this is completely voluntary. You can change your mind at any time, and you do not have to answer any questions that you do not want to answer. At any point that you want to stop this interview, simply tell me.

Also, I want to explain that all of your answers will be kept confidential. No one outside of the University of Northern Iowa graduate department will know what we discussed here today. This includes other teachers, the principals, your students, or parents. The only time I would break this confidentiality is if I have reason to believe someone is harming you or that someone else is being harmed or is in danger of being harmed. By law I am required to do that.

I am conducting this research as a part of my own personal growth as an educator. I am not using what I hear or see in any way to evaluate you or the work you are doing here in Mount Pleasant.

Also, your name will not be used as a part of this research. Your information will be assigned to a fake name with no connection to you. This interview will last between thirty and forty-five minutes. In order to really pay attention to what you are saying, I would

like to record this interview. Is that okay with you? You can always tell me to turn off the recorder at any time. Before we start, do you have any questions or concerns?

Teacher Interview Questions:

1. How long have you been a teacher at Winnebago Middle School?
2. What are some of your strengths as a teacher?
3. What are some things that you are working to improve upon as a teacher?
4. How do you define belonging? What does it mean to belong?
  - a. What does belonging look like to you?
5. What are some things you do proactively in your classroom to create an environment of belonging for all students?
6. What are some things you avoid doing in your classroom to maintain an environment of belonging for all students?
7. What are some things that you have seen other teachers do that either help to increase student belonging, or hinder student belonging?
8. Do you feel you are able to tell which students feel they belong in your classroom and which students do not feel they belong in your classroom?
9. What do you think keeps some students from belonging to the learning environment of your classroom?
10. How do you go about improving the level of belonging for those students?

## Appendix C: Interview Questions Round 2

Interviewer Opening Remarks for student:

Thank you for again agreeing to participate in my study by answering these questions. I have had a chance to visit two of your classrooms to observe how students and teachers interact with one another during the school day.

Before we begin with questions, I would like to remind you that your involvement in this is completely voluntary. You can change your mind at any time, and you do not have to answer any questions that you do not want to answer. At any point that you want to stop this interview, simply tell me.

Also, I want to explain that all of your answers will be kept confidential. No one outside of the University of Northern Iowa graduate department will know what we discussed here today. This includes your teachers, the principals, and your classmates. The only time I would break this confidentiality is if I have reason to believe someone is harming you or that someone else is being harmed or is in danger of being harmed. By law I am required to do that.

Also, your name will not be used as a part of this research. Your information will be assigned to a fake name with no connection to you. This interview will last between thirty and forty-five minutes. In order to really pay attention to what you are saying, I would like to record this interview. Is that okay with you? You can always tell me to turn off the recorder at any time. Before we start, do you have any questions or concerns?

Student Interview Questions (part 2):

(In an attempt to maintain a truly open and responsive stance, these questions are as of yet undetermined, and will be directly tied to observations made during the study)



## Appendix D: Interview Questions Round 2

Interviewer Opening Remarks for teacher:

Thank you for again agreeing to participate in my study by answering these questions. I have had a chance to visit your classroom to observe how you and your students interact with one another during the school day.

Before we begin with questions, I would like to remind you that your involvement in this is completely voluntary. You can change your mind at any time, and you do not have to answer any questions that you do not want to answer. At any point that you want to stop this interview, simply tell me.

Also, I want to explain that all of your answers will be kept confidential. No one outside of the University of Northern Iowa graduate department will know what we discussed here today. This includes other teachers, the principals, your students, or parents. The only time I would break this confidentiality is if I have reason to believe someone is harming you or that someone else is being harmed or is in danger of being harmed. By law I am required to do that.

I am conducting this research as a part of my own personal growth as an educator. I am not using what I hear or see in any way to evaluate you or the work you are doing here in Mount Pleasant.

Your name will not be used as a part of this research. Your information will be assigned to a fake name with no connection to you. This interview will last between thirty and forty-five minutes. In order to really pay attention to what you are saying, I would like to

record this interview. Is that okay with you? You can always tell me to turn off the recorder at any time. Before we start, do you have any questions or concerns?

Teacher Interview Questions (part 2):

(In an attempt to maintain a truly open and responsive stance, these questions are as of yet undetermined, and will be directly tied to observations made during the study)

**Appendix E : Observation Protocol**

<b>Descriptive Notes</b>	<b>Reflective Notes</b>

## Appendix F: Institutional Review Board Approval Email



Dawn Del Carlo <dawn.delcarlo@uni.edu>

to me, Timothy, Lisa, Karen ▾

Mon, Oct 17, 2022, 12:23 PM ☆ ↶ ⋮

Dear Angie,

Thank you for your revisions. Your study, *Anchored to a community: Middle school student's experience of belonging in the classroom*, has been approved by the UNI IRB through the review procedures authorized by 45 CFR 46.104. You may begin recruitment, data collection, and/or analysis for your project. You are required to adhere to the procedures and study materials approved during this review, as well as to follow IRB policies and procedures for human subject research posted on the IRB website.

If/when you need to make changes to your study design, samples, procedures, or study materials, please email [lisa.ahern@uni.edu](mailto:lisa.ahern@uni.edu) to request approval of the changes before they are implemented, and attach any revised study materials with edits highlighted. You may expect a response within a couple of days.

Your study will not require annual review and approval by the IRB. However, you will receive an **annual study update request**, which will ask if the study is still active and if any problems have arisen. Advisors: If your student has graduated, please reply to the annual update request on the student's behalf.

**Problems or adverse events** related to your research that were not anticipated must be reported promptly after being discovered, either within 7 or 14 days, depending on the seriousness of the event, as outlined on the [Reporting Problems and Adverse Events](#) page. Examples include unexpected injury or emotional stress for study participants, missteps in the consent process, or breaches of confidentiality. The IRB will advise on any next steps that might be necessary.

If you need a signed approval letter, contact the IRB office and one will be provided for your records.

Best wishes for your project success,  
Dawn